I am learning that when I see children as competent and capable citizens I am able to help them deepen their learning experiences as we engage together in a community of lifelong learners. Previous to this program I had always thought that my relationship with my students had always been good. I found I would take the time to listen to them and try my best to get to know what they were interested in. At the beginning of this program we discussed about children being citizens and protagonists of their own learning. This was something that I felt I tried to do by providing my students with choice in different activities and lessons, however I still found that when we were working on projects, that although some students worked hard and participated that it seemed they were trying to do things to please me, rather than what they actually thought. Loris Malaguzzi says: “Both children and adults need to feel active and important — to be rewarded by their own efforts, their own intelligences, their own activity and energy. When a child feels these things are valued, they become a fountain of strength for him. He feels the joy of working with adults who value his work and this is one of the bases for learning.” (Malaguzzi, 1993). We all want to feel valued for our efforts, children have so little control in their life, that when we recognize what they can do, their confidence is boosted and their desire to learn increases. When I read this, I thought back to my own learning and the times when I felt most engaged were when I was actively involved in the creation and execution of a project.

When I think back to my first field study of using documentation to encourage critical thinking in my students, I found the first few times that we would reflect on our documentation, I had my doubts about whether they would be able to reflect on their learning but as time went on I found they were excited to see their work. I found they “felt valued for their efforts” (Malaguzzi, 1993) not just in the product but in the process of their learning. I found the more opportunities they had to reflect on their learning they began to develop an individual identity as learners and began to see themselves more as teachers and collaborators in the classroom. In reading this article, I think of how each one of my students is an individual with unique needs and rights. Malaguzzi says each child comes with their own reality, they have connections and experiences that exist outside the classroom. I have continued to learn how bringing out these experiences can help me to learn more about what they are capable of and how I can support them in their learning.

In my first field study I was concerned about being able to back up my data with credible sources and from the theorists that we were learning from. Previous to this diploma program I did not really think of educational theories and philosophies as part of my professional development. Now having had the opportunity to investigate these theories, I feel more confident in my beliefs and in my practice of Reggio inspired learning. Previous to this diploma, my activity on social media was mostly for entertainment, however I have now incorporated my social media platforms as part of my professional learning network which has introduced me to more sources that have helped me inform my practice.

My second field study of this program coincided with me taking on a student teacher for the long practicum. I had previously worked with him during his short practicum and felt we had developed a good rapport with each other and that he would also be a good fit for the class. Knowing that my student teacher would be doing most of the teaching that term, I decided that this would be a good opportunity to work on self-assessment with my students through conference time. Giving my students the opportunity to self-assess allowed them to “feel valued for their efforts” (Malaguzzi, 1993) and also to learn more about themselves as learners. With the new reporting language using “I statements” I was able to help my students be more active in their own assessment and in thinking about their learning and their progress.

In one of the readings from The Power of Inquiry: “Conferring with students is formative assessment at its best. As we gain a sense of where the child is at, we can also provide on the spot specific feedback and guidance about where to go next.” (Murdoch, 2015) When I read this, I thought about being purposeful in my conference with my students and really trying to ask specific questions to get a better sense of where they were at in their learning and how I could provide them with support. This was an important learning in my practice as I felt previous to this I would conference with students in a very generalized way and my follow up with them would often not happen. Through this field study and I found that when I made the time to conference with my students I was able to help them in setting goals in their learning as well as to be able to celebrate their successes. Giving my students the opportunity to reflect on their learning also helped them to be more accountable and feel that they had control over their learning and also to see learning as a life long process rather than just something to get through.

Dylan Wiliam speaks about self and peer assessment. He says that through self-assessment students become owners of their own learning and that through peer assessment it activates students as sources for one another in their own learning. They are able to help each other to improve in their own work and internalize the assessment the assessment they give as peers to improve in their learning. The idea of involving students in peer and self-assessment is linked with children being protagonists in their own learning. I found that when I gave students the opportunity to reflect on their learning they were able to identify and set goals for themselves as learners. The goals that they set were more meaningful then if I would give them a goal on something I thought they should work on.

Along with conference time I continued in my efforts of documentation. “Documentation contributes to children’s own understanding of how they and others learn; it serves as a reminder of what goes on in the classroom, offering students an opportunity for reflection, for evaluation of other children’s theories and hypotheses, and for self-assessment.” (Project Zero: Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 2003). Looking back at documentation was significant for my students as it helped them remember what was going on that day. Having the opportunity to reflect and evaluate their ideas and those of their peers helped them to see things differently and think more critically about what they were doing. Often when we would take the time to look back at our documentation there was a student who had been away that day, despite her absence she was still able to participate by asking questions. The students who had been present were able to explain and expand more upon the experience as they were supported by the documentation we were reviewing as a class.

In the fall of 2018, we had the opportunity to attend an evening with Tiziana Fillipini; a question she asked was “How does the idea of school change when children are protagonists in the learning process?” I have found that when children become protagonists I learn more alongside them and I can see their “constructive and interpretative potentials as human beings” (Fillipini, 2018) in the world and not just as children in the classroom. From a journal entry of the fall of 2017 I wrote “I want to change how much voice I give to my students, giving them more time to explore their interest with meaning…more time for them to reflect and recognize their strengths instead of me telling and talking.” With learning to see my students as capable and competent citizens the avenue of inquiry, exploration and play opened up.

My final learning statement for this program was “Play and exploration are important to support meaningful learning experiences.” When I first began this program and in my teaching career I really did not think much of play time as a learning time. I thought of it more as something to do right before winter break and spring break when we had finished all our projects and units and so this was a time of “filler” because I didn’t want to start something new right before the breaks. After myself having the opportunity to play and explore with materials but also with ideas I think back to a conversation I had with a parent of my very first class. I had taught her son and then 4 years later I taught her daughter. Something that stood out to me in the intake meeting for when I taught her daughter was that she remembered her son coming home saying “we don’t get to play anymore in grade 3!” Thinking back to this moment I reflected on how my practice has changed over time.

Previous to this program my idea of play in the classroom was based on “alternating direct academic instruction with free-play periods” (Bertrand, 2018). I found that through my last field study of the program this is where I gained a better understanding of play-based learning and how I can incorporate this into my practice. My final field study was about using Story workshop to engage my students in writing in French. Throughout Story workshop I was able to observe students as individuals and be able to support them in their individual needs as writers. As I watched them play and explore with the materials as they created and wrote their stories I could see them develop their identities as writers and grow more confident in their abilities. Previous to beginning this field study, students had the opportunity to explore and play with these materials in a variety of situations. We had an exploration table set up, where they could play and explore with materials when they finished the structured lesson. When they would explore, at the beginning they engaged in free play and later on as they became more familiar with the material I provided provocations related to the other topics we were learning about. By providing opportunities for free play, inquiry play, collaborative play, playful learning and learning games (Bertrand, 2018). I saw more engagement when it came time to use these materials for more structured activities such as Story workshop.

Through learning more about play and exploration I have grown in the capacity of exploring contexts and environments that support and respond to learners needs. I recognized that environments and contexts are ever changing and that by being more intentional in my practice I was able to be more responsive to my students’ needs. In the article The Principles of Playful Inquiry from Susan Harris Mackay “when adults pay attention to the interest of children, children get serious about learning. The more they expect to be listened to, the more curious they become about their experiences…When we pay attention to the things that children seem to wonder about, learning becomes joyful.” (Mackay, 2010). Being able to respond to the wonders and interests of the children has helped me to respond to their intellectual needs but also to their social-emotional needs. Getting to know them more personally has helped me to find ways to engage learners as individuals as well as in groups.

During the two years of this diploma program one of the most impactful learning has been about myself, not only as a teacher but also as a learner. In the article *The courage to teach* “Good teaching requires self-knowledge.” (Palmer, 2007). Some things that I’ve learned about myself are, that being purposeful and intentional in my teaching has helped me to develop my practice with more depth rather than being superficial in my teaching. Previously I would have the experience of setting learning tasks for my students but I did not find that they were very meaningful and it was hard to engage some of my more reluctant learners. These past two years I have taken the time to reflect on my practice, to learn from my attempts and see the setbacks as learning rather than failures (Turcios, 2017-2019). I have learned that seeing the learning process of myself and my students was often more important than a finished product at the end. In being more intentional and purposeful in my assessment I have gained a better understanding of my students’ strengths and also of their learning needs.

Throughout the program having the opportunity to develop a carry out different Field study questions has helped me to grow in developing a disposition of inquiry and critical reflection. I often found that as I carried out my field study question it would not be going the way I had hoped or I would get stuck and would not know what to do next. My learning statement from Fall 2018 was “I am learning that inquiry and uncertainty is something I’m willing to welcome rather than hide from.” This statement has stuck with me throughout the rest of my diploma program. When I first began teaching and up until I began this program I would spend a very long time preparing my year plan. Throughout the year I would feel a panic if I would fall behind on the time line I had set for myself. These past two years I have made more of a general plan and depended more on my students to guide our learning. I have taken more time to wonder and investigate with my students, to slow down and to learn together by putting my students more at the center of their and my learning. I have learned to take time, to take time to repeat and go back, to take time re-represent our learning, to take time to play and explore and to take the time to become a community of learners.

“Intellect, emotion and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education” (Palmer, 2007). As teachers there is so much more that needs to be taught in the classroom besides the academics. Considering the needs of the whole child has helped me to engage more with families in order to support the children in their learning journey.

Having the opportunity to be in this diploma program has helped me to grow in collaborate with learning communities. Participating in mentor groups by sharing our successes and challenges during our field studies, visiting the Opal school to engage and learn from teachers who have the same beliefs that I do and other opportunities of learning from educational theorists has reminded me that my learning journey does not have to be one I do on my own. I have had the opportunity to go through this program with Kate, who is a good friend and colleague. Teaching at the same school has helped us also to not only share and support each other in our practice but also to collaborate with other teachers at our school. We are looking forward to the fall to continue with the investigation of a field study question and to continue to improve in our practice together. “Teacher research begins and is sustained over time when you have one friend who is willing to listen and work with you” (Shagoury, 2003). I’m grateful that in the beginning I had one friend who was willing to listen and work with me and support me through my challenges that I encountered in my classroom. I am now even more grateful that I have a “community of colleagues” (Shagoury, 2003) made up of individuals that I know I can turn to and support me in my learning.

To conclude with Loris Malaguzzi “Nothing without Joy.” Throughout these two years. I have had some ups and downs. There have been times where I have felt overwhelmed not only with my workload in my school life and in my work life but with my personal life as well. I have come to learn that there is an opportunity to see and feel joy in all parts of our life and learning. I have learned that if I can help my students to see that joy in their life and in their learning even when it becomes challenging that we can grow together to create a community of learners that can go on to support each other in the challenges that come in life.

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