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**The application of somatic practices into the praxis of being a teacher educator: how can I take better care of myself?**

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# **The application of somatic practices into the praxis of being a teacher educator: how can I take better care of myself?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents the findings of an action research project which makes my embodied knowledge explicit in order to contribute to the growing interest in somatic practices and their application to the wider field of teaching and learning. This paper proposes that in order to increase wellbeing within the work environment, the factors which enhance and improve the health of educators must be understood and researched. As somatic practices study direct bodily experience as a source of knowledge, they offer the field of education the opportunity to reposition the body as central to this enquiry. By broadening the concept of wellbeing to encompass the subjective experiences of educators, somatic practices of self-care are evaluated. Evidence of improved wellbeing can then be fed back in to the professional field of education for the self-improvement of educators. Thus the research further aims to make a wider contribution to the field of education and the relatively new and not-yet-mainstream field of somatics.

**Key words:** Somatic; Self-care; Educator; Health: Wellbeing.

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## Background

As a teacher with experience in Primary Schools and FE, my practice has been based around core values and methods which I have adapted to different contexts, but which remain essentially unchanged. The value which motivates my passion for teaching and learning is a dedicated commitment to making a difference. I am always interested in how a child, a person, a situation, or an institution can change and grow to realise its potential. The question 'How can I improve what I am doing?' has been central to how I have lived my life by these values. Yet my work as an educator has frequently left me physically and emotionally exhausted. I have suffered from excessive tiredness and regular bouts of colds and viruses which have impacted negatively on my health and my morale. The result has been a higher than average absentee rate, which has also had a negative effect on my ability to teach. For a long time I have been searching for ways to improve my health, reduce my absence rate and fulfil my potential as an educator.

My search led to a growing interest in the new paradigm of somatics which has been developing as a distinct disciplinary field across the United States of America and Europe since the 1960's. The name 'somatics' refers to a group of around 30 – 40 practices which all study direct bodily experience as a source of knowledge. The term 'somatic practices', refers to the techniques used to bring attention to the inner experience of physical sensations in order to become more consciously aware of the interrelatedness of body, thinking and emotion. In 2009 my enquiries into this new field led to my enrolment on the MA 'Dance and Somatic Wellbeing: Connections to the Living Body'. I encountered somatic practices which developed my awareness of internal sensations and movements through the body. As I explored my own body processes I came to the realisation that I experience myself as a 'living contradiction'; this is a key idea in the Living Educational Theory of Jack Whitehead (1989). He defines the experience of being a living contradiction as 'holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them' (1989: 43). Whilst I valued nurturing the potential in others, I did not value the need to nurture myself and take care of my own wellbeing at work. Although I could clearly articulate my values, the discomfort and tightness I regularly experienced inside my body showed

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me I was not embodying them in the living of my own life. Becoming aware of these contradictions between my inner body state and my outward expression of values is the embodied process through which the focus of this action research emerged. I aim to discover if somatic practices can resolve the tension and the ill health which can arise when we articulate values without embodying them.

## **Research Aims**

Literally, at the heart of my enquiry, lies a deep desire to discover how I can fulfil my potential as an educator, and at the same time, keep myself healthy and well.

Therefore this research aims to explore and ask the following two questions:

- How can I take care of my body-self before and after I teach?
- How can I find support for my body-self during a teaching session?

Implicit in these two questions is the following sub-question:

- Is it possible to identify practical strategies which can be used by educators to increase health and wellbeing in the work place?

I use the term body-self to reflect the holistic approach of somatics, which always works with the mind and body as being inseparable.

## **Literature Review**

The cross-Government Health, Work and Wellbeing Strategy Unit was initiated by the New Labour Government in 2005 to improve the health and wellbeing of working age people. The ongoing research supplies the evidence base which continues to inform the policies of the current Coalition Government with regard to making a substantial difference to improving the health of individuals and reducing the cost of ill health to businesses and the UK economy. The response to this range of initiatives within the Department of Education has been to focus on helping teachers achieve a work-life balance, which was defined in the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document as '... helping teachers combine work with their personal interests outside work' (2009:201). This focus led to a commitment to reduce

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teachers' hours through New Labour Government legislation in 2009. Four provisions were put in place to implement effective work-life balance strategies, aimed at securing '...downward pressure on excessive hours worked in schools...' (Ibid: 203). The four provisions are: additional hours for classroom teachers over and above the annual 1265 must be reasonable; for teachers not covered by the 1265 annual limit on directed time overall hours should be reasonable; head teachers must have regard to the desirability of all teachers being able to achieve a satisfactory balance between the time required to discharge their professional duties and the time required to pursue their personal interests outside work; head teachers are also covered by these provisions and it is the responsibility of the school governing body or the Local Authority to have regard to them.

In 2008 a review by the Teacher Support Network of educational research into teacher wellbeing revealed that the majority of existing studies focus on the causes of poor wellbeing amongst teachers. Although one of their recommendations was for new studies to prioritise evaluating ways of enhancing teacher wellbeing, it is still very difficult to find any studies with strong evidence for understanding the factors which do enhance and improve wellbeing. This gap in the research evidence also points to a limitation in the New Labour Government's legislation to improve teacher wellbeing; a lack of focus on how to improve the work environment itself in order to help teachers manage the day-to-day stress and pressures of the job. The phenomenological approach of Fraleigh (1987, 2004) and Johnson (1986, 1992, 1995) potentially offers a way of moving beyond this limitation by re-positioning the body as central to our lived experience. Broadening the concept of wellbeing to include mind and body allows new directions in research to emerge through a cross-disciplinary approach between education and the field of somatics.

By drawing together shared principles from numerous practices across this field, Johnson challenges the Cartesian tradition of mind-body dualism which he sees as being endemic to Western civilisation. What is significant is his use of the term 'technologies of alienation' to describe specific techniques used by Western cultural institutions such as schools, to 'disconnect people from their sensual authority'

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(1992:80). By giving priority to the visual and auditory modes of learning the education system is disconnecting teachers and learners from the felt kinaesthetic sense. He supports his argument by referencing the latest research in neuroscience, which increasingly shows how our capacity for reason is dependent on bodily and emotional processes. Although Johnson's concept of technologies of alienation is currently underdeveloped and under researched, it does draw attention to how education largely ignores the body not only as a source of knowledge, but as a potential factor in personal and social transformation. He goes on to argue that a recovery from this state of alienation is possible by relocating authority from external sources to the self. By giving attention to one's own bodily perceptions and feelings, people are freed to self-regulate towards health and wellbeing. Therefore, positioning the subjective knowledge of educators as primary is understood by Johnson as a potential act of social transformation which can counter mainstream ideologies.

There is currently very little research evidence to substantiate this perspective. However, the ill health which results from living in such a state of sensory alienation has been well documented in the field of somatics by body workers such as Linden (1994) and Hanna (1970), and dancers such as Halprin (2002), Conrad (2007) and Greenland (2000). Myers argues the ill health which results from this alienation from our kinaesthetic sense is 'the most pervasive epidemic on the surface of the planet today' (1998:113). His contribution is to use this evidence as an argument for devising an education system which is more kinaesthetically literate and thereby able to promote a healthier and more functional society. His argument has two limitations. Firstly, he calls on somatic educators to develop their educational role without considering the contribution which could be made by mainstream educators already working in the field of education. Secondly, the importance of the educator's wellbeing and how that potentially influences the learners and pupil outcomes is left unaddressed.

For Eddy (2002, 2007) the need for learners and educators to listen to the wisdom and intelligence of the body is the first step in changing the direction of our decision making in order to orientate towards health and wellbeing. Her contribution is the

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way in which she understands the process as a coming into 'self-responsibility'; somatic practices potentially offer educators the opportunity to educate themselves about their own health and wellbeing. Scholars such as Fortin, Vieira and Tremblay (2009) and Guimond (1999) explore this further by considering how giving authority to the self can be empowering for individuals and all those they influence. For Guimond, somatic education proposes 'a new relationship to oneself and to others: sensing one's actions, knowing one's feelings, no longer considering oneself as an object, but as a creator of one's own life' (1999: 6). Juhan (2002, 2003) understands this new relationship with oneself as making a connection with the innate intelligence each body has and allowing it to naturally move towards balance and more easeful functioning. For him, 'self-responsibility' begins with directly experiencing body processes through awareness of internal sensations and movement, so that empowered individuals can then make choices about what feels pleasurable and easeful in the direction of increasing their own wellbeing.

These critical researchers are fundamental and provide the principles underlying somatic practices, together with a philosophical framework which I use to support my enquiry. In addition, this framework has been shaped by experiences in my university department, which emphasises the need for self-care by combining a functional knowledge of the body with slowing down to biological time and discovering moment-by-moment health (Williamson 2009).

## **Methodology**

The aims of this research are: to make a wider contribution to the field of education and to the new field of somatics which is not yet mainstream; and to advance the need to build up research evidence which can be fed back into these professional fields for the self-improvement of educators. In order to achieve these aims, the project adopts an action research model.

In adopting the action research methodology of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and evaluating, I have been influenced by the work of McNiff (2002) and Living Educational Theory developed by Whitehead and McNiff (2006). I undertook

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a practical process to methodically cross-examine aspects of my role as an educator with the experiences of Mary Abrams and Miranda Tufnell, two leading professionals from my institution who teach on the Dance and Somatic Wellbeing MA Programme. The need for self-care is central to the course framework, so I was interested in how they combined their role as educator with taking care of themselves both before and during a class. The initial aim was to identify the distinctive somatic practices which Mary and Miranda use to prepare, and then identify the similarities and differences with how I prepare to teach. I observed them preparing to teach and participated in the class. After reflecting on those observations with my MA tutor, several themes emerged and crystallised into a set of eight questions with the aim of clarifying exactly what they did and how they understood those practices as contributing to their own wellbeing whilst in the role of educator. I submitted those 8 questions to Mary and Miranda in advance and recorded the interview with their signed consent. Due to the constraints of time and money I was unable to have the tapes fully transcribed, therefore I took copious notes as I listened. Mary and Miranda have given me written permission to use extracts from those interviews in my writing, and have also confirmed that the chosen quotations are accurate in content and interpretation.

I used the two interview tapes to identify convergences and divergences with relation to my core values and research questions. I identified the different actions taken by Mary and Miranda which I could adopt in the way I prepared to teach and look after myself whilst teaching. To support my ongoing reflections and evaluations, I kept a reflective diary as a phenomenological inquiry into my own bodily experiences whilst implementing these actions. I accurately recorded the bodily sensations I was aware of during each day, noting down the context and the feelings and thoughts which accompanied my inner experience of bodily sensations. Critical peers from the MA Programme and a colleague from my school read the diary to check what I experienced was understandable and relevant to my themes.

Analysing the diary revealed specific differences in my wellbeing after changing the identified actions in the way I teach. I used a theoretical triangulation of

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phenomenology, educational theory and philosophy of somatic movement dance education to analyse the significance of these differences. Eisner (1993) argues that using multiple perspectives from different subject disciplines to analyse experiences is a valid approach to research. The choice to present the following findings in the form of personal story is also supported by Eisner's emphasis on new styles of presentation with an emphasis on the personal.

There are potential drawbacks to such an interdisciplinary and hermeneutic approach, as highlighted by Eisner (1993) and Green (1999). These are primarily due to the level of subjectivity and the potential for ambiguities inherent in such an approach. Therefore, I have continually considered my own position in relation to the diverse fields of education and dance, seeking to validate my evidence through discussions with tutors and critical friends. Although, my own experiences and those of my two interviewees cannot be representative of these professions as a whole, it is hoped that this research study yields interesting results for educators.

## **Findings**

After observing and interviewing Mary and Miranda I identified the following 2 somatic practices I could use both before and whilst teaching and I recorded my findings in my journal.

Firstly, I took 5 minutes to give attention to my breath as often as I could remember during the day. I followed the instructions learnt from Mary and Miranda to simply observe my breath without controlling it and give attention to the following: notice which area of the body moves first on the inhale, notice the length of inhalations and any opening sensations within the body, notice the length of exhalations and any contracting sensations within the body, notice where your breathing involves effort and where in the body do you sense it, let the movement of breath soften hard places and create spaciousness within the body. I found this breath work slowed me down during the day. I noticed my shallow breathing and then lengthened my breath. I noticed which parts of my body felt tense and tight and then moved to

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release it. I noticed which parts felt soft and encouraged those sensations to spread out inside my body.

Secondly, I took a several minutes to map my skeleton bone by bone through self-touch. I followed the instructions learnt from Mary and Miranda to press through the muscle and contact my bones, feeling out their direction, curves, edges and angles and notice the accompanying sensations. Through this practice I found I made contact with the presence of bone in my body and defined the shape of my skeleton. I gained a sense of the weight of different parts of my skeleton and how they connected into the whole.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Since 2009, the Government initiative to reduce teacher's hours has had a positive impact on my health and wellbeing. Working fewer hours in the classroom, together with dedicated time for planning and preparation, has led to an increase in my energy levels and a decrease in feeling so physically exhausted. However, overall my role as an educator continues to be stressful and impacts negatively on the quality and enjoyment of my life. I frequently feel emotionally exhausted which I attribute to the high levels of emotional labour required by my role; for interacting with children involves exaggerating a whole range of emotions which over time becomes stressful and draining.

By drawing on the range of somatic practices I experienced on the MA programme I chose to make a perceptual shift, bringing the lived experiences of my own body to the centre of my enquiry. This meant becoming more aware of the bodily sensations which travel from skin, muscles, and organs to the brain, most of which arrive without us having any conscious awareness of them. I gave attention to sensations relating to breath, weight and relationship to gravity; chosen because Miranda referred to them in our interview as 'the fundamentals to which one always returns and through which one is constantly learning.' This is further supported by McHose and Frank (2006) who explore how we stabilise our physical structure in order to resist the downward pull of gravity and move without falling. For when we are well orientated

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to gravity, we have a true sense of our physical weight and can stabilise ourselves in ways that allow our bodies to remain open and flexible but when we do not orientate to gravity, our physical body will attempt to feel stable through extensive muscular activity within. This leads to our bodies becoming shorter and narrower as we contract muscles and compress our joints and organs.

Initially, these changes brought to my awareness how uncomfortable I often feel in my body whilst teaching. The following two diary entries reveal the various levels of discomfort coming to my attention, and being reflected back to me through the children I teach:

‘Sitting in assembly I am aware of tension in my neck, it hurts. I start to move it gently and realise it feels locked, I have fixed it in a certain place and I am shocked to realise how much pain I am starting to feel. I notice the heaviness and tightness running down my shoulders, down my back, down my spine, but I am not free to move much in my chair.’

‘Next week I am surprised to see this mirrored in the children sitting in front of me. Classes of young children who want to please adults will sit cross-legged and pull their backs up as straight as they possibly can, with their hands touching their knees, or perhaps a finger on their lips and one arm crossed across their chest. What learning is taking place in that moment? Hold yourself in, squeeze everything tight and then you are prepared and ready to learn because that is how I prepared to get ready to teach you.’

I believe, like Adler (2002) and Blackburn and Price (2007) that what we sense inside the body corresponds to what we sense outside. Therefore, I make a connection between the stresses I experience in my outer environment with the pain I was beginning to become aware of in my internal environment. What this suggests, is that through the perceptual shift I am making, I am able to engage with a process of bringing awareness to aspects of my physical and cognitive experiences which until now have been largely in the realm of the unconscious. This is supported by Hanna, who writes ‘Awareness serves as a probe, recruiting new material for the

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repertoire of voluntary consciousness' (1995:348). Therefore, exploring how I can take care of my own body-self begins with bringing into consciousness my bodily experiences in the present moment. The significance of this is that the increased consciousness brings the possibility of choice, and making decisions in the direction of improving my wellbeing.

The preparation I do to prepare to teach is largely a cognitive and physical task, due to the requirements to write a plan which follows the statutory guidelines, find suitable resources and prepare the learning environment. The following is an extract from my journal after tracking my bodily sensations in the present moment before a session:

'I gather every scrap of energy from within in order to get ready to send it outwards into the classroom. I keep going by pulling everything up inside, a bit like zipping myself up but it's a tight fitting, so I have to squash all of me in my chest. Somehow that squeezing of me into a tight place creates the energy which literally propels me through the day.'

This kinaesthetic awareness leads me to the realisation that in anticipation of teaching a session, I contract and tense my body in order to brace myself to face my learners. Over time I am gradually becoming more aware of the subtle details of these movements within me, noticing for example how my ribs close inwards which makes me lose breadth, which in turn makes my chest sink and my shoulders tighten up so I lose height too. The somatic discourse understands this as the embodiment of habitual muscular armour, which is understood as 'an attempt to feel safer and less vulnerable by making your body feel solid' (Bond 2007:22). This suggests I have learnt to contract and tighten myself to try and control the stress of my teaching role. This attempt to feel safe by 'zipping myself up' causes pain in my body, and the levels of discomfort I am feeling can be clearly identified in the above quote from my journal.

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This contrasts sharply with how Miranda answered questions about preparing to teach during our interview:

'I spend time working on my own sense of breath, rhythm, time and inner spaciousness. That may sound abstract but it is a very practical and physical process. I find the length of my spine. I make space in my brain, making myself available and receptive. This tuning in through a sense of physical spaciousness allows in the idea or direction that generates material for a session.'

In the light of reflecting on Miranda's practice, I have begun to do two exercises adapted from her work to bring me into present contact with my bodily sensations before teaching. I find they give me support in waking up my physical presence. As I sense more of my body I can let go of the thoughts in my head which are often critical and limiting. I have been able to sense different parts of my body softening, especially my throat and my face which seems to be related to my breathing slowing down. The exercises give me more connection with my belly and I can breathe more from that place, as the ball of energy in my chest is not so prominent. As I release tension I find I do not need to close in on myself so much. This makes me feel wider and longer, helping me to be less constricted and freer in my movements. I notice I can allow myself to smile more and I experience more openness both in my body and in my willingness to engage with what I am meeting outside and around me.

The gaps in my journal indicate there are days when I resist doing the exercises to prepare. I notice there is a correlation between having surges of high energy throughout those days and then feeling totally drained in the evening. The following quote reveals my developing awareness of the connection between the discomfort I feel in my body and the resistance to changing it:

'Each morning my body immediately goes into a high state of energy in order to get the classroom ready quickly. School is so busy, so fast, and my system is moving fast as I rush about. Most of the sensations I feel are down my front, down my breast bone, in my chest, not sure what, if anything is going on below my belly. I

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recognise how I do like being in this body state of high alert. It reminds me of home and somehow it prepares me for my day ahead.'

The significance of this lies in the way it reveals the complexities and ambiguities surrounding my perceptions of wellbeing. Regaining health is not a matter of simply choosing to change how I prepare and resource myself to teach, but involves meeting learned habits and patterns of response which are engrained in the very tissues and muscle fibres of my physical body. These complex neural and glandular interconnections within our systems are explored in depth by Juhan, who concludes that 'to make the necessary shifts can seem like more trouble than tolerating the present condition. Well-worn routines, and even world views, may well be involved in such shifts' (2003:325). In other words, increasing wellbeing must involve acting upon the increased consciousness gained from developing the kinaesthetic sense through practical steps which support the process. These actions sound simple, but it is important to recognise how the profound shifts taking place at a physical and cognitive level take time and need support.

Both Mary and Miranda convey a deep commitment to exploring their own living body processes which stretches back over many years and lies behind all of their teaching. Mary describes in detail how she has had to teach herself to take care of her basic needs for rest, for eating and for listening to the nuances of her own rhythms and cycles. Her actions reflect Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Huitt, 2007) which positions basic physiological needs at the bottom of the pyramid, and which must be met before a person can continue moving towards self-actualisation. Listening to Mary share her personal journey and how she consciously cultivates her intention to self-care, I am struck by a depth of self-love and self-acceptance which I find profoundly moving. It helps me to understand that self-care is something I have to teach myself, and the impulse to meet those needs must come from within my own body-self. This is confirmed by Gintis (2007:143) who writes:

'Devotion to caring for yourself arises from a reverent sense within. There is no end point, no goal to caring, respecting, and loving yourself. Being motivated from within

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to be attentive and attend to your Health as an expression of love and respect for your own life offers the gifts of the endlessly unfolding potential of being human.' What this suggests is the importance of waiting and allowing this bodily impulse to care to come from within. For then, any objectification is potentially transcended through the inner movement of bringing my truth into being.

After many weeks reflecting on this new awareness, I draw inspiration from Mary's description during our interview of how she supports herself whilst teaching:

'I touch myself a lot. I regularly touch my feet and my legs, which is very grounding for me. I do it consciously and unconsciously to give support to my thoughts. I feel my own breath. I have discovered that somebody can be going on and on talking and if I pay attention to my own breathing rather than their talking I actually hear them more fully.'

Touching my body whilst teaching has not been an easy step to take, however I am finding it beneficial. This is primarily because it helps me to slow down and reconnect with my breathing and my body-self within a fast paced environment.

For example, when I find myself walking at a fast pace with mind racing, I stop and remind myself to breath and touch myself lovingly, mostly the skin on my hands and arms, or the tops of my leg. The touch acts like a reminder to my body that it can slow down and I feel reassured that everything is actually fine. Slowing down gives me more ease in my body as I teach, so I do find myself doing this more and more as it feels so supportive. Taking time to stop and breathe also creates a space for me to ask myself how I want to respond to what is happening, rather than just responding how I have always done. Generally I am more relaxed, which means I give less emotionally. It has been a great surprise to discover that giving less actually makes teaching more enjoyable for me and I believe for the children as well.'

Overall, the real significance here lies in the way these practices put me in touch with a wider perspective of what is important in the moment. The duties of my role as an

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educator are important, but they must be held within a field which includes being and staying connected to what is healthy in myself and in others. Miranda and Mary affirm this repeatedly through their work, as they both describe the need to keep a very clear sense of themselves and their own body processes in relation to the context within which they work. Implicit in this, is an acknowledgement of the profound impact a teacher has on learners, especially through their physical presence. This is echoed by Ambady and Rosenthal (1993):

‘... the impact of teachers’ bodies in the classroom can be profound. Emotions are aroused, comfort or discomfort levels are established and evaluations are made well in advance of verbal communication. Without saying a word, teachers reveal themselves and students accurately judge them, as optimistic, confident, active, dominant, likeable and enthusiastic – or the reverse ...’ (1993).

Therefore, learning to take care of my own needs and connecting to what is healthy in me, enables me to model this for the learners I influence so they too can choose to be more involved in their own body processes. By valuing my own health and wellbeing I allow my learners to make choices about how they will value their health in the living of their own lives. I am beginning to articulate this in my teaching, and notice how the learning I am engaging in through this project has the potential to change the learners I influence, and through them, the world in which we live and move.

## **Conclusions**

This action research project aimed to answer the following two questions:

- How can I take care of my own body-self before and after I teach?
- How can I find support for my body-self during a teaching session?

The evidence leads to three main conclusions. Firstly, taking greater care of my own body-self before and after teaching was clearly achieved. I found the changes I made in relation to breath and inner space invited me to make contact with my bodily

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sensations in the present moment before teaching. This allowed a softening and a release of tension, together with a sense of lengthening and widening which had positive effects on my wellbeing.

Secondly, by applying the principles of somatic practices to my role as an educator, I was able to find support for my body-self whilst teaching. By slowing down, and giving attention to breath and touch I discovered I could relax, and take time to ask myself how I wanted to respond in the moment. The reassurance I gained from these changes meant I gave out less emotional labour during the day. These choices to give attention to my own health had positive effects on my overall wellbeing. They also reduced my absence rate.

Thirdly, this project does indicate some of the practical steps which could be taken to promote greater self-care for educators. A crucial step in the process is bringing bodily experiences into the centre of the inquiry. To support this process further, a journal should be maintained as a valuable method of recording and reflecting on experiences. Furthermore, the possibility of resistance to the process should be openly acknowledged and understood by future researchers and educators. To do this, professionals working in the field of somatics will need to continue developing a language of self-care which allows people to adequately express their somatic experiences.

These changes in my body-mind have helped me to begin to resolve the contradiction in my life experience. I now value change and growth for myself as well as for the learners I teach. In offering my lived experiences to the wider base of public knowledge I hope to encourage other educators to value their own needs for self-care in the professional fields of education and somatics.

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