Teaching as Stability:

An Autoethnography on the Stabilization of Identity Through the Service of English Education

A Dissertation Presented for the

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Degree

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Jonathan Blake Trent

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Dedication

Dedicated to every author of the books I read as a child. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to realize who I wanted to be. Dedicated to the late L.C. Collins. I know you touched many more lives than mine, and I can only dream of having even a modicum of the impact you had on so many lives.

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First, I would like to thank my dog, Monty. There have been many moments in my adult life that would have been far more difficult to navigate without her steady presence. In the quiet hours of writing, revising, and reflecting, her sweet face looking up at me served as a simple but powerful reminder to pause, breathe, and keep going. Her companionship provided a kind of grounding that made long days of work feel a little less heavy.

I would also like to thank my girlfriend, Pamella. She has been by my side for all six years that I have been working toward this culminating milestone. Throughout the many stages of this process with moments of excitement, frustration, doubt, and renewed determination, she has met me with patience, encouragement, and humor. Her quick laughs, steady support, and unwavering love have made the difficult parts of this journey manageable and the successes more meaningful. I am deeply grateful for the ways she has stood beside me through it all.

I would also like to thank my family. While they are not always portrayed in the most favorable light within these pages, I nevertheless carry a deep love and appreciation for them. The experiences that shaped my life, both the supportive moments and the difficult ones, have contributed to the person I have become and to the work presented here. In many ways, this project exists because of the complex and formative experiences that emerged within my family. For that, and for the enduring bonds that remain, I am grateful.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. I am grateful to my chair and advisor, Dr. Jud Laughter, for his guidance, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback throughout this process. His support has been invaluable as this project took shape. I would also like to thank Dr. Ashlee Anderson, Dr. Pamela Angelle, and Dr. Susan Groenke for serving on my committee and for their careful engagement with this work. Their insights,

questions, and perspectives strengthened this study and helped me think more deeply about its implications. I appreciate the time and attention each of them invested in supporting me through the completion of this dissertation.

Abstract

This autoethnographic dissertation examines how reading, teaching martial arts, and teaching English has informed the stabilization of my own identity across key developmental periods. Guided by the research question, *How has teaching informed the stabilization of my own identity?*, the study situated lived experience as both data and site of analysis, drawing on narrative vignettes from childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. These vignettes are analyzed using an integrated theoretical framework that includes Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1956), Marcia's Identity Status Model (1966), McAdam's Narrative Identity Theory (1997), and Laing's Social Identity Theory (1965).

Through systematic coding and iterative analysis, the findings illustrate how teaching emerged not initially as a vocational commitment but as a relational practice that provided coherence, continuity, and emotional regulation during periods of identity diffusion. Teaching functioned as a stabilizing structure through which exploration was transformed into commitment, allowing identity to consolidate in response to social responsibility, care for others, and pedagogical authority. Importantly, the analysis also interrogates the limitations of stage-based identity theories by demonstrating how identity stabilization can precede, interrupt, or reconfigure linear developmental expectations.

This study contributes to scholarship in teacher identity, autoethnographic methodology, and identity theory by reframing teaching as a stabilizing identity practice rather than solely a professional endpoint. By foregrounding the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching, the dissertation offers insight into how educators may come to teaching not only through choice but through necessity, survival, and the search for coherence.

Keywords: autoethnography, teacher identity, identity theory, trauma, identity stabilization

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Chapter 1: Personal Motivation

Motivation for academic research is often personal in scope. The "research area is often personally meaningful for the researcher and can be motivated by a range of factors" (Baguley et al., 2015, p. 15). I chose this dissertation with a personal interest in both discovering how I have made being an educator my most stable identity, as well as how other teachers have found their own form of stabilized identity. I carried this out through autoethnographic research that highlights specific instances in my life as data points using thematic analysis. This was not an easy task emotionally for me as my family continues with many of the struggles mentioned in the personal vignettes later in this work. I was motivated to both finish this research and also continue to reflectively work towards discovering why being an educator provided me with an identity that served as a salve for the moments in my life that have, and continue to, cause me emotional distress and dysfunction as an adult.

Teachers have a desire to work with children as guides in the curriculum they teach, but also serve, often unintentionally, as role models in how to act as an adult. Some children are not granted parents who serve as good examples for how to act maturely when faced with difficulties or confrontations. Just like anyone else, I have fallen short of my own expectations for myself. Being beholden to others as a person that desires to be good, even though I may not always succeed, is a model that has given me the opportunity to find significant purpose.

This research sought to connect my adverse experiences I had as a juvenile with the opportunity I have had as an educator to show a different path to my students through the texts I have been given to teach as well as my actions in front of students in the classroom, hallways, and with coworkers. I do not think that this motivation is entirely unique, though this research intended to find this throughline of the value for the educators themselves within the vocation.

While teacher identity research has examined professional development through frameworks such as Narrative Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, Communities of Practice, Possible Selves Theory, and Positioning Theory, there remains a need for work that weaves these perspectives together in an autoethnographic account.

Introduction

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking."

— Joan Didion

Autoethnography is how an author uses the inherent reality that "our lives are rooted in narratives and narrative practices" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 78) to describe a culture and the systems in place that shape those narratives. Our narratives are how we understand the world around us and how we understand ourselves through stories, objectively true or not, that we tell ourselves. The self's iterative story of disadvantage and abuse "explains" the proneness towards victimization. A contemporary and unfortunate example of this would be a self-described incel believing themselves to be victimized because of the continued disregard by the opposite sex (Ging, 2023). This reiterated story becomes the narrative of an individual to explain all of their actions, which can be positive or negative actions by the standards of the society around them. This is the theory of a person's existence, which becomes a core reference point. An individual will "judge encounters with the social worlds in accordance with it" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 2003, p. 4).

A significant part of my own self-exploration revolved around my identity as an educator in respect to the many other identities I have inhabited and how the educator identity has been a stabilizing identity. Herrington, Parker, and Boase-Jelinek (2014) defined identity as "an active, dynamic and intentional process that profoundly influences one's experiences" (p. 23). A stabilized identity "refers to a coherent, consistent sense of self that persists over time and across

situations, allowing individuals to function with a sense of continuity, purpose, and self-knowledge" (Erikson, 1968, p. 73). This coherent sense of self, for me, has been developed out of that continuity and purpose described by Erikson.

Autoethnography is the act of sense-making of the world around us through our interactions with the cultural system in which we exist and how we make "sense of lived experience and communicate it to others" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 52). The relevant culture in forming initial identity in childhood is within our family structure. This early developed identity is the schema we contend with as we form various identities through our lives. This study focuses on developing a stable identity of "educator" and though teacher identity has received plenty of interest in qualitative research. A problem develops in that "research on teacher identity is also characterized by a wide-range of theoretical perspectives, and a tendency toward disconnected qualitative studies that have conceptualized and operationally defined professional teacher identity from a number of different perspectives", which points to difficulty in a common definition within the literature (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 115). Further complicating a clear identity formation, individuals struggle to find stability when adverse experiences affect the opportunity for positive self-identity (Erikson, 1956; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

Childhood trauma has effects on every aspect of one's adult life. According to Erikson (1956), identity development requires consistent psychosocial support and opportunities for exploration. When individuals experience adverse circumstances during this period, the resolution of the Identity versus Role Confusion stage becomes compromised, often resulting in an unstable or fragmented self-concept. I can say this has absolutely been true for me. I have had trouble maintaining relationships with friends and family as a result of my experiences as a child and the significant anxieties I have developed. I found myself feeling connected to the following

statement in *The Body Keeps the Score,* "being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on, unchanged and immutable, as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past" (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 53). I do not like the idea of calling myself a victim, and I am aware my childhood experiences regarding significant emotional abuse have led me to find an alternative identity from the norm in being a teacher.

I am an English teacher. I would say that this is my most prominent identity among the ones I assume in my day-to-day life. After 9 years as an educator, I decided to come back to school for my PhD in an effort to be better able to do something about a problem I saw in the English curriculum of public education. While I have learned a great deal about how to be a better teacher through supervision of interning new teachers and stimulating conversations in my classes, I have also come to the personal belief that change in curriculum is not something I, nor any of the many well-intentioned teachers I have worked with, can actually do on a grand scale in the current politicized educational climate.

This study, an autoethnography, was written during an interesting time to be an educator. Interesting may not be the right word, though I feel it has enough breadth as to not imply the disheartening nature of being within a system that certainly needs an overhaul, but instead is getting dismantled in all the wrong ways. Currently in 2026, with the Department of Education ostensibly dismantled, it seems like moves in the direction of an overhaul of education for the betterment of students is unlikely in the near future. I very well could be wrong about that, and I'll be happy if I am. We can only attempt to do what we have always done, close the door and do what is best for our students.

"Remember your why" is a common refrain among teachers to help maintain morale in the tough parts of a school year. However, the reality that it is "increasingly the norm in the

United States that teachers are required to use ‘scripted curricula” (Fitz, 2020, p. 1), Whether this leads to an exodus of good educators and/or a dearth of new educators in English Language Arts is unknown at this point. I feel disheartened, though not necessarily less motivated, to continue teaching when I know so many student needs are not being met. As I go back to teaching, I feel it is important and necessary to investigate why I chose to teach, and why I want to continue to do so. This autoethnography is an opportunity to better understand my “why”.

Identity development has been an academic interest of mine since I took my first philosophy class in 2007. Helping students find an identity in curricular texts has always been a passion of mine as an educator. As an extension of my interest in how students develop identity through reading experiences, I had this research question in my initial dissertation study:

> How might the lack of positive Black representation in the English curriculum in Tennessee influence student identity development and self-perception among Black students?

This question, and the context around it, became the foreground to a deeper question that I was trying to understand. Why do I want to do this research into identity development in the first place? Do I have a stable identity myself? How has teaching informed the stabilization of my own identity? I intend to answer that question with the writing I present here in the form of autoethnographic research.

Autoethnographic research is a “qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010, p. 2). As I approached this research, it became apparent to myself and my committee that I needed to step back into how I got to this

career, dissertation, and topic. Why did I become a teacher? Why would I want to write about developing identities that are seemingly disparate from mine? Whom am I writing this for?

I continue to find the philosophy around identity development interesting, and I think this is perhaps because I have always struggled with my own identity. As I have gotten older, I have found myself gravitating towards memoirs as a reader. I find how others navigate their lives to be interesting and, to be honest, motivating for me to keep going in spite of persistent depression and imposter syndrome regardless of the avenues I have pursued. It's this odd feeling that everyone around me is an adult, and I am the child. This has been an undercurrent within my research endeavors as an academic in that I would appreciate it if my research could quell or explain these feelings.

I studied reading identity and the inclination towards reading as a result of the modeling of reading for my Master's thesis back in 2011, and I knew I wanted to continue down that line because I have, subconsciously, always worried that my obsessive interest in reading might have always been a means to an end in the midst of a tumultuous childhood and an anxious adulthood. I have always felt that my incessant reading as an adolescent led me away from the anger at the world which both of my parents seemed to possess. I know that the joy of reading inspired me to be a teacher in order to share that joy with others. However, I found that the curriculum provided as an English teacher often made this connection with my students unnecessarily difficult.

The purpose of this study is to examine how my experiences as a public-school English teacher have contributed to the stabilization of my identity, using narrative inquiry to illuminate the ways personal history, professional practice, and engagement with literature intersect to shape and sustain the self. Further, this study intends to provide evidence for the need for

discussions regarding the development of professional identity among educators both in pre-service and during professional development during employment in a school system.

Research Question

The researcher in an autoethnography uses their own experiences as data for a research interest. In this research, I am using my life experience as a young reader amidst a chaotic childhood and the resulting motivations and rewards of being a teacher in an effort to help others find their identity experientially through reading. This choice to pursue autoethnography as a form of research is guided by the following primary question:

- How has teaching informed the stabilization of my own identity?

This question is not just one in which I have interest in as a researcher, but one I have interest in to create a better understanding of myself. I have been my own worst enemy many times in my life, though being a teacher has always grounded me in an identity that I could be proud to inhabit. This research question aligns with my desire to use narrative inquiry to explore how my lived experiences have fed into the need to have an identity that serves as foundational to my self image within the culture around me. To begin to address this question, I developed a framework to understand inquiry into identity.

Understanding Identities

Identity theories related to the culture one exists within have resonated with me ever since I first encountered Jean-Paul Sartre's (1945) existentialist discussion of self in *The Age of Reason*. The novel explores the tension between the desire for absolute freedom and the realities of living within a structured society. As I interpreted Sartre's text, the human condition is marked by a pursuit of radical freedom, yet that freedom is constantly constrained by the roles, responsibilities, and expectations placed upon us by social institutions and cultural norms.

Reading this as an undergraduate deeply influenced my interest in identity studies. It was the first time I considered how inhabiting multiple, often conflicting identities as student, employee, child, friend could fracture or support a coherent sense of self. Sartre's protagonist, torn between personal freedom and social obligation, mirrored my own early experiences of identity formation, and sparked my desire to investigate how we navigate, resist, or stabilize identity across a lifetime.

Having encompassed several identities throughout my life, most of which are not academic, I have always been interested in how texts that are read help an individual develop their individual identity as they either relate to or detest the actions of characters that they are reading through "differing ways of entering text in relation to what one has experienced in the world" (Schieble, 2010, p. 375). This identity is part of an individual's narrative identity, which is "the dynamic inner story a person crafts to bind the remembered past with the present and the imagined future" (McAdams, 2001, p. 101). This interest developed further as I began my career as a public-school English teacher. These experiences will inform my developed identity found within the vignettes.

As I worked through school, I developed an interest in being an educator. In Janet Alsup's (2019) *Millennial Teacher Discourses* "generational theory" is used to discuss how teachers from the millennial generation uniquely approached the vocation in an effort to explain "how we understand new teachers entering the profession today" (p. 7). This theory may imply some level of generalization, though the point of her study was not to "categorize all teacher candidates as similar or the same" (p. 12). Instead, I hope to open up discussion and reflection about young teachers who are entering our profession today, and how their

generational and cultural influences, as well as how they communicate their professional priorities, might be affecting their teacher identities as well as identity durability and hence necessitating new approaches to teacher education.

Significance of the Study

Through autoethnographic storytelling and thematic analysis, I explored how repeated classroom experiences, reflective practices, and professional relationships have allowed me to construct a coherent sense of self. Riessman's (2008) emphasis on the structure and function of narrative supports this process, helping me trace how teaching has stabilized my identity over time by providing continuity, voice, and purpose.

The value of this study was threefold. First, its experiential nature helped explain the thinking of an educator as they come to the determination that they want to be an educator while also navigating the dynamics of personal trauma. Second, it was reflective in nature, which is the foundation of any good educational practice. My colleagues may find themselves in parts of this text, and they may find themselves entirely disparate from the experiences I share. Regardless, this may be useful in helping English educators see that their students are very much in need of any opportunity to find themselves in the texts that they are required to read in the hopes that a stable identity may develop. Third, this study seeks to further the practice of autoethnography as a legitimate source of valuable insight for researchers. My literature review research made me aware of the dearth of autoethnographic research in education compared to the other, more conventional forms, of research.

Identity research in education serves the purpose of providing an understanding of how educators can be supported in developing stable and sustainable professional identities, both within teacher education programs in universities and through ongoing professional development

in school districts. By examining how teachers make meaning of their experiences, confront challenges, and integrate personal histories into their instructional practices, identity research highlights the developmental processes that shape educators' sense of purpose, agency, and belonging in the profession. Studies employing autoethnography, narrative inquiry, and reflective practice demonstrate that teacher identity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, evolving construction influenced by relationships, institutional contexts, trauma, resilience, and professional expectations.

These insights allow preparation programs and school leaders to design more intentional forms of support such as mentoring, reflective writing, collaborative communities, and trauma-informed practices that help teachers navigate identity transitions and remain committed to the profession. Ultimately, identity research provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for understanding how teachers' lived experiences shape their professional trajectories and how educational systems can better nurture teachers' growth, well-being, and long-term success.

The research question is grounded in narrative inquiry's central belief that identity is constructed, negotiated, and stabilized through the stories we tell about ourselves. By employing Catherine Kohler Riessman's (2008) narrative methodology, this study examines personal teaching narratives not simply as memories, but as meaning-making acts that reveal the evolving contours of the self. In the context of my own journey through childhood trauma, early experiences teaching taekwondo, and then into the classroom, teaching becomes more than a profession. It becomes a site of identity repair where emotional consistency, relational meaning, and a sense of agency begin to take root.

Psychodynamic Theories of Identity

Psychodynamic theories of identity strongly "emphasize developmental issues" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 2003, p. 5) in the formation of identity, which are heavily influenced by Erikson's (1956) work on developmental identity. This approach and its proponents stated that each person's identity is strongly grounded in childhood experiences. This approach also very much emphasizes the "other" into one's identity. This "other" being the people around during childhood such as parents, peers, admired or despised individuals, and many others. In other words, a person's identity is "grounded in identifications and transactions with others" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 2003, p. 7; Erikson, 1956, p. 57). Erikson defined his approach to psychodynamic identity in as much as how a child perceives him or herself to be deemed as a "worthy member in the community to which he or she belongs" through experiences of success and failure (Weinrich & Saunderson, 7, 2003). This is an iterative process in an effort towards identity stabilization.

Erikson's understanding of Psychosocial Identity Development (1956) being foundational to this research requires the acknowledgement of contemporary examples of pushback on this theory. In Crosetti's article *Identity Formation in Adolescence: The Dynamic of Forming and Consolidating Identity Commitments*, she both builds on, and pushes back against, Erikson's classic model of identity development by reframing identity not as a single psychosocial crisis to be resolved in adolescence, but as a dynamic, iterative system of processes that unfold over time. Whereas Erikson conceptualized identity formation primarily through the stage of identity versus role confusion, implying a central developmental conflict whose successful resolution yields a coherent sense of self, Crocetti argued that identity is better understood through ongoing interactions among three empirically measurable processes: commitment, in-depth exploration,

and reconsideration of commitment. In her dual-cycle model, identity development involves both a formation cycle where reconsideration and commitment drive change and a maintenance cycle where commitment and in-depth exploration consolidate and strengthen existing choices.

The reconceptualization challenges the stage-like, relatively bounded nature of Erikson's account by demonstrating, through longitudinal research, that identity commitments fluctuate, stabilize, destabilize, and reform across adolescence rather than culminating in a singular resolution. This shifts Erikson's crisis-oriented framework into one that is more process oriented. This is a commonly held push back in contemporary reimagining of Erikson's theory as he had a much more rigid perception of identity formation and resolution. In doing so, Crocetti shifted the field from a philosophically rich but broadly defined crisis framework to a process-oriented, empirically testable model that captures identity as adaptive, recursive, and contextually responsive rather than as a one-time developmental achievement. However, I will reference Erikson's work in the analysis due to the focus on resolution as stabilizing rather than the more iterative nature of identity formation and reformation. This is because I have a concluding formation of identity in mind as an educator that sought a coherent self out of destabilization instead of the more complex son, friend, American, brother, and the many other identities I exist as concurrently with being a teacher.

This multi-faceted approach to childhood identity development is focused on the various "disturbances" that can occur within a child's self-concept within their surrounding group. It is very much focused on the positive and negative reinforcement of actions that the surrounding community deems to be either acceptable or unacceptable. The child is an "active agent" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 8, 2003) in this conceptualization and the tasks, whether accomplished or not, contribute to the notions of self-efficacy and agency for the individual. Each

accomplishment contributes to a development in self-perceived status, which is discussed in another strand of the psychodynamic approach. There are many available approaches to explaining how teacher identity develops, as research in chapter two will suggest, and the following in Figure 1.1 are examples of a larger umbrella of relevant theory.

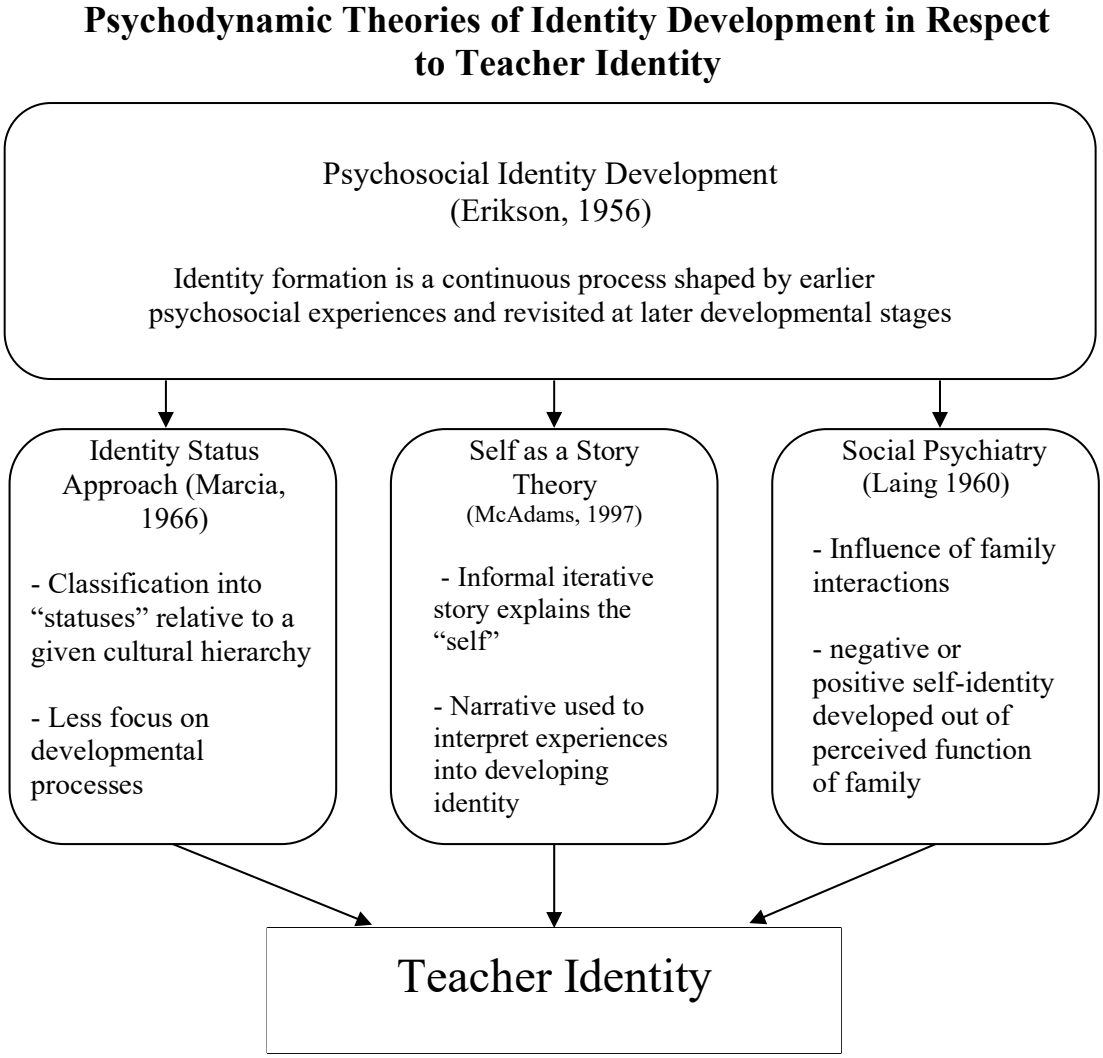


Figure 1.1 *Contributing Theories of Identity in Educators*

Psychodynamic theories of identity emphasize that identity is formed through developmental crises that require resolution over time. Erikson (1956, 1964) argued that individuals must negotiate tensions between personal continuity and social belonging in order to

develop a coherent sense of self. Friesen and Besley's (2013) framework explicitly adopted Erikson's framework as Marcia (1980) built upon it with the notion of identity status through identity related decisions. In a similar vein, Arriaga (2015), Stinson (2009), and Parke (2018) all explored how teachers reflect on their identity through the process of exploration and commitment. This framework and its use will be further elaborated on in the review of the literature.

Social Psychiatry

Laing's (1960) social psychiatry approach followed Erikson's approach in "emphasizing past, current, and future components of the experienced self" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 4, 2003). This approach involves a discussion on how dysfunctional families affect the nature of identity development. This means that specific interactions with family members that create a negative self-identity are, in effect, much larger determinants of how one may act out in reference to that constructed identity.

An example is provided that discusses how a daughter who develops anorexia may come from a home with a particularly judgmental mother and aloof father; this is in tandem with high expectations of her within the family. These circumstances contribute to a negative socio-cultural identity development that the daughter has developed as the confluence of these circumstances makes her believe that her weight is correlated with her worth. Similarly, in respect to my study, students that only perceive negative representations of themselves in mainstream media and have no positive representations (or any representations for that matter) in the available curriculum may feel either unseen or apply a negative self-concept. This is an identity shaping practice within our curriculum for students, and curriculum developers should be aware of how their choices can have ripple effects culturally.

Self as a Story Theory

Contemporarily known as the Narratology Approach (McAdams, 1997), two major themes dominate this conceptualization of identity. One of these themes is the appeal to an informal story "that is a theory of self, which self uses to 'explain' to self and others why one is and acts the way one does" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 2003, p. 11). This is the reiterated overarching story a person tells themselves in response to their successes or failures. The self's reiterative story of disadvantage and abuse "explains" the proneness towards victimization.

An example of this would be a self-described incel believing themselves to be victimized because of the continued disregard by the opposite sex. This reiterated story becomes the narrative of an individual to explain all of their actions, which can be positive or negative actions by the standards of the society around them. This is the theory of a person's existence, which becomes a core reference point. An individual will "judge encounters with the social worlds in accordance with it" (Weinrich & Saunderson, 4, 2003). This narratology displays itself among students in public school classrooms often.

Many students state that they "hate reading" or that "reading is boring" as a reiterative story that dissuades the student from pursuing recreational reading outside of school and detest assigned reading tasks in class. This narrative makes up much of the language students will use in response to inquiries about their self-described reading identity, and are therefore key data points for the purpose of this study.

Identity Status Approach (ISA)

Perhaps the most relevant to occupational identity, the Identity Status Approach (ISA), developed by Marcia (1980), builds on Erikson's work by classifying individuals into specific "identity statuses" based on their exploration and commitment to identity-related decisions

(Weinrich & Saunderson, 2003, p. 8). However, a key criticism of this approach is that it tends to oversimplify identity development by focusing on categories rather than the underlying processes involved. This limitation can lead to contradictions in interpretation because individuals may not fit neatly into a single identity status, or they may shift between statuses depending on context, experience, or developmental stage.

Such categorization risks ignoring the fluid, nonlinear, and often recursive nature of identity development. In response to this criticism, later iterations of the Identity Status Approach attempt to move beyond static classification by focusing more closely on the processes through which identity is formed, challenged, and renegotiated over time. This includes recognizing the roles of personal agency, social interaction, and cultural context in shaping identity trajectories (Weinrich & Saunderson, 2003).

Synthesis Towards Defining Teacher Identity Development

These various theories explain how individuals develop personal identities and, more specifically for this study, professional identities as teachers within particular cultural and institutional systems. Collectively, they emphasize that identity is neither fixed nor solely internally constructed, but instead emerges through ongoing social interaction, exploration of roles and goals, and the interpretation of the outcomes of those explorations over time. Psychodynamic theories of identity, as articulated by Erikson and synthesized by Weinrich and Saunderson (2003), provide a foundation for understanding teacher identity development as an extension of general identity formation, wherein experiences of success and failure, recognition, and belonging within classrooms and school communities contribute to a coherent sense of self as teacher.

Social psychiatry, particularly Laing's (1965) work, extends this framework by foregrounding the relational and social conditions under which identity is affirmed or destabilized, illustrating how patterns of validation or invalidation within families, schools, and institutions can produce disruptions to identity that persist into adulthood. Within this integrated framework, early social interactions in school function as formative identity experiences that can shape how individuals come to imagine teaching as a viable and meaningful vocation. Marcia's Identity Status Approach (1980) builds on Erikson's theory and provides relevance to the idea of an occupational identity such as "teacher" as a means of providing a foundation for the exploration and commitment in making the identity concrete.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given an explanation of my current research interests and why I have chosen to write an autoethnography. I believe this reflection on my childhood and journey to this point in my career was a fruitful endeavor in better understanding myself and my own experiences and understanding why I want to investigate identity development and why I chose to become a teacher. This research was an effort in understanding educators through qualitative research as well as the possible fruits of that investigation for teacher education programs. In Chapter 3, I expand on how this identity framework is operationalized through the study's methodological approach, including the use of vignettes, autoethnographic reflection, and thematic analysis.

Chapter 3 builds upon this foundation by detailing the methodological approach of my study, including the use of autoethnographic vignettes, thematic analysis, and reflexive writing. It will explain how the theoretical frameworks discussed in this chapter directly shaped the selection of personal narratives, the analytical procedures used, and the interpretive lens through

which I examine my identity development and healing. Through these methods, the next chapter will demonstrate how theory and methodology converge to support a rigorous, ethical, and meaningful exploration of teacher identity.

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

Teacher Identity Frameworks in Research

Teacher identity research is dynamic within the culture of both education and the larger culture surrounding the institution of public schools. The teacher goes through a constant shift in identity during the practice of developing as an educator. This development and its importance have been thoroughly researched in qualitative studies. As Meijer et al. (2014) noted, “Essential in pedagogies of identity is the focus on the “learning-aspect” of the development of a professional identity” (p. 295), and an understanding of the deeply embedded relationship of the personal self with the professional self. Identity is structured through the social relationships that develop within a given culture. Being a teacher is an inherently social task of “helping” students understand the material found in the curriculum, and sometimes more than what is found in the curriculum. Research in identity regarding the role of the educator can be viewed through multiple lenses. These frameworks provide complementary lenses that acknowledge the interplay of self-authored narratives, social belonging, future aspirations, and discursive positioning in the ongoing development of teacher identity.

In practice, identity frameworks that have been thoroughly explored through different studies provide the researcher with an opportunity to see how well a given framework explains the development of the professional identity. Although Narrative Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, Communities of Practice, Possible Selves Theory, and Positioning Theory arise from different disciplinary origins, they converge in their emphasis on identity as a socially situated, dynamic, and meaning-making process. Each framework recognizes that teacher identity is not a static trait but an ongoing negotiation between personal history, professional experience, and social context.

In this chapter, I provide research providing both a foreground and guide for my own autoethnographic study. I provide tables for each set of articles that relate to my own research, both in their focus in development of educator identities or their methodologies regarding autoethnography. The tables are divided into two categories: (a) studies that used multiple participants to explain the ways in which identity develops as a teacher works through their career where the chosen identity framework is highlighted (Table 2.1) and (b) studies that focused on independent autoethnographies where the findings and implications are highlighted (Table 2.2). After each table, I further elaborate on these highlights, as well as how the methodologies they use can be useful in my own autoethnography. The purpose of the search was not to exhaustively catalog all teacher identity research, but to identify influential and theoretically aligned studies that conceptualize teacher identity as developmental, social, relational, and narratively constructed in a manner aligned with and central to the analytic framing of this dissertation.

Search and Inclusion Criteria

To identify the scholarly works that informed this study's theoretical and methodological foundations, I conducted a systematic search using my university's library database, OneSearch. OneSearch was selected because it aggregates peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and academic texts across major databases, enabling a comprehensive and efficient literature review. Initial search terms included combinations of: *teacher identity*, *professional identity*, *teacher identity development*, *preservice teacher identity*, and *teacher professional identity*. My search process involved the use of targeted keywords, iterative refinement of search terms, and screening of abstracts to determine relevance to teacher identity, autoethnographic methodology, and identity development within educational contexts. These broad searches were then refined

using theory-specific terms aligned with the study's conceptual framework, including *social identity theory*, *Erikson identity development*, *narrative identity*, *positioning*, *agency*, and *communities of practice*.

I first used the phrase *autoethnography* in conjunction with *education* to locate scholarly work that operated at the intersection of this methodology and the field of educational research. This initial review was conducted to establish how autoethnographic approaches have been positioned, justified, and explained within education research, and to identify methodological conventions relative to this study (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Engaging with this body of literature supported the development of a research design grounded in reflexivity and positionality while maintaining alignment with qualitative research standards.

I then conducted a subsequent review focused on *English Education* to examine how autoethnographies may have been taken up within my specific discipline within education. This step was guided by the goal of situating the study within conversations specific to English education, particularly those concerned with identity formation and maintenance, ensuring my methodological approach was theoretically sound in a manner consistent with existing research.

Seminal review articles and frequently cited empirical studies were prioritized to establish definitional clarity and theoretical grounding. For example, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) was identified through searches combining teacher professional identity and review, and served as an example that framed teacher identity as multifaceted, evolving, and closely tied to teachers' personal practical knowledge. Friesen and Besley (2013) was selected because it explicitly integrates Erikson's theory of identity development with social identity theory, offering a developmental-social bridge that informs the present study's attention to both internal meaning-making and group affiliation in becoming a teacher.

To foreground identity as relational, discursive, and context dependent, the search was further refined using terms such as *narrative inquiry, positioning, agency,* and *teacher identity*. Kayi-Aydar (2015) came from this search, and it was included due to its narrative positioning approach and emphasis on identity as fluid and continuously negotiated. Barkhuizen (2016) was included because it provides a conceptual bridge between narrative identity theory (McAdams, 1997) and teacher identity research, legitimizing autobiographical reflection as both a pedagogical and methodological practice. This framing directly supports the use of self-narrative as data in the present study.

Finally, to connect identity development to professional learning and community participation, more recent literature came out of the search terms *teacher professional development*, *identity*, and *communities of practice.* Talafian et al. (2025) was identified as an example demonstrating how teacher identity develops from participation within a community. Talafian et al. portray identity development as movement from exploration toward commitment within a professional community. From college course and the internship to professional development within their district, teachers explore their options of pedagogical identity which influences their identity as an educator through the commitment towards one of those choices.

Table 2.1 *Multiple Participant Identity Frameworks Used in Educator Identity Research*

Author(s) (Year)	**Abstract**	**Findings/Implications**
Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004)	The studies considered in this review of recent research on teachers' professional identity can be divided into three categories: (1) studies in which the focus was on teachers' professional identity formation, (2) studies in which the focus was on the identification of characteristics of teachers'	This review of studies regarding teacher identity development found that the most common definitional understanding of teacher's identities was through the concept of Social Identity Theory. This explored how teachers see themselves within a group affiliation of the role of teacher. A shared sense or perception of professional identity is hard to identify in the

Table 2.1 Continued

	professional identity, and (3) studies in which professional identity was (re)presented by teachers' stories. Four essential features of teachers' professional identity could be derived from the studies. Many of the reviewed studies appeared to be studies on teachers' personal practical knowledge. However, in only a few studies was the relationship between this knowledge and professional identity made explicit.	studies on aspects of teachers' professional identity.
Friesen, M. D., & Besley, S. C. (2013)	The study examined the development of teacher identity in a cohort of first year student teachers from a developmental and social psychological perspective, relying on Erikson's (1964) theory of identity development and Turner, Oakes, Haslam, and McGarty's (1994) self-categorization theory. As hypothesized, aspects of both personal identity development and social identity were significantly associated with higher teacher identity after controlling for several covariates.	The goal of this study was to describe the associations between aspects of personal and social identity, generativity, and the development of teacher identity in first year teaching students. The results of this study provided evidence that those with experience working with children and those that were parents showed higher levels of teacher identity compared with non-parents and those without experience working with children.
Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015)	This study explores the identity (re)negotiations and agency of three pre-service classroom teachers who received their ESL (English as a Second Language) endorsement at a research university in the United States. An analysis of	Using narrative inquiry, Kayi-Aydar found that the three participating ESL preservice teachers constructed differing positional identities depending on the contexts in which they narrated their experiences. Through journals and researcher interviews, the participants revealed that their identities were not fixed but

Table 2.1 Continued

	interview data and teachers' journal entries, from a narrative positioning perspective, indicates that the teachers took on various, and sometimes conflicting, positional identities in relation to their social context (e.g., mentor teachers, ELLs, etc.). The findings further indicate that those positional identities have shaped teachers' agency and self-reported classroom practices. The analysis presented provides implications for teachers of ELLs and teacher educators.	fluid, shifting in response to classroom dynamics and the discursive spaces they occupied. The findings indicated that these teachers' positional identities were shaped most directly in relation to English Language Learner (ELL) students and mentor teachers, suggesting that identity development is deeply relational and context-dependent. Importantly, the study underscores how teacher agency is negotiated rather than assumed, as the participants positioned themselves differently depending on power relations, expectations, and interactions with students and mentors. The implications highlighted the need for teacher education programs to foreground identity work as part of professional preparation, creating space for preservice teachers to critically reflect on how social positioning, institutional hierarchies, and relationships with learners influence their sense of self as educators.
Barkhuizen, G (2016)	This article presents a theoretical overview of the concept of teacher identity, particularly focusing on poststructuralist conceptions of what identity means, and shows how these ideas can be associated with ideas about narrative and narrative inquiry.	The Identity Framework found in this article is that of narrative identity (McAdams, 1997). This framework serves to allow teachers to use the practice of reflection, as all pre-service teachers are encouraged to do, in order to determine their developed or developing teacher identity. This individualistic, postmodern approach helps researchers see the development of identity as a unique in specific experience for each individual as opposed to qualitative research geared towards defining the qualities of the named group studied.
Talafian, et al. (2025)	Creating learning environments that can	This study framed teachers' growth as movement from peripheral

Table 2.1 Continued

	accommodate teachers' diverse needs is challenging because responsive elements are not clearly defined or identified. This study identified responsive teacher professional development (PD) elements by taking a phenomenological approach. Using surveys and interviews with 13 high school physics teachers in a PD program at a Midwestern university, the researchers identified responsive features such as practicality, flexibility, and accessibility core to the enactment of a responsive PD. Other features were opportunities for community engagement, pedagogical support, and professional growth, which were aligned with the benefits of engagement in a Community of Practice model incorporated in this work.	participation toward more intentional engagement in the professional community (a direct borrowing from Wenger's Communities of Practice model which fits within Marcia's ISA framework). The study focused on how professional development for teachers could reinforce their identity within the community of other educators. Collaborative meaning-making within professional development supported both participation as well as positive self narrative in terms of effectiveness as educators.

Teacher Identity as Academic Research

Teacher identity research continues to evolve from the developmental and psychodynamic foundations first articulated by Erikson (1956). Erikson's view of identity as emerging through social interaction and self-evaluation within one's community established the notion that identity is both intrapersonal and relational. Friesen and Besley (2013) extended this framework into teacher education, drawing on Erikson's psychosocial model and Marcia's (1980) Identity Status Approach to empirically examine how preservice teachers negotiate exploration and commitment in their professional identities.

Their findings, that generativity, experience with children, and parental roles predict stronger teacher identity, reflect Erikson's assertion that identity formation depends on mastering developmental tasks that promote self-efficacy and belonging. Marcia's focus on exploration and commitment, as explored in Friesen and Besley (2013), showed that professional identity is neither fixed nor singular but constantly mediated by developmental stage and lived experience. Self-concept being defined through "explorative" successes and failures which each help the individual "commit" to the adopted identity.

While developmental theories highlight internal progression, social theories such as Laing's (1965) social psychiatry foreground the relational conditions that shape one's sense of self. Central to *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1965) is the concept of ontological security, the felt sense that one's self is continuous, real, and able to exist safely in relation to others. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) echoed this orientation in their synthesis of studies linking professional identity to Social Identity Theory, arguing that teachers define themselves through group affiliation and social validation. This social constructionist lens frames identity as emerging through dialogue with "the other" colleagues, institutions, and cultural expectations, which mirrors Laing's claim that identity disturbances often originate in dysfunctional social feedback.. Many of the experiences described in this work describe the negative experiences as an educator having a more profound impact than the positive examples in their narratives.

Similarly, Talafian et al. (2025) illustrated this dynamic through Wenger's (1998) *Communities of Practice* model. Their phenomenological study of high-school physics teachers revealed that participation, community engagement, and shared practice foster responsive professional development and reinforce a collective sense of self. By situating identity within communal interaction rather than isolated introspection, both studies extend psychodynamic and

ISA concepts of agency into a sociocultural framework in which belonging and recognition become central to identity maintenance.

Across the body of research employing different identity theories, several complementary dimensions emerge that help explain how educational identities are developed and sustained through the narratives teachers tell themselves. Narrative Identity Theory has been applied to teacher development to illuminate the reflective, storied ways educators make sense of their professional experiences (Barkhuizen, 2016). Barkhuizen's work examined "the complex interrelationship between identity, language, and power," making a compelling case for a narrative approach to understanding teachers' evolving sense of self (p. 26). Using thematic analysis of participant journals, he framed identity development as a discursive activity; one shaped by language, reflection, and the ongoing reconstruction of personal and professional stories.

Similarly, Kayi-Aydar's (2015) study of three ESL preservice teachers used Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) to explore how identity is socially constructed through language and interaction. In this framework, teachers' identities are not fixed but are continually negotiated as they position themselves in relation to others, students, mentors, and institutional expectations, while remaining aware of their own evolving self-narratives. In this way, both used narratology from which they found data regarding teacher identity.

Identity scholarship moves toward narrative-based interpretations of identity that resonated with McAdams' (1997) *Self as a Story* theory. Barkhuizen (2016) and Kayi-Aydar (2015) both framed teacher identity as a process of ongoing narrative negotiation. Teachers within the research used this narrative storytelling to provide context as well as data for the researchers through interviews and journals. This narrative practice served both as a

methodological tool as well as a conceptual bridge across multiple identity frameworks represented in the literature.

In Barkhuizen's (2016) poststructuralist framing, narrative reflection allows teachers to construct and reconstruct their professional selves, emphasizing the fluidity of identity as it evolves through lived experience. Similarly, Kayi-Aydar (2015) demonstrates how preservice teachers use storytelling to navigate their positional identities within shifting social contexts, revealing how identity is both narratively performed and socially navigated. The conclusions from these studies explain identity development as a continuing dialogic process. We find ourselves in conversations with others, both through language and transactional relationships, and these experiences inform how we see ourselves in a continual redefinition process.

Theoretical Tensions, Critiques, and Reflexive Positioning

As aforementioned, this research draws on Erikson's theory of identity development as a foundational framework for understanding the tensions, commitments, and disruptions evident across the narratives presented in Chapter 4. Erikson's conceptualization of identity, particularly the psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion, has been influential in shaping subsequent theories of identity development and remains widely cited research. However, Erikson's theory has also been the subject of sustained critique (Arnett, 2000; Côté, 2016: Kroger, 2017), particularly regarding its assumptions about linear development, coherence, and universality. In presenting my analyses, it is therefore necessary to situate this study in relation to those critiques and to clarify how Erikson's theory is used cautiously, selectively, and in dialogue with other theoretical perspectives to alleviate this theoretical tension.

One of the most frequent critiques of Erikson's identity theory concerns its stage-based and linear structure. Erikson conceptualized identity development as unfolding through a series

of psychosocial crises tied to age-related stages. Critics have argued that such a model inadequately captures the ongoing, recursive, and non-linear nature of identity development. Identity, from this perspective is not resolved once and for all, but is continually renegotiated in relation to social, cultural, and historical conditions which are addressed with both Marcia and Laing's theoretical use in this research. This critique is particularly salient for the present study, which traces identity development across multiple life stages rather than treating adolescence as a definitive endpoint. Rather than assuming resolution, this analysis attends to moments of destabilization, regression, and reconfiguration. In this way, Erikson's framework is used not as a rigid developmental sequence, but as a language for examining identity tension and moments in which questions of self, purpose, and belonging are brought to the foreground by lived experience.

Search Protocol for Autoethnographies Investigating Educational Identity

Following an initial review of autoethnographic research in education for the material in Table 2.1, I conducted a focused search to identify studies in which teachers used autoethnographic methodologies to examine professional identity development. This phase of the review was guided by the goal of locating exemplars in which teachers positioned themselves as both practitioner and researcher, using lived experience, memory, and reflective writing as primary sources of data to analyze how identity shapes instructional practice, professional commitment, and meaning-making over time. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research and dissertations that foregrounded identity construction as a central analytic concern and documented sustained or disruptive moments of professional change.

Studies such as Stinson's (2009) reflective examination of mathematics teacher identity, Vasconcelos's (2014) vignette-based exploration of the teacher-learner self, Arriaga's (2015)

autoethnography of sustainability and commitment in urban teaching, and Parke's (2018) analysis of illness, recovery, and identity transformation were included because they demonstrate how autoethnography functions as a rigorous qualitative method for examining teacher identity as ongoing, situated, and relational. These studies all provide examples of how this autoethnography can only be accomplished through significant and iterative reflection of both the narrative itself as well as the moments that highlight identity development as it becomes visible in relation to the guiding theoretical frameworks.

Table 2.2 *Autoethnographies Investigating Educational Identity*

Author(s) (Year)	**Abstract**	**Findings/Implications**
Stinson, A. (2009)	The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a personalized account of one twenty eight year veteran mathematics teacher's use of reflective teaching as a resource for change. This dissertation is about a journey of change in instruction that was fostered by a change of identity as a mathematics teacher. This dissertation chronicles the identity construction of the teacher. This study has relevance because the process utilized by the teacher provides a method of self-examination and identity construction for other mathematics classroom teachers who want to improve their practices. This study also has relevance because it describes the process of how a classroom teacher takes ownership of self-improvement.	This very reflective dissertation provided insight mostly for the author, as he admits, on his identity development within the classroom. Stinson is proud of his alignment with identity development found in Danielewicz (2002) book on teacher identity development where teachers are not just putting on a role as a teacher, but completely creating an identity as a teacher. Further, he reflects on the necessity of having this type of reflective thinking. Theoretically framed by this identity theory, Stinson found that his research question regarding how identity construction in the classroom affects teaching practices was answered through his development as a more multifaceted educator. As a mathematics teacher, he had not promoted critical discourse among his students, yet he found this to be an invaluable practice as he reflected on his continuously developing understanding of how useful critical reflection can be for all vocations. Further, he found that collaboration was a continuously developing skill through the career of an educator in general, but he personally also found he became more open to

Table 2.2 Continued

		collaboration with other mathematics teachers as he became more comfortable in the situated identity of an educator.
Vasconcelos, E. (2014)	This article is an autoethnographic investigation of Vasconcelos' second-nature teacher-student self. What has made her into the teacher she is? What makes her the teacher she is? She draws upon her memories of er own teachers and students to address these questions. She portrays her teaching-learning experiences as textual "snapshots," and finds that her dearest memories come from when I have been in dialogue with my teachers and students. This investigation leads her to pedagogy centering attention to teacher-student relationships; a humanizing pedagogy that she discovers, embraces, and which redefines and recreates her teacher-learner self.	Vasconcelos admits that the answers to the questions she poses in the introduction are not clear cut even after her own reflections. She states that her "greatest teachers had different personalities, came from various sociocultural backgrounds, and employed an array of teaching methods and techniques" (p. 436). This reflective process has made her want to be as much like those teachers as she can be in a consistently purposeful manner. She used vignettes or "snapshots" as her data source to explain how her continuous internal dialogue made her a "teacher-learner" whom stands on the shoulders of her best teachers in trying to be her best self as an educator. Her conclusion is left open-ended for this reason. She will continue to try to be the best teacher she can be, and she hopes other teachers will as well.
Arriaga, J. (2015)	The purpose of the study is to offer a first-hand description of factors that affect the profession of teaching and especially teachers who may be wondering how to stay in teaching for more than five years. Veteran teachers gain the opportunity to reflect, validate, and (probably) celebrate their own journey through this profession. This autoethnography uses the experience of a 29-year veteran teacher, who	The study's implications include two sub-groups: teacher education programs and school administrators. The implication for teachers is the importance of a two-fold support system in order to thrive: first teachers need spiritual support and second they need to surround themselves with like minded teachers. The implications for teacher education programs include making pre-service teachers aware of the realities of urban settings and provide them with resources, which could help overcome the attrition rate. Additionally, pre-service teachers need to know how to form credible relationships with their students.

Table 2.2 Continued

	started with an alternative teaching license, to mirror what researchers have identified as key factors for sustainability and how they affected my continued commitment to teaching in urban schools.	This study also reveals the important role that school principals play in the success of their teachers. First, principals are responsible for creating a positive school climate that promotes a professional learning community. Second, they need to establish relational trust in their building. Third, they need to nourish their staff both physically and emotionally. Finally, the implications of autoethnography for teachers and researchers are also discussed.
Parke, E. (2018)	This autoethnographic work explores the author's experience with illness (specifically anti-N-methyl D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor encephalitis) alongside the processes of recovery and career change that unfolded within a few months. Through reflexive interviews and a first-person narrative, the study analyzes the shifting nature of the author's identity, particularly their teacher identity as it evolved from struggling educator to patient and then back to teacher. It also examines how the act of writing, and the process of composing the autoethnographic narrative, contributed to healing. The author's story illustrates that, in moving from pre-illness to post-illness, their teaching identity transformed from that of a strict, content-focused instructor to a constructivist facilitator emphasizing critical thinking.	This autoethnography narrates and analyzes how healing can occur in the process of establishing yourself within the profession after significant traumatic experiences. The author found that the writing of an autoethnography was cathartic in respect to her traumatic experience of nearly losing the opportunity to teach. She states that this autoethnography is only a snapshot of a continuous reflection on her understanding of her identity as a teacher that has had to claw back from a traumatic affliction. The author's implications for teacher research include the role of confidence in teacher identity, the needs of teachers that return to the classroom after a hiatus, and the possiblility of all teachers participating in a form of autoethnography in order to better understand themselves within their vocation.

Autoethnographies Investigating Educational Identity

Autoethnography is a valuable methodology in educational research because it allows scholars to explore the complex interplay between personal experience and broader cultural and institutional contexts. By placing the researcher's personal narrative in the greater framework of education, autoethnography provides a way to critically examine how identity, power, and social structures shape teaching as a practice of identity development or stabilization. This approach is especially useful in uncovering the often-hidden emotional, relational, and cultural dimensions of education that more traditional methods may overlook.

It also fosters reflexivity, encouraging researchers to interrogate their own positionality and how it influences their interpretations. Ultimately, autoethnography contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of educational practices and policies by blending lived experience with scholarly analysis in a narrative manner unseen in other forms of research within the field. The studies found in Table 2.2 each approached autoethnographic research through different methodological approaches. Each one helped inform my understanding of how to approach my own research, both with the possible benefits and possible gaps in reliability found in each one.

Autoethnography has increasingly become a methodological space through which teachers explore the layered dimensions of identity, practice, and personal transformation. The studies by Arriaga (2015), Vasconcelos (2014), Stinson (2009), and Parke (2018) exemplify how this methodology situates lived experience as both data and analytic lens. Each study contributes to insights about teaching and how identity develops and/or changes in respect to trauma, career trajectory changes, illness, and the reflective practice of being an educator. Examining these works together reveals distinct methodological practices, shared strengths and limitations, and a range of substantive implications for teacher identity research.

All four studies employed first-person narrative as the primary data source, yet they vary in scope, structure, and analytic rigor. Arriaga (2015) reflected upon nearly three decades of professional experience in urban schools, using reflective narrative retrospection to explore factors that support teacher longevity in his estimation based on these experiences. His narrative acts as both personal testimony and a mirror to existing research on teacher attrition, blending autobiography with reflexive practice. Vasconcelos (2014), by contrast, structured her study through a series of "snapshots" or vignettes that capture her interactions with teachers and students. These episodic reflections function as episodes of relational formation of her identity and teacher-self.

Stinson (2009), whose dissertation focused on his identity transformation as a veteran mathematics teacher, incorporated multiple data sources including reflective journals, instructional materials, and documentation of pedagogical shifts. His approach aligns with formal self-study traditions, offering more triangulated evidence than narrative-only accounts like those of Vasconcelos and Arriaga. This provides a degree of reliability that evidence strictly drawn from memory does not. Finally, Parke (2018) integrated first-person narrative with reflexive interviews, positioning writing as both method and mechanism for recovery after illness. Her approach emphasizes the therapeutic and reconstructive potential of autoethnography as she documents a shift from rigid, content-centered teaching toward a constructivist, student-centered stance.

All of these studies demonstrate reflexivity by the researchers in regards to their practice as educators, though the degree of methodological transparency differs. Stinson (2009) and Parke (2018) make reflexivity an explicit analytic procedure with the use of journals and memoing. Vasconcelos (2014) has the most aligned methodological approach to my own research aims.

She used “snapshots” to show her continuous internal and external dialogue with both students and herself. She also explains that her aim in her study was to help her understand her own story as an educator in deference to the educators she had as a student. Her reflexivity is an act of respect for those educators and she sees herself as a work in progress. As Vasconcelos put it, she wrote her autoethnography to “honor (her) teachers of the past and the present, and to inspire (her) students of the present and the future to write their own stories too (2014, p. 437). I feel a similar sentiment in my own impetus for this research.

Framework Representation in the Literature

The theoretical frameworks of identity development I have chosen for my research were represented in every autoethnographic literature example I found as they all exemplified, in one way or another, self-narratives as data in forming identity in an iterative reflexive practice. Marcia’s Identity Status Theory (1966) explains how identity commitment is reached through exploration and commitment. Laing’s Social Psychiatry (1965) explains why trauma disrupts identity by fracturing relationships and social meaning. McAdams’ Narrative Identity Theory (1997) explains how meaning is made, showing how individuals create coherence by turning lived experiences into personal stories. Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory of Identity Development (1956) explains where identity stabilization occurs across the lifespan, situating commitment within key developmental stages.

However, there were ways in which the literature would explicitly or, more commonly, implicitly represent a theory of identity I have chosen for the present study. A way of clarifying how I read these works was through the ways in which the author would frame the identity development in the study. In the following table, I list the theories and their representations identified in each study as either implicit or explicit along with a brief explanation for each. For

the sake of clarity, if an identity framework is not represented, I defined it as *not applicable* (NA) within the table.

Table 2.3 *Theoretical Framework Representation in Autoethnographic Literature*

Study	**Identity Status Approach (Marcia)**	**Social Psychiatry (Laing)**	**Self as a Story Theory (McAdams)**	**Identity Stabilization (Erikson)**
Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop (2004)	Implicit (identity defined through professional role commitments)	Implicit (identity embedded in social roles)	NA	Implicit (identity stability linked to professional self-concept)
Stinson (2009)	Explicit (movement toward identity achievement through reflective practice)	NA	Explicit (reflective narrative as identity construction)	Implicit (consolidation of professional identity through sustained reflection)
Friesen & Besley (2013)	Implicit (movement toward achieved teacher identity)	NA	NA	Explicit (direct success/failure development towards stabilization)
Vasconcelos (2014)	Implicit (identity shaped through reflective comparison with admired teachers)	Implicit (identity emerges through dialogic teacher–student relationships)	Explicit (identity constructed through autobiographical "snapshots")	Implicit (continued exploration of teacher self)
Arriaga (2015)	Implicit (identity tensions and resolution across teaching career)	Explicit (identity shaped through lived experience, trauma, and interaction)	Explicit (autoethnographic self-narrative as identity construction)	Implicit (identity coherence developed through teaching role)
Kayi-Aydar (2015)	Implicit (identity negotiation through shifting commitments)	Implicit (identity shaped through relational positioning)	Explicit (narrative positioning; identity constructed through self-storying)	Implicit (identity fluidity during preservice stage)

Table 2.3 Continued

Table 2.3 Continued

Barkhuizen (2016)	Implicit (identity formation through reflection and narrative exploration)	Implicit (identity shaped through discourse, language, and power relations)	Explicit (narrative identity; teachers construct identity through storytelling)	Implicit (identity development over time through meaning-making of events)
Parke (2018)	Explicit (identity disruption and re-achievement following trauma)	Implicit (illness as a socially and relationally destabilizing experience)	Explicit (healing through narrative reconstruction)	Explicit (reestablishing identity after crisis)
Talafian et al. (2025)	Implicit (movement from peripheral to committed professional identity)	Implicit (identity developed within relational communities)	Implicit (professional self-narratives reinforced through PD participation)	Implicit (identity consolidation through professional engagement)

This table helped me see where the most common forms of identity development relative to those displayed on the table are represented in the literature as well as in what ways they are used for analysis. Erikson's Identity stabilization and Marcia's Identity Status Approach are relevant to all of the studies either implicitly or explicitly. The vocation of teacher plays a great role in the thinking of each narrative and that serves as a stabilizing foundation for describing themselves relative to their function within the systems of education and the societal role educators fill.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized the literature which helped inform my work by demonstrating that identity development in education is a multidimensional, fluid, and relational process shaped by personal history, social context, and professional experience. Theoretical perspectives such as Erikson's psychosocial model, Marcia's identity status framework, and narrative conceptions of

identity underscore the importance of exploring how individuals negotiate crises, make commitments, and form coherent self-understandings over time.

Studies of teacher identity using multiple participants, including those by Barkhuizen (2016), Beijaard et al. (2004), Friesen and Besley (2013), Kayi-Aydar (2015), and Talafian et al. (2025), collectively affirmed that identity is not a static attribute but an ongoing developmental process influenced by community participation, reflective practice, and the sociocultural spaces teachers inhabit.

The body of autoethnographic research from individual narratives reviewed including Arriaga (2015), Vasconcelos (2014), Stinson (2009), and Parke (2018), illustrates how personal narrative, reflexivity, and vignettes illuminated the complex intersections of personal history, professional growth, trauma, and healing. These studies demonstrated the methodological power of autoethnography to capture the internal processes of identity reconstruction and meaning-making, particularly for educators navigating moments of transition, adversity, or transformation. Their methodological choice, such as the use of narrative snapshots, reflective journaling, dialogic memory, and iterative self-analysis inspired and informed the structure of my methodology, which I will describe in the following chapter.

Collectively, the literature reviewed in this chapter establishes that identity development is a dynamic, relational, and narrative process; that autoethnography is a rigorous method for examining such processes; and that prior research has successfully integrated identity theory with autoethnographic inquiry. However, few studies explicitly examine how early childhood trauma interacts with professional identity stabilization in teaching. This gap informs the methodological choices described in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 : Methodology

The preceding chapters established the theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding teacher identity development and its relation to personal experience, trauma, and professional growth. Building upon that foundation, this chapter outlines the methodological framework of my own autoethnographic study, in which I employ vignettes as narrative data points to examine the evolution and stabilization of my identity as an English teacher. Drawing from Vasconcelos (2014), whose work similarly used reflective vignettes as units of analysis, I approach these narrative fragments as both personal stories and analytical sites for meaning-making.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how my methodological choices enable an exploration of identity development through self-narrative and reflection. By analyzing my lived experiences spanning a traumatic childhood, early teaching experiences, and recovery through pedagogical practice, I aim to reveal how identity is negotiated across personal and professional contexts. Through this process, I also consider how these findings might inform teacher education programs, particularly in preparing educators to reflect critically on the relationship between personal history and professional identity formation.

The data for this study are drawn from autobiographical vignettes and reflective journal entries written during and after therapy sessions. These vignettes capture pivotal moments of identity construction: becoming a teacher, negotiating my sense of self within the classroom, and reconciling personal trauma with professional purpose. A central focus of this inquiry is the ongoing tension between the fragmentation produced by a dysfunctional family background and the stability found through teaching.

This chapter is organized as follows: first, I define autoethnographic research and its relevance to identity studies; next, I outline my research design and methodological orientation, followed by a discussion of positionality and reflexivity as they pertain to my dual role as participant and researcher. I then describe the process for selecting vignettes and explain how they function as data within the study. Finally, I discuss the use of therapeutic journaling as a complementary data source, including the theoretical rationale for its inclusion, and conclude by outlining how these data will be presented and analyzed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will provide implications for educational identity research.

Autoethnography as Research

Autoethnography is the act of making sense of the world through reflection on one's lived experience within the cultural systems that shape meaning. It is both a research method and a representational practice, allowing the researcher to "make sense of lived experience and communicate it to others" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 52). Within the context of identity research, autoethnography functions as a qualitative methodology that interweaves personal narrative with cultural, social, and theoretical analysis.

Emerging from the narrative turn in the social sciences of the 1980s, autoethnography foregrounds storytelling and experience as legitimate forms of inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Carolyn Ellis (2004) described autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. xix). This framing is useful for identity-focused work because it situates the self not as an isolated object of study, but as a participant in the ongoing negotiation of meaning within social and professional contexts.

In this study, autoethnography is employed with a praxis-oriented aim, that is, to transform personal reflection into actionable insight for educational practice and personal and professional growth. The goal is not only to describe or theorize the formation of teacher identity, but to consider how reflective storytelling and narrative inquiry can stabilize identity and foster resilience following childhood trauma and professional transition into being an educator. This approach follows Boylorn and Orbe's (2020) call for critical autoethnography that links self-understanding to pedagogical and institutional change. While the research engages descriptively with the vignettes of lived experience, it also draws theoretically from narrative identity (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993) to analyze how the construction and reconstruction of self-stories support identity continuity and healing.

The interpretive foundation of this research aligns with constructivist and narrative paradigms, emphasizing the ways individuals make meaning through storytelling. Bruner (1990) argued that human understanding is narrative in nature, that we "organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative" (p. 4). Likewise, McAdams (1993) proposed that individuals construct "life stories" that integrate past experiences, present challenges, and imagined futures into a coherent self-concept. Within this framework, autoethnography allows these narrative processes to be rendered visible: the researcher becomes both storyteller and analyst, examining how language, emotion, and social positioning shape the evolution of professional identity.

Autoethnographic identity research thus bridges the personal with the theoretical, transforming lived experience into scholarly and pedagogical insight. It challenges the traditional separation between researcher and subject, instead embracing vulnerability, emotion, and authenticity as valid forms of knowledge production (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For teachers, this

mode of inquiry underscores how professional identity is formed not merely through formal training or institutional policy but through lived negotiation across classrooms, relationships, and crises. By drawing from personal narrative and established theoretical frameworks, this autoethnography both documents and participates in identity construction, advancing a human-centered, reflective approach to understanding teacher identity development and stabilization.

Positionality and Reflexivity as Praxis

In qualitative research, and particularly in autoethnography, the positionality of the researcher is a significant part of the data. This accounting of *who I am* and how it informs *what I know* is an important epistemological grounding. Positionality refers to the acknowledgment of how one's social, cultural, and professional identities shape the production and interpretation of knowledge (Milner, 2007, 2024). Reflexivity extends this awareness into active, ongoing reflection on how personal experiences, assumptions, and emotions influence the research process (Finlay, 2002). In this research, I position myself as the researcher and the participant, examining how my lived experiences and multiple lived identities have influenced my understanding of each one in respect to being a teacher. I have used teaching as a means of necessary stabilization of identity.

My perspective as an educator first is grounded in my identity as a reader. I have been a teacher for over a decade, and that identity has helped me tremendously in creating a foundational ethos of "just be there for them and have a book ready when they're ready for it." I invited students to think critically and express themselves through narratives in daily bellringers that connected with the given standard, but let students show themselves to the classroom if they cared to share. Teaching became not only my profession but a significant component of how I defined myself.

My story as a child who *needed* books to escape the world I was in for much of my period of avoiding a rage-filled father and an often inebriated mother. The books gave me a place to escape, and I feel that an English teacher's responsibility is to direct children to books that will help them discover themselves. The byproduct of engaging with texts creates opportunities for academic success, as it did for me. So many students I have had have needed some sort of escape from the realities of their home life, and none of the most common means of escape such as social media or video games. Books provide opportunities to escape both metaphorically and literally.

My identity as a teacher is inextricably linked to my experiences as a child of abuse not only as a reasonable extension of why I chose my vocation, but also in how both have shaped the stories I tell about myself and the roles I inhabit in relation to others. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued, human experience is storied. Our lives unfold through the narratives we live, tell, retell, and relive through memories. Through this lens of narrative inquiry, I have come to understand that my teaching practice and my personal history are not separate strands, but rather interwoven narratives that continually inform one another. Teaching has become a reminder of my childhood as I work with students that are struggling at home, which helps maintain my "why" as an educator in a cultural context that devalues the role of both teachers and texts within learning. This juxtaposition of my yearning to be there for students in a way that English teachers uniquely can be and the conversely negative cultural narratives described in contemporary political rhetoric creates a dichotomy of who a *teacher* is in my mind as I interact in the world.

This research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is socially and narratively constructed through interaction and reflection. As Bruner

(1990; McAdams, 2001) suggested, we organize and interpret our experiences through stories that give coherence to our identities. This stance aligns with the use of autoethnography as a methodology that values subjective experience as both data and analysis, positioning self-narrative as a valid means of understanding professional identity development.

Reflexive Practice in the Research Process

Reflexivity was an essential component of this autoethnographic study, functioning as both a methodological and ethical practice. After each given vignette, I used reflections from personal journals in conjunction with discussions around my experiences in therapy. This is so I can provide an analytical distance from my emotionally laden personal experiences when analyzing how my identity is/was unstable throughout my childhood and into adulthood, and what specific measures I have been able to find within my interpretations of my experiences to find stabilization. Because I am both the subject and the researcher, my interpretations are inevitably shaped by personal history, emotion, and evolving identity.

To maintain critical self-awareness, I approached the research process as a continual cycle of reflection and response, documenting how my perspectives shifted across time and context. Following Finlay's (2002) call for "thoughtful, conscious self-awareness," I treated reflexivity not as a one-time declaration but as an ongoing engagement with my own meaning-making processes. Pillow (2003) similarly reminds qualitative researchers that reflexivity should resist comfort and certainty; it should keep the researcher accountable to the complexity and partiality of their interpretations.

Choosing Vignettes

The selection of specific vignettes from my childhood and early professional life is grounded in the theoretical frameworks informing this study, Erikson's (1956) psychodynamic

theory of identity, Marcia's (1980) social identity status model, and Laing's (1965) Social psychiatry identity model. Each vignette is chosen for both its autobiographical relevance and for the ways it illuminates the developmental processes of exploration, commitment, and identity reconstruction that have occurred through my work as an English teacher. I chose to do some contextualization of my childhood before beginning my vignettes as a means of explaining my parents' influence on my identity through the generational trauma they have received, and then subsequently passed on to myself and my sister.

I have chosen four vignettes described here in short form:

1. Finding Safety in Reading: Early Identity Formation Through Solitude
2. Exploration of Academic Competence Amidst Trauma
3. Embodied Pedagogical Identity in Martial Arts Practice
4. Exploration of Teaching Identity as a Traumatized/Trauma Informed Educator

Each of these vignettes represents a point in my life where reading, education, or teaching as practice provided stability in my life that I was not able to find in my personal relationships. In discussion I have had in therapy, I found that many of my feelings of contentment with myself revolve around my enthusiasm for reading, academic successes, pedagogical successes, and/or feelings that I have provided a comfortable place for others around myself.

Analysis of Vignettes

The autoethnographic data consist of first-person narratives representing salient experiences across childhood, adolescence, and professional teaching life. Analysis as well as figures for visual interpretation will be provided after each vignette with a focus on my identity frameworks as the lens through which my personal narratives and experiences shaped my

inclination towards English education, and my commitment to this vocation as a means of stabilizing my identity.

Specific attention in my earlier narratives will use Laing's social psychiatry (1965), which foregrounds the relational and familial conditions under which identity develops. This lens is especially relevant in vignettes depicting childhood trauma, where identity formation is analyzed as a response to relational environments rather than individual pathology. Teaching English and engaging with literature are interpreted as relational counter-spaces as contexts in which meaning, voice, and recognition are restored through interaction with texts and students. Here, Marcia's Identity Status Theory (1966), narrative episodes are examined for evidence of exploration and commitment, revealing how identity commitments emerge over time.

Using narratives as data allows identity to be analyzed in ways that clarify how meaning is made, where disruptions occur, and where stabilization of identity occurs across a lifespan. To operationalize this analytic stance, I coded my narratives through four complimentary lenses. Drawing on Marica's Identity Status Theory (1966), narrative segments were coded for evidence of exploration and commitment, highlighting how commitments develop over time and the influence on self image that results. Laing's Social Psychiatry (1965) directs towards coding toward moments of relational rupture, conflict, care, and recognition, explaining why trauma and disrupted relationships destabilize identity.

McAdam's Narrative Identity Theory (1997, 2001) frames the narrative itself as analytic data, with codes attending to coherence, turning points, and redemptive meaning-making that show how experiences are organized into self-stories. Finally, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1956, 1968) situates coded patterns developmentally, allowing analysis of where identity stabilization occurs as early experiences are integrated into sustained adult roles, such as

teaching. Through these theoretical lenses, with cited peer expansions of each theory in my analysis, I coded and analyzed my autoethnographic data.

Coding the Data

Prior to formal coding, each narrative was read multiple times to achieve immersion and familiarity with the data. During this stage, analytical memos were recorded to capture initial reflections, emotional responses, and emerging identity tensions without the imposition of predetermined codes. This step ensured that the narratives were understood holistically before being segmented for analysis. Then, initial open coding was conducted to identify segments of text related to identity-relevant experiences. Codes at this stage remained descriptive and closely tied to the language of the narrative(e.g., avoidance through reading, seeking safety, being seen as competent, relational rupture). This inductive process allows patterns to surface organically while preserving the integrity of the autoethnographic voice.

Following open coding, a second coding cycle was conducted using theory-guided codes aligned with the four analytical frameworks:

- Marcia's Identity Status Theory (1966): Narrative segments were coded for evidence of *exploration, commitment, diffusion, moratorium,* or *achievement.* These codes were used to identify how identity commitments form, shift, or stabilize over time.
- Laing's Social Psychiatry (1965): Segments were coded for *relational disturbance, validation, conflicting narratives, care,* or *recognition*. These codes attend to why identity was disrupted or supported through interpersonal and social contexts.
- McAdam's Narrative Identity Theory (1997): Coding focused on *turning points, coherence, redemptive sequences,* and *self-authorship*. These codes captured how meaning is made as experiences were organized into personal narratives.

- Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1956): Narrative data were coded developmentally to identify moments of *identity crisis, resolution,* or *role consolidation*. These codes situate identity work within specific life stages, indicating where stabilization occurred across my lifespan.

Each narrative segment has been coded under multiple frameworks to reflect the layered nature of identity development.

Codes generated through the theoretical lenses are then clustered into broader themes that cut across frameworks (e.g., *Reading as Survival*, *Teaching as Reparative Space*, *Kindness as Moral Identity*, *Professional Commitment as Stabilization*). This process reflects a common practice in qualitative analysis in which theoretically informed codes are progressively organized into higher-order categories that capture patterned meaning across data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2021). Rather than treating each theoretical framework as an isolated interpretive structure, codes are examined for points of convergence, tension, and complementarity across lenses. For instance, a moment coded through Eriksonian (1956, 1968) identity tension may also appear narratively significant within McAdams's (1997) framework or function relationally within Laing's (1966) conception of selfhood. Themes and codes were revisited iteratively to ensure coherence, theoretical alignment, and fidelity of narrative data.

In the final analytic phase, themes were interpreted through the integrated use of all four frameworks. Rather than privileging a single theory, interpretation examines how each framework contributes to understanding identity development across time, relationships, and professional contexts. This integrative analysis supports claims about how teaching functioned as a stabilizing identity role following earlier disruption of coherence of self. This multi-layered coding process allows for systematic yet reflexive analysis of autoethnographic narratives,

ensuring that identity development is examined as a developmental, relational, narrative, and professional process.

Table 3.1 *Autoethnographic Narrative Coding by Framework*

Framework	**Analytic Focus**	**Example Code**	**Example Narrative Segment**
Identity Status Approach (Marcia, 1966)	How identity commitment forms	Exploration	"I taught Tae Kwon Do without any thought of being a teacher, but I enjoyed the process of teaching."
		Commitment	"Teaching became the first opportunity to use the skills I developed as the mediator of my family."
Social Psychiatry (Laing, 1965)	Why identity is disrupted or supported relationally	Relational rupture	"I was told by my sister that I couldn't write well, so teaching was a bad choice."
		Relational repair	"In the classroom, I had a natural inclination to help students that seemed to have a rough home life."
Self as a Story Theory (McAdams, 1997)	How meaning is made through narrative	Redemptive meaning	"What once felt like a burden in having a dysfunctional family has become a strength in better understanding my students."
		Turning point	"I realized my love of reading would always be a source of defining who I was

Table 3.1 Continued

			and am as a person and educator."
Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1956)	Where identity stabilizes developmentally	Identity confusion	"I didn't know if I could be anything more than the 'idiot' my sister called me or the 'pussy' that my father called me.
		Identity stabilization	'Teaching gave a sense of purpose to the dysfunction I have endured."

Following this table, narrative segments were coded using concise, theory aligned codes that captured how identity commitments formed (Marcia, 1966), why relational contexts disrupted or supported identities (Laing, 1965), how meaning was constructed through self-storied reflection (McAdams, 1997), and where identity stabilized developmentally (Erikson, 1956).

Following this umbrella set of frameworks, more specific codes were gathered for analysis, presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 *Theory-Informed Codebook for Narrative Analysis*

Code	Theoretical Framework	Definition	Analytic Function
Stabilization	Erikson (1956)	Sustained identity coherence over time	Locates identity outcomes across the lifespan
Role Confusion	Erikson (1956)	Difficulty integrating roles or expectations	Identifies developmental instability
Identity Crisis	Erikson (1956)	Periods of role confusion or psychosocial tension	Situates identity disruption developmentally
Conflicting Narratives	Laing (1965)	Competing stories imposed by others	Illuminates relational identity tension

Table 3.2 Continued

		that fracture self-understanding	
Recognition	Laing (1965)	Moments in which the self is seen, affirmed, or understood by others	Identifies relational support
Care	Laing (1965)	Relational practices that provide emotional or psychological safety	Explains conditions supporting identity continuity
Relational Disturbance	Laing (1965)	Interpersonal interactions characterized by contradiction, instability, or emotional threat	Explains identity destabilization
Exploration	Marcia (1966)	Active questioning, searching, or experimenting with identity roles, values, or commitments	Traces pre-commitment identity work
Commitment	Marcia (1966)	Adoption of values, roles, or identities that provide direction or stability	Identifies identity consolidation
Moratorium	Marcia (1966)	Active exploration without commitment, often during uncertainty or crisis	Identifies transitional identity states
Achievement	Marcia (1966)	Commitments formed following exploration	Signals identity resolution
Turning Point	McAdams (1997)	Narratively significant moments that reorient identity meaning	Marks identity reorganization
Narrative Coherence	McAdams (1997)	The integration of experiences into a meaningful, ordered	Assesses narrative identity development

Table 3.2 Continued

		life story	
Redemptive Sequence	McAdams (1997)	Narratives that move from suffering toward growth or purpose	Identifies meaning-making processes
Self-Authorship	McAdams (1997)	Assertion of agency in interpreting and narrating one's life	Highlights agentic identity construction

Although codes are organized by theoretical origin, analysis did not treat them as discrete categories. Instead, codes were read relationally to trace how identity commitments formed (Marcia), why identity destabilized in relational contexts (Laing), how meaning was narratively constructed (McAdams), and where stabilization occurred developmentally (Erikson). This integrative approach allowed identity development to be examined as a dynamic, longitudinal process rather than a linear progression.

This study addresses concerns by situating identity development within specific educational, relational, and institutional contexts rather than treating it as an abstract psychological process. Identity is examined as something formed in relation to schooling practices, disciplinary norms, authority structures, and social expectations. In doing so, the analysis aligns with critiques that call for greater attention to context and power in theories of identity development.

This study rejects essentialist views of identity. Instead, identity is understood as constructed, negotiated, and narrated, which is an orientation informed most directly by McAdam's narrative identity theory (1997). McAdam's emphasis on life stories as meaning-making structures allows identity to be examined as something through narrative coherence rather than discovered.

Within this set of frameworks, Erikson and Marcia's theory contributes vocabulary for understanding why identity becomes a pressing concern at certain moments, while McAdam's

theory offers tools for analyzing how identity is narrated and revised over time. Laing's work further destabilizes assumptions of coherence by foregrounding moments in which identity narratives fracture under pressure. Together, these theories allow for analysis that acknowledges both the pull toward meaning within the inevitability of disruption. The analysis in the following chapter recognizes essentialist understandings of identity and seeks to use these theories together in creating a coherent analysis after each vignette.

Conclusion

This chapter established the epistemological and methodological grounding of the study by situating researcher positionality and reflexivity as central sources of data within an autoethnographic framework. Drawing from Milner's (2007, 2024) conceptualization of positionality and Finlay's (2002) articulation of reflexivity, the study positions the researcher as both participant and analyst, acknowledging how lived experience, professional practice, and identity intersect in the production of knowledge. My identity as an educator, shaped by a long-standing relationship with texts and early coexisting experiences of trauma, informs how I understand teaching as both a vocational choice and a stabilizing identity.

Through a constructivist epistemology and narrative inquiry lens (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), this research treats personal experience as storied, socially constructed, and inseparable from professional practice. Autoethnography therefore functions not only as a methodological approach, but as a means of examining how teacher identity is continually formed, sustained, and reinterpreted through narrative, reflection, and relational engagement with students, texts, and the larger institutional structure of public education.

The coding methodology and example codes I have provided in Table 3.1 serve as a lens for understanding each part of my identity development and a codebook in Table 3.2 to define

the ways in which my narrative was analyzed through those four theoretical lenses. Taken together, this analytics approach ensured that my autoethnographic narrative was examined systematically, allowing patterns of exploration, relational disruption, meaning-making, and identity stabilization to be traced across time. By applying these codes iteratively and reflexively, the analysis attended to both the personal specificity of my experiences and their theoretical influence, positioning my narrative as data that illuminates broader processes of teacher identity development within the public-school context.

Chapter 4 : Trauma isn't Traumatic When You're a Kid, It's Just Your Life

"Certain kinds of trauma visited on people are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice or rights, or the goodwill of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination."
—Morrison, 2019

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the analytic core of this autoethnographic study through a series of focused personal vignettes and accompanying analyses. These narratives function as sites of analysis through which I examine how my vocational choice of becoming an English teacher contributed to the stabilization of my identity in contrast to a fragmented and disjointed identity development during childhood and early adolescence. As the title of this chapter suggests, I did not realize I was being traumatized while I was a child. I only realize now through reflection how severe some of my experiences were on my young psyche. Rather than serving as isolated recollections, each vignette is situated within its relational, cultural, and institutional contexts, consistent with the methodological commitments of autoethnography.

The chapter is organized around a set of focused vignettes that trace key moments across my identity development, including early moments of instability and belonging, the emergence of language and literacy as identity anchors, and the gradual consolidation of my professional orientation and stabilized self through teaching. Each vignette highlights a particular tension, rupture, and/or turning point and is followed by analytic reflection that connects my personal narrative to a broader theoretical understanding. These understandings help me name my implications in Chapter 5.

To interpret these narratives, I drew on multiple relevant theoretical lenses introduced in earlier chapters which include identity development theory, teacher professional identity, and

socio-cultural perspectives on self and meaning-making. These lenses were not applied as rigid frameworks, but as interpretive tools for understanding myself as I worked through adolescence into early adulthood. Together, the vignettes and analytic commentary through reflection demonstrate how teaching English functioned as a vocational choice and an identity-stabilizing anchor, offering insight into the reciprocal relationship between personal history and professional becoming.

Figure 4.1 provides a graphic representation of the analysis process and is replicated in the analysis of each vignette. In this figure, the vignette provides a narrative moment for analysis leading into an analytic focus on what stands out in the narrative relative to the codebook (Table 3.1), then this moment is analyzed through one of the four theoretical lenses, which then is used to describe the identity work at play. This process helps me discover the findings across the vignettes as I find crossover within the identity work occurring across all my narratives.

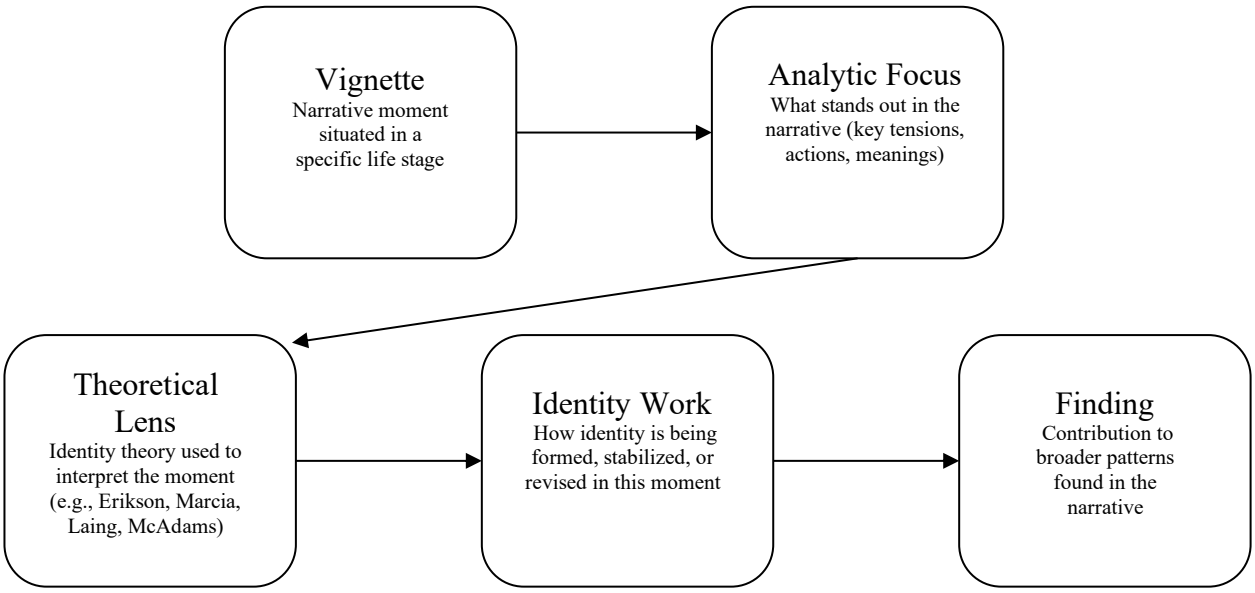


Figure 4.1 *Analytical Pathway from Narrative to Finding*

While these narratives include experiences of relational harm and instability, this analysis does not frame identity development as the product of deficit. Instead, these experiences are

examined as contexts within which commitments formed, meaning was constructed, and identity stabilized through agentic narrative work. This is extraordinarily important to my understanding of these narratives as meaning-making parts of my currently developed identity (McAdams, 2001). I developed agency in the circumstances I responded to where others might name it as resilience. I do my best to avoid deficit framing of my parents, my sister, or myself in these narratives.

When talking about these experiences with my therapist, he believes that my parents were both traumatized and passed that along to me. He also confirmed my suspicions of their narcissistic personalities. We discussed how books became a survival mechanism, and the implied positive reinforcement of being a reader kept me engaged in finding another book, even when I picked up one I did not like.

Background Contextualization

In order to best understand my own self narrative, a general contextualization of my early childhood leading into my first vignette seems necessary. David Foster Wallace in his commencement speech at Kenyon University in 2005 gave a short parable about fish. It goes as follows: “There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’” (Wallace, 2005). I reference this parable because I believe my use of these short narratives in this section serve as providing an understanding of the “water” that I was swimming in during my childhood. These experiences created an environment of anxiety, one which I still contend with today. Being a teacher has provided one of the few reprieves from this anxiety because I have the opportunity to be there for students that may be

going through difficult times themselves in much the same way both books and teachers were there for me.

I was born in Kingsport, Tennessee, to a father who worked as a mechanic for his father and a stay-at-home mother. My parents were 30 and 23 respectively when they had me. My sister was born two and a half years earlier than I. As we were told during childhood, neither of us was a planned pregnancy. My parents had very little emotional stability, but my mother was a natural caregiver while my father was a capable handyman. I can readily admit that they both had positive qualities which helped me become the semi-capable adult I am now, but I will not go so far as to say they were *good* parents. While my autoethnographic narrative specifically discusses how my abusive childhood led to a need for the stabilization of being an educator, I chose these moments as a backdrop for understanding my need to "hide from" and later stabilize my identity.

The following few paragraphs are some of the highlighted moments of my childhood that I feel have made my relationship with my parents, sister, those around me, and even myself difficult. These memories are my best recollection of how they occurred. Even if there are discrepancies between the reality and my memory (as there likely are), this is how I remember them and their emotional impact then as well as how I feel about them now.

Ages 0-4

Just like their first child, my sister, I do not think either of my parents were prepared to have a second child. At a very young age, both my sister and I were aware that we were "accidents" as our parents chose to tell us. I grew up on Raintree Drive of Kingsport, Tennessee, in an area known as Lynn Garden. My grandfather on my Dad's side bought it when my mom became pregnant with me. It was not a very nice area, but it was a fine enough house for raising kids. My early childhood was, from what I knew at the time, a very happy one. I was as calm and

easygoing of a kid as a parent could ask for. My mom loves to talk about how little I cried as a child in contrast with how difficult my sister was in this respect.

I was born nearly completely deaf in my right ear. It is a handicap that I rarely think of as an adult, but it was a source of shame when I was a child. I also had a speech impediment, which lasted longer than it should have due to my hearing loss. I couldn't hear very well, and I had trouble speaking clearly. These factors working together led to me speaking less than most children my age. This is likely a part of why I found books as an enjoyable outlet. I didn't have to be myself, and people often didn't speak to me if I was engrossed in a book. I did not think about my hearing loss too often as a child, but when my mother drunkenly told me that my hearing loss was due to my father assaulting her while she was pregnant with me, it became a source of depression through my adolescence that I still contend with today. I would venture that this repeated narrative told to me in the midst of inebriated vitriolic rants created a wall between myself and both of my parents beginning around the age of nine when I was first told.

"Woo woo!" I yelled as I gyrated my hips for my mom and her friends in what we called our playroom. My mom laughs while telling her friends "He loves doing the 'Woo-woo Dance'." I had a slight buzz from the hard iced tea I was given, and I was enjoying the attention. As happy as I was in that moment, I look back on this with a sordid mix of feelings. Though I am not certain, I would say I was around 4 years old and my mom was probably around 28 at the time. This was a recurring event in my early childhood. My mom would give me some alcohol to "loosen me up," and I would be malleable enough to dance for her friends in my "tighty whities." I was too young to be embarrassed. In retrospect, this is the first memory I have where I am now aware that my parents were not prepared to be good parents. However, just like my students, I do believe they did the best they could with the tools they were given.

Ages 9-12

"Dad, please stop!" my sister yelled as he drove at least 50 miles per hour down the road of the street I grew up on. My mom and her fiancé were chasing us in his rusted red truck screaming and cussing out of the window. My dad was picking us up for his time with us over the weekend. My mom's fiancé decided to say something to set my father off, though I cannot be sure of exactly what was said. My mom may have been the one to start it. She could be antagonistic for the entertainment of it, which she has admitted since. I was 11 and my sister was thirteen and we were both terrified. It wasn't the first time, nor the last, that my dad would drive far too fast in a neighborhood out of an anger he couldn't allay.

I was frozen in the backseat choosing not to speak at all and bracing myself for whatever was to come. We were in a sedan, which will shortly be relevant information. They caught up and pulled in front of us crossways in the road. My assumptively soon to be stepdad (they broke up before a wedding could happen) got out of the truck with a handgun and began walking towards the car. My sister was still screaming and crying, and my dad had stopped the car. My mom was hurling cuss words at him from her window, though nothing I had not heard many times before this day. My dad decided to bolt forward and, smartly, my mom's fiancé jumped up and his shoulder shattered the windshield. My dad then reversed and drove around the truck.

We were quickly pulled over, though all of the screaming and adrenaline of the moment makes everything after that moment difficult to remember clearly. I have discussed this with my therapist as a significant moment in my childhood precisely because I cannot remember any details after the vehicular assault. I have a flash of my father being arrested, but the rest is blurry. No one, including my sister, will talk about this moment at all to this day. However, it had a big impact on how we all interacted afterwards.

At least at home, my very early childhood before my parents' divorce was, all in all, a pleasant one from my naive perspective. My experience of childhood became periods of general comfort and security with punctuated moments of fear and upsettedness. The most stable period of my very unstable childhood began when my father moved into a nicer neighborhood. I developed friends in the neighborhood, which helped in socialization outside of school contexts.

This move across town was great for me in retrospect because I dove into books even further, thus creating a foundation of literacy that carried me academically to this very moment. Positive as it was in making me the person I am today, I find that reading was a coping mechanism and distraction from the world around me. This coping mechanism developed into not only a lifelong love of reading, but also developed into other forms of escapism that were less healthy. I could not be more thankful for the support my mother gave me in early reading development as it became, and still is, a very useful tool for getting through the difficult times in my life.

Age 14-17

When I was in eighth grade, I began using drugs on a fairly regular basis. I knew my father smoked marijuana, and my mom would get high on seemingly anything she could get her hands on, so I had been given a model for this behavior for years leading up to my own drug use. I started with trying marijuana and drinking, but neither were extraordinarily consistent. I graduated to taking pills as I entered ninth grade. I had found my mother's stash, and my father didn't like to take pills that he was prescribed when recovering from an accident or surgery. This led to a significant amount of opportunity to imbibe on various types of pain and anxiety medications. When I talk about my experiences in high school in the following narratives, I was quelling a lot of depressive thoughts with these medications and the excitement I got from

getting away with taking them. This backdrop helps paint a more clear picture for my search for an identity that feels stable.

Finding Safety in Reading: Early Identity Formation Through Solitude

Ages 4-8

Before I chose reading as a consistent outlet, I pretended to be a superhero as my means of escape. I watched Batman, Ninja Turtles, and Power Rangers often. I so badly wanted to be someone who was able to help those in need. This isn't unlike most other young boys in the early 90's. However, I chose to do my pretending in a significant amount of solitude. My neighborhood wasn't good, and I only had one other boy around my age to play with throughout my early childhood. This led to me being both "fighters" in any imagined conflict. My sister, which she even now admits, absolutely despised my existence when I was around her. From her perspective, my mom gave me more love than she gave my sister. I don't remember this over-affection, but I won't deny her feelings. This early schema helped me understand that much of my enjoyment of life was solitary, whether I acknowledged this reality at the time or not. Pretending is what reading came to be for me.

I remember, at the age of around five or six, I began using a comical amount of positive language in my pretend fights. I acted out both sides, jumping from one side of the living room to the other, mentally becoming the hero or villain in my own made up story. I would say things akin to "Thank you for the opportunity of this battle, sir." and "You're so welcome to have this bout with me." or "Can I help you defeat this foe?" I remember needing to hear this language, even if it was in dialogue with myself, because what I was hearing more often was "If you would just shut the fuck up for a second and let me talk!" or "You're too much of a fucking pussy to hit me!" and "I won't let you talk to me like that without making you wish you didn't!" The screams

I heard were becoming exceedingly relentless as my parents were making their inevitable progression towards their divorce. I would get lost in my made up worlds in order to distract myself from this one. I feel that reading was a natural progression, but one that had a real opportunity for growth into being a young adult that understood more than the tiny window of the world I saw on Raintree Drive in Kingsport, Tennessee.

Ages: 9-11

I began forming an identity as a reader when I was in 4th grade. At the inimitable Scholastic Book Fair, I found a book that caught my eye because of the cover. This Animorph's book with the image of a minotaur looking purple alien on the front still is so clear in my mind's eye. I was very much a "is the cover cool?" reader early on. My new book ended up being part of a series, which in hindsight was wonderful for building an interest in long form novels as it started a habit of going from one series to another. I loved to read Animorphs at any opportunity, and I later used those books to "hide" from my family. This began my love of book series, which I suggest to students at any opportunity for the positives that developed from this love.

I remember sleeping next to my book and rubbing the slightly raised front which depicted an alien on the front cover art. I had yet to be so engaged in a book, and the characters were young teenagers navigating that space while trying to defend the earth from aliens. It was a natural development out of my interest in The Power Rangers, which is also a story of teenagers with powers that help them defend the planet from aliens. My mom was a voracious reader, and she very much supported my enthusiasm.

I moved to the other end of Kingsport, Tennessee, fairly shortly after my parents divorced. I was entering fifth grade. Mr. W was my new teacher, whom many said was the

strictest of the fifth-grade teachers. I remember thinking that it seemed as if he did not enjoy working with kids. He was my first male teacher in my experience of public schools, which I remember feeling confused about. I did not know that men could be teachers, and I was a very happy-go-lucky kid who very much wanted to be liked. My home life was pretty turbulent, with my parents constantly embittered with one another when they interacted in front of me, only worsened when they spoke ill of each other in front of me to seemingly gain favoritism in my eyes. School was a place to be away from their disdain for one another.

Early in the school year, maybe a month into school, I was granted the opportunity to say the morning announcements over the intercom. I was anxious, but excited. In retrospect, one of the adults in my life should have told me it was not a good idea. I had a speech impediment that made me pronounce my name as "Bwake Twent." As a result, when I came back to class after the announcements, a classmate said "Hey, it's Bwake Twent!" The class laughed, which included, I remember vividly, Mr. Wyatt. This name became my moniker for the rest of the school year, and for many years afterwards among certain classmates. I had lost the solace of the school as a comforting space, which made me dread going to school as well as coming home from school. The only place I found where I didn't have to think about these uncomfortable interactions with my parents or classmates was in books.

I desperately wanted people around me to be nice to each other, and I found opportunities to see the kinds of actions that I wanted to exist around me more often in the books I read. The identity of being a "kind person" was one I genuinely thought held the most importance in contrast with how mean I saw others be to each other and to me. My parents constantly used negative narratives about each other to lift themselves up while putting each other down. They shared these narratives with me on a regular basis, and continue to do so till this day.

Ages 12-15

My mother has always had a drug abuse problem, as well as an unhealthy relationship with how drugs can affect the people around you, especially your children. Many of the times when I would notice that my mom had slurred speech, I instinctually knew this was the precursor to long rants accusing my father of physical abuse, or even direct physical and verbal abuse directed my way. I get upset just writing this because of the fact that she has yet to apologize for, and generally continues to defend, her actions in those times because of the physical abuses that she suffered from her father and my father.

Perhaps one of the most significant experiences I have had in my life occurred during middle school. I believe this was during eighth grade. It was a night when I was staying with my mother and my sister was staying with dad. I had deep anxiety about being alone with my mom because she was so often inebriated on alcohol or pain medication when the evening came. As usual, I would stay in my room lying in bed and reading. I had gotten into books based on the videogame *Resident Evil* around this time. My middle school years were when I leaned into dystopian horror books about the end of the world. I needed to believe that things could be worse than what I was experiencing.

My mom was back in her room down the hall. She came into my room and sat on the bed. She asked me if I knew why I was deaf in her slow, inebriated drawl and it didn't seem like she could lift her lower lip while she spoke. I realize now that this was because of the pills. I told her she had told me this story before. She began screaming that I was going to hear it again. She told me "He would hit me, you know. He was too much of a pussy to hit me while I was looking, so he would hit me first while I wasn't looking and knock me down!" I protested that I just wanted to read, though I had been through this enough times to know that this was not going to

happen. She began telling one story after another for what felt like hours in an attempt to turn me against my dad emotionally. He often did the same, though he was always sober when he did this.

This contentious back and forth as my sister and I were handed off between parents lasted, both in my recollection and in my journaling, until I got into high school. The arguments and aggressiveness therein died down once my sister and I were both showing real signs of being aware of our parents' immaturity. I believe it embarrassed them when one of us would interject on their arguments with something like "Who is this helping!?" My mother, to this day, tells my sister and I that she can't wait until my father dies. My father just constantly states that she has "mental illness". Disappointing as all of this is and was, I still maintain a relationship with them because I appreciate and generally like the person I have become.

Analysis of "Finding Safety in Reading: Early Identity Formation Through Solitude"

This anchor vignette, which I contend is the foundation for my progression towards the *commitment* of the vocation of English teacher (Marcia, 1966; Kroger et al., 2010; Crocetti, 2017). The analytic focus of this vignette is how imaginative play and literacy practices functioned as adaptive strategies for regulating identity in the context of sustained relational instability during childhood and early adolescence. Across the periods described as early childhood (ages 4-8), late childhood (ages 9-11), and early adolescence (ages 12-15), escape into imagined worlds emerges not just as disengagement from reality, but as an early form of identity work (Erikson, 1956, 1968; Kroger, 2007; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). Viewed retrospectively, these practices reveal how identity stabilization preceded overt exploration and vocational commitment (Marcia, 1966, Côté & Levine, 2016).

The vignette demonstrates how literacy-based practices gradually replaced solitary pretend play as socially acceptable, internally meaningful, and developmentally expandable means of coping with fear, confusion, and emotional volatility. In applying the primary theoretical lens, I draw on Marcia's Identity Status Framework (1966, 1980), which provides a structure for understanding shifts between diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and commitment (Kroger et al., 2010; Crocetti, 2017). Erikson's psychosocial theory (1956, 1968) complements this framework by accounting for the relational and emotional conditions under which exploration and commitment become psychologically possible through the use of texts as a buffer relative to my family orientation.

While Marcia's (1966) framework clarifies patterns of commitment and exploration, it does not fully account for the emotional intensity and relational saturation evident in the vignette. Erikson's psychosocial theory provides a necessary complement, particularly with respect to the crises of initiative versus guilt and industry versus inferiority that dominate developmental periods described (Erickson, 1956, 1968).

From a Marcia-informed perspective on identity development, the early portions of this vignette reflect a prolonged period of identity diffusion, characterized by limited exploration and the absence of stable commitments (Marcia, 1966, 1980). However, the **analytic focus** reveals that this diffusion was not passive. Rather, the vignette illustrates what might be understood as protective diffusion in which avoidance of interpersonal conflict and emotional threat constrained opportunities for outward exploration through parental interaction. In early childhood, superhero play functioned as an early site of identity work that required no negotiation with peers or adults. The absence of playmates and experience of solitude positioned me both "fighters" in imagined conflicts, underscoring the lack of relational scaffolding that

would have been provided by a more comfortable family and social dynamic associated with early identity experimentation.

As this imaginative practice evolved, it began to incorporate highly formalized, polite, and cooperative language with dialogue that contrasted with the verbal aggression occurring in the home. Through the theoretical lens of Marcia's (1966) framework, this shift can be read as an internally regulated attempt to establish coherence and moral order in the absence of stable external commitments. Importantly, these imaginative practices did not yet constitute exploration in Marcia's identity framework in that they were not directed towards future-oriented commitments, but rather toward emotional survival consistent with Laing's (1965) conception of defensive adaptations developed in response to relational insecurity. The analytic focus here highlights how identity work can occur internally before it becomes visible through socially recognized commitments (McAdams, 2001, 2013).

Through Erikson's psychosocial lens (1956, 1968), this retreat into solitary imaginative play can be understood as an attempt to preserve initiative in an environment where direct expression risked reprimand or escalation (Kroger, 2007; Syed & McLean, 2017). The highly courteous dialogue enacted during pretend battles reflects not only creativity, but compensatory moral order which is an imagined world governed by consent, gratitude, and mutual recognition. Absent values in my family's interactions. Erikson's theory emphasizes that consistent affirmation supports the development of initiative and industry; in its absence, children may redirect these developmental processes inward (Erikson, 1956, 1968; Kroger, 2007). This creates a need for constructing private worlds where agency can be exercised without threat. This is my attempt to have agency over how people interact with each other around me. Agency I later found in the practice of education as well.

The transition from pretend play to reading in late childhood marks a significant developmental shift. Reading, particularly serialized fiction such as Animorphs, offered a structured and socially sanctioned identity space. At this stage, I began to exhibit commitments not in ideology or vocation, but in practice. Reading becomes a consistent valued activity supported by parent modeling and institutional reinforcement. Through the theoretical lens of Marcia's framework (1966, 1980), foreclosure involves commitment without extensive exploration, often shaped by external cultural expectations. Parent modeling and institutional reinforcement positioned reading as both safe and meaningful, allowing identity work to occur within culturally validated structures (Hammack, 2008; Syed & McLean, 2017). Here, reading initially functions less as an exploration of self and more as a reliable refuge in an identity position that is acceptable and unlikely to provoke conflict.

However, the vignette also shows how this foreclosed practice in reading gradually opened into exploratory possibility. Engagement with long-form series fostered sustained immersion, narrative continuity, and identification with adolescent protagonists navigating moral complexity. Through Marcia's lens (1966, 1980), this progression reflects movement toward moratorium, in which symbolic exploration precedes real-world experimentation (Kroger et al., 2010; Crocetti, 2017). The analytic focus reveals reading as a bridge between diffusion and later commitment, providing rehearsal space for values of kindness, cooperation, and protection of others that would later inform the chosen vocational identity.

In late childhood, the humiliation experienced following the morning announcements episode marks a rupture in the narrator's developing sense of industry. School, previously experienced as a refuge from familial conflict, becomes another site of vulnerability. Through Erikson's psychosocial lens (1968), such experiences risk producing enduring feelings of

inferiority when competence is publicly undermined (Kroger, 2007; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012).The vignette illustrates how reading again functions as a reparative space, allowing me to reclaim competence, mastery, and belonging through identification with capable, morally driven characters.

The snapshot into early adolescence (12-15) intensifies this pattern. Exposure to parental substance abuse, emotional manipulation, and prolonged triangulation situates the narrator within what Erikson's framework identifies this developmental period as particularly vulnerable to role confusion when relational environments provide inconsistent or contradictory recognition (Erikson, 1956, 1968; Kroger, 2007). Reading dystopian and horror fiction during this period serves a dual function: it externalizes fear by locating it in fictional worlds and simultaneously relativizes personal suffering by imagining scenarios "worse than what I was experiencing." Through the analytic focus, reading emerges not as avoidance alone, but as an active mechanism for preserving ego coherence and psychological continuity (Laing, 1965).

Taken together, Marcia's Identity Status Framework (1966, 1980) and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1956, 1968), supplemented by Laing's relational perspective (1965) and McAdams' narrative identity theory (2001, 2013), provide the theoretical lens for understanding literacy as both identity shelter and identity laboratory (Kroger et al., 2010; Syed & McLean, 2016). Marcia's theory (1966, 1980) helps me understand how reading facilitated movement from diffusion through foreclosure- adjacent stability toward moratorium, while Erickson's theory accounts for the affective necessity of that stability in the face of psychosocial crises. The vignette demonstrates that reading was not merely a coping mechanism, but an early identity defining process that allowed me to rehearse values, regulate emotion, and sustain a sense of self when external conditions rendered direct exploration unsafe.

In Figure 4.2, I illustrate how the analysis moves from vignette to finding. The vignette describes reading as a way to avoid unsafe adult interaction while exploring alternative relational experiences. This moment is analyzed as culturally sanctioned avoidance that simultaneously enabled identity exploration. Marcia's Identity Status framework (1966) is applied to interpret reading not as withdrawal, but as a form of exploration contributing to identity formation. This produces the finding that culturally supported reading functioned as both a protective strategy and a pathway toward commitment to a reader identity.

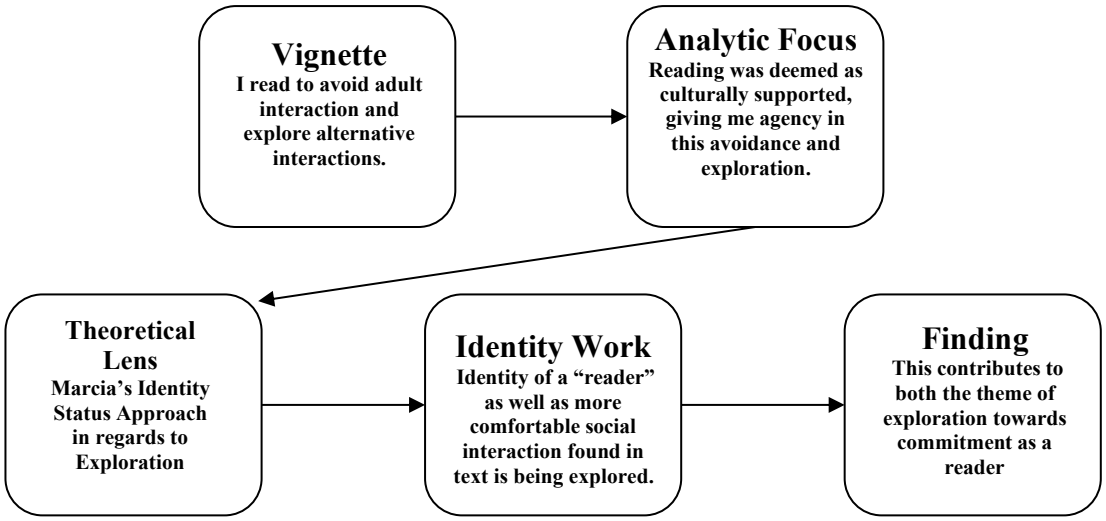


Figure 4.2 *Analytic Pathway of Reading Commitment*

The finding produced through this analytic focus is that culturally supported literacy practices functioned simultaneously as protective identity stabilization and exploratory identity rehearsal. This anchor vignette establishes a foundational pattern that recurs throughout the narrative: identity stabilization precedes and enables exploration, and vocational commitment emerges not in spite of early instability, but through practices that made instability emotionally survivable. Subsequent vignettes build on this trajectory, tracing how reading evolved from a

private refuge into a relational and professional identity anchored in teaching English. The gradual emergence of a stable reader identity that ultimately contributed to vocational commitment (Marcia, 1966, 1980; Erikson, 1956, 1968; Kroger et al., 2010; Crocetti, 2017; Hammack, 2008; Syed & McLean, 2016).

Exploration of Academic Competence Amidst Trauma

Ages 11-14

I do not come from a family who has significantly valued education in their actions. My mother dropped out of high school in eleventh grade, and my father finished high school with no aspirations to go any further in academics. My mom dropped out due to significant abuses happening to her by her father and a mother who very much followed the "seen but not heard" narrative that existed within many marriages of the period. This is a story she has told me many times in order to justify some of her more egregious moments from my childhood and teenage years.

I am unsure of the veracity of these stories, but I do remember my grandfather drunkenly yelling at my grandmother before he died of cirrhosis when I was an adolescent. However, I believe I inherited her desire to escape from her circumstances through reading, though we have never shared this understanding explicitly. She was always the more supportive one in terms of my love of reading, but my father made sure I continued martial arts until my black belt helped in providing some self confidence that carried into the classroom.

In sixth grade was the first time I remember feeling confident in the classroom. I had always been okay in school, but never exceptional. My sister was in the gifted programs and honors classes throughout elementary school and into middle school. I was a B or C student in most of elementary school. I was not as "gifted" as my sister, but I did love to read as much as

possible in fifth grade and over that summer as already stated. I came into middle school without even realizing how much my obsessive hobby of reading had influenced my ability to understand new ideas and concepts in about every subject area outside of math.

I vividly remember I was the only one to get a 100 on a quiz in English class. My teacher even let the whole class know. I was happy to get an A, nervous at everyone looking at me, and surprised to get the best grade in the class. That is such a distinct moment in my memory. I, for the first time, felt as if I could be good at school if I tried hard enough. In the background of this, my mom had started dating a new guy named Phil.

My mom chose guys whom she could get drunk or high with, but also enjoyed that they were violent in some way. I don't remember any man whom she was with who didn't have a mean and violent side to him, including my own father. Phil was this kind of guy. He had a tile laying business, so he was fairly successful. However, he spent almost every moment not working with a beer in his hand. He also had a predilection for pills, but I didn't know this until I found his stash. He once demeaned my love of reading by saying "There is nothing I've read in a book that has put food on my table." I had, by then, fully decided that I was a reader and would always be a reader. I saw this line of thinking as akin to my dad's disdain for my love of reading, which did little to make me like him.

His son, Austin, was especially awful in the good-ole boy redneck way that I detested so much about my community. He was a few years older than me and probably 6 or 7 inches taller than me. He would dip tobacco constantly, and watching him spit in a bottle every few minutes made me wretch. There was one instance where he made me look at his penis. He framed it with "Don't be a fag, look at it!" while grabbing my hair. I've reflected on this framing as ironic to the point of laughter several times as an adult. It took years for me to realize this was sexual

assault. I dove into books more aggressively after emotionally heightened moments like this one because they worked as noise to drown out my thoughts of frustration and anger. It didn't help that, very shortly after this, my mom would be arrested for domestic violence against Phil right in front of me. Her "Please look away, honey." on her knees as I heard the cuffs click as I was standing in what was always called our "play room" throughout my childhood is one of the most salient and vivid memories of this period. Once again, I found books to be my salvation in these moments.

I had become deeply engaged in *Harry Potter* around this time. I read the first four of the series in less than one six-week grading period. I doubt I've read so many pages in such quick fashion at any point since then. Our school had Accelerated Reader as a motivator for students reading (a program I genuinely think schools would have benefited from keeping, or at least updating).

Without intending to, I ended up getting the most Accelerated Reader Points in my grade for a six-week grading period because of *Harry Potter*. This was the first time I had received an award and recognition for an academic achievement, and it meant a lot to me. I then became a "reader" or "nerd" to my friends and classmates. Anything that wasn't "Bwake Twent" was a step in the right direction in my mind. This development was one that my parents were fairly dismissive of, which made this a private point of pride and home and a public point of pride at school. This made my middle school years have an academic focus that served as a welcome distraction from my dysfunctional family.

Unfortunately, this pride and focus was disrupted during my seventh-grade year. I had an ELA teacher who, seemingly, did not want to be a teacher. She was hostile towards her students, and she seemed to genuinely not like me. I'll admit, I was going through a lot at the time at

home, so maybe I was a more disruptive student than I remember. However, English class was my favorite class the previous year, so I imagine I was enthused about being in a domain where I knew I had the ability to be successful. We had an expository essay assignment where we had to explain how to do a specific task in writing. I got excited about the assignment because I chose to write about how to beat the videogame *Metal Gear Solid 2* on Playstation 2. I followed the expectations of the assignment, and wrote a little over four pages. I was so proud of myself when I turned it in. I had never written so much in one paper.

I ended up receiving a 70 (a D grade then), and I was so confused. A friend of mine behind me wrote half a page and got an 85 (B). My teacher couldn't give me a good answer beyond "I don't like video games. You should have chosen a simpler subject." In retrospect, I can sort of understand her reasoning because my topic was overcomplicated for the assignment; however, I still believe I should have gotten a better grade given the effort I put forth. I finished the school year with a D in her class, which kept me from being in Honors English the following year. This may have been part of the reason I began lashing out and getting in trouble in school.

I had several fights during this school year, got high for the first time with my old friends from my first elementary school on the rougher side of town, and became somewhat sullen in a way that only my mother seemed to notice. I didn't have a positive feeling about myself in academics as I had the previous year, so I intended to confirm those negative feelings through acting out. This was the first time I had ever questioned a teacher's desire to be a good teacher. I had no idea that this would be part of the inspiration in choosing to be an English teacher as my career.

The following year, I had a much better ELA teacher. I could tell she cared about her students' success, and she praised my work nearly immediately as the school year began. Life

wasn't any less dysfunctional at home, so this was akin to being pulled up onto a boat while in the midst of drowning. I loved her class. She had Socratic seminars on books that we were reading, asked me about the books I read, and genuinely seemed to enjoy her job. I did well in her class too. I had better grades, lashed out less, and found existence more palatable.

This was around the time I began really leaning into exercise. I did fifty pushups and fifty sit ups every night. I was a brown belt in Taekwondo at this point, and I was beginning to get the opportunity to teach the white and yellow belt students in my class. My parents were still being awful to each other, and I was able to get high, get drunk for the first time, and try my mom's pills (which I had stolen) for the first time. I was at a crossroads between a very bad path and a competent and stable path. I believe L.C. Collins, my martial arts instructor through this entire period, made the biggest influence in making sure my life stayed grounded in self-growth as opposed to self-destruction.

Analysis of "Exploration of Academic Competence Amidst Trauma"

During early adolescence, academic engagement emerged not as a linear progression toward educational identity, but as a compensatory practice shaped by relational instability and chronic exposure to violence. In this period, the analytic focus in this period centers on how reading functioned less as exploration in Marcia's (1966, 1980; Luyckx et al., 2006; Crocetti, 2017) sense and more as a stabilizing activity that allowed for the maintenance of a coherent inner self amidst external chaos. Laing's (1965; Sokol, 2009; Côté & Levine, 2002) conception of the divided self is useful here, as books became a site where I could retreat from an environment that repeatedly threatened psychological safety.

Academic competence was not yet imagined as a future-oriented commitment, but as a private mechanism for regulating affect and preserving a sense of internal continuity during

moments of familial rupture. This engagement constituted critical identity work, allowing the maintenance of a coherent inner self amidst external chaos (Côté & Levine, 2002; Syed & McLean, 2017). Through the theoretical lens of Laing's conception of the divided self, books became a protected internal space where psychological coherence could be maintained despite relational fragmentation (Laing, 1965; Sokol, 2009; Côté & Levine, 2002).

The public recognition I received in sixth grade marked an important shift in how this practice began to intersect with identity. The experience of being singled out for academic success introduced the possibility that competence could be socially legible rather than merely private. The analytic focus here isolates the moment when private identity work became publicly recognized. In Eriksonian (1956, 1968; Schwartz, 2001; Kroger, 2007) terms, this moment briefly resolved tensions between identity and role confusion by offering external validation of an emerging self-concept. Through the theoretical lens of narrative identity theory, this recognition remained fragile, as it was not reinforced within the home and therefore functioned as a situational rather than global sense of self-worth (McAdams, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

A clear turning point within McAdam's (1997, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013) framework occurred when I received the Accelerated Reader award after reading and passing the comprehension tests of the first four *Harry Potter* books in a single grading period. The analytic focus here centers on how external recognition reorganized the meaning of reading from private refuge to publicly validated competence. This moment functioned as a narrative turning point because it reorganized the meaning of earlier experiences, reading as private escape, into a socially affirmed identity claim. In McAdams' terms, the episode becomes a self-defining memory that introduces a redemptive sequence (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The resulting

finding is that social recognition transformed reading from a purely protective coping mechanism into a viable and narratively meaningful identity pathway.

What began as a coping strategy for trauma was reinterpreted as evidence of competence and worth. The public recognition attached a positive moral valuation to an activity that had previously existed only as psychological refuge, allowing academic engagement to enter my life story as a legitimate and valued pathway. This turning point did not resolve identity conflict or produce stable commitment, but it altered the narrative trajectory by establishing the possibility of intellectual engagement as protective and purposeful.

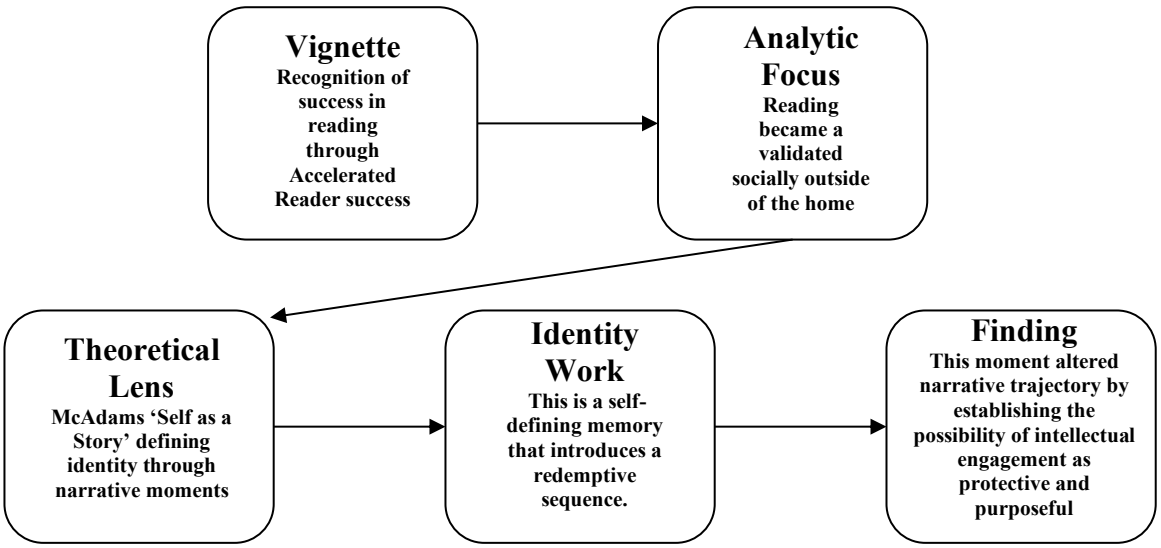


Figure 4.3 *Analytic Pathway of Narrative Reframing of Identity*

In Figure 4.3, I have illustrated how the analysis of this moment moves from vignette to finding. The moment of tension is my success in reading, which is analyzed as validity through social recognition. McAdams Narrative Theory (1997) is recognized as relevant to understanding this moment as a moment of self-definition, thus producing the finding of an altered trajectory into academic English as a source of validation by providing a source of effective and protective

validation. This experience helped me realize that recognition through academic competence could help guide my choice of trajectory in life. One that included going to college and becoming a teacher while focusing on developing my skills in both academia as a person socially outside of the context of my hometown. This turning point (McAdams, 1997) in my narrative was crucial in steering my self-narrative in the direction of stabilization. Several moments from this period illustrate how academic competence functioned as a fragile but meaningful site of identity stabilization.

The English quiz in sixth grade, where I was the only student to earn a perfect score, stands out not simply as an achievement, but as an interruption of a long-standing comparative identity shaped by my sister's gifted status. In Marcia's (1966, 1980; Luyckx et al., 2006) terms, this moment did not initiate exploration in a deliberate sense, but it cracked open the possibility that academic success could also belong to me. Erikson's framework (1956, 1968; Schwartz, 2001) helps situate this experience as a brief resolution of inferiority and uncertainty, while the theoretical lens of narrative identity theory, (1997; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007) explains why this moment persists in memory; it marked the first time my internal sense of capability aligned with public recognition, making it narratively durable as identity shaping. This constituted meaningful identity work.

As academic success became increasingly associated with reading, it also became positioned in opposition to dominant familial and community values. The analytic focus here centers on how identity stabilization occurred in tension with relational invalidation. Dismissive attitudes toward education, particularly Phil's explicit devaluation of reading, further solidified academic identity as something privately held and quietly protected. This oppositional positioning aligns with Laing's assertion that individuals in invalidating relational environments

often cultivate inner worlds that remain hidden as a means of self-preservation (Sokol, 2009; Côté & Levine, 2002). Through the theoretical lens of relational identity theory, identity stability depended not on universal recognition but on selective relational affirmation (Côté & Levine, 2002). At the same time, the accumulation of Accelerated Reader recognition and ELA class success provided external affirmation that nudged this practice closer to Marcia's concept of exploration, though still without the intentionality or future commitment typically associated with that status.

The sexual assault by Phil's son, Austin, represents a stark contrast to these moments of validation and further clarifies why reading became such a central identity practice. Laing's work is particularly salient here in providing an analytic focus explaining how trauma intensified reliance on internally regulated identity practices.(Côté & Levine, 2002; Sokol, 2009), as the violation of bodily autonomy and psychological boundaries intensified the need for an internal refuge where the self could remain intact and unobserved. Rather than producing outward exploration or disclosure, this experience reinforced inward retreat and narrative silence. Books functioned as both distraction and containment, allowing me to regulate emotions that had no safe outlet within my own family system. This constituted essential identity work, preserving psychological continuity when external relational environments failed to provide recognition (Giddens, 1991). From a developmental standpoint, this complicates Erikson's emphasis on social negotiation in identity formation (Erikson, 1956, 1968; Kroger, 2007), as the social environment repeatedly foreclosed opportunities for healthy meaning-making.

The disruption of this emerging academic identity during seventh grade illustrates the contextual vulnerability of early identity formation. The analytic focus centers on how institutional invalidation in receiving my poor essay grade destabilized my nascent sense of

academic competence that I had developed in the previous school year. This contributed to a regression marked by behaviorally acting out. Erikson's framework (1956, 1968; Schwartz, 2001) helps explain this shift as a return to role confusion following the withdrawal of institutional validation, while Marcia's model (1966, 1980; Luyckx et al., 2006) clarifies how the absence of supportive structures can interrupt exploratory processes before they consolidate into commitment. Through the theoretical lens of narrative identity, this teacher's action became narratively salient not only as a moment of academic failure, but as an early rupture in my trust in educators as generally benevolent authority figures (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

The subsequent years' experience with a supportive ELA teacher demonstrates how relational affirmation can rapidly restore and reorganize identity trajectories. The analytic focus here centers on how validation of my academic abilities reestablished school as a site of safety and meaning, counterbalancing ongoing dysfunction at home. Within McAdams's (1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013) framework, this period represented a redemptive sequence in which earlier setbacks are reinterpreted through later affirmation. Concurrently, my increasing involvement in martial arts instruction offered a parallel domain of competence and emerging responsibility, suggesting the early formation of identity commitments grounded in mastery and care for others through pedagogical practice (Marcia, 1966, 1980; Crocetti, 2017).

These experiences constituted sustained identity work, allowing competence and relational affirmation to anchor identity against instability (Côté & Levine, 2002). Together, these experiences occurring while I was also engaging in drug use reflects a crossroads between self-destruction and stabilization, where identity was not resolved once and for all, but provisionally assembled through supportive relationships and self-affirming exercises which anchored the self against instability (Côté & Levine, 2002).

Finally, the convergence of supportive teaching and martial arts instruction during this period highlights the role of relational scaffolding in identity stabilization. My ELA teacher's care and L.C. Collins's mentorship in Taekwondo provided parallel contexts in which competence, discipline, and growth were affirmed. Through the theoretical lens of relational identity development (Laing, 1966; Sokol, 2009; Côté & Levine, 2002), these relationships offered moments of interpersonal recognition that countered the fragmentation produced by my home life. Within Erikson's framework (1956, 1968; Kroger, 2007), they functioned as provisional resolutions to identity conflict, allowing for coherence without permanence. Narrative theory (McAdams, 1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013) helps situate these figures as recurring characters in a developing life story oriented towards educational stewardship as care against self-destructive tendencies. Marcia's model (1966, 1980; Luyckx et al., 2006) suggests these experiences helped lay the groundwork towards later commitment in being an educator.

The resulting finding throughline is that academic reading initially functioned as a protective identity practice that preserved psychological continuity under relational threat, and through relational and institutional recognition, gradually transformed into a narratively integrated academic identity that supported later commitment to teaching. I would not have found commitment in teaching without these concurrent experiences shaping my understanding of how I self-identified.

Embodied Pedagogical Identity in Martial Arts Practice

Ages 9-12

I started Taekwondo when I was in Fourth Grade and continued until tenth grade. I, to this day, believe this was the most impactful learning experience of my life. Anytime anyone asks how to help their child be a better person or student, I recommend martial art classes with a

thoughtful instructor. I was a bullied kid, but I didn't want to learn Tae Kwon Do for revenge or to start fights. I wanted to learn Taekwondo so I could feel more confident in the circumstances where I felt uncomfortable. I was also a big fan of the Power Rangers and Batman at the time, so there was certainly a degree of childlike optimism to be more like the heroes I watched on TV.

My father was the one who always paid for my classes, and I believe that this one consistent act on his part is the single best parenting moment he achieved during my adolescence. The owner and lead instructor at the school became my best example of a good and honorable man, particularly when contrasted with my father and my mother's boyfriends, and this experience deeply influenced my understanding of how important it can be to find meaningful role models beyond one's family.

The instructor, L.C. Collins, was a big man who had an authoritative yet gentle way about him. He was one of the first teachers whom I found a great deal of respect for because of the way he interacted with his students gently while commanding the room. He also did a great job of using his students as teachers. Even students who were brown belts were given the task to work with white belts through the early Katas (a sort of memorized dance) and Rotations. I initially learned from these older students that had been at the school for a while. I would later realize that this is a fantastic teaching strategy to both create a classroom community and help students better memorize the "basics," be it in English or in martial arts. This is the first time that I realized the best way to teach is to be a good leader of the room, and that doing this is partly about finding the other natural leaders in the classroom.

I remember being intimidated by the entire experience. However, slowly I became more comfortable as I went every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I would learn the necessary sets of memorized moves, test, and move up to the next belt. There was a clear reward system for my

effort, and there was a degree of confidence that came with being a yellow or green belt and seeing the nervous white belts come in on their first days. The longer I was there, the more pride I felt in these moments. With this pride came confidence in myself as a person.

My childhood was filled with anxiety, and having this space where I felt comfortable and safe made a huge impact on my ability to reset my emotions and avoid a spiral into negative emotions. I could feel upset all day starting with my father screaming at my sister in the morning, then going to school where I was made fun of, but when I entered my Dojang, the term for a Taekwondo gym, I felt as if I wasn't "in the way."

Ages 13-16

When I was in eighth grade was the first time I had to use my martial arts training to defend myself. I got in a fight with a classmate named Billy. He and I didn't like each other already because he was one of my classmates who would regularly still call me "Bwake Twent" to upset me. He didn't do well in school and came from, I assume, a similar type of southern family dysfunction as I did. Cliché as it was, we decided to meet after school to fight. There was a small crowd around us because everyone loves a fight in middle school. Neither of us necessarily won the fight because it devolved into wrestling. However, I was able to use some of my training to avoid his punches in a way that impressed the onlookers. This moment had a big impact on my standing among my male classmates, which contributed to me sense of self away from "Bwake Twent" or the scared child hiding under the blanket as my mom yelled at me.

Teaching and learning Tae Kwon Do is quite different from teaching and learning English, though the experience of seeing a student's "lightbulb" moment of clarity is quite similar. I began getting to teach the White Belts when I was around 13. I was a Brown Belt by this point and had been enrolled for four years. I remember feeling so honored to be asked to

teach instead of working on my own development. L.C. told me a phrase that would be reiterated in my Teacher Education courses: “The best way to learn is to teach.”

I became a better martial artist as I worked with students on the basics of blocking, foot positioning, and the need for many repetitions to solidify memorization of both basic skills and the katas and rotations, a sort of martial arts “dance” and specific move sets in response to an attack. Showing a student a kata and working through it repeatedly in small increments is much like the incremental and iterative practice I would end up doing with students that were learning how to write essays. Both take a lot of patience and repetition of the same phrases. I found that it came very naturally to be patient with students as we worked. Their lack of understanding didn’t frustrate me in the same manner I saw my father get frustrated quickly in trying to teach me. He was a mechanic and would try to teach me basic labor skills in that vocation, and while I was interested in learning, his teaching style of “learn it the first time or I’ll be angry” made me dread any instance where he tried to show me a skill. I became more focused on the potential backlash than the skill I was attempting to learn.

This experience made me feel like I inhabited three different identities through the week. I was the Blake who went to school and was anxious around everyone as if they were all making fun of me in their heads, then I was the Blake who came home and played second fiddle to his popular and smart sister while avoiding his parents moments of rage or inebriation, and some evenings I was the Blake who knew what he was talking about in his Taekwondo class and garnered respect immediately because of the belt around his waist. I only had one identity I felt truly proud of during the week.

The few instances I felt proud in school for academic competence were too far apart for me to fully embody that identity in a manner which supported my self-esteem, so being a martial

arts instructor in the evening became my only consistent domain for self-confidence. This is the first instance in which a teaching identity became my means of stabilization of self. During this period, after an impactful school day where I participated in a Socratic Seminar for *The Giver* in ELA class, I got in my dad's Ford pickup truck and said "I think I want to be an English teacher." He retorted, "Oh, you'll change your mind."

Analysis of "Embodied Pedagogical Identity in Martial Arts Practice"

Beginning Taekwondo in fourth grade marked an early period of identity exploration and deliberate identity work (Marcia, 1966; Luyckx et al., 2006; Crocetti, 2017), as I actively sought a means of developing confidence outside of my lack of relational affirmation both in school and at home. The analytic focus in this phase centers on how voluntary participation in martial arts functioned as a structured environment for experimenting with competence, agency, and self-definition. My attraction to martial arts was shaped by a desire for personal safety within my childlike identification of heroic figures such as the Power Rangers or Batman, reflecting a period of moratorium in which identity experimentation occurred without fixed commitment. This exploration unfolded within the broader context of an identity crisis (Erikson, 1956; 1968; Schwartz, 2001), as anxiety and discomfort characterized much of my childhood experience.

Although many relational dynamics during this period were destabilizing, my father's consistent financial support of my Taekwondo training functioned as a form of care (Laing, 1965; Honneth, 2007), providing continuity that enabled sustained participation. This consistency allowed identity exploration to persist rather than fragment. Through the theoretical lens of relational identity theory, such continuity represents a stabilizing form of recognition necessary for identity consolidation (Laing, 1965; Côté & Levine, 2002).

Similarly, L.C. Collins as instructor emerged as a critical site of recognition in offering a model of masculinity that stood in contrast to the relational instability present in my family system. Through this relationship along with relationships with other instructors in the class, I began to understand the importance of seeking affirming role models beyond one's immediate family, and insight that supported an identity continuity rather than disruption I found in other contexts of adolescence (Giddens, 1991; Côté & Levine, 2002).

The instructional structure of Taekwondo school further contributed to this process. Observing how advanced students were entrusted with teaching novices and then being entrusted to do the same marked a turning point (McAdams, 1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013) in how I understood learning and leadership. Being taught by peers, and later teaching others myself, initiated early self-authorship as I began to interpret these experiences as meaningful rather than merely procedural (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Over time, repeated testing and advancement through belt ranks fostered Marcia's identity commitment to effort, discipline, and self-improvement, resulting in what Erikson would describe as resolution (Erikson, 1956; 1968; Schwartz, 2001) where confidence had the opportunity to replace anxiety. L.C. Collins pedagogical and modelling of an adult I wished to emulate provided relational identity work. This relational experience constituted significant identity work, as I began to internalize alternative models of adult identity that contrasted with instability present in my family system.

The Dojang itself became a rare space of stabilization, where I experienced emotional safety and relational predictability. Entering this environment allowed me to regulate emotions accumulated from family conflict and peer ridicule during the day, contributing to a sustained sense of identity coherence (Côté & Levine, 2002; Schwartz, 2001). Within this setting, I did not feel like an intrusion or burden, but rather a legitimate contributor and participant, reinforcing

early *role consolidation* centered around competence and respect (Honneth, 1995, 2007). Figure 4.4 illustrates the analytic pathway through which the vignette of teaching within the dojang is transformed into a broader finding about identity stabilization.

The vignette serves as the empirical anchor, capturing the lived experience of early instructional responsibility. From this moment, the analytic focus isolates stabilization through embodied structure and relational space, identifying how the physical routines of martial arts and the relational dynamics with students and instructors created conditions for coherence. This moment is then interpreted through Erkson's (1956, 1968) concept of containment and Marcia's (1966) foreclosure-adjacent commitment, clarifying how role enactment provided regulatory structure and reinforced competence. Through this layered process, the analysis demonstrates that identity consolidation did not emerge abstractly, but through embodied role performance and relational recognition, producing the finding that adaptive relational stabilization enabled a more coherent and durable sense of self.

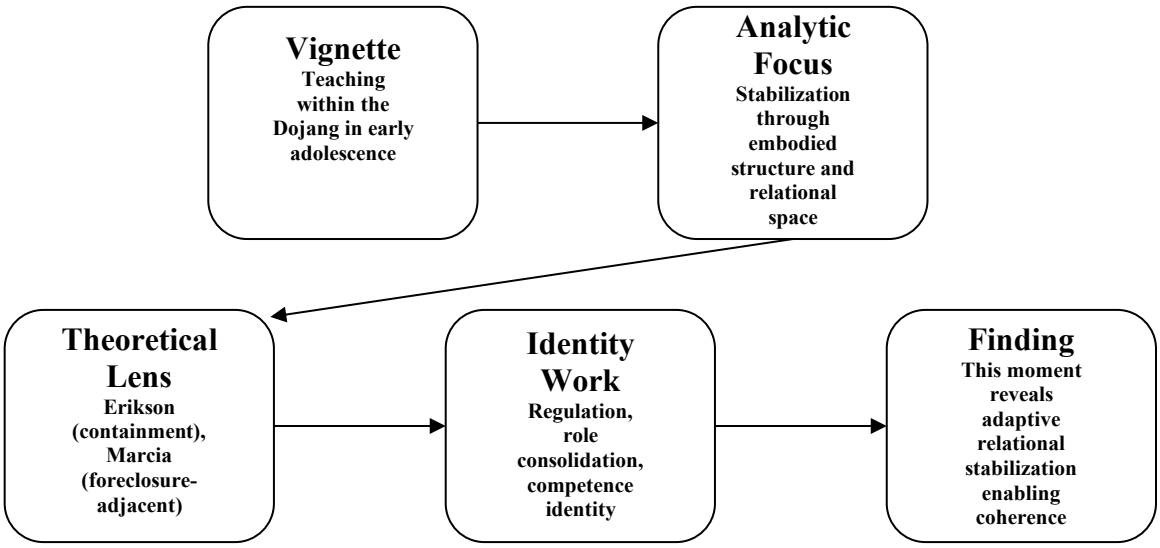


Figure 4.4 *Analytic Pathway of Role Consolidation as Martial Arts Instructor*

By adolescence, the identity work initiated through Taekwondo began to shift from Marcia's (1966, 1980; Luyckx et al., 2006; Crocetti, 2017) identity exploration toward achievement. The moment in eighth grade when I used my training to defend myself marked a significant turning point as external recognition altered how I was perceived by peers and how I understood myself (McAdams, 1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013. This experience disrupted the contaminating narrative of being "Bwake Twent" and contributed to emerging narrative coherence, allowing me to organize prior experiences of fear and marginalization into a story of competence and control (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

As I advanced in rank and began teaching white belts, identity commitment deepened. Being asked to teach represented institutional recognition, and the instructor's assertion that "the best way to learn is to teach" reinforced an emerging teaching identity and pedagogical understanding (Marcia, 1966; Kroger, 2007). Through this role, my identity work leaned into self-authorship, interpreting patience, repetition, and relational attunement as strengths rather than liabilities. These experiences contrasted sharply with concurrent experiences of relational disturbance, particularly with my father's punitive teaching style, which associated leaning with fear of reprisal rather than growth through consistent effort (Laing, 1965; Honneth, 2007).

During this period, I experienced pronounced role confusion across contexts of student, son, sibling, and martial arts instructor; yet Taekwondo remained the only domain in which I consistently experienced pride and confidence in the effort of identity stabilization. The analytic focus highlights how teaching functioned as stabilizing, consolidating identity through sustained affirmation and relational safety (Côté & Levine, 2002). When I articulated my desire to become an English teacher, this statement reflected what Marcia (1966, 1980; Crocetti, 2017)) would

describe as an early identity commitment grounded in prior achievement rather than impulsive aspiration, even as it was met with invalidation with my father's skepticism of this commitment.

Despite this, the teaching identity persisted, signaling early role consolidation between academically competent English student and pedagogically competent martial arts instructor (Luyckx et al., 2006; Kroger, 2007). The resulting finding is that early instructional responsibility within martial arts provided a relationally recognized and embodied foundation for a future teaching identity, liking competence, recognition, and pedagogical self-understanding into a coherent developmental trajectory (McAdams, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2015).

Exploration of Teaching Identity as a Traumatized/Trauma Informed Educator Ages 17-23

As a result of my opportunity to competently teach martial arts in the evening and having a generally close relationship with my English teachers, I found myself asking those English teachers what they enjoyed about the job. The most common answers were "building a relationship with the students" and "getting to talk about books that interest me while getting paid for it." They neglected to tell me the negatives of IEP meetings or the consistent "meetings that could have been an email" that I would face. My teachers never tried to talk me out of it, which I appreciate in hindsight. Being a teenager can have you waffling from one possible future to another on a day-to-day basis depending on how you feel about it on that given day.

I began student teaching in 2011 at a local high school near my university. The school could not have been better suited to set up an attitude towards teaching that I have carried throughout my career. I was given one ninth grade and one tenth grade class. The first day of school was one of the more nerve-wracking experiences of my life. I was 22 and about to co-teach an English class. I had put so much work in to get to this point in my life. Teaching Tae-

Kwon-Do, asking my English teachers in high school what it was like to be a teacher, and all of my English classes in college have led up to this moment of being the one in front of the room. I was officially Mr. Trent in a professional context.

After graduating from college, I ended up substituting and tutoring for a couple years in Jacksonville, Florida. My significant other at the time was in the Navy, so Jacksonville was my first foray into adulthood. I believe this was a formative experience for me as a teacher. For the prospective teachers I worked with as a post-graduate student, I found myself recommending the same experience if they can afford to do so. I got the opportunity to see several school cultures within the same city, and it became quickly apparent that no two schools were the same. It is all too easy to think you are a teacher in a vacuum, but I learned that every school has a different culture and a feeling to them that all of the teachers within have to navigate for better or worse.

One of the most interesting realities of being a teacher is how often it pulls you back to your own adolescence. Every school year, I have been reminded of what it felt like to be the age of my students and the difficulty in navigating that uncertain space between childhood and adulthood. My own formative years were far from ideal as I've relayed, so I've always had a soft spot for students facing difficult circumstances at home. Early in my career, I was advised to "be friendly, but don't be their friend," a line I've tried to walk carefully. Still, I can't help but see parts of myself reflected in certain students.

No matter where I've taught, I've developed a kind of intuition for recognizing those who carry the quiet weight of home struggles. Perhaps that comes with being an English teacher, the one who reads their private thoughts in essays and journals, or from the weekly "Free Write Friday" sessions that invite students to share their current thoughts as a bellringer. The problem with this desire to extend care to my students through understanding their struggle is the mental

health struggles it creates for you at home. I had never contemplated how much secondary trauma would affect me outside of my time in the classroom. However, my first full time job as a teacher had me worried about my students to a degree to which I was unprepared. My next chapter of teaching had me working in Portsmouth, VA as a ninth grade Language X teacher.

Ages 24-27

I remember my first day at my new high school during inservice. The school is the only high school that serves the city, so there is a wide diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. I was being given remedial ninth grade English students which comprised my entire day of classes. My new principal, an older but very firm principal from what I could tell at first impression, called me into her office and had a very straightforward conversation with me about what I should expect. She was not the type to mince words, which I appreciated then and still appreciate now. In my experience, there tends to be a lot of "saying what you're supposed to say" as opposed to "saying what is actually happening" among school administrations.

Her first words let me know that I was not going to be in for an easy school year. "Look, Blake. These students are mostly from very rough backgrounds, and the majority of them attended less than a full year of middle school over the last three years. I was told that "The students are pushed through into high school so that sixteen-year-olds aren't in class with younger students, so you've got very academically challenged students this year." I found myself repeating "Yes, ma'am" over and over as she explained this. "Most of your students will have elementary school reading levels, and they will not want to do the work you assign because they don't see school as a way out of their circumstance." It was a surprising piece of information because this was not told to me until now. I was told I would be teaching ninth grade in the

initial interview, but not all of this information was included. This was when I was first told "Don't smile till Christmas. Be firm, or they'll eat you alive."

As it turned out, I ended up enjoying this job because it required me to see students as more than the institutional labels attached to them. In doing so, I found myself actively resisting deficit perspectives that framed them as problems to be managed rather than persons to be understood. Myself and my best friends in middle school were all constantly in trouble because our parents made us feel out of control, and I felt more comfortable with these students than I expected to feel as a result. Unfortunately, none of them had academic pursuits to help them hide from their problems like I did. They represented the beginning of a path I very easily could have gone down. Nearly every student I had was being raised by their grandparents, which has become an unfortunately very common reality I have noticed throughout my career. I had four classes of ninth graders, and all of these students were Black save for two white students in my last class. I wasn't given a curriculum beyond "do what you can" and "here are the books you are expected to teach." This freedom was useful given the circumstance because I could adjust how I presented the information based on how I knew the students in each class.

The students were difficult, but being a teacher who listened to them and allowed them to be themselves in my classroom was not. I allowed them to cuss by not writing them up because that's all they ever heard at home, but I didn't openly support "unprofessional language" as I put it. Many of them needed to learn how to get out of their own way more than they needed an English teacher to correct their grammar endlessly. I still taught the curriculum and we still read the texts that were provided, but I was given the leeway to make my own professional judgements about how best to prepare them for subsequent English classes. I look back on these

two years as fundamental to my understanding of teaching students with significant deficits in skills while they have to navigate difficult home situations outside of the classroom.

Ages 28-32

After a difficult break up, which made it very difficult to find a stable feeling of identity outside of the classroom, I moved back to my university city to teach where I had done student teaching and had familiarity with the city and school system. I got the opportunity to teach middle school ELA, which I was excited about due the importance of my middle school English teachers in helping find this vocation. My experience in Virginia only strengthened my resolve in knowing I had made a good decision in choosing education as my career. Because of my own negative experience with a middle school English teacher, I felt a great sense of responsibility in being thoughtful and responsive to all of my students every day. The community I would teach in was once again one that had many students going through difficult times at home. This led to many instances of needing to exercise and model patience in order to maintain the respect of the students. Patience and being calm became my greatest asset in a classroom in which the majority of my students rarely saw calm attitudes at home.

I once was about to begin class and needed a student to be quiet so I could begin, but he was not interested in listening. I asked again, “Hey, John (not his name). Can you stop talking so we can begin class?” He immediately went off saying “All you fuckin’ teachers do is tell us to be quiet so you can try to teach us useless shit! I’ll talk if I want to!” I responded with, “Hey man, I know you’re not mad at me. I’m just doing my job and there are other people in this room that may want us to get started with class.” He gets up saying, “Fuck you. I can’t stand this school. I hate school! I’m out of here!” He gets up and walks past me as I say, “You’re not mad at me,

man. We'll be all good tomorrow. Try to have a better day." He slammed my classroom door as he left. The room was silent, expecting me to say something.

One of his classmates said, "Why didn't you yell back?" I said, "Because then he wouldn't have heard what I said. My parents yelled at me as a kid, and I learned to ignore whatever they said if they were screaming." I saw recognition of this reality in my students eyes as if many of them had not thought of this. We went on to have a good lesson. This was a very difficult class with many "difficult" students. Difficult students are often students that do not have structure at home, which inclines them to be abrasive when provided structure in school. This makes them no less capable of learning, but does provide an extra hurdle for an educator. This class had many students with those circumstances, and it can often be an exercise in patient consistency to get them on board with your expectations. If the students know that you will not be different in classroom management from day to day, and you also will not hold it against them when they had a tough day the day before.

That one moment completely changed the dynamic of the rest of the school year for myself and that class. John apologized for his behavior the next day. This moment is an important teaching moment in the narrative I tell myself as a teacher. I hold this up in my mind as one of the moments I was talking to myself in that classroom. I really wish I had a teacher say something like this when I was in middle school. I feel like it would have humanized teachers for me much earlier.

Analysis of "Exploration of Teaching Identity as a Traumatized/Trauma Informed Educator"

The period between ages 17 and 23 represents a critical transition from diffuse exploration into provisional identity commitment, particularly in relation to teaching. From a

Marcia (1966; Crocetti, 2017; Luyckx et al., 2006) framework, the analytic focus in this phase reflects movement from identity moratorium toward emerging commitment, though notably without a full encounter with the disconfirming realities of the profession in high school. My conversations with my English teachers functioned as socially mediated exploration, where the role of "teacher" and identity work through validity was evaluated primarily through its relational and intellectual rewards. The absence of discussion around bureaucratic or emotional labor limited the depth of this early exploration of my prospective career, creating a pathway toward commitment that was affectively affirming, but not yet fully tested.

Relationally, this period marks a significant shift from earlier experiences of misrecognition to experiences of relational validation. Through the theoretical lens of Laing (1965; Honneth, 1995), the English teachers who spoke openly and positively about their work provided a form of interpersonal mirroring that stabilized my emerging professional self. Unlike earlier relational contexts that destabilized identity through criticism or dismissal, these interactions confirmed that the qualities I valued such as connection, intellectual engagement, and care were not only legitimate, but professionally viable. This relational support reduced identity anxiety and made commitment feel emotionally safe.

The initiation of student teaching in 2011 represents a decisive moment in identity enactment. Being addressed as "Mr. Trent" signaled a transition from imagined identity to performed identity, where the self is no longer privately held, but publicly recognized. Erikson's (1956; 1968; Schwartz, 2001) framework as analytic focus helps one understand this moment as a movement towards identity consolidation, in which role experimentation gives way to role assumption. The intense nervousness of the first day reflects vulnerability inherent in this transition where identity is no longer hypothetical, but subject to the evaluation of others, leaning

into identity work from perceived role expectations to externalized role expectations (Côté & Levine, 2002)..

From McAdams's (1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013) perspective, this moment functions as another narrative turning point, retrospectively framed as the convergence of multiple identity threads including martial arts instruction, academic preparation, and relational affirmation. The narrative coherence of "everything leading to this moment" illustrates how meaning is constructed after the fact to support a stable sense of self. Importantly, this coherence is not yet permanent in this early phase of exploration, but it provides a narrative anchor that supports ongoing commitment.

The post-graduation period of substituting and tutoring in Jacksonville represents a phase of contextual testing, where identity commitment is challenged and refined rather than abandoned. From a Marcia (1966; Kroger, 2007; Luyckx et al., 2006) perspective, this period reflects commitment under revision rather than regression to moratorium. Exposure to multiple school cultures disrupted any notion of teaching as a fixed or universal role, revealing the profession as relationally and culturally situated. This complexity deepened commitment by grounding it in reality rather than idealization.

Laing's (1965; Giddens, 1991) emphasis on social context is particularly salient here as analytic focus. Identity as "teacher" was no longer enacted within a single supportive environment but across multiple institutional realities, each with its own norms and expectations. Rather than destabilizing identity, this variability strengthened my sense of professional self by teaching me that competence would not be tied to a single setting. Identity became flexible without becoming fragmented. I was still a teacher, and that identity could assume many different forms within different professional contexts.

Analytically, McAdams's (1997; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007) narrative framework helps explain how this period is later framed as formative rather than disillusioning. What could have been experienced as instability in not having the consolidated identity I was seeking is instead constructed as experimental breadth, reinforcing a self-story adaptability and learning. This reframing contributes to identity continuity, allowing challenges to be integrated rather than experienced as threats.

The increasing emotional pull toward students' lived experience reflects a deepening alignment between personal history and professional role. However, this also marks the beginning of secondary trauma, introducing tension into identity stabilization. Erikson's (1956; 1968; Côté & Levine, 2002) theory suggests an analytic focus in identity work that while vocational identity was consolidating, emotional boundaries were still underdeveloped, creating vulnerability even as commitment strengthened.

Teaching remedial ninth-grade students in Virginia represents a significant deepening of identity commitment through empathetic identification. From a Marcia (1966; Crocetti, 2017; Luyckx et al., 2006) framework, this stage reflects achieved commitment, not because alternatives were exhausted, but because teaching increasingly aligned with deeply held values and personal history. The recognition that these students represented a path I "could have gone down" intensified commitment linking professional purpose to personal meaning.

Relationally, Laing's (1965; Honneth, 1995) concept of identity as socially negotiated is evident in my comfort with students labeled as "difficult." These students did not destabilize my identity; instead, they affirmed it by allowing me to enact a version of teaching grounded in recognition rather than control. The principal's blunt framing of student deficits initially risked

positioning these students as problems to manage, yet my relational approach sought to resist this framing, reasserting identity centered on care and responsiveness.

McAdams's (1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013) narrative theoretical lens reveals how this period is constructed as a redemptive sequence, where earlier personal instability is reinterpreted as a resource for professional empathy. The absence of a prescribed curriculum further allowed identity expression through pedagogical judgement, reinforcing a sense of agency and competence in the stabilizing identity. From an Eriksonian (1956; 1968; Kroger, 2007) perspective, this marks a crucial site of stabilization and identity work through role integration. Teaching was no longer just a job; it had become a coherent extension of self capable of holding complexity of roles without collapse.

The return to a familiar teaching context following personal upheaval underscores the degree to which professional identity had become a stabilizing force. While relational disruption in my personal life threatened identity coherence, teaching functioned as a domain of continuity and meaning. Erikson's (1956; 1968; Côté & Levine, 2002) framework is particularly useful here as vocational identity provided a stabilizing axis amid broader life instability.

The classroom incident with "John" serves as a crystalizing moment of integrated identity enactment. Marcia's (1966; Crocetti, 2017) commitment is evident not in deliberation, but in instinctive response. There is no hesitation about how to act in pedagogical confrontation. Laing's (1965; Giddens, 1991) theory is present in the refusal to escalate conflict, recognizing the student's behavior as relational expression rather than personal attack. McAdam's (1997) narrative theory explains why this moment is preserved and retold as it functions as a self-defining memory, reinforcing a coherent identity narrative centered on calm, empathy, and intentional relational repair.

The memory does not stand alone; it integrates earlier experiences of instability, discipline, and role modeling into a meaningful vocational narrative. This moment also represents Eriksonian (1956; 1968; Schwartz, 2001) stabilization at its most visible. The response was not borrowed, rehearsed, or imposed; it emerged from an integrated self. The desire to be the teacher I wished I had illustrated identity continuity across developmental time, signaling a stable sense of who I am and why I teach.

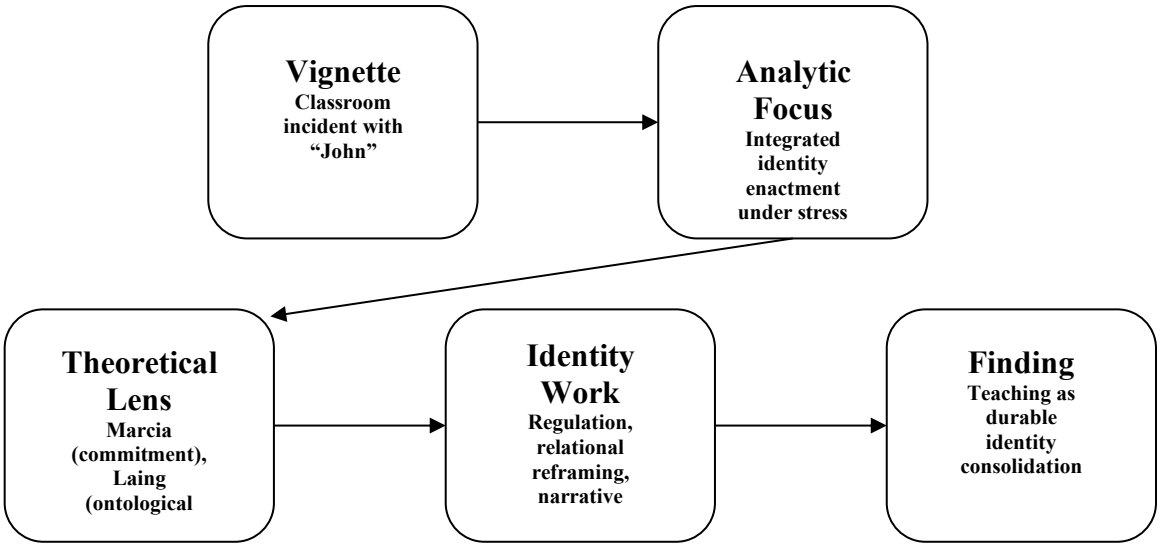


Figure 4.5 *Analytic Pathway of Self Defining Pedagogical Practice*

Figure 4.5 illustrates the analytic pathway through which the classroom incident with John is interpreted as a moment of durable identity consolidation. The vignette serves as the empirical anchor, capturing a moment where pedagogical action occurred under emotional and relation stress. From this experience, the analytic focus isolated integrated identity enactment. This moment is then interpreted through Marcia's (1966) concept of commitment, Laing's (1965) notion of ontological security, McAdams's theory (1997, 2001) of self-defining memory, and Erikson's (1956, 1968) concept of stabilization, clarifying how the ability to act coherently under stress reflects the integration of identity across relational and narrative domains. This

narrative moment leads to the finding that teaching was enacted as consolidated and durable through the anchoring of this memory on future practice.

Findings in Cross-Vignette Analysis: Stabilization Across Time

The preceding portion of this chapter presented a series of life vignettes that traced the movement of my identity across childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Each vignette functioned as a bounded narrative moment situated in time, shaped by context, and analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Erikson, Marcia, Laing, and McAdams's identity frameworks. While these individual analyses illuminated how particular experiences reflected exploration, foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, psychosocial crises, role confusion, adaptive stabilization, among other codes identified in Table 3.2 in Chapter 3, no single vignette fully addresses the central research question guiding this dissertation: How has teaching informed the stabilization of my own identity? That question cannot be resolved within isolated narrative moments. It requires examining how patterns emerge *across* them.

Cross-vignette analysis is therefore methodologically necessary. Autoethnography privileges lived experiences, but analytic rigor requires moving beyond episodic interpretation toward patterned synthesis. By reading the vignettes against one another, I am able to trace recurring mechanisms of stabilization where identity destabilized, where it was temporarily secured, and how those earlier strategies compare to the form of stabilization that emerges through teaching. This approach prevents an over-reliance on singular episodes and instead foregrounds developmental continuity and transformation.

Importantly, cross-vignette analysis also allows for theoretical integration focused on answering the research question through various findings. Examining the vignettes collectively makes visible how teaching functions not merely as another contextual influence, but as a

qualitatively distinct stabilizing structure, one that differs from earlier adaptive strategies such as reading, academic performance, or drug use. Through this synthesis, teaching emerges not as an incidental career choice, but as a developmental site in which identity consolidation becomes durable rather than provisional. By placing the vignettes in conversation with one another, I seek to clarify how teaching has operated as a stabilizing force within my identity trajectory. In doing so, I return directly to the guiding inquiry of this study: How has teaching informed the stabilization of my own identity?

Table 4.1 Cross Vignette Analysis Regarding Identity Stabilization

Vignette / Developmental Period →	Destabilizing Context →	Stabilization Mechanism →	Type of Identity Work →	Contribution to Identity Stabilization Across Time
Reading (Childhood)	Family dysfunctionality, peer ridicule	Solitary imaginative immersion; narrative absorption; narrative agency in stories and play	Affective defensive containment through withdrawal; early narrative meaning-making	Provided protective stabilization, temporary coherence through internal retreat; introduced narrative processing as a coping structure
Dojang / Taekwondo (Middle Childhood)	Continued family dysfunction, need for legitimacy and belonging	Embodied discipline; relational predictability; structured progression through belts	Role consolidation centered on competence and respect; regulation through physical practice	Established structured stabilization, externally scaffolded coherence grounded in discipline and earned recognition
Academic Competency (Adolescence)	Performance pressure; identity comparison;	Mastery, achievement, and intellectual	Self-definition through competence;	Produced performative stabilization,

Table 4.1 Continued

	intellectual competition	positioning	performative identity consolidation	conditional coherence tied to achievement and external validation
Teaching English (Adulthood)	Live relational stress; public authority testing; student dysregulation	Instinctive, relationally grounded professional response	Integrated enactment of commitment; relational reframing; narrative integration	Produced performative stabilization, conditional coherence tied to achievement and external validation

The visual I have provided in Table 4.1 moves across my four vignettes relative to destabilizing factors to my consolidated identity and the mechanisms by which I was able to stabilize my identity. As you move from left to right in the table, you move from the destabilizing context into how the stabilizing mechanism of this period of my life fits into the identity work provided by the theoretical frameworks of identity. Lastly, how these frameworks help me understand how the context, each stabilizing mechanism, and theoretical framework provide evidence of stabilization over time as supported by the theory. Unlike the previous sections of this chapter, where analysis unfolded sequentially in prose in line with the narrative, this table is designed to be read vertically, from top to bottom, with each row representing a distinct developmental snapshot. The appropriate description of the period of my life wherein the narrative occurred is in parentheses. The columns remain consistent across rows so that patterns in stabilization can be compared similarly across multiple experiences. Taken together, the table organizes these moments into a coherent analytic structure, making visible the cumulative process of identity stabilization that is examined in greater depth in the subsequent cross-vignette analysis.

Finding 1: Identity Stabilization Through Provisional Practices Rather Than Linear Resolution

Across multiple developmental periods, my identity did not progress toward resolution in a linear or cumulative way, but instead stabilized temporarily through practices that provided coherence amidst relational and environmental instability. Rather than achieving durable identity commitments during adolescence. I repeatedly relied on activities, most notably reading, academic engagement, physical discipline, and teaching, that functioned as stabilizing mechanisms when other domains of life were marked by unpredictability. These actions served as defensive affective containment in order to escape feelings of destabilization (Di Giuseppe et al., 2021)). These practices did not resolve identity conflict in Erikson's (1956) sense, nor did they initially reflect intentional exploration toward future commitments as described by Marcia (1966,1980). Instead, they allowed for provisional coherence that made continued functioning possible.

During early adolescence, reading emerged as the most consistent stabilizing practice. In the context of familial violence, substance abuse, and emotional neglect, books provided a private and internally ordered space that contrasted sharply with my external environment. Drawing on Laing's (1966) conception of the divided self, reading functioned as a means of preserving inner sense of continuity when interpersonal relationships repeatedly undermined psychological safety. This practice was not outwardly expressive or socially negotiated; rather, it was protective and largely invisible. Although this behavior resembles exploration at a surface level, it lacked the future-oriented intentionality that Marcia associates with that identity status. Instead, reading served as a form of affect regulation and self containment that temporarily suspended identity confusion rather than resolving it.

Moments of institutional recognition occasionally transformed these private practices into socially legible identity claims. The sixth grade English quiz on which I earned the only perfect score, and later the Accelerated Reader reward earned through obsessive engagement with the *Harry Potter* series, stand out as narratively salient events because they publicly affirmed an ability that had previously existed only as an internal refuge. Within McAdams's (1997) framework, these moments function as self-defining memories that reorganized my life story by introducing a plausible alternative to the identities modeled within my family system. For the first time, academic competence appeared not only possible, but recognizable by others. However, the lack of reinforcement within my home environment prevented these moments from consolidating into stable identity commitments. As a result, academic identity remained situational being activated and affirmed at school, but concealed or dismissed elsewhere. This fragmentation kept stabilization from becoming coherent.

The fragility of this emerging academic identity became particularly evident during seventh grade, when a negative interaction with an English teacher disrupted my sense of coherence. Despite investing significant effort and pride into an expository essay, the low grade and dismissive feedback I received undermined the tentative belief that effort and creativity would be met with validation. Erikson's (1956) framework helps understand this experience as a return to role confusion following the withdrawal of institutional affirmation, while Marcia's (1966) model highlights how exploratory trajectories can be premature;ly foreclosed when evaluative structures appear arbitrary or hostile. This disruption was not confined to academics; it coincided with increased behavioral acting out, substance use,and physical fights, suggesting that identity destabilization manifested across multiple domains when academic stabilization failed.

The following years' experience illustrates how quickly identity coherence could be restored under supportive relational conditions. A caring ELA teacher who validated my abilities and expressed genuine interest in my thinking reestablished school as a site of safety and meaning, even as dysfunction at home persisted. Within McAdams's (1997) narrative framework, this period represents a redemptive sequence in which earlier academic failure was reinterpreted through subsequent affirmation. Importantly, this restoration did not eliminate identity conflict or resolve broader developmental tensions. Rather, it provided a renewed point of stabilization that made engagement with school, and with myself, more tolerable.

Parallel to these academic experiences, martial arts functioned as an additional stabilizing practice that reinforced discipline, mastery, and incremental growth. Teaching younger students as a brown belt marked an early instance in which competence extended beyond self and toward responsibility for others. Within Marcia's (1966) framework, this experience reflects the beginnings of identity commitment, though still provisional and context dependent. From a narrative standpoint, this role foreshadows later identity configurations centered on teaching and mentorship, suggesting that stabilization through guided responsibility would become a recurring theme in my life story.

Taken together, these moments indicate that identity development across adolescence was characterized less by resolution than by cycles of destabilization and re-stabilization. Practices such as reading, academic engagement, and teaching did not eliminate identity conflict but provided temporary coherence that allowed development to continue despite ongoing trauma. This finding complicates traditional developmental models by suggesting that, under conditions of sustained instability, identity may be maintained through provisional anchors rather than consolidated commitments.

Finding 2: Teaching as a Concrete Relational Anchor

Across the vignettes, stabilization initially emerged through strategies that reduced emotional threat or imposed structure upon instability. Reading provided an opportunity for solitude and a reduction in stress (Voss, 2025) and an opportunity of defensive affective containment (Di Giuseppe et al., 2021). The Dojang offered disciplined, relational predictability. Academic success produced conditional coherence through intellectual performance and recognition of competence informing identity coherence. Each mechanism stabilized the self in context, but each remained either internally isolated, externally scaffolded, or performance-dependent.

In childhood, reading offered protective stabilization through withdrawal. Narrative immersion reduced affective overload and introduced early meaning-making structures consistent with narrative identity theory (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Teaching differs qualitatively in that it functions not merely as a short-term stabilizing strategy, but provides a relational anchor and reciprocal structure within which identity coherence is enacted, reinforced, and integrated over time.

The Dojang (or martial arts classroom) marked a shift from solitary containment to structured relational participation. Ontological security, in Laing's (1965) sense, became possible because the environment was predictable and role expectations were clear. Yet even here, stability depended upon externally maintained structure. Identity coherence was scaffolded by ritual, hierarchy, and earned progression. As Harwood-Gross (2021) explained in *The Effect of Martial Arts Training on Cognitive and Psychological Functions in At-Risk Youths*, a "significant improvement was observed following the 6-month martial arts intervention on several measures of executive functions" (p. 7). Reciprocal interactions were discussed as

significant to the progress students made in conflict resolution and self-esteem. My relayed experience in the vignette mirrors this finding.

Subsequent attainment of an academic identity introduced exploration and competence formation, resembling movement toward identity achievement in Marcia's (1966) terms. However, contemporary dual-cycle models of identity formation emphasize that commitment is continually evaluated and reworked (Crocetti, 2017). This dual cycle of identity formation explains that commitment leads to reconsideration of identity when results arise from this commitment. An individual has this iterative process concurrently with continued exploration and strengthening of identity formation. Crocetti argues that identity is not a single crisis to be resolved, but a dynamic adaptive process that continues throughout adolescence. This finding is illustrated in my first three vignettes quite clearly as I continually found new avenues of identity stabilization while reverting back to initial avenues such as reading through the years.

Teacher identity scholarship emphasizes that professional identity forms through dynamic interaction between biography and practice (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Kelchtermans et al., 2019). Identity is not simply internal, but enacted within institutional and relational contexts. In the vignette describing my confrontation with "John", the instinctive refusal to escalate the conflict demonstrates what Kelchtermans (2019) describes as professional vulnerability met with principled response. The moment reflects not reactive self-protection, but relational anchoring where the self remains stable while engaging another's dysregulation.

This relational anchoring aligns with Eriksonian (1956) stabilization. Identity versus role confusion, when resolved, produces a sense of continuity that persists across contexts (Erikson, 1968; Crocetti, 2017). In the confrontation, the response was neither rehearsed nor externally imposed; it emerged from an integrated professional self. The desire to become the teacher once

needed reveals identity continuity across developmental time, signaling durable consolidation rather than provisional stabilization (Erikson, 1956) through exploration (Marcia, 1966) found earlier in reading or academic competence.

Narrative identity research suggests that self-defining memories organize identity around themes of agency, redemption, and relational meaning (Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2020). The preservation and retelling of the "John" incident, as well as similar self-defining stories in my career, function as a narrative anchor. Unlike earlier memories that reflect coping or containment, this memory reinforces a coherent story of vocational purpose: calm authority, empathy, and intentional repair. Teaching thus operates not only behaviorally, but narratively. It becomes the interpretive frame through which earlier instability is reauthored as preparation. The discipline cultivated in the Dojang, the empathy shaped through reading, and the intellectual precision refined in academic focus converged within exploration and commitment of pedagogical practice. Teaching integrates rather than replaces prior identity strategies.

What distinguishes teaching from earlier stabilization mechanisms is durability. Reading stabilized my identity provisionally and only when I was alone. Taekwondo only stabilized within the structured walls and had limited opportunities of commitment to teaching. Academic identity was stabilized within performance-based contexts, which were rarely consistent in the context of dysfunctional family dynamics. Teaching, however, stabilizes across relational unpredictability. It is tested under live stress and reaffirmed through repeated enactment with consistent opportunity. Contemporary identity research emphasizes that durable identity commitments are strengthened through recursive engagement rather than static resolution (Crocetti, 2017). Teaching demands this recursion daily. Each classroom interaction reaffirms commitment, deepens relational competence, and reinforces narrative coherence.

Across the vignettes, stabilization evolves from protective containment to structured participation to performative competence, culminating in relational integration. Teaching does not introduce stability for the first time; rather, it consolidates and anchors it in ongoing relational practice. Teaching emerges as the site where adaptive strategies are integrated into a durable, relationally enacted professional self. It is not merely a career choice, but a developmental resolution enacted under pressure, sustained across time, and organized into coherent narrative meaning.

Finding 3: Recognition as a Catalyst for Narrative Coherence

Across the four vignettes, recognition emerges not as peripheral interpersonal experience, but as a catalytic mechanism in the stabilization of identity. While early developmental theory positioned identity formation primarily within psychological maturation, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes the constitutive role of relational recognition in organizing selfhood (Côté & Levine, 2016; Hammack, 2015). Within this study, moments of being seen, named, affirmed, or entrusted function as turning points in which diffuse self-experience becomes narratively ordered. Recognition does not merely affirm an existing identity; it actively structures it.

From a psychosocial perspective, Erikson (1968) conceptualized identity development as emerging through the successful negotiation of crises that hinge upon social validation. Identity coherence depends upon mutual recognition between the individual and their social world. However, across the early vignettes, recognition is inconsistent or destabilized, contributing to diffusion rather than consolidation. It is only when recognition becomes reliable through mentorship, academic validation, and students' trust that identity was able to move toward

stabilization. In this way, recognition operates as the social mechanism through which the Eriksonian crisis is resolved.

Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm helps clarify how recognition interacts with commitment. Marcia emphasized exploration and commitment as the structural components of identity achievement, yet contemporary extensions of this work demonstrate that commitment is significantly reinforced and disintegrated by relational affirmation (Luyckx et al., 2013). In the teaching vignette, commitment is no longer exploratory or provisional, it is enacted reflexively. The recognition from my students that I have had their experience of being yelled at by parents that did not have the emotional regulation skills to admonish in a more patient manner. This consolidated my identity through relational recognition from my students, which helped in my success as a teacher and their success as students. Recognition, therefore, is not simply encouraging; it is structurally consolidating.

Narratively, McAdams (1997, 2001) argued that identity becomes coherent when individuals construct self-defining memories that integrate past fragmentation into meaningful continuity. Recognition intensifies this process. When one is recognized, the event is more likely to be encoded as narratively significant (Adler et al., 2017). Across the vignettes, moments of affirmation become anchor memories for this process, those that are retold because they confirm a stable throughline: "I am someone who can be trusted," "I am someone who can lead competently and calmly," or "I am someone who repairs rather than retaliates." Recognition thus catalyzes narrative coherence by selecting and stabilizing particular interpretations of self across time.

Relationally, Laing (1965) provided a deeper existential dimension as ontological security suggests the self becomes stable when it experiences itself as real within the eyes of

others. Misrecognition threatens the integrity of the self; attuned recognition secures it. In the classroom vignette, identity does not fracture under student confrontation precisely because ontological security has been established. The teacher self does not depend upon compliance for validation. Instead, it is grounded in prior experiences of authentic recognition. Contemporary relational identity research supports this dynamic, demonstrating that professional identity in teaching is sustained through perceived relational validation rather than technical competence alone (Day & Gu, 2010; Kelchtermans, 2019).

Taken together, the cross-vignette pattern demonstrates that recognition functions as a developmental accelerant. Early instability reveals how its absence diffuses identity where mentorship illustrates how provisional recognition organizes emerging commitments. Recognition as a reader, academically capable student, martial arts instructor, and teacher across my vignettes affirms teaching as a means of narrative integration of self. In contrast with the moments of instability, trauma, and self-doubt, I found teaching as a reciprocal site where recognition is both received and extended. Across the lifespan represented in these vignettes, being seen becomes the condition under which the self becomes stable and, ultimately, enacted.

Finding 4: Trauma Reconfigures Exploration

Across the four vignettes, trauma does not simply interrupt development; it reorganizes the conditions under which *exploration* becomes possible. Rather than foreclosing identity formation, trauma reshapes its timing, intensity, and direction (Côté & Levine, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2019). Exploration does not disappear, it narrows, becomes strategic, or is deferred until relational safety is secured (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; McLaughlin, Weissman, & Bitrán, 2019). Read longitudinally, the vignettes reveal that exploration unfolds not as a linear progression toward self-discovery, but as a series of recalibrations in response to

instability, consistent with trauma theory that highlights how adversity redirects developmental processes rather than halting them (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Layne, 2014; Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018). Trauma alters what can be explored, when it can be explored, and under what relational conditions exploration becomes psychologically tolerable (Brunzell et al., 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2019).

In the earliest vignette, relational unpredictability constrains outward experimentation. Instead of exploratory engagement with multiple roles or peer affiliations, exploration turns inward. Reading becomes less of a hobby and more of a regulatory mechanism as an internally controlled space where emotional intensity can be metabolized without relational risk (Voss, 2025). From a developmental standpoint, this reflects a modification of what Erikson (1968) theorized as the psychosocial task of identity versus role confusion. Exploration typically requires sufficient ego strength to tolerate ambiguity; trauma reduces this tolerance. Contemporary trauma research supports this pattern, demonstrating that chronic relational instability often leads to hypervigilance and constrained risk taking rather than expansive experimentation (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Layne, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2019). My hypervigilance is represented in my solitary play enacting relational repair in order to feel some agency in the way people around me treat each other. Exploration, in this phase, is not about identity breadth but about emotional survival. It is cognitive and imaginative rather than social.

This inward redirection does not indicate identity foreclosure; rather, it reveals an adaptive reconfiguration. Marcia (1966) conceptualized foreclosure as commitment without exploration. Yet what appears at first glance as narrowed exploration may instead be trauma-informed selectivity. Rather than sampling multiple peer identities, exploration occurs with narrative worlds. Contemporary extensions of Marcia's (1966) work complicate the assumption

that exploration must be socially visible to be developmentally meaningful (Luyckx et al., 2013). Internal narrative rehearsal, imagining alternative selves through story, can function as exploratory groundwork that later becomes externally enacted. The first vignette thus shows trauma not eliminating exploration but relocating it into psychologically safer domains.

The vignette focusing on my experiences in taekwondo marks a critical shift. Exploration expands due to opportunity, even if this opportunity exists within tightly structured boundaries. The dojang provides ritualized predictability, hierarchical clarity, and earned progression. Exploration here is disciplined rather than diffuse. Risk is contained within codified rules and culture found in martial arts classrooms. This pattern aligns with trauma adaptation research indicating that youth exposed to instability often seek environments characterized by structure and clear authority (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). Exploration becomes scaffolded; it is not free-form identity experimentation but structured role acquisition. Rank advancement, embodied competence, and instructor affirmation gradually widen tolerance for exposure.

Importantly, this expansion into a new role depends upon relational safety. Laing (1965) argued that ontological security arises when one experiences oneself as real and continuous in the presence of others. In the dojang, the recognition of my competence and the trust put into me to teach younger students created an opportunity for stabilization and freedom of exploration. The body simultaneously became a site of mastery instead of vulnerability. Trauma and dysfunctional relational disrepair had constrained experimentation; relational security allows its cautious reintroduction outside of reading. Contemporary developmental neuroscience reinforces this dynamic: perceived safety reduces stress reactivity and restores cognitive flexibility, thereby increasing exploratory behavior (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Exploration, therefore, is not simply a function of age as Erikson (1956) might contend, but of relational regulation.

The academic vignette further illustrates trauma's reconfiguration of exploration. Intellectual achievement becomes both an exploratory and a protective shield. Rather than sampling multiple social identities as I attempt to in middle school and early high school, this exploration narrows toward competence and mastery. Academic success, while limited to only one subject area, offers predictable feedback and measurable advancement, minimizing relational unpredictability. Yet within this narrowing lies genuine identity work. McAdams, (1997, 2001) argues that narrative identity develops as individuals organize self-defining experiences into an internalized and evolving life story. Exploration in the trial and error of academic affirmation and being given inarguable information confirming competence provides particularly powerful narrative material during adolescence.

Working with my father led me to develop a kind of protective armor against negative feedback, which pushed me to lean more deeply into this self-defining role as a teacher. Contemporary research on identity formation supports this interpretation, showing that adolescents are more likely to integrate experiences of competence into their developing self-concept because those experiences help stabilize self-esteem and reduce identity uncertainty (Branje et al., 2021; Crocetti, 2017). These recognitions allow exploration to shift from survival-based regulation to aspirational trajectory. Exploration is oriented toward domains where evaluation criteria are explicit and relational ambiguity is reduced. Recognition in structured domains like school becomes more than performance feedback; it becomes evidence that the self is viable and exploration is not inherently negative.

Contemporary identity scholarship increasingly recognizes that adversity can intensify meaning-making. Processes rather than inhibit them (Adler et al., 2017; Hammack, 2015). Across the academic vignette, exploration becomes future-oriented. The question subtly shifts

from “How do I stay safe?” to “Who can I become?” Trauma’s earlier constraints have not disappeared, but they now coexist with emerging agency. Exploration is no longer purely defensive; it begins to incorporate generativity. Research on trauma and adolescent development suggests that youth exposed to instability often prefer structured environments where expectations are transparent and control feels attainable (Cantor et al., 2019; Luthar et al., 2020). My future self as an educator became an attainable future orientation.

Neuroscientific research on post-traumatic-growth further illuminates this developmental arc. While trauma can narrow behavioral flexibility, supportive relational contexts can facilitate cognitive reappraisal and increased prosocial motivation (Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018). In the final vignette, exploration manifests as moral experimentation: choosing restraint over retaliation, curiosity over control. Trauma’s early hypervigilant response becomes an asset rather than a liability. The same sensitivity that once constrained exploration now sharpens relational discernment.

Read cumulatively, the vignettes demonstrate three phases in the reconfiguration of exploration:

1. **Constrained Exploration** – Trauma narrows exploration to internally regulated spaces (reading, imagination).
2. **Scaffolded Exploration** – Structured relational environments cautiously expand behavioral experimentation (martial arts).
3. **Integrated Exploration** – Relational security and commitment allow exploration to occur within morally complex professional contexts (teaching).

Importantly, this progression reflects more than linear maturation; it is better understood as trauma-informed adaptation. Contemporary developmental and neurobiological research

suggests that exposure to chronic stress recalibrates how young people assess safety, risk and relational threat (Cantor et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2020). Exploration, therefore, does not unfold evenly across contexts. It contracts when safety is uncertain and expands when predictability and recognition increase. In environments marked by instability, adolescents often turn inward, favoring solitary, competence-based, or tightly structured domains where evaluation criteria are explicit and controllable (Luthar et al., 2020).

From a DisCrit (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri 2016) perspective, these moments can be understood not simply as individual coping responses, but as identity adaptations shaped by structural and relational conditions that regulate belonging and legitimacy. DisCrit scholars argue that psychological and educational identities emerge within systems that define normative competence and regulate who is recognized as intellectually and socially legitimate (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016; Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016). Within environments characterized by relational instability and emotional unpredictability, academic competence functioned not merely as a developmental milestone, but as a socially legible form of stability that provided access to recognition otherwise unavailable in familial contexts.

Leonardo and Broderick's (2011) concept of "smartness as property" is particularly useful here as reading proficiency and academic success operated as forms of symbolic protection, granting conditional legitimacy and a degree of psychological safety. From this perspective, academic engagement was not solely an internally motivated exploration in the Eriksonian (1956, 1968) sense, but an adaptive response to conditions in which emotional security was inconsistent.

The cross-vignette pattern complicates traditional stage-based readings of Erikson's psychosocial sequence. Erikson (1956, 1968) described identity development as a normative

progression through crisis and resolution, yet contemporary research suggests that developmental tasks are often revisited, compressed, or unevenly distributed under conditions of adversity (Syed & McLean, 2016; Branje, 2022). Trauma does not halt development; it reorganizes it. This is evident in my self narrative where some navigations into maturity were strengthened while adapting to trauma, while other forms of exploration were halted. Marcia's (1966) conceptualizations are evident in the form of stable configurations of exploration and commitment; however, some longitudinal studies now demonstrate fluid movement between statuses across adolescence and emerging adulthood, particularly in response to relational stressors (Crocetti, 2017; Meeus, 2018). The oscillations visible across the vignettes align with this more dynamic understanding.

Ultimately, the finding that trauma reconfigures exploration underscores a central analytic claim: instability does not preclude identity formation; it alters its architecture. Across the vignettes, trauma functions less as derailment and more as directional force in redirecting exploration toward safety, structure, competence, and eventually generativity (Erikson, 1956, 1968). This trajectory aligns with emerging research suggesting that adaptive functioning under adversity often involves the strategic cultivation of domains where agency can be exercised and recognized (Cantor et al., 2019; Luthar et al., 2020). Teaching represents the culmination of this reconfiguration. The classroom becomes a relational arena where earlier adaptive strategies (calm under volatility, preference for structure, sensitivity to give and receive recognition) are neither denied or outgrown, but integrated. What began as self-protection evolves into sustained, morally grounded engagement with others.

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Chapter 5

"Owning our story can be hard, but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it." ~ Brené Brown

This chapter presents implications of this autoethnographic study through a synthesis of patterns that emerged within and across the narrative vignettes and theory guided analysis presented in chapter 4. Whereas the previous chapter focused on analytic engagement with specific moments across the course of my life, this chapter shifts toward interpretation and meaning-making. The implications presented here are not discrete outcomes or generalizable claims, but rather theoretically informed assertions about identity development as it was lived, narrated, and retrospectively understood within this study as well as within my own matured emotional understanding of these moments.

The implications illuminate identity development as a recursive, relational, and survival-oriented process that does not neatly align with linear understandings or stage-based models. Across developmental periods, identity work was frequently shaped less by future-oriented exploration and commitment than by the immediate need for emotional stability and relational responsibility. These patterns complicate dominant identity theories (e.g., Erikson, 1956, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Laing, 1965; McAdams, 1997) by foregrounding contexts of instability and caregiving which are largely under-theorized within the literature of traditional models of identity development. In doing so, the implications both extend and challenge existing frameworks, highlighting moments where theory proved generative and where it fell short in accounting for lived experience.

This chapter concludes by considering the implications of these implications on identity theory, teacher identity development, and qualitative ethnography as mode of inquiry in education research. By situating personal narrative within broader theoretical conversations, the

chapter underscores the value of autoethnographic work in revealing dimensions of identity development that remain obscured in linear decontextualized approaches. Together, the implication contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how identity is formed, sustained, and revised over time in relational care, survival, and professional becoming.

Implications for Teacher Education

The findings of this study suggest that teacher education must be understood not merely as skill acquisition or pedagogical training, but as structured identity formation work. Research in teacher identity has increasingly demonstrated that becoming a teacher involves ongoing negotiation of self-understanding within relational, institutional, and narrative contexts rather than the accumulation of discrete competencies (Beijaard et al., 2004; Britzman, 2003; Day et al., 2006). Across the vignettes, professional development emerges not as linear maturation, but as relationally mediated consolidation. Identity development is influenced by personal history, relational affirmation, and the classroom contexts in which preservice teachers situate themselves (Friesen & Besley, 2013). These findings carry significant implications for how teacher education programs structure coursework, field experiences, supervision, and assessment.

Across vignettes, identity stabilization occurred not through abstract coursework or philosophical alignment with teaching, but through relational recognition, embodied role enactment, and reflexive integration of prior life experiences. Teaching became stable not when it was cognitively chosen, but when it was socially confirmed and narratively integrated. This has direct implications for teacher education programs. If identity commitment deepens when preservice teachers experience recognition as legitimate professionals, then programs must intentionally create spaces where novice teachers are treated as emerging colleagues rather than

provisional assistants. These findings carry significant implications for how teacher education programs structure coursework, field experiences, supervision, and assessment.

Identity Stabilization Through Provisional Practices

The first finding in chapter 4 illustrates that identity stabilizes through provisional practice rather than through definitive internal resolution, which challenges dominant assumptions about professional readiness. Identity development research has long complicated linear stage models, demonstrating that exploration and commitment often coexist dynamically rather than sequentially (Marcia, 1966; Luyckx et al., 2006). Teacher identity scholarship similarly portrays identity as continuously reconstructed through participation in practice (Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen, 2008). This study and corroborating research suggest that stabilization occurs through repeated, embodied rehearsal of the role itself.

Certainty follows enactment rather than preceding it. This interpretation aligns with sociocultural theories of identity formation that situate identity within participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Practice-based approaches to teacher education further support this claim, demonstrating that approximations of practice such as rehearsals, microteaching, and scaffolded responsibility (similar to my martial arts experience) facilitate professional judgement and identity consolidation (Grossman et al., 2009; Ball & Forzani, 2009).

Accordingly, teacher education programs should legitimize provisionality as normative. Rather than interpreting ambivalence or fluctuation as unsuitability, which sometimes happens, programs might understand such experiences as integral to consolidation (Crocetti, 2017; Luyckx et al., 2008). Evaluative systems that demand premature coherence risk misreading adaptive oscillation as deficiency. Research on identity formation demonstrates that processes of exploration in breadth and depth, along with cycles of reconsideration, are developmentally

productive and often precede more stable commitments (Marcia, 1966; Luyckx et al., 2006). When teacher education frameworks prioritize early certainty over developmental process, they may inadvertently foreclose the very exploration that supports long-term professional resilience and commitment (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Single semester teacher education programs may not be enough time to develop this professional resilience and commitment.

Teaching as a Concrete Relational Anchor

The second finding of teaching being a concrete relational anchor for educators demonstrates how professional identity is not consolidated through abstract philosophical alignment with the profession, but through sustained responsibility within relational contexts. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the centrality of clinically rich preparation in teacher development (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Extended and coherent field experiences are associated with stronger professional commitment, instructional confidence, and retention (Ronfeldt, 2012).

Relational continuity appears particularly consequential. Research on teacher education and attrition indicates that relational support and meaningful responsibility significantly predict persistence (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). When candidates experience authentic responsibility in planning, assessment, and classroom management within a stable school community, the professional role becomes experientially real rather than aspirational. This suggests that fragmented placements may undermine identity anchoring. Sustained engagement with the same students and mentors enables candidates to inhabit responsibility over time, fostering presence and moral accountability. Clinical provisional practice should not be applied nor understood as coursework, but as a developmental core of preparation wherein the educator reflects on their pedagogical practice as a never-ending work in progress.

This finding has direct implications for the structural design of teacher education programs. First, programs should introduce structured increases to responsibility over time, rather than limiting candidates to observation until the student teaching semester. Candidates might begin by assisting with small-group instruction, then progress to planning individual lessons, designing assessments, and eventually planning and managing full instructional sequences. This gradual assumption of responsibility allows candidates to experience competence in manageable increments, reinforcing the internalization of the teacher role. For instance, when a candidate designs and teaches a unit that students respond to positively, and then analyzes student work to revise future instruction, they begin to see their decisions as consequential to learning (Grossman et al., 2009).

This experience strengthens the perception that they are not merely learning about teaching, but actively functioning as an educator. Research on teacher learning emphasizes that opportunities to enact core instructional practices rather than merely observing them are critical for developing professional judgement, confidence, and identity (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Lampert et al., 2013). Gradual release of responsibility also aligns with developmental models of teacher preparation, which show that scaffolded participation supports the transition from student to professional by allowing candidates to integrate skill acquisition with identity consolidation (Hammerness et al., 2005).

Secondly, mentor relationships should be intentionally structured to provide relational recognition. Programs can train mentor teachers to treat candidates as emerging colleagues rather than passive assistants by involving them in professional conversations, collaborative planning meetings, and reflective dialogue about instructional choices. Reminding mentors that soliciting candidates' instructional reasoning by asking why they chose a particular strategy, how they

interpreted student responses, and what they would adjust if they did it again provides an opportunity for the student teachers to feel professionally legitimate. This recognition contributes to identity stabilization by reinforcing the perception that they belong within the professional community.

Further, this is what good teachers do at every stage of their career. Studies of mentoring consistently show that relational support, collaborative reflection, and professional inclusion significantly influence teacher identity development, self-efficacy, and retention (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008). When candidates are positioned as legitimate participants in professional dialogue, they begin to internalize the norms and responsibilities of the profession, strengthening their commitment and sense of belonging (Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012; Wenger, 1998).

Third, programs can incorporate structured reflections, such as guided narrative reflection or cross-vignette analysis, that help candidates connect their lived classroom experiences to their developing professional identity. For example, candidates might document moments when they felt particularly effective, uncertain, or responsible, and analyze how these moments shaped their sense of themselves as educators. This process helps candidates recognize that identity consolidation occurs through relational and experiential engagement rather than through abstract mastery of theory alone. Reflective practice has long been identified as central to teacher development because it enables candidates to interpret experience, integrate theory with practice, and construct coherent professional identities (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Narrative and autobiographical reflection, in particular, has been shown to support identity integration by helping teachers understand how prior experiences shape present

professional commitments and instructional decision making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Olsen, 2008).

Finally, teacher education programs should minimize prolonged periods in which candidates remain observational or peripheral, as these conditions may inadvertently reinforce uncertainty about professional belonging. Instead, programs should design experiences in which candidates are consistently positioned as necessary contributors to classroom functioning. Over time, this transforms teaching from a hypothetical future into an enacted identity. Research on induction and early career teaching demonstrates that opportunities for meaningful participation and responsibility are strongly associated with professional commitment, instructional competence, and long-term retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2014). From a socio-cultural perspective, professional identity emerges through participation in practice rather than through abstract preparation alone, underscoring the necessity of designing teacher education around sustained, relationally embedded clinical experiences (Wenger, 1998; Zeichner, 2010).

Recognition as a Catalyst for Narrative Coherence

The third finding highlights the catalytic role of recognition. Identity consolidation was precipitated not solely by successful performance, but by being seen and named as competent by significant members of the professional community. Theoretical work on narrative identity emphasizes that coherence emerges through social affirmation and interpretive framing (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Within teacher education, research indicates that mentoring relationships significantly shape professional self-concept (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Feedback functions not only as technical correction, but as identity discourse. When mentors articulate specific observations of competence and growth, they contribute to the

candidate's emerging narrative coherence. Conversely, evaluative climates characterized by surveillance rather than affirmation may undermine professional self-efficacy (Day et al., 2006). Teacher education programs should therefore attend to the relational equity of supervision.

Mentor preparation might include explicit attention to identity-affirming feedback and the distinction between corrective guidance and narrative recognition. Recognition does not imply uncritical praise; rather, it situates critique within relational trust and developmental possibility. Absent such recognition, practice remains just episodic performance without productive cooperative reflection. With recognition, practice becomes integrated into a coherent professional narrative.

Teacher education programs should therefore attend to relational equity of supervision by ensuring that candidates receive consistent, identity-affirming mentorship rather than exclusively evaluative oversight. Research on clinical supervision demonstrates that developmental mentoring, characterized by dialogue, mutual trust, and collaborative interpretation of practice, supports both instructional growth and professional identity formation (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Zeichner, 2010). Programs might formalize mentor training that helps experienced teachers understand how their feedback shapes not only candidates' instructional decisions, but also their emerging sense of themselves as educators. For example, mentor preparation could include structured protocols for post-observation conversations in which mentors identify specific instructional moves that were effective, those that were ineffective, and connect those observations to the candidate's developing professional and natural strengths. Such practices help candidates understand that competence is not accidental, but recognizable and reproducible (Grossman et al., 2009).

A further recommendation resulting from the finding would be mentor preparation having explicit attention to identity affirming feedback and the distinction between corrective guidance and narrative recognition. Corrective guidance focuses on improving discrete instructional behaviors, while narrative recognition situates those behaviors within a border developmental trajectory, helping candidates understand themselves as becoming increasingly capable professionals. Research on feedback and professional learning emphasizes that feedback is most effective when it is specific, growth-oriented, and embedded within trusting relationships that support risk-taking and vulnerability (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). For example, rather than stating only that a lesson lacked sufficient structure and transitions, a mentor might acknowledge the candidate's effective questioning strategies and explain how strengthening lesson organization will allow these strengths to have greater impact.

This framing supports a sense of competence while supporting continued development. Research on teacher identity demonstrates professional growth is most sustainable when candidates experience both challenge and affirmation with supportive professional relationships (Kelchtermans, 2009; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). When critique is delivered in the context of supportive recognition, feedback is more likely to be interpreted as evidence of investment in growth rather than judgement of inadequacy. This interpretive shift strengthens resilience, persistence, and willingness to engage in reflective practice (Day et al., 2006).

Trauma as a Reconfiguration of Exploration

The fourth finding complicates linear models of professional exploration. Trauma did not foreclose identity formation; it recalibrated the conditions under which exploration could occur. Developmental trauma research suggests that exposure to adversity heightens sensitivity to relational threat while increasing the importance of psychological safety for adaptive growth

(Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Van Der Kolk, 2014). In educational contexts, trauma-informed frameworks emphasize relational safety, predictability, and clarity as foundational conditions for learning and exploration (Carello & Butler, 2015). Highly competitive or ambiguously evaluative environments may constrict experimentation for candidates whose prior experiences amplify threat perception.

Recent literacy scholarship extends this understanding by demonstrating that trauma and vulnerability are not merely barriers to learning, but central conditions through which meaning-making and identity formation occur. In *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy: Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy*, Dutro (2019) argued that literacy learning is inherently bound to emotional exposure and relational recognition, and that educational spaces must be intentionally structured to hold vulnerability without exploitation or dismissal. Dutro emphasized that when learners' emotional realities are acknowledged and relationally contained, vulnerability becomes generative rather than destabilizing. This insight has direct implications for teacher education: candidates' professional exploration is shaped not only by instructional opportunity, but by whether the environment can hold uncertainty, vulnerability, and developmental fluctuation without converting those experiences into deficit judgments. When vulnerability is relationally supported, candidates are more able to engage in reflective risk-taking, experimentation, and identity integration (Dutro, 2019; Carello & Butler, 2015).

Conversely, relationally secure and structurally clear environments foster risk-taking and generative engagement. A trauma-informed approach to teacher education does not require therapeutic intervention; it instead requires attention to climate. Psychological safety, clear expectation, and consistent supervisory relationships support adaptive exploration. This aligns

with research demonstrating that supportive induction and mentoring environments reduce attrition and promote professional resilience (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

This finding suggests several concrete implications for teacher education practice. Supervisors can provide transparent evaluation rubrics and developmental feedback cycles so that candidates understand how growth will be assessed, reducing ambiguity that may trigger threat-based responses. Programs, as aforementioned, can also incorporate structured narrative reflection practices that help candidates interpret moments of uncertainty as part of identity development rather than as isolated failures (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dutro, 2019). Additionally, supervisors and mentors can explicitly frame the vulnerability of uncertainty about instructional decisions or emotional responses to student relationships as expected and productive aspects of professional learning. The practices align with trauma-informed pedagogical principles emphasizing predictability, relational trust, and interpretive support (Carello & Butler, 2015).

Importantly, developmental oscillation should be anticipated rather than pathologized. It comes as no surprise that a job with so many moving parts would create a struggle for narrative coherence in becoming a teacher. Temporary contraction in confidence may represent adaptive recalibration rather than regression. Programs must be designed to hold such fluctuation without creating destabilization that could hurt the trajectories of graduates.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher education should be understood as developmental containment as Kelchtermans (2009) explains it: a structured relational environment within which provisional enactment, recognition, responsibility, and narrative integration can occur. Professional identity forms not through linear ascent toward certainty, but through iterative rehearsal within stable relational frameworks (Wenger, 1999; Beijaard et al.,

2004). This reconceptualization extends beyond preparation programs. If identity stabilization depends upon recognition and relational anchoring, then early career induction systems must sustain similar conditions. Research consistently demonstrated that comprehensive induction and mentoring programs significantly improve teacher retention and professional growth (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Ronfeldt, 2012). Ideally, there should be mentorship within districts to help continue this professional development through professional community recognition and relational anchoring within schools.

Ultimately, this study positions teacher education as an identity-forming institution. The work of preparing teachers is inseparable from shaping the relational and structural environments in which professional selves stabilize. Programs that attend to relational architecture, structured responsibility, and the legitimization of provisional practice may cultivate educators whose identities are not only competent, but durable (Ball & Forzani, 2009). Table 5.1 provides a visual representation of these implications from finding to practical application across four key stakeholder groups. The leftmost column identifies the four core findings of the study: (a) identity stabilizes through provisional practice, (b) teaching functions as a relational anchor through sustained responsibility, (c) recognition catalyzes identity consolidation, and (d) trauma recalibrates the conditions under which exploration is possible.

There are handouts (Appendix A) that correspond to this table where practical advice is being given. There is a handout for mentors and one for teacher candidates. Each handout could function as a jumping off point for discussions regarding creating productive developmental containment and teacher identity for the candidates throughout the student teaching school year. These could be referenced throughout the school year as many of the suggestions are iterative practices.

Each finding represents a developmental mechanism through which professional identity becomes more coherent and durable over time. The remaining columns provide structured means of support for teacher candidates to begin developing the skills to maintain this durable identity. Practically, the table functions as a translational bridge between the interpretive findings of this autoethnography and actionable programmatic considerations. While the narrative vignettes illustrate how identity stabilization unfolded within a particular lived context, the table abstracts those developmental processes into structural and relational conditions that can be intentionally cultivated in teacher preparation and induction environments. The table therefore operationalizes the finding's central claim that teacher education can be a form of developmental containment, providing concrete guidance for structuring the appropriate environment for this process.

Table 5.1 *Implications of Developmental Containment Model Across Stakeholders*

Core Finding	**Teacher Education Programs**	**Teaching Mentors**	**Public School Districts**	**Teacher Candidates**
Identity stabilizes through provisional practice (not premature certainty)	• Normalize developmental oscillation • Design iterative rehearsal cycles (microteaching → co-teaching → lead teaching) • Extend clinical duration beyond a single semester • Avoid equating coherence with readiness as readiness is unlikely to occur so quickly	• Frame uncertainty as developmental • Distinguish hesitation from incompetence • Encourage reflection during fluctuation	• Reduce "sink or swim" entry structures • Allow gradual assumption of full responsibility • Protect early-career experimentation	• Expect fluctuation in confidence • Interpret doubt as recalibration • See practice as professional identity-building and not performance -only
Teaching functions as a relational anchor	• Prioritize sustained placements over	• Provide authentic responsibility	• Support multi-year mentorship • Minimize	• Invest deeply in relational continuity

Table 5.1 Continued

through sustained responsibility	fragmented rotations • Integrate coursework with ongoing classroom responsibility • Treat clinical work as developmental core, not peripheral requirement	(planning, assessment, management) • Maintain relational continuity • Support ownership over time	reassignment in early career • Create stable school placements	• Recognize responsibility as meaning-making • Track growth across time
Recognition catalyzes identity consolidation	• Prepare mentors in identity-affirming feedback • Separate technical evaluation from narrative recognition • Build feedback structures that name competence explicitly quickly after observation	• Articulate specific observations of growth • Situate critique within relational trust • Avoid surveillance-oriented supervision	• Publicly affirm early-career teachers • Create cultures of professional recognition • Reduce purely compliance-based evaluation climates	• Attend to moments of being “seen” • Integrate affirming feedback into professional narrative • Seek constructive mentorship
Trauma recalibrates the conditions under which exploration is possible	• Design psychologically safe evaluation systems • Provide structural clarity and predictability • Anticipate contraction in confidence as adaptive and formative	• Scaffold risk-taking gradually • Avoid ambiguous evaluative climates • Provide consistent relational presence	• Stabilize supervisory relationships • Reduce high-stakes pressure in early years • Invest in supportive induction environments	• Recognize threat sensitivity • Seek relational safety • Understand oscillation as developmental, not regression

Structured Relational Autoethnographic Reflection (SRAR): A Process for Teacher Identity Integration

The Structured Relational Autoethnographic Reflection (SRAR) model (see Appendix A) visually represents the analytic and developmental process through which this study moved from narrative excavation toward integrated professional identity, which could be useful in teacher education courses for students to have analytic dialogue with themselves. Each phase reflects distinct analytic movement that emerged during the writing vignettes, engagement with identity theory, and relational processing through dialogue and therapeutic support. The progression from narrative recall to anchored professional integration mirrors narrative identity theory's assertion that individuals construct coherence by organizing autobiographical experiences into an interpretive life story that links past experience with present identity and future direction (McAdams, 1997; McAdams & McLean, 2013). In this study, writing vignettes did not merely document prior experience; it enabled reinterpretation of those experiences as meaningful precursors to professional commitment.

The implications presented in the previous section of this chapter represent the process that teachers would be undergoing through SRAR. Teachers can better understand the moments in their lives that provided stabilization and consolidation by systematically identifying and writing brief vignettes of formative experiences across developmental periods, particularly moments characterized by emotional intensity, relational rupture, or unexpected recognition. The first two may not be well represented in their lives, but it is likely that someone becoming a teacher was recognized as a student by a prominent teacher in their lives.

In practice, teachers would begin by selecting a discrete memory such as a classroom interaction, moment of academic success or failure, or an experience with a mentor, and writing

a short narrative focused not on evaluation, but on a concrete sensory or relational detail. Details such as who was present, what was said, how their body felt, and what meaning they assigned to the moment at the time are all relevant to this process. Following this narrative construction, teachers would engage in guided analytic reflection by asking structured questions: What aspect of the self was threatened or affirmed in this moment? How did this experience alter what felt possible or safe to explore? What roles did recognition, rejection, or emotional containment play in stabilizing or destabilizing their sense of self? Teachers would then revisit the vignette through a theoretical or conceptual lens provided in coursework in order to reinterpret the experience in broader developmental processes rather than an isolated personal weakness or success.

Finally, teachers should synthesize across vignettes, looking for recurring patterns in how they respond to authority, feedback, evaluation, and relational closeness. These are all significant parts of the professional life of an educator. This cross-vignette synthesis allows teachers to recognize earlier adaptive strategies such as overpreparation, emotional withdrawal, perfectionism, or heightened sensitivity to evaluation, which may continue to shape their professional practice. Through this structured sequence of narrative construction, analytic questioning, theoretical reframing, and pattern identification, SRAR makes visible the developmental origins of professional identity and enables teachers to relate to their present classroom with greater clarity, intentionality, and self-compassion.

The first phase, Narrative Excavation, reflects the foundational role of autobiographical recall in identity development. Identity research consistently demonstrates that autobiographical reading, the ability to interpret past events in relation to the self, is central to developing a coherent sense of identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In teacher education, narrative writing has been shown to help preservice teachers recognize how prior schooling and relational experiences

shape their beliefs about teaching and learning (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). By externalizing formative experiences through written vignettes, individuals create an analytic distance that allows experience to be examined rather than simply relived, which is a central methodological function of autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

The second and third phases, Emotional and Adaptive Pattern Identification and Identity Throughline Analysis, reflect the process of linking emotional experience with professional commitment. In teacher education specifically, prior experiences with recognition, marginalization, or academic competence often influence why individuals enter teaching and how they understand their professional role (Flores & Day, 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009). Making these connections explicit allows teachers to understand professional identity not as an abstract role adoption, but as an extension of ongoing identity development shaped by relational experience.

The fourth phase, Relational Reframing Through Dialogue, reflects the importance of relational contexts in identity consolidation. Identity development does not occur in isolation, but through social recognition and interpretive dialogue with others (Erikson, 1968). Research on teacher identity similarly demonstrates that mentorship, collegial dialogue, and reflective supervision play a critical role in helping teachers interpret professional experiences and sustain commitment in the profession (Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012). Structured reflection in relational contexts allows teachers to reinterpret prior experiences in ways that increase agency and reduce the unconscious influence of unresolved instability on professional functioning.

The final phase, Anchored Professional Integration, represents the movement toward a consciously integrated professional identity. This reflects contemporary understandings of identity as a dynamic but stabilizing structure that provides continuity across contexts and over

time (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). In teacher education, identity clarity has been linked to increased professional resilience, persistence, and long-term retention (Day & Gu, 2007). When teachers understand the personal meaning underlying professional commitments, they are better able to sustain engagement despite institutional pressures and emotional demands.

Within the context of this study, the SRAR model functions both as a representation of the analytic process and as a methodological contribution. It demonstrates how autoethnographic narrative analysis facilitated identity stabilization by making visible the relational and emotional foundations of professional commitment. More broadly, it provides a structural reflective protocol that teacher education programs may use to support preservice teachers in developing reflexive awareness of how their personal histories shape their professional identities. By legitimizing narrative reflection as a structured developmental practice, this model aligns with growing recognition that teacher preparation involves not only skill acquisition, but the formation and stabilization of professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2009).

Implications for University-Provided Therapeutic Support During Student Teaching

The findings of this study suggest that student teaching is not merely a capstone practice, but an intensified site of identity consolidation, relational exposure, and emotional demand. Research consistently identifies the transition into classroom responsibility as one of the most stressful phases of teacher development (Gold & Roth, 1993; Kyriacou, 2001). Even during preparation, teacher candidates report high levels of anxiety related to classroom management, evaluation, performance expectations, and relational dynamics (Chaplain, 2008). The student teaching semester often intensifies these pressures due to high stakes observation, summative evaluation, and full instructional responsibility. This stress is not a trivial concern.

Longitudinal research indicates that early-career stress strongly predicts attrition (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Emotional exhaustion and identity destabilization frequently precede exit from the profession (Schaefer et al., 2012). If professional identity stabilizes through provisional enactment, as this study suggests both in my martial arts teaching experience and later professional experiences as an educator, then student teaching is precisely the moment when instability is most likely to surface. In other words, the single semester designed to consolidate professional identity is also structurally positioned to destabilize it.

Emerging scholarship also suggests that the professional lives of educators cannot be separated from the traumatic experiences that shape their minds and identities. In their autoethnographic study of higher education teaching, Walters and Anderson (2023) document how unresolved trauma manifests directly within classroom practice, influencing emotional regulation, pedagogical decision making, and perceptions of safety within academic spaces. Their narratives demonstrate that trauma does not remain confined to private life, but instead surfaces through hypervigilance, anxiety, and altered interactions with students and colleagues, often transforming teaching into something that must be endured and managed.

Importantly, their work highlights a critical gap in the literature. While educational research frequently focuses on students who have experienced trauma, the experiences of teachers themselves remain largely overlooked. Rather than functioning solely as sites of skill acquisition, classrooms become spaces where teachers continually negotiate personal history, emotional regulation, and professional responsibility, reinforcing the need to conceptualize teacher education as a developmental context capable of containing and supporting these complex identity processes.

Teaching is fundamentally relational work. Research on emotional labor in teaching demonstrates that educators routinely regulate affect, manage interpersonal tensions, and absorb student distress as part of their professional role (Hargreaves, 1998; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). Student teachers encounter these relational demands without yet possessing consolidated professional identity or well-developed coping frameworks. Furthermore, teacher candidates are often placed in school environments serving students with high personal adversity. Secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma have been documented among educators working in high need settings (Hydon et al., 2015), which is an especially common circumstance early in one's teaching career.

My experiences conveyed in this study reflect this phenomenon. Trauma-informed education research underscores that exposure to students' traumatic narratives can evoke personal histories and intensify emotional strain (Carello & Butler, 2015). Therefore, university-provided therapy during student teaching may help students develop coping mechanisms they can carry into their career. Research on teacher resilience demonstrates that persistence in teaching is strongly associated with access to relational and institutional support rather than individual coping capacity alone (Gu & Day, 2007; Johnson et al., 2012). Supportive professional environments allow teachers to interpret emotional challenges as developmental rather than evidence of personal failure. Universities therefore occupy a critical position in providing this structured support.

Operationalizing therapeutic support within teacher education requires structural integration that maintains appropriate ethical and professional boundaries. First, universities can ensure that teacher candidates have prioritized access to confidential counseling services during student teaching. Research across helping professions demonstrates that access to counseling

during periods of professional transition improves emotional resilience, reduces burnout risk, and strengthens professional persistence (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016). Providing counselors familiar with educator stress and identity development allows candidates to process emotionally complex experiences within a protected and confidential setting. Maintaining clear separation between counseling services and program evaluation is essential to preserve psychological safety and encourage voluntary participation.

Lastly, the implications of this study extend meaningfully beyond education by offering a broader model for understanding identity stabilization as a practice-based, relational process rather than an internal, fully resolved state. In fields such as healthcare, counseling, social work, and even corporate leadership, individuals are often expected to demonstrate confidence and coherence before they feel internally secure. However, these findings suggest that stability emerges through repeated enactment of roles within relational and safe contexts. This reframing has particular relevance in trauma-informed settings, where identity disruption is common and traditional expectations of readiness may be unrealistic or even harmful. By emphasizing provisional practice, relational containment, and the gradual alignment of action and self-concept, the study provides a framework for supporting individuals as they grow into roles through doing, rather than waiting for certainty that may, and likely will, come and go. More broadly, this perspective contributes to conversations in psychology and organizational development by positioning identity not as something achieved prior to participation, but as something continuously constructed through it.

Personal Implications

Now that I have completed this work, what is most different for me is not the facts of my history, but my relationship to them. Writing these narratives required a level of confrontation I

had long avoided. There were many moments during the drafting of these vignettes when I had to step away from the page because the emotional weight of the memories felt, ironically I suppose, destabilizing. What I once carried as diffuse tension became specific, named, and contextualized. This examination of myself both in writing and in therapy has altered how I understand myself in what I believe to be a necessary struggle for coherence.

My family relationships remain complicated. I have a tenuous but communicative relationship with my parents, and a largely estranged relationship with my sister. Certain topics still lead to arguments, particularly when I name past moments I experienced as hurtful. Political differences, especially my father's increasingly right-leaning views, create additional strain. These realities have not disappeared as a result of this study. What has changed is my expectation that they must resolve in order for me to feel stable. Previously, I believed that a repaired family relationship was a prerequisite to a repaired sense of self. Through this work, I have come to see that while relation rupture shaped me, it does not define me presently.

I also now recognize more clearly how much I wished for a different relational foundation. I am certain a more emotionally secure family environment would have altered how I learned to relate to myself. Yet, engaging in this research by writing my vignettes, studying identity development, and participating in therapy with an unbiased professional has provided a different kind of relational containment. The process has been, at times, a painful one while also being cathartic. It has made visible the throughline between my early experiences of instability and my longstanding commitment to teaching English. What feels new is not simply pride in being an English teacher as I wished to be back in eighth grade; it is the clarity about why that role mattered to me so much. Teaching is not an accidental career choice I made all those years back; it is my stabilizing anchor for moving through life in a purposeful manner.

Another significant shift for me involves how I understand privilege in relation to trauma. A persistent internal struggle throughout this process has been the acknowledgment of the material advantages I have had. I have never wondered where my next meal would come from. I did not grow up in financial hardship. My grandfather's economic success, despite his limited education, created generational stability that afforded my sister and I opportunities many do not receive. Even though that wealth is now long gone through poor decision making, the structural advantages remained. Recognizing this complicates my narrative. It would be simpler to tell a story of hardship without qualification. Instead, I must hold both realities: material security and emotional instability. What is different now is that I no longer experience these as mutually canceling forces. My access to financial stability does not negate the abuse I experienced.

Quite significantly, I am struck by the fact that I have reached this stage of my career despite recurring periods of self-hate and internal fragmentation throughout adulthood. I once interpreted those internal struggles as evidence that I was fundamentally unstable. What is new for me is not the elimination of pain or conflict. It is a more coherent narrative about them. I experience greater ownership of my story and clearer recognition of the ways teaching has served as both professional calling and personal integration. I do not have better parents than I did before this study. I do not have a fully-repaired family system. But I do have a more integrated understanding of how I have become who I am and who I am becoming.

A very important note about this entire process is that I do not see my trauma as some special, useful part of being a teacher, or person, or any label I might give myself. It is not useful because none of it should have happened to me. My throat is closing up even as I write this. My parents are not awful people, but flawed people who have their own traumas. It is the same way I see my students when I am frustrated. I tell myself, "They're only the product of their

environment, and they cannot control that." I feel the very same about my parents. Do I wish they were better able to regulate their emotions in my youth? Of course I do. However, we take the hand we are dealt.

I absolutely do not see myself as some resilient, strong person who overcame hardship. Not at all. I see myself as someone who was granted the right modelling to help me realize that I loved to read. If there is a central point beyond the implications for teacher education in this work, it is that reading is the most wonderful thing we are granted the ability to partake in; everyone should be constantly reinforced to read as much as they can in their youth. I would not have made it out of the circumstances I had without the love of reading developed out of actually reading. It's less because I was told it was good, but more because I did it and loved it. I have also always enjoyed being inebriated in various ways, and I still do. More than I like to admit to myself. Without reading, that would have been my passion. I am certain of that. I'm extraordinarily lucky, and none of my abuse is going to make me believe differently.

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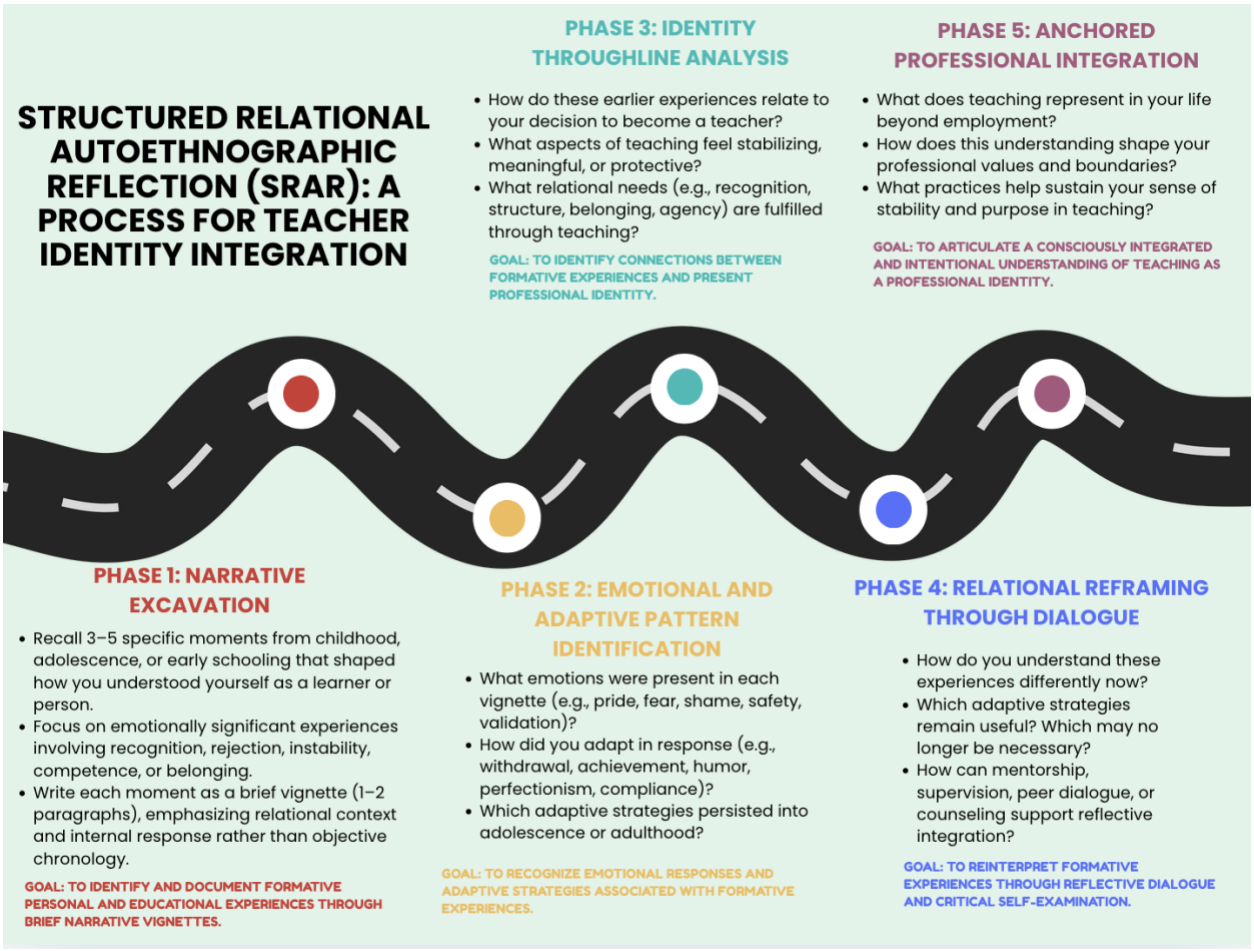
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Appendix

Appendix A



Mentor Teacher
IDENTITY BUILDING SUPPORT

Professional identity consolidates not simply through repeated teaching performance, but through relationally grounded supervision in which candidates are supported, recognized, and gradually entrusted with responsibility. Mentors play a central role in helping candidates integrate their experiences into a coherent professional identity.

Normalize Uncertainty as a Development

- Expect fluctuations in candidate confidence and instructional clarity.
- Frame uncertainty as part of professional growth rather than deficiency.
- Invite reflective dialogue about challenges rather than focusing solely on correction.

Why it matters: Identity stabilizes through practice over time. When uncertainty is interpreted as failure, candidates may withdraw from exploration that is essential for development.

Provide Authentic and Gradually Increasing Responsibility

- Allow candidates to design lessons, assess student work, and manage classroom routines.
- Gradually increase instructional autonomy as competence develops.
- Treat candidates as developing professionals rather than passive observers.

Why it matters: Professional identity consolidates when candidates experience real responsibility within meaningful relational contexts.

Offer Identity-Affirming Feedback

- Name specific strengths and improvements you observe.
- Connect feedback to the candidate's emerging professional capacities.
- Situate critique within a relational context of support and shared purpose.

Why it matters: Recognition helps candidates integrate their experiences into a coherent narrative of competence and belonging within the profession.

Provide Relational Stability and Predictability

- Maintain consistency in expectations and communication.
- Clarify instructional goals and evaluation criteria.
- Provide regular opportunities for reflection and dialogue.

Why it matters: Psychological safety enables candidates to take instructional risks necessary for growth and professional development.


Teacher Candidate
BUILDING YOUR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY
Becoming a teacher is not a process of immediate certainty, but of gradual identity development shaped through practice, relationships, and recognition. Understanding this process can help candidates navigate preparation and early career transitions more effectively.
Expect Fluctuation in Confidence and Clarity
Recognize uncertainty as a normal part of professional development.
Reflect on challenges as opportunities for growth.
Avoid interpreting temporary difficulty as evidence of unsuitability.
Engage Fully in Instructional Responsibility
Take ownership of planning, teaching, and assessment opportunities.
Seek active participation rather than remaining in observational roles.
Treat each teaching experience as part of your professional formation.
Why it matters: Professional identity stabilizes through repeated engagement in teaching, not through immediate mastery.
Why it matters: Identity develops through sustained enactment of professional responsibilities.
Attend to and Integrate Feedback
Listen for moments when mentors and supervisors recognize your growth.
Reflect on how feedback contributes to your development.
Use both affirmation and critique to guide professional learning.
eek Supportive Professional Relationships
Build strong relationships with mentors and peers.
Ask questions and seek clarification when needed.
Recognize the importance of relational support in professional development.
Why it matters: Recognition from experienced educators helps consolidate professional identity..
Why it matters: Psychological safety enables experimentation, learning, and identity consolidation.

Vita

Blake Trent was born and raised in Kingsport, Tennessee. He pursued his undergraduate studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, earning a Bachelor of Arts in English with a focus in Rhetoric and Writing and a minor in Education in 2011. He completed a Master of Science in Teacher Education with a concentration in Secondary Teaching at the University of Tennessee in 2012. Following his graduate preparation, Blake taught English Language Arts in a range of middle and high school contexts, including seventh and eighth grade classrooms in Knox County Schools and ninth-grade intervention English in Virginia. Across these settings, he taught honors, inclusion, intervention, and on-grade-level courses, developing a sustained interest in literacy instruction, identity development, and the relational dimensions of teaching. In 2020, Blake began doctoral coursework toward the Doctor of Philosophy in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. During his doctoral studies, he served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and intern supervisor, co-teaching and mentoring preservice teachers in the Master of Education program and supporting their instructional development through observation and feedback. His professional experiences as a classroom teacher, mentor, and educator have shaped his research interests, which center on identity formation, teaching as a stabilizing force, and the ways pedagogical relationships inform personal meaning-making. Blake continues to work in secondary school contexts while completing his doctoral studies, maintaining a commitment to teaching, teacher education, and reflective practice.