

A self-study of my professional development in the early years of my teaching career

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
Curriculum and Instruction Program
Faculty of Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2019

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Abstract

Teachers have spent thousands of hours watching other people teach, and those observations and experiences have inevitably influenced how one's pedagogy is developed. In this self-study, I sought to identify and understand the ways in which my relationships, experiences, and different identities from kindergarten to graduate studies have influenced my teaching pedagogy today as an early career teacher. Engaging in self-study as an early career teacher has proven to be an eye-opening professional development opportunity, as I have experienced new realizations about where the values in my educational credo stem from. It has also offered an opportunity to review the literature supporting those values. Through this experience I have looked carefully at my practice and have identified instances where the way that I was teaching did not align with my beliefs. Additionally, I have become aware of tensions that exist between my different identities.

Keywords: Self-Study; Kindergarten; Identity Formation

To my family and friends, thank you for your unwavering support, love, and understanding. It's cliché, but I could not have done this without all of you.

To Shawn, thank you for your guidance and for always having more confidence in me than I do.

To my mentors and teachers, thank you for providing me with so many experiences and memories to draw on.

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List of Acronyms

ECE	Early Childhood Education
K-12	Kindergarten to Grade 12
PE	Physical Education
PDP	Professional Development Program
SFU	Simon Fraser University
TA	Teaching Assistant
TTOC	Teacher Teaching on Call

Introduction

I am a white woman who grew up in a racially-diverse suburb in British Columbia, Canada. I lived in the same city from kindergarten to Grade 12, and in that time attended one elementary school and one high school. My experience with school was what I would consider rather typical in that it was uneventful and typically life went smoothly. I did not, however, enjoy school. It was usually a chore, and as graduation approached, I could not wait to leave. In my Grade 12 year when it came time to decide what my plan was for the following year (apply to post-secondary or take the year off), I had a feeling that I needed to return to school in September, otherwise I was concerned that I may get caught up in working and be less inclined to attend post-secondary schooling at all. After much debate, I did apply to university and when the time came, I was excited to attend.

Through discussion with co-workers and friends, it seems that many teachers knew that they wanted to go into teaching since they were children. This was not the case for me. It was the summer before Grade 12 when the idea of going into teaching was first proposed by a friend. For many years previous I had wanted to become a music industry representative; however, I struggled to figure out how to enter the industry and where to start. I attended an information session at a college that had a music production program, but too much uncertainty revolved around that career, particularly because I was not interested in moving to another city. A more practical option that I often considered was a lawyer, but I was unsure about whether or not I could handle so many years of schooling. At first, I dismissed the idea of being a teacher, but after more consideration I realized that perhaps it was a good idea for me, and I went into university with education as my focus. Even with the plan of becoming a teacher, I still had some doubt about whether or not this would be the right choice for me, and so I completed a history degree. That way I could go into teaching, or I could return to my original career hope in high school, the field of law. Eight years later I have found myself in the teaching profession, and often reflect on the irony of my job given how little I liked school myself. Part of the reason why I entered teaching is because of my experience, and I wanted to change the experience of others so that they would hopefully enjoy their school years.

Currently, I teach kindergarten in a suburban school district that is different than the district that I grew up in. This is my third year of teaching, but the first year with my own classroom where I own the position and teach 100%. In my first two years, I covered a maternity leave for several months and job shared in four different positions (two kindergarten positions, one teaching Grade 5, and one working in learning support services). This is the first year where I have control over how the curriculum is taught to my students, and it has been a wonderful year filled with constant experimentation and realizations.

With a desire to change how students see school being one of the reasons that I entered teaching; it is important that I monitor my progress in working towards that goal. As an early career teacher (in my third year of teaching at the time of writing), it can be difficult to take the time to slow down and reflect on the work that we do because it feels like there is constantly something more to be done. With the year passing so quickly, it can be easy to become disconnected with what one believes is happening in the classroom, or what one wants to be happening in the classroom, versus what is really happening. Through this self-study, I have had the opportunity to look carefully at myself and my current practice. It has given me the chance to understand what experiences in my life have influenced my beliefs as an educator and to what extent those beliefs come through in my practice. By completing this study early in my career, it was my hope that I would have a better understanding of myself and be able to develop a practice now that aligns with my core beliefs.

My current practice is in many ways a hodgepodge of different educational approaches and strategies. With no interest in teaching kindergarten prior to PDP, the bulk of my schooling was completed with the intention of opening as many doors as possible. I focused on coursework that would transcend beyond a specific age range and (hopefully) prove useful for whatever grade I ended up teaching. Learning challenges, curriculum design, and multicultural education were particular areas of focus. I ended up with few courses that would fit into the early childhood category. When I reached my short practicum and was placed in a kindergarten class I was stunned, but ready to embrace the challenge. Once my practicum began, I was surprised at how much I enjoyed that age group. After completing my long practicum in Grade 5, I decided that my goal would be to teach kindergarten. Unfortunately, during a hiring presentation I was informed that the district that I hoped to work in did not hire kindergarten teachers

without Early Childhood Education (ECE) training or equivalent experience. A short *and* long practicum in kindergarten would have constituted equivalent experience. I was quite disappointed, but still believed that I made the right choice minoring in Learning and Developmental Disabilities.

In an unexpected turn of events, I entered teaching during a teacher shortage and was offered a job teaching kindergarten to cover a maternity leave almost immediately upon beginning work in the district. Fortunately, this gave me the equivalent experience that I needed to be considered a kindergarten teacher in my school district. Working as a kindergarten teacher has been a joy, though in many ways I do feel self-conscious about not having my ECE. Beginning my first year in my own classroom this past September saw me taking pieces from many different approaches and putting them all together in a semi-cohesive practice. The Reggio Emilia Approach is most evident in my classroom, but Waldorf and Montessori have also influenced how I teach. Outdoor schools around the world, particularly in Scandinavia, have had a significant impact on my approach to teaching as well. With so many ideas that I was excited to try, I ended up working hard to navigate how to incorporate everything that I wished, while also researching as I moved through the year. Completing my thesis at this time added to the chaos of the year, but it also offered me an opportunity to reflect upon the work that I was doing. Similarly, it pushed me to think through my decisions, research carefully, and make changes if something was not going well.

While this experience has been beneficial for me and my teaching, I hope that other educators will find value in this study as well. Both for new teachers entering the field and experienced teachers alike, this study may provide the inspiration for them to try something similar. The literature reviewed in this paper may also help to confirm or even change beliefs about how teachers teach.

Chapter 1, *Literature Review*, outlines the history of the self-study methodology and what it looks like in practice. The chapter goes on to look at how self-study has been used in teacher education, the field in which self-study appears to be utilized the most. The works of Donnell (2010) and Dinkelman (2003) are used to demonstrate the realizations that can happen while conducting a self-study. The section that follows looks at identity exploration within the context of self-study. In that section the works of Ritter (2007), Williams and Ritter (2010), and Skerrett (2011) are used to illustrate how

academics have utilized self-study to understand how their identities have developed and what factors influenced that development, as well as the tension that can arise for individuals as their identity changes (e.g. from teacher to teacher educator). The final subsection of self-study that is looked at, are self-studies being conducted by someone who is trying something new, such as myself with teaching. For examples of this type of self-study the work of Bullock (2012), Trent (2013), Callary, Werthner, and Trudel (2012) are used. These studies involved developing a pedagogy as a doctoral student and beginning teacher educator, the process of moving from teacher to teacher educator, and the difficulties that can come with balancing two passions (coaching and being a PhD student) respectively. Towards the end of the literature review the focus shifts to the details of this specific self-study. It outlines my research question and the approach that I have taken to conduct this self-study. It is worth noting that I have not drawn strict lines between the literature review, methodology, and analysis. Instead, these concepts have been integrated in a way that fits with the narrative approach that I have taken.

In Chapter 2, *Connecting with Students*, I explore the connections that I made growing up. In order to provide some context, I offer some insight into my life outside of school to situate my experience in that setting. From there, different connections and relationships that have left an impact on me for different reasons are laid out in chronological order and are broken into different periods of time. The years explored are: Grade 1, Grade 5, High School, Undergrad, Teacher Education, and Graduate Studies. I then turn to negative connections that were formed and consider why these connections did not have a positive impact on me. These negative connections happened during high school PE and Math, English 12, and PDP. I decided to look at these negative relationships as a way to better understand what exactly it was that prevented a better connection from being made. In the discussion section, larger themes that influenced my connections with the educators that I encountered (availability, interests, observation, communications, and one-on-one learning) are explored.

Chapter 3, *Turning Points as a Learner*, found me reflecting on learning experiences that I have had from kindergarten to present that have left me with fond memories and as a result have influenced my teaching. Following each turning point, I consider what made the event a turning point for me and what educators can learn from the memory. This chapter specifically explores the benefits of integrating student interests, field trips, hands-on and experiential learning, cross-curricular lessons, gently

pushing students outside of their comfort zone, and inspiring students. Other research supporting these ideas is shared, and I turn to my own classroom now to consider if these values that I strongly support come through in my teaching.

In Chapter 4, *Identity in Learning to Teach*, I consider what identity means and work through the different identities that make me who I am. An athlete and an outdoor enthusiast are two of the identities that clearly come through in my teaching. Through this self-study I have discovered that two of my identities, teacher and student, are frequently at odds with each other in recent years. Within the larger identity of teacher, there are smaller identities that exist such as my temporary identity as a new teacher and my identity as a kindergarten teacher. These are all identities that I self-identify with. There are then identities that have been imposed on me based upon the institutions that I have been associated with such as an SFU grad/student, the city that I grew up in, and the school that I currently work at. These identities have all influenced my pedagogy.

I am a new teacher with many ideas, but ultimately still little (but growing) experience. With each day comes new challenges and things to try in my classroom. I have set goals for myself and try to be the best teacher that I can be for my students. That means providing them with the best learning opportunities and teaching them that school is a great place to be. Unfortunately, I regularly feel unsure of myself and unsatisfied. I ask myself why I do what I do and whether or not what I am doing in my classroom is in fact best practice. Conducting this self-study has pushed me to take a careful look at myself and my pedagogy. It has also provided me with the opportunity to dive into the research and develop a better understanding of why certain parts of teaching, such as field trips, learning outdoors, and so on, are done by teachers.

Chapter 1.

Literature Review

1.1. What Is Self-Study

History of Self-Study

The term self-study has been used for decades, and over time its meaning has changed. In early literature, the term self-study referred to students working independently, at their own pace, and using forms of self-evaluation (Loughran, Hamilton, LeBoskey, & Russell, 2004). It has also been used to describe studies of the self and self-image from a more psychological perspective. There are papers that can be found where the “self” in question is actually an institution, such as a post-secondary institution (Loughran, 2004). In the studies where the self is an institution, it is typically the structures and functions of a program being examined. As I scrolled through search results under “self-study” it became clear that there are two branches that stem from the term self-study. There is self-study in the general sense, like the instances outlined above where the term has been used to describe students working independently or the study of oneself or an institution. Alternatively, self-study of teaching and teacher education practices refers to a methodology that has developed in more recent years. For ease of reading, in this paper I use the term “self-study” throughout to refer to the methodology of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices.

Self-study is an increasingly popular research methodology, particularly among those in the field of Education. Prior to the 1990s, teacher educators were encouraging reflective practice among their students; however, the teacher educators themselves were not practicing this (Loughran et al., 2004). In the early 1990s, many teacher educators were faced with the challenge of educating future teachers while also producing research in order to further their own careers within academia (Loughran, 2018). From this predicament and with influences from reflective practice, action research, and practitioner inquiry, emerged the “Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group”. This group was formed as a part of the “American Educational Research Association” in 1993 (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). By

creating the special interest group, regular conferences took place and the amount of literature about self-study, as well as the number of self-studies, increased (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). Self-study allows teacher educators to produce research while also examining their own practice and ensuring that they are “practic[ing] what they preach” (Loughran, 2018, p. 1). The same can be said for any professional wanting to take a closer and deeper look at him or herself.

Defining Self-Study

Defining self-study is difficult, but for the purpose of my self-study we will use Loughran’s definition; “the term self-study is used in relation to teaching and researching practice in order to better understand: oneself; teaching; learning; and the development of knowledge about these” (Loughran, 2004, p. 9). Educators of any kind setting out to complete a self-study must have a curiosity about themselves and their own practice, while also possessing a willingness to change (Gregory, Diacopoulos, Branyon, & Butler, 2017). Without that willingness to change, the purpose of self-study is defeated.

To add to the definition of self-study, LeBoskey (2004) outlined five distinguishing characteristics of self-study:

1. A self-study must be self-initiated and focused.

Fletcher’s (2005) work on mentorship explained that a mentor’s role is to help their mentee pick a suitable focus; however, the mentee cannot be overly reliant on the teacher or mentor (Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011) and ultimately, the decision to complete a self-study must come from the researcher who will be conducting the study. This is because completing a self-study can be a challenging task, as it requires the researcher to look carefully and be critical of themselves and their practice. It can also bring about realizations that the researcher may not have anticipated. Additionally, when looking to publish a self-study or when working with others, personal stories connected to the self-study will be shared. For some, this may be uncomfortable or embarrassing. For this reason, although assistance and suggestions are acceptable, a self-study must be self-initiated and focused solely on the researcher.

Completing a self-study did bring about a level of discomfort for me. Sending off early drafts for my mom to look at was nerve-racking, let alone anyone else. Many of

these pieces of my past have either not been shared with others or had not been reflected upon until now. There was, and is, a level of vulnerability that sometimes leaves me nervous to even share my research question with others, however, I believe that this work is valuable. With so much variation in how self-studies have been written, as well as having never read one that is longer than 20 pages, I was sometimes left wondering if what I was doing was the “right way”. In many instances I wished for more guidance, but my supervisor managed his role well and did not let me rely too heavily on him for guidance with regards to the specific content. While it may take the insight of someone else to suggest a methodology, the decision to move forward must ultimately lie with the researcher.

2. A self-study should be improvement aimed.

The individual completing the self-study should look at the study as an opportunity to improve him or herself. It is an opportunity to ensure that the individual’s beliefs and practice are lining up. It should also be looked at as a chance to make new discoveries and changes, not simply confirm things that are already known. Senese (2005), for example, completed a five-year longitudinal review of his Grade 12 English students. He had students write quarterly responses (with general guidelines) reflecting on their learning, but never on Senese himself. The responses were then used to help guide the course. Senese believed that he had been taking a constructivist approach in his classroom, but through student responses he realized that what he thought was happening versus what was really happening did not align. By completing the self-study, Senese was able to identify where some of the gaps existed, and alter his practice as needed. Having a growth mindset is a necessity, and self-study should not become self-justification (Loughran, 2007).

If a self-study is being viewed as a way to confirm what the researcher already knows, then conducting the study serves little purpose. Working through a self-study should be viewed as a learning opportunity and a chance to critically examine your practice. I began my thesis with the intention of bettering myself as a teacher in some capacity. There was uncertainty surrounding what that learning might look like, but I was certain that this was going to be an opportunity to become a better, more informed teacher. This ties into the first characteristic, that a self-study must be self-initiated and focused. If the researcher makes the decision to conduct a self-study, then they should

look at it as a way to truly learn about the self – not just look for reassurance. Not knowing what will be discovered is part of the journey.

3. Although the term self-study implies that it is an individual project, collaboration is an important aspect.

A self-study does not need to be, and should not be, completed entirely independently. As mentioned previously, some researchers may be working with a mentor to guide them through the process and perhaps offer personal experience with this methodology. Literature on self-study shows that working with a critical friend on a self-study is another popular option among researchers. When sharing their experiences of working in a critical friendship, Schuck and Russell (2005) defined a critical friend as,

...a trusted friend who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (p. 107)

According to Schuck (2005), being a critical friend can be a challenging role to navigate, especially if the expectations of the role are not clearly laid out by the researcher. Similarly, when serving as the researcher in "Phase 2" of their project, Schuck (2005) sometimes found herself becoming defensive when she received feedback from Russell about areas of her practice that could be improved.

As an early career teacher educator, Christou (2014) was given the opportunity to be the instructor of a new class that was intended to teach future teachers how to teach both science and social studies. Christou kept a journal of his thoughts as he moved through the course and invited Bullock, also a new teacher educator with a background in science, to discuss the course. This evolved into a self-study where Bullock served as Christou's critical friend. Bullock's job was to ask Christou questions and provide comments. Together they worked through Christou's thoughts in order to develop a new understanding of how the course could be taught, and about "the nature of teaching about teaching social studies in science" (Christou & Bullock, 2014, p. 88). Having a critical friend helps to navigate the process and prompt new considerations.

The flexibility of the self-study methodology allows for individual interpretation, which can be daunting. Having someone to turn to for their thoughts and suggestions can help a great deal in reassuring the researcher, while also opening their eyes to

potential new insights. Beyond working with my critical friend and supervisor, this study has been a conversation piece with many friends and family members. Recalling past events, considering the impact that they had, and weighing in on my different ideas has occupied much of our conversations over the last year. Having a support system of some kind, whether that be a mentor or critical friend, and others is essential.

4. Data collection involves multiple methods.

Data can be collected in a number of ways including but not limited to journals, activity logs, incident reports, and video recordings (Foot, Crowe, Tollafield, & Allan, 2014). Self-study is not “prescriptive” in how it must be done (Christou & Bullock, 2014). Researchers have a great deal of flexibility with what method of data collection they would like to use for their study. Typically, self-studies are qualitative (Christou & Bullock, 2014).

5. The validity of the project is based on trustworthiness.

In order to produce trustworthy research, data must be clear and be accompanied by an explanation about how that data was then turned into findings (Tidwell, Heston, & Fitzgerald, 2009). A criticism of self-study is the perceived “lack of methodological rigor and transparency” (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015, p. 510). Thus, in order to maintain the validity of this methodology, it is of the utmost importance to base the study on true data. Feldman (2003) offers steps that can be taken to increase the validity of a self-study. First, he said that a clear and detailed description regarding data collection must be given. A clear description should also be given of how the data collected has contributed to the end conclusion(s) (Feldman, 2003). Feldman explains that because data can be interpreted in a number of different ways, it is suggested that the researcher explain why a particular representation was chosen. Finally, assuming that there has been a change in the researcher as a result of the self-study, offering evidence that shows the value in such changes helps increase the validity as well (Feldman, 2003). “[I]f we want others to value our work, we need to demonstrate that it is well founded, just, and can be trusted” (Feldman, 2003, p. 28). In this thesis the research has been presented and is supported by literature to increase its trustworthiness.

What Self-Study Is Not

When thinking about self-study, it can be easy for practitioners to get caught up in the reflection piece of self-study, but reflection in and of itself is not self-study, although it is a component (Loughran, 2007). Self-study moves beyond reflection to analysis, and then to a conclusion that contributes to the greater good (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015, p. 510). Self-study has led to an increased awareness in the ways in which our beliefs and values come through in our teaching (Crowe & Dinkelman, 2010).

Furthermore, a self-study is not just a story. "...[T]elling stories is helpful for sharing practice, but in terms of academe and the development of knowledge, I would suggest that stories alone are not enough" (Loughran, 2010, p. 223). When looking at teaching specifically, it becomes a question of whether or not what is being shared is "how to do teaching" versus knowledge gained, with the purpose of self-study being knowledge gained (Loughran, 2010, p. 223). Moving beyond the story can be difficult. At times I worried that my thesis was just a collection of stories. It was neat for me to reminisce about them, but not helpful to the larger academic community or ultimately myself. Weaving in the literature and asking the bigger "so what" question is what differentiates a diary of stories from a paper that seeks to contribute knowledge gained from experience. The vulnerability that researchers offer through self-studies comes through in the stories that they share and then the conclusions that are drawn. Their analysis and the growth that stems from their research make self-study what it is. Reflection and reminiscing are a part of the self-study methodology, but on their own they are not self-study.

1.2. Self-Study in Teacher Education

For teacher educators, self-study provides an opportunity for a better understanding of their own teaching, while also modeling the process for the teacher candidates that they are working with. Additionally, it can move teachers beyond the status quo by pushing the boundaries within teaching (Samaras, Hicks, & Berges, 2004). "Self-study of teacher education practices is, by and large, considered a methodology that encourages teacher educators to describe, interpret, and analyze the sources and effects of their pedagogies of teacher education" (Bullock & Sabatier, 2018). Essentially,

in order to effectively teach teacher candidates, teacher educators should be examining their own pedagogies.

Donnell (2010) conducted a self-study while working as an early career teacher educator. Through the process, she learned that, “modeling reflective practice for my students is a powerful aspect of my pedagogy as a teacher educator” (p. 232). Her hope was that by the teacher candidates seeing her work through different real-life dilemmas, then the teacher candidates would view reflective practice as an essential component of their teaching practice. Two themes emerged for Donnell (2010): finding a voice and accountability vs. authenticity. She wrote about how confrontation with colleagues was not something that she would allow, but through her self-study she realized that avoiding confrontation meant potentially missing out on opportunities to influence change, particularly within the program that she was teaching in. The second theme showed the difficulties in balancing accountability (what content was required to be taught and preparing teachers for state teacher testing) and authenticity (developing teacher candidates in an authentic way). The article goes on to explain the adjustments that Donnell (2010) made to the *Introduction to Elementary Education* course each time that she taught it. Her involvement of the teacher candidates in this process of revision and taking into account their thoughts and concerns was no doubt appreciated by the candidates.

Dinkelman (2003) advocated for self-study specifically in teacher education after a discussion in his class revealed that not all students felt safe in the class, with one student even crying as a result. It was later pointed out by a former student and then reaffirmed by a personal friend that Dinkelman had a particular “look” during conversations that came across as implying someone was stupid. Dinkelman had no idea that this was how people felt, but after this discovery he began demonstrating the “look” and explaining it to his students on the first day of class. That way there were no misunderstandings. The difference with students is “accounted for by knowing something important about my practice that I did not know before, something I only came to know about as a result of self-study” (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 7).

With its increasing popularity among teacher educators, what is it that brings teacher educators to begin self-study? In a self-study aimed at understanding why teacher educators are drawn to self-study, Grant and Butler (2018) found that their

reasoning for turning to self-study were in fact similar. Negative experiences teaching as a minoritized woman at a university pushed Grant to engage in self-study as a way to repair her professional identity that she felt had been compromised. Similarly, Butler often felt like the “other” professionally, and questioned himself as a teacher and doctoral student. Brandenburg (2008) began self-study research because of concerns about the relationship between her teaching as a teacher educator and her students learning to teach.

Self-Study Beyond Teacher Education

While self-study has predominately been used in teacher education, there are other fields as well that are turning to self-study to fit their research needs. Meskin and van Der Walt (2014), two drama teachers at a higher education institute in South Africa, argue that self-study is a useful methodology in the field of culture and performing. According to them, “[s]elf-study offers a way to integrate theory and practice in profound ways that (re)invent and (re)invest creative disciplines such as drama in terms of what, and how, we name ‘research’” (Meskin & van Der Walt, 2014, p. 66). Theater does not easily fit with many research methodologies, but self-study has proven useful. Self-study is also gaining popularity in the field of medicine. Barbour (2016) conducted a self-study to explore her experiences with grief as an oncology nurse. Through the self-study she was able to identify specific stressors as well as ways to release stress. There are then practicing kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers who are using this methodology, such as myself, to carefully examine their teaching practice.

1.3. Self-Study and Identity

Many self-study practitioners have used self-study as a way to explore their identity. Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith (2010) define identity as

...the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past – what used to be true of one, the present – what is true of one now, or the future – the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to become, or the person one fears one may become. (p. 69)

I believe this definition successfully summarizes the different layers of what identity means. As we move through our lives, we develop and take on any number of

identities. Conducting a self-study during this process can help make sense of who you are. It can help to better understand where tensions exist between different identities, as well as to see how our identities come through in various aspects of our lives. Literature shows that many teachers and teacher educators turn to self-study during the development of a new identity. Moving from teacher to teacher educator is a popular topic. For myself, I explore self-study and identity at a time when I am moving from the life of a student to the life of a teacher.

Williams (2018) wrote about using self-study as a way to better understand her experiences, particularly with discrimination, as an early childhood educator, now university professor. Vozzo (2011) worked with a group of teacher researchers, and while doing this work, he conducted a self-study. His actions (providing support, encouragement, and so on) helped him shape and realize his identity as a professional friend. In both of these instances, it is the identity of teacher educator, or professor of education, that is being looked at. As mentioned previously, however, self-study is not just limited to teacher education or Faculty of Education members. Foot, Crowe, Tollafield, and Allan (2014), looked at how their daily experiences as doctoral students influenced their identities as doctoral students. To explore the subcategory of self-study and identity more deeply, the following section will take a closer look at articles by Ritter (2007), Williams and Ritter (2010), and Skerrett (2011).

Ritter (2007) utilized the self-study methodology to identify the tensions that he faced as he moved from a classroom teacher to a teacher educator. When he first started working as a teacher educator, Ritter recalls having difficulties establishing a teacher educator identity. With limited training on how to be a teacher educator, Ritter turned to his classroom teacher roots as a source of expertise. Additionally, having been accustomed to the banking style of teaching both in his own education experiences and then in his practice as a classroom teacher, Ritter took this approach to teacher education. He described the tension that then arose as he began to see flaws in the traditional approach that he was used to. In the conclusion of his article, Ritter said, "My experience suggests that the process of becoming a teacher educator is far more complex than is typically acknowledged, as it involves modifications to professional identity as well as to pedagogy" (Ritter, 2007, p. 20). By conducting this self-study, Ritter shed light on some of the challenges that can be faced by early career teacher educators as they transition into their new teacher educator role.

Several years later, Williams and Ritter (2010) co-authored a study together which looked at how both authors developed their professional teacher educator identity and how similar many of the struggles that they faced were. Williams had been an elementary school educator for 25 years in Australia, while Ritter had taught in the secondary school system in the United States for three years. For Williams with a long history of teaching in elementary schools, she struggled to balance her own expertise to teach her students with allowing them to uncover their own solutions and answers. Self-study helped her work through this struggle and student evaluations showed that her students appreciated her experience as a classroom teacher. She wondered, however, if she was properly filling the role of teacher educator. Both Ritter and Williams shared how important making professional connections was for not only identity construction, but also professional learning.

When discussing self-study and identity, Skerrett (2011) wrote that if unexamined,

...teachers fail to recognize how their past and current experiences and beliefs shape their professional lives as well as the lives of their students. If unexplored, teachers are denied opportunities to identify productive and problematic influences and begin a lifelong process of reflection, change, and growth” (p. 213).

Skerrett went on to explain that it was through her early self-studies that she came to recognize important self-understandings as well as directions for change and growth in her life as a professional. Through self-study, Skerrett became aware of how her experiences at home with literature, thanks to a mother who loved literature, instilled a love of reading and later led Skerrett to become an English teacher. Another realization was how her experiences as an immigrant of colour attending a difficult urban school in the United States resulted in her working in an urban school. Skerrett (2011) said, “I was able to clarify the educational ideals I wished to embody and identify which of my beliefs and practices reflected or contradicted these ideas” (p. 214).

1.4. Self-Study for a New Teacher

To my knowledge, there has not been a self-study on pedagogy development conducted by an early career kindergarten teacher. With many teachers and teacher educators turning to self-study as a way to ensure that their pedagogy aligns with their

practice, I turn to self-study at a time when my pedagogy is evolving. Influences from my own education, volunteer work, post-secondary, and personal life have all been coming together to form my pedagogy. Having only recently completed the teacher education program and now working on completing my master's degree, I have been particularly in tune with today's best practices and therefore have a specific vision of what I would like to see in my teaching practice. Conducting a self-study at a time when I am in the early years of my career has meant that I am not only checking to ensure the alignment between what I practice and preach, but it also has helped me understand how my educational and personal history has had an influence on my practice. A review of the literature shows that periods of transition into new roles are in fact a popular time for self-studies. The following examples demonstrate how self-study was used by others during a period of transition into a new role.

Bullock (2012) used the self-study methodology to analyze the development of his pedagogy as a doctoral student and beginning teacher educator. To complete his self-study, Bullock journaled, both on paper and through audio recordings, about his experiences as a doctoral student who was also supervising a group of teacher candidates during their practicum placements. He explained the various tensions that arose over the course of the year, as he not only worked to support his students in the program, but also as he dealt with his own changing identity. Focusing specifically on identity, Bullock points to the realizations that he had early on in the year when he first went to meet with the associate teachers. At the meetings he instinctively reverted back to his identity as a high school teacher. After further consideration, however, he realized that although that identity might be more relatable for the teachers that he was meeting with, ultimately, this was not who he was anymore. Bullock wrote, "I found it difficult to reconcile my developing identity as an academic with my former identity as a teacher, particularly because I was conscious of both my age and the perceptions that many teachers have of Faculties of Education" (Bullock, 2012, p. 151). Despite this, Bullock valued the connections that he was making. This article brought to light the identity shift and challenges felt by Bullock between teacher, doctoral student, and his new position as a faculty member.

Trent (2013) looked at seven individuals in Hong Kong who were transitioning from teacher to teacher educators and the difficulties that came with that transition. For beginning teacher educators, tensions can arise between personal and professional

isolation, teaching theory and classroom-based practical knowledge, and the pressure to conduct research (Trent, 2013). In their interviews, many of the participants shared that they felt discouraged and frustrated working as a teacher teaching English as a second language, and they saw moving into teacher education as a way to help fix how languages are taught (Trent, 2013). Some even described the move as a way to preserve their identity. Despite moving to teacher education, several participants shared mixed feelings about being a teacher educator. One participant said that she sometimes had regrets about becoming a teacher educator because it was "...just as frustrating as being a [school] teacher..." (Trent, 2013, p. 270). Others expressed disappointment with the slow progress in moving away from the traditional ways of language instruction. Navigating new identities and crossing boundaries brings certain challenges. In some instances, as is the case for some of the participants in Trent's study, making a professional change may not bring the results that one would like. As teacher educators work to develop their own teacher educator identity (while also helping develop the teacher identity of their students), they must work through personal and professional isolation, and negotiate their past experiences, competencies, and personal ideals (Trent, 2013).

Callary, Werthner, and Trudel (2012) used the self-study methodology to examine Callary's "process of becoming" during the first four years of her PhD program (p. 4). When she first started the PhD program, she was a high-performance alpine ski coach. Journal entries from her first two semesters in the program show conflicted thoughts between coaching and schooling, as well as coaching and being a wife (Callary, et al., 2012). She wondered why she was going to school because she was a great coach and did not think about anything else when she was coaching, but she also viewed schooling as a safe and reliable route. Coaching was unpredictable. Coaching at the World Cup level would also mean that she would be away from her husband for long periods of time. As the program progressed, Callary faced difficult decisions, primarily whether or not she wanted to pursue coaching at the World Cup level or start a family and focus on research. Through the reflection of life experiences, interests, and priorities outside of academics and the roles that she has had, Callary began moving towards becoming a professor until she eventually reduced her coaching schedule and decided to start a family while pursuing her research (Callary, et al., 2012). For Callary, the

process of self-study helped her prioritize what was most important to her, and then which path she wanted to follow professionally.

1.5. Methodology and Methods

Methodology

As the literature illustrates, the self-study of teaching and teacher educational practices methodology provides a way for educators to participate in professional development. Conducting and presenting a self-study is not a prescriptive task. There are no established methodological traditions (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001), though there is an increasing number of works to draw on. As such, the researcher is able to make changes to the formatting that would, perhaps, not be found in traditional research papers. In this case, the review of the literature that has been offered at the beginning of this chapter outlines many characteristics of the self-study methodology. In essence, for this self-study the literature review and the methodology are one in the same because my approach has been largely informed by the literature reviewed in this chapter.

I have used an autobiographical self-study to consider my past experiences within education and contemplate them now as a teacher myself. I have looked at this as an opportunity to better understand how I have become the teacher that I am, while also looking ahead to where I want to go as an educator. I have used a narrative style to describe each event and within each chapter, events are laid out in chronological order to help create the feel of a story that can be easily followed and invested in by readers.

A particularly powerful quote from Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) comes in relation to the “so what” question of self-studies. When considering the value and quality of a self-study piece they wrote that they asked themselves, “[i]f we didn’t know this person, would we care? Would we read?” (p. 17). After reading this I was struck and left wondering how I could ensure that my paper was one that would be read. To help ensure the value of the paper, I followed the steps to completing a self-study, as outlined by Samaras and Roberts (2011):

1. Develop a question about your practice.
2. Work collaboratively with a group of critical friends.

3. Determine what the value of the research is to others.
4. Start the research process in a way that is clear and accurate.
5. Share with the public what has been learned.

These five steps served as an outline for where to start with the study and how to proceed forward.

In addition to the “how to” steps offered by Samaras and Roberts (2011), Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) offered guidelines for those writing an autobiographical self-study to help develop quality self-studies. Along with the work of LaBoskey’s (2004) five distinguishing characteristics of self-study, the guidelines offered have helped ensure the validity and usefulness of this work. To summarize the ten guidelines for establishing quality, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) wrote,

A self-study is a good read, attends to the “nodal moments” of teaching and being a teacher educator and thereby enables reader insight or understanding into self, reveals a lively conscience and balanced sense of self-importance, tells a recognizable teacher and teacher educator story, portrays character development in the face of serious issues within a complex setting, gives place to the dynamic struggle of living life whole, and offers new perspectives. (p. 19)

Each guideline was considered in relation to the contents of this paper, though ultimately it is up to the readers to decide whether or not this self-study is successful in each area.

Research Question

My research question is a broad one; how have my own experiences in education impacted my pedagogy as an early career teacher today? I also hoped that completing a self-study would shed some light on whether or not my views of teaching align with my actual practice. Given that I am teaching a grade that I did not originally intend on or train to teach, I feel that conducting a self-study to check for any gaps in knowledge and practice is particularly critical. In my school district, kindergarten teachers are required to be trained in Early Childhood Education or have equivalent experience. When I was first hired to teach kindergarten, I did not have either, but because of a teacher shortage the requirement was dropped. Now, having realized that kindergarten is my real passion, I often worry that despite having some experience now, I am missing pieces that would have been covered during the ECE program.

Additionally, without the Early Childhood background and only now being in my first year teaching my own kindergarten class, I have a vision of what I would like to see done but know how easily elements can slip through the cracks. Similarly, with teaching being so fast-paced, it can also be difficult to find the time to reflect and analyze why I do what I do in all aspects of my practice and pedagogy. Prior to starting this research project, I had not given much thought as to how my experiences have influenced my teaching. By looking back on my educational experiences and then drawing conclusions, I hope to answer my research question, while also finding out how I can be a better educator.

Methods

A two-pronged approach was used to conduct my study. To start, I read many self-studies in order to better understand how others have used this approach and what its benefits are. If I were to use the self-study methodology, I needed to have a well-rounded, thorough understanding of it. When the idea of completing a self-study for my thesis was originally proposed, I was reluctant. While I knew that doing a self-study would be beneficial to my own practice, I was concerned about what value it would hold for anyone else reading it. The literature shows that this is a concern many have initially (Luenberg & Samaras, 2011). It is for this reason that moving beyond the story and considering *why* is a critical step in self-study. As Lounghran (2010) said, “[w]hat does the story tell and what purpose does it serve?” (p. 223). The *why* piece has been something that I have constantly been considering throughout this process.

It quickly became clear through the literature that a self-study could be completed in many ways, and that it would ultimately be up to the researcher (in this case myself) to determine what method of data collection works best for them. Reading through the literature also helped to reassure me that my work would be valid and useful, provided proper protocols and guidelines are followed. Finally, reading the literature exposed me to various styles of writing and framing self-studies. It has been getting lost down the rabbit hole of self-studies that has helped me wrap my head around what I would like to accomplish.

The second aspect of my research has been journaling. I first started by writing about any significant memories that were recalled immediately when thinking about my experiences in school (kindergarten to present). Many memories came to mind with vivid

recollection. Some I was able to instantly recall due to my fondness of the memory, while others were somewhat traumatic and had left a negative mark. Once I had those documented, I began exploring artifacts. My mom always made an effort to save many of my special school projects, class photos, and so on. I spent time going through each box and seeing what, if any, memories were triggered by each item. A number of memories came about through this process. Exploring the artifacts also led to many conversations with my parents and friends, which then further helped in the process of gathering data.

After I had journaled about my various experiences, I shared my writing with my supervisor, Dr. Shawn Bullock. Bullock, working in the role of both my critical friend and my supervisor, read through what I had written and helped push me to look critically at each memory and search for overarching themes. With his guidance and thought-provoking questions, I was able to extract three larger themes from the data that I had gathered. The three themes that were originally decided upon were: relationship building, determination, and engagement. Following the identification of the three themes, I reviewed the journal entries again, this time coding each memory. After the coding had been completed, I began writing, at which point the three themes began to evolve. The three final themes are: connecting with students, turning points as a learner, and identity development in learning to teach.

With each experience, I sought to answer the question of significance. This work is beneficial to me, but how can I analyze each story so that it proves valuable to others? The way that this question has been answered looks different in each chapter, as no single format fits all three chapters. In some instances, the analysis follows immediately after each individual experience, in other cases bigger ideas are extracted and examined towards the end of the chapter. In all cases, there are takeaways.

Chapter 2.

Connecting with Students

“At the core of teaching practice at every level are caring and relationship-building”

(Martin, 2017, p. 129)

Some students arrive to school each morning hungry, without their teeth brushed, and in the same clothes that they wore the previous day. Others arrive having been well cared for and loved at home. Over the past two years while teaching kindergarten, Grade 5, and Learning Support at an inner-city school, I have seen first-hand just how critical building relationships and connections can be with all students and parents alike. This chapter will look at how relationships and connections in my life, positive and negative, both inside and outside of school have affected the way that I approach teaching today. As a new teacher working to create connections and build a reputation, there is an even greater importance on understanding how to go about forming these relationships.

There is an abundance of research that points to the importance of positive student-teacher relationships. When a child reaches kindergarten, the developmental history of the child can make child-teacher relationships more difficult to form; however, there is evidence that positive relations can overcome early history (Pianta, 1999). Adults need to invest time and attention to their students in order to build a positive relationship (Joseph & Strain, 2004). By making this investment, teachers are taking the necessary steps to allow for more effective intervention if challenging behaviours arise (Joseph & Strain, 2004). Two separate studies looked at students from kindergarten to Grade 5 and found that positive student-teacher relationships had positive effects on both behaviour and academics (Baker, 2006; Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Furthermore, Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal (2011) found that student-teacher relationships are equally important across the elementary years for children to be able to regulate their emotions, follow rules, and interact with others. McCormick (2013) looked at kindergarten students specifically and found high math academic achievement in Grade 1 when there was a positive teacher-student relationship.

Positive student-teacher relationships remain important in older years as well. Zaccor (2018) examined the affect that student-teacher relationships had on high school students in a small Chicago high school. African Americans made up over 80% of the student population and 95.8% of the entire student population was considered low income. The study looked specifically at a history teacher who adjusted the curriculum in a way that made it relevant to his students. He focused primarily on current problems that students had experience with, such as race, and then he tied those problems to history. Even though he did not come from the same background as his students, the teacher showed his students that he cared by acknowledging their realities and creating a curriculum that was specific to them. As a result, students felt connected to him and the class. His students spoke highly of him and they felt like he cared about them.

While positive student-teacher relationships have been shown to have an impact on student behaviour and academics, negative student-teacher relationships also have consequences. Studies have shown that the relationships that students have with teachers have impacts on their mental health. Holdaway and Becker (2018) found a connection between children's mental health symptoms and conflicts with teachers. In a study that examined how teacher-perceived relationships are connected to the academic and behavioural outcomes from Grades 1-8, Hamre and Pianta (2001) found that kindergarten teacher perceptions of conflict and overdependence were significantly correlated with academic outcomes through elementary years and into middle school.

Knowing how important it is to develop a relationship with students, I sought to uncover what, specifically, helped in building the connections that I made during my schooling. Each header features one or more important connection or relationship from my years of schooling. I then categorized each connection or relationship into broader categories that are then explained more thoroughly.

2.1. Family Working Life

Growing up, my parents and grandparents were social people and frequently had company over, so I had been comfortable talking to adults and other people from a young age. My mom always emphasized the importance of being polite and friendly to people when I was spoken to – not just ignoring those people as some children do. From the age of 9, I found myself spending hours on end at my parent's grocery store. I was

given odd little jobs to do such as breaking up bread tags (they come in a long roll and need to be separated into their individual pieces), sweeping the floor, or breaking down cardboard boxes. While at the store, I was talkative with my parents' employees, and I also spent time interacting with countless customers over the years. We would hold fundraisers or different events and I was regularly on hand to help my parents. Through these sorts of activities, I would connect with many people. We had quite a few regular customers who I spoke with several times a week, and in fact sometimes daily, particularly once I began working at the store when I was older. In other instances, I had just one-time interactions with people as they stopped in the store to quickly grab something. Through all of these conversations and interactions, I learned how to connect with people and show a genuine interest in their lives. Learning names, learning their stories, these were all aspects of being at the store that I truly enjoyed. I was always amazed at how much people were willing to share with the person ringing in their groceries if that person showed the slightest bit of interest and kindness. There were even customers who bought me birthday and graduation gifts because of the relationship that had been formed. To this day there are still some that I visit from time to time.

Over the seven years that I worked there, plus the years prior when I was younger, I witnessed the power that building relationships can make. In addition to meeting customers at the store, I spent many Friday afternoons driving around the city with my mom and brother delivering groceries to those who were housebound. This included people with disabilities or who struggled with mental health, but it was largely elderly people who we delivered to. In many cases, these customers had little in the way of family and no doubt enjoyed having two children come to visit them. Our deliveries often ran well past dinnertime as many customers invited us in for tea or treats, or we spent time putting away their groceries for them. Accompanying my mom along on these deliveries taught my brother and I a great deal about compassion, and also showed us how much taking the time to talk with someone can mean to them. Though at the time I did not always enjoy spending my Friday nights in and out of a car, I am thankful that I had that opportunity growing up.

Through my time spent at the grocery store I learnt many beneficial skills, but perhaps the most useful and applicable skill that I learnt in relation to my current job as a teacher was the importance of and the ability to build relationships. I love connecting with my students and their families and believe that it is important to take the time to do

so. Being available before and after school for a friendly conversation or to give students the chance to show their parents things inside the classroom has helped create a strong sense of community in my classroom that I am proud of. Without the strong community of customers, employees, and other businesses in the area that was built around my parent's grocery store, I may not have ended up valuing relationships in the way that I do.

2.2. Grade 1

My original Grade 1 teacher left early in the school year to go on maternity leave, so we had a new teacher take over partway through the year. While many aspects of Grade 1 have since been forgotten, I recall the friendly and caring personality of my teacher, and the gift that she gave each student at the end of the year. For our end of the year gift, my teacher had made each student a personalized bookmark by hand, featuring an acrostic poem of our name on the front in gel pen, then laminated, and finished with a braided tassel. After receiving this gift, I used it regularly all through elementary school and into high school. It was a meaningful and thoughtful keepsake that reminded me of the positive relationship that my teacher had built with others and myself in the class.

While looking through boxes of old schoolwork to help remember pieces of my schooling past, I came across several home reading books from Grade 1. Each day there are comments written by my parents, or on some days another "fill in" family member such as my grandma or aunt, and then some sort of response or comment from my teacher. I was shocked to find that the comments were not simple one-word notes. She took the time to write several sentences on many days. Through these notes home and other interactions, she built a positive relationship with my parents as well.

2.3. Grade 5

Grade 5 was an interesting year for me. Near the end of Grade 4, when students started discussing which teacher they would like for the coming school year, many specified who they did *not* want. There was one teacher who had been teaching for many years and had a reputation of being difficult and "mean". Hearing this, my parents encouraged me to keep an open mind and judge for myself if I ended up being placed in

her class. I did end up in that teacher's class that year, and I admittedly did not enter her class with a totally open mind, as I could not forget the various criticisms that I had heard so many times leading up to September. In some ways she did fit the widely used description of being a hard marker, quite strict, and unbending in her teaching style. I still occasionally hear the echo of her catchphrase "nose to the grindstone" as I work.

In the years since, many of my fellow classmates from that year look back and still have negative things to say, yet I have a much different recollection of that year. Despite being a difficult teacher, I give her a great deal of credit in shaping me into the student I am today. She taught me the importance of working hard and staying on task. It was also the first year where I distinctly recall firm expectations being upheld and consequences if work was not completed. In order to be successful in her class, one needed to be organized, focused, and be willing to put in the time. Fortunately, I was able to refine these skills in her class.

This teacher was unlike the other teachers that I was accustomed to because of her apparent stern attitude. She wasn't an overly friendly individual and students had to work hard to build a connection. Once I built that connection, I quickly realized that she was actually a very kind person who was working hard to teach us. Fortunately for me, her teaching style proved to be one that I could thrive with. By the end of my Grade 5 year I felt accomplished, and in the coming years I was grateful to have been in her class.

To be frank, I do not recall very much of the content from Grade 5. I do remember reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* over the course of several months and completing a number of projects based on the book that involved analyzing and taking notes on the book. After we finished the book, my class went on a field trip to see the play at the Jewish Community Centre in Vancouver. I also recall the Ukrainian Easter eggs that she taught us how to design and create, but otherwise I recall little about the material that we learned. This tells me that the material was not typically taught in an engaging way for me personally, but looking back as an educator now I frequently consider what about this teacher helped me excel. I believe it was her firm but kind attitude that helped to ensure that I was motivated to do my best while still feeling cared for.

What I am left considering, as well, is that while this approach worked for me, there are many students who it did not work for and who still consider her to be a mean teacher. Was it worth being known as the teacher that few wanted? Was it worth being remembered by many as a “bad” teacher? Being the bad guy the majority of the time is difficult for me, so I do not think that I could ever model my practice after hers in that aspect, but I do take away the importance of sticking to expectations and being the bad guy from time to time if it will ultimately benefit the students.

2.4. High School

While in high school I had many teachers who were kind and helpful. They did their job, made classes enjoyable, and I left their class happy. When focusing specifically on relationship building, however, there is a small group of educators who left a lasting impression on me. For French 11 I had a teacher who was new to my school, and although she did not say anything, I believe that she was an early career teacher at the time. She was extremely kind and caring, while also doing a great job teaching. Occasionally she would adjust or cancel entire assignments as needed if pieces were not working as she had expected as we moved through the course. While some of my peers viewed this as a weakness or the teacher being easily manipulated, I saw it as her recognizing that something wasn't going to work and then adjusting accordingly. In one instance, she assigned the class a project where each student was put in pairs and then each pair were tasked with researching and presenting on a French-speaking country. As we went over the criteria, most students expressed concern about how advanced the expectations were compared to our knowledge base. She listened to our concerns and then decided that we would not do the assignment. Planning projects can take a great deal of time, so I appreciated that she did not ask us to do it anyways, knowing that we would have a difficult time.

The Home Economics department, specifically the cooking and textiles teachers, were almost always available for extra help or to offer a quiet place to work on other assignments. Through these classes I was challenged constantly, but support was always there if needed. By taking textiles every year, which aside from Grade 8 was always a multi age class at my high school due to low enrollment numbers, I eventually gained enough confidence to become somewhat of a leader in the department. In my senior years (Grade 11 and 12), our textiles teachers even organized an end of the year

fashion show for students to model their creations and designs. These extra steps taken by this group of teachers helped create wonderful memories, and I felt comfortable approaching them with any questions or concerns.

2.5. Undergrad

During undergrad, a time notoriously known for few connections between professor and student because of large class sizes and short terms, I was able to build relationships with a few professors. During my second year of undergraduate studies I was able to connect with two fantastic professors from two different departments. The first was through a smaller Education class consisting of 29 students. With such small numbers for the seminar and no teaching assistant, students were able to get to know each other better as well as the professor. Throughout my time at university, even now at the graduate level, I have never been an overly active class discussion participant, but I do pay careful attention to the discussions and contribute when I feel it is appropriate. This was the case for the course at hand, but through sharing and discussions the professor learned that I was completing a History major with a minor in Education. He asked if I would be interested in working as a research assistant to which I happily accepted. Over the coming years this professor became a real mentor of mine and taught me a great deal about academia. He has significantly more confidence in my abilities than I do, and it is because of his support and guidance that I have continued on in academia beyond my original goal of the Professional Development Program.

During a directed studies course with this professor focusing on Hayden White's *Metahistory*, I struggled to make it through the complex ideas presented in the book. Through our one-on-one discussions, he pushed me to fully develop my thoughts and expand upon my ideas. As we discussed each chapter, I was able to extract surface-level ideas, but through questions and encouragement I was able to develop some coherency and deeper thinking. With each meeting I gained more confidence and got the boost that I needed to keep reading. After years of lectures and small, but never one-on-one classes, this level of investment from a professor was truly appreciated.

The second professor was a faculty member of the History Department. I took four courses with this professor because of the knowledge and background that she shared with us, as well as her dedication to each student and her willingness to support

them in any way possible. In the first class I took with her, there were 81 students and my tutorial was run by a teaching assistant. While I did not connect with her during this class aside from brief comments or short conversations, the following three classes were smaller, thus we regularly engaged in conversations at length about the various course topics and beyond.

In the lower-level courses, this professor frequently had the same teaching assistant. Initially I found him to be quite abrupt and intimidating, but I quickly came to realize that I valued his honesty and that he was making an effort to push me to reach my full potential. His methods were perhaps what many would consider rude; however, his advice and guidance were helpful. In the years following the courses, I would occasionally run into him on public transit. Each time he stopped to chat, inquired about my progress, and again offered some insight. This was an unusual relationship, and one that initially often left me questioning whether or not he thought that I was naive, but he made a real effort to get to know me, help me in the classes that he was working as a TA for and in the program as a whole, while also making me a better history student.

Working with all three of these individuals made me feel highly motivated to do my best in their courses. I felt supported and listened to while also feeling as though the professors were there to teach and wanted their students to succeed. The result for me was a better understanding of course content because I was not afraid to ask for clarification or dig deeper into an issue. I also received some of my highest marks in all of the courses taken with both professors, which I attribute to all of the factors mentioned above.

This is in contrast to the courses where I struggled academically, all of which I lacked any real connection with the professor and in some cases even felt belittled and afraid to speak up if I did not understand the material. In those courses a lack of relationship between either the professor in the case of seminars, and the TA and professor in the case of lectures and tutorials, left me feeling unsure and floundering. In a number of instances, I attempted to form some sort of relationship, but when those attempts failed, it felt as though nothing more could be done.

2.6. Teacher Education

During my teacher education, I was fortunate to work with an educator who brought a tremendous amount of first-hand experience to a course on disabilities. He had such an impact on me because not only was the material that he assigned practical for the classroom, but he also offered truthful, first-hand accounts both from his previous job and from raising his son who has a disability. In my experience, when discussing disabilities, there is often a focus on the positives. This can be good to help change stereotypes surrounding disabilities, but it can also create a false perception of what working with students with disabilities can be like. After taking a class with this professor, I felt like I had a realistic understanding of what working with students with disabilities *can* be like.

By being so honest and candid in his experiences, it also increased my comfort level to ask questions. Not only did I know that I could expect a truthful and informative answer to the best of his abilities, but he also spoke to his students in a friendly fashion. There was a certain level of casualness in the way that he ran his seminars that led to informative and thought-provoking class discussions. His relaxed demeanor made for a comfortable learning environment.

In addition to the coursework, there was a two-part practicum component to my teacher education. Teacher candidates completed both a short practicum and a long practicum. During my long practicum, which I completed in a Grade 5 classroom, I was able to work with an extremely driven School Associate. She had experience working with teacher candidates and right from our first conversation over the phone she was informing me about different workshops that I could attend through the district. I quickly filled my after school hours with professional development workshops and seminars which not only benefited me by providing me with more learning opportunities, but also helped me build more connections with people working within the school district. My desire to take advantage of professional development opportunities has continued into my teaching and I regularly attend relevant workshops offered by my school district.

It was during my long practicum where I, as a learner, became confident in effectively taking and applying feedback. Heading into PDP, I worried that this would be an area of weakness because I struggled with not taking criticism too much to heart. My

instincts had always been to defend or justify myself when given any critiques, which I believe stems from my desire to be successful at everything that I do. During PDP, I kept reminding myself that I am not, nor should I be, successful at everything. If I wanted to be successful at the end, I needed to work on my ability to take feedback and make the necessary changes in a timely manner. With this mindset, I ended up being complimented for my ability to take and use feedback. It was seen as one of my strengths. This was a significant mindset shift for me that has helped me become a much better learner.

While adjusting how I looked at taking feedback, I was more aware of how feedback was given, which has then helped me understand how to provide feedback to students. Building a relationship of some kind did help me feel more comfortable about receiving comments. I also appreciated the idea of three stars and a wish (three things that went well with one suggestion for something to work on). I have taken these feedback strategies and tried to model how I give others feedback. This is just one example of how the practicum component of my teacher education program helped me understand myself as a learner, and in turn helped me become a better teacher.

2.7. Graduate

Graduate school has been a completely unique experience from any other schooling that I have done. The tone of the class is much different from even that of upper level undergraduate courses. In my experience, the professors have been more aware of the workload and the other factors that influence and take up time in their student's lives. One professor took the time every few classes to check in with how we were managing and if we were having any difficulties in the course. This was a casual check in just before class started and it was nice to hear how others were managing, and to have a time to freely ask any questions. This was refreshing given that a common comment made in undergrad by my peers was about how very few professors ever acknowledged students having other classes at the same time as theirs. Students frequently said things like, "the professor thinks our lives revolve around only their class". Even if nothing was going to change in terms of workload, it was still nice to feel as though the professor cared about our progress. It also allowed for our professor to learn about what our work schedules looked like in terms of report cards, parent teacher interviews, and so on. This simple act allowed for a more honest and open relationship.

A number of professors left parts of the course schedule open to allow for student input on which topics they would like to further explore, or perhaps to look at topics that had not yet been covered. Many professors also offered a great deal of choice for final paper topics and tried to accommodate student interests as best as possible. By offering these casual check-ins and allowing for some say in what is learned and researched, it felt as though there was, generally speaking, a working relationship between the professor and the student.

2.8. Negative Connections

While it is beneficial to look at the positive connections and relationships that I had during my schooling, it is equally valuable to consider those connections and relationships that I do not consider positive. By looking at how I felt as the student in these situations, some examples of what *not* to do as an educator can be noted.

Physical Education

Despite having a large Physical Education Department in terms of staff, I had the same teacher for my three years of PE, and then again for my two senior Superfit classes. Despite being her student for so long, rarely missing class, and being an active participant, it took four years for me to build a relationship with this teacher. I grew up playing soccer and enjoyed sports of all kinds. I excelled in PE during elementary school and approached high school PE with the same attitude. The difficulty that I encountered came in Grade 8 when we almost exclusively played basketball and volleyball, two of my lesser preferred sports. I still gave each gym class my all, but with several of my class members being a part of the girls' volleyball and basketball teams, both of which my teacher coached, it was not surprising that I found it hard to build a connection. This continued to be the case until Grade 12, when it seems that the majority of the volleyball and basketball players were no longer opting to take any sort of physical education class. It was only during Superfit that year that she acknowledged me in the halls, asked for my opinion during class, or provided any compliments or words of encouragement.

It was nice to finally have my passion for athletics recognized and my opinions heard, but unlike other student-teacher relationships that I had at school, this one felt far less natural. After spending four years watching this teacher give privileges to her, for

lack of a better description, “favorite students”, I did not like the idea that I was now filling that role. It was difficult because I wanted to do well in the course and prove my overall athletic abilities, but I did not want to be known as the student who got special privileges or was the favorite. The situation put me in an uncomfortable spot, and through my lens, it is an example of a negative relationship.

Math

I've been fortunate to have had many excellent teachers throughout my schooling, yet the one subject area where I likely would have benefited the most from a caring and invested teacher was math, and it was not until university that I finally had that teacher. My experience with math in elementary school was nothing noteworthy. I made my way through the material without any real problems, although it was a subject area that required extra attention. The difficulties came in Grade 8 when, after only a few weeks, my math teacher left our school abruptly. He remained unreplaced for the remainder of the year, so my class had many teachers on-call filling the position. I distantly recall one teacher who did stay for a few weeks; however, she was an art teacher who admitted to not understanding the material. She, along with the many other TTOC's who taught in our room, did their best, but I cannot say that I learned very much that year. Without a teacher our midterms and final exams were cancelled, which at the time called for celebration, but now I look back at that semester as the start of a very difficult road with math.

With Grade 8 math being disastrous, I entered Math 9 with low confidence and apprehension. Over the course of the semester I felt as though there were significant gaps in my knowledge. It was as if the foundation had not been properly built. I had hoped that to some degree my teacher, who had been at the school for many years and therefore likely knew about the situation the previous year, would recognize these gaps in a number of her students, but this was not the case. Working with a poor foundation, a lack of confidence, while also trying to navigate my teacher's thick accent made for another hard year. I also became scared to ask for help after being ridiculed by my teacher on a number of occasions. At one point I distinctly recall her slapping the table, throwing her hands in the air, and raising her voice to say, “how are you not understanding this?!”. I made it through Grade 9 math with acceptable enough grades to be recommended to stay in the highest level of math, but it was hard.

By the time I reached Grade 10, I faced real anxiety over math. I dreaded going to class each day and spent more time on my math homework than I did for any other subject. In Grade 10 I started looking towards attending university, and I knew that I needed to do well if I wanted to attend my preferred institution. Despite being quiet and reluctant to ask for help after the poor response in Grade 9, I decided early in the semester that I needed to ask for help and approach my teacher about the peer tutoring program at the school. I explained that while I was getting a C+ in the course, I truly did not understand the concepts and did not feel as though I could hold that grade much longer. To my surprise, my teacher said that instead of being tutored, I should instead become a peer tutor. I was shocked, but even after expressing concerns over my abilities to understand the material, let alone explain it to someone else, I was signed up for the program and paired with a new student in my class. I tried to tutor him, but I quickly realized that not only could I not answer any of his questions, but that he, in fact, understood the material much better than I did. It was embarrassing. I left the peer tutoring program after only a few sessions.

I had Grade 11 math with the same teacher that I had in Grade 9 and did manage to get accepted into university with my final grade; however, in Grade 12 I completed the course again online because with the grade that I had, I would have needed to take the equivalency course during my undergrad. Once in university, I took Math for Elementary School Teachers and was totally amazed at the difference. Even with a large class, I felt like the professor cared about how her students did and she was approachable when I had questions. Additionally, she made the course fun, and assigned some creative assignments. I still found the content challenging and completed each assignment in the room designated for extra math help just in case, but I felt much less anxious during that course. I truly wish that I could have experienced a math teacher like this woman earlier in my schooling. Perhaps it would not have made a difference, but I believe it would have.

English 12

I had the same English teacher for English 10, 11, and 12. I found him to be intimidating because he was quite informal in his teaching and often made sarcastic comments to students that came across as questioning their intelligence. Therefore, in Grades 10 and 11 I entered class each day feeling nervous and rarely volunteered to

speaking unless I was totally confident in what I had to say. Once in Grade 12 I felt fairly comfortable. I had many friends in the class which helped, plus after being in his class for two years already I knew what he was like and I think ultimately, he knew what I was like. This helped us reach an unspoken understanding. The semester was going well until a shocking event occurred. I cannot remember the exact context, but I believe that we were studying genres. My teacher had a self-expressed love of horror, and at the end of class one day he announced that we would be watching *Pet Sematary* (an R rated movie based on the novel by Stephen King) the following day and then completing a writing assignment. Immediately I felt a sense of panic welling up inside of me because I was, and still am, terrified of scary movies, so I avoid watching them. After hearing this news, I was left with a decision: do I watch the movie and try to manage my fears, or do I ask to be excused?

After talking to my parents about my concerns I decided to have my mom write a note to excuse me from watching the movie and instead complete an alternative assignment. It was a difficult decision since I knew that my peers could tease me for opting out of the activity because I was scared, but I simply could not watch a scary movie. The next day I quickly went to class so that I could privately give him the note before class started. I was surprised by his response after reading the note. He began to laugh at me and tease me, in front of my peers who were settling in. When deciding whether or not to be excused, I considered the ridicule I could face from my peers, but I had never considered the possibility of my teacher mocking me. After having his laugh and gathering his composure, he then told me that I could not be excused. In hindsight, I should have just walked out at that point and tried to speak to administration, but because I did not want to be punished or cause a scene, I found a seat. Knowing that I would need to complete some sort of writing assignment after the viewing, I took notes and watched the film carefully. Much to my dismay, I was left with nightmares for several months after the film. It was hard to believe that an educator would intentionally put his student in a state of upset and disregard both the student and their parent's wishes to be excused.

Professional Development Program

During my teacher education program, two of the supervising educators who I worked with struggled to connect and build a positive relationship with many of us. Given

that these individuals were presented as being master teachers, I was surprised how poorly they connected with their students (us). While there were many issues surrounding their practices, it was their communication that I believe created the biggest disconnect between them and the students. For example, when discussing how to effectively teach, a great deal of emphasis was put on modeling for students. Given the number of times that this was brought up, I was expecting my teachers to model this sort of behaviour. To my surprise, they modeled the opposite behaviour. I frequently refer to this period of learning as the time when I learned what *not* to do. For example, I strive to show my students that what they say holds value. Therefore, if a child comes to speak to me, I do my best to stop whatever I'm doing, look at them, and listen with my whole attention. My teacher educators, however, did not show this same level of respect. One area where this was particularly apparent was during student presentations, where they would spend the whole time on their laptops doing other work, and then at the end would ask questions that had already been answered in the presentation. When this first happened, I had hoped that they were taking presentation notes on their laptop, but in other presentations their screens were facing us, and we could see that it was completely unrelated work. Other times they would leave to talk on the phone or show up partway through presentations. As an audience member seeing this happen to another group, I felt angry for the presenters about the level of disrespect that they were being shown. When I was the presenter, I was upset that they cared so little about the work that had been put in to creating an informative presentation. From this experience alone, I realized that I never wanted my students to feel as though I did not care about what they had to say.

Through my interactions with these individuals, I also learned how not to approach potentially sensitive subjects with students. In numerous instances, students were called out in front of the entire class in a rude and disrespectful manner for things beyond their control. I feel fortunate that I was never in one of these situations myself, but because of the way in which they were handled, I was a witness to the cruel treatment. These are not my stories to share, so no details are provided below on the actual reason for the event beyond how I felt as an observer. With their voices raised, the teacher educators would ask a condescending question or make an accusatory remark to the student in front of the class. In the instances that I vividly recall, the students were all caught off-guard and clearly nervous to respond. By not thinking before

they spoke, issues of race, mental health, and general appearance were all brought up in inappropriate ways.

In PDP, the power balance between the student and the teacher is unlike any other educational experience that I have had before. In the program, certain individuals hold an enormous amount of power over their students; not simply by way of a bad grade, but instead the student's career, and therefore the student's future, is in question. With this extreme imbalance comes a feeling of helplessness and overwhelming pressure to please them. Thus, even when witnessing or experiencing injustices, it is all the more intimidating to speak up.

2.9. Discussion

Moving into my own classroom, I knew that relationships would be key with everyone involved in my practice: students, parents, and school staff. In looking carefully at each positive relationship example above, I asked myself what exactly it was that made each relationship important. What was it that made these individuals so special? Furthermore, what can I learn from these relationships and then apply in my own practice? As I reread each example in an effort to answer these questions, I began to notice reoccurring themes. I took note of the different themes in each example and from there selected the five most common themes to further expand on. Those themes are: availability, interests, awareness, communication, and one-on-one attention.

Availability

One of the most appreciated and respectable qualities that can be seen in many of those influential relationships is the time that was made to either simply have a conversation, help with an assignment, provide a quiet workspace in a classroom, and so on. Focusing specifically on the educators mentioned, it needs to be acknowledged how much is already expected of them. It was not until seeing the "behind the scenes" of teaching through my volunteer work that I came to realize just how much is expected of teachers before and after school, as well as during lunch breaks. Meetings, extra-curricular commitments, marking, entering grades, preparing materials and lessons, and more are all on the average teacher's list of things to do. In the years after receiving my Grade 1 bookmark, from time to time I considered the time that would have been needed

to not only physically make each bookmark, but also the time that it would have taken to brainstorm appropriate adjectives for each letter in each student's name. It was no small feat to take on at the end of the school year. The feeling that I had got when I first received the bookmark, as well as the feeling that I continued to have when looking at it in the years to come were positive and resulted in me reflecting on how well I felt the teacher knew me based upon the adjectives that she selected. Additionally, finding the time to write comments home daily in each student's reading book was an extra step beyond what was expected.

In the case of my textile's teachers, their commitment to helping students complete the projects that they had envisioned and offer extra time to finish if needed during lunch and after school showed their commitment to student success. Through this extra time, I found that an even better relationship was built because there were times when only a few students were in the room at a time working, so we were able to have casual conversations and more one-on-one attention. Based on the relationship that had been built with my textiles teacher over the course of five years, it was a clear choice for me to select one of my textiles teachers for my high school exit interview.

In the university context, both of my professors were available before and after class for discussion and were quick to reply to emails. When marking assignments, both professors provided a great deal of useful feedback and were willing to answer any questions that students had. There was a sense of reassurance knowing that they were almost always available to answer questions, clarify assignment criteria and concepts, or read something that I had written to make sure that I was on the right track. In my university experience that level of availability was rare, but it was also unexpected. These two professors went above and beyond for their students, and it seemed as though many students recognized and appreciated this quality.

By providing extra time to write notes home daily, help students outside of class time, and answer questions, these educators showed students that they were committed to their success. Putting in this extra time showed me just how much they cared about their job, and as a result I felt extra motivated to put in the time at my end. It also made me feel as though they were more approachable, and I was more inclined to turn to them for support when needed. These educators did more for their students than required, and it really did make a difference in the relationship that I had with them.

I recognize the benefits that I experienced by having educators in my life who gave their students some of their time beyond the typical expectation. Thus, in my own practice now I do my best to put in extra time as needed and make myself available if students need extra help, if parents would like to meet for any reason, or if students would like to show their parents something in our classroom.

Give an Interest, Take an Interest

Another factor that can be seen in building a positive relationship is both sharing your interests and also taking an interest in your students' lives. My textiles teachers did not typically share much about their personal lives; however, I found it very interesting when one shared that she also made flower girl dresses on the side. In university, it was helpful when each professor took the time initially to share a little about themselves, whether it be about their personal lives, their education, or areas of interest and experience. In the case of one of my History teachers, it was fascinating to learn about her background as a lawyer on a First Nations reserve in the United States. Another professor from the Faculty of Education frequently shared her own experiences teaching around the world. There were two other faculty members who regularly shared stories about their children in a way that was connected to the content. For myself, adding a story along with the content helped with my recall and provided some real-world context. Knowing this information about these educators helped me better understand where they were coming from and ultimately in some cases, I valued their teaching a little bit more because of the unique experience that they brought to the course and its content.

In other instances, it was, perhaps less relevant, but still interesting information that helped to build a relationship. For example, one professor, despite working in the Faculty of Education and being promoted as a science teacher, had an interest in and had studied History. It was also uncovered that we enjoyed the same, lesser known, musical artist. In another instance it was the realization that a professor was also in a country band that helped build the foundations of a relationship. A high school English teacher was a big hockey fan and although we cheered for different teams, that commonality provided a topic of conversation for us. Throughout my teacher-training program we, as teacher candidates, were encouraged to create a community in the classroom through icebreakers and games that helped students get to know each other and find commonalities among them. I believe that to some degree the same should be

done between teacher and student. Build a community through getting to know each other and find commonalities where the teacher is included. For myself, these little fun facts helped me to see these educators as people beyond just the individuals who were teaching and marking me.

As much as it is valuable to receive some insight into the professor when working on building a positive relationship, from my experience it is also helpful when the professor takes an interest in the student's interests and life. This could be as simple as asking about the student's major or allowing time for introductions on the first day. Perhaps follow up on something noteworthy that was happening in the students' life or ask about upcoming plans. Checking in on course progress or allowing for student interests to be incorporated into the course is also thoughtful. I appreciated when professors asked me where I was headed with my degree and maybe even offered a suggestion or piece of advice.

In a kindergarten classroom, these sorts of connections and sharing of interests can come quite naturally. In my classroom we typically start our morning by sitting in a circle and sharing either something that we are excited about, any news, or something that has happened in the previous evening or weekend. In addition to allowing students to work on their public speaking and listening skills, them sharing also allows me to learn more about what is important to them and check in as needed. Similarly, I also share during this time as students often ask what I did on the weekend or something that I am excited about. Students become especially excited when they find that we have something in common.

Stay Alert

It is easy to get caught up in the business of the day but taking the time to get to know your students can make a massive difference in their experience. This is easier for elementary school teachers who spend an entire year with the same group of students, but it is no less important for high school and university educators. In the case of my PE teacher, for years I felt unacknowledged. For a long period of time I questioned whether or not she even knew who I was since I never saw her take attendance. Wondering whether or not the teacher knows who you are is not how students should feel.

In math, extenuating circumstances made my Grade 8-year challenging, but my teachers in the years that followed made little effort to acknowledge or assist with the anxiety and struggle that I was facing. If you are aware that a student experienced extenuating circumstances the year previous (no teacher, moving from somewhere else, etc.) be cognizant of that and watch for signs of difficulty. When a student asks for help, particularly those students who do not often do so, it is important to try and help them if possible. If it is not possible, try directing them to where they can get help.

Communication

Consider and be aware of how you communicate with and to your students. I know that I was struggling to understand concepts in math, but when my questions were being answered I did do my best to try and understand the explanations that were being given and ask clarification questions if needed. I was not purposely trying to be difficult, but I can understand the frustration that my teacher felt after she explained the concept again only to find that I still did not understand. Nonetheless, by so clearly showing her frustration I felt as though I was stupid for not understanding and was being a nuisance to the teacher. This reaction from my teacher, in front of my peers as well, made me feel less inclined to ask for help in other instances.

Nonverbal communication is another aspect to consider. My teacher educators were not verbally saying that they were uninterested in student-led presentations, but this was shown by their actions. If we become caught up in what we are doing and do not give students our full attention, then we send a message to our students that we are too busy for them and that what they have to say is not important. In my practice, I frequently bend down to be at the same level as the student, that way not only do they not feel like they are having to talk up to me, but this strategy also helps keep me focused on them.

One-On-One

My directed studies course taught me the difference between group, small group, and one-on-one learning. The learning that occurred at the one-on-one level was much more thorough. It was nerve-racking to engage in discussions surrounding the book, particularly since I struggled with understanding the content, because there was no way

to avoid answering a question. In a group setting it can be easier to blend in and not admit to being unclear on something. Through this personalized course I realized how problematic this thinking is and how beneficial it was for me to not be able to hide.

Even in an elementary setting it can be difficult to find time on a regular basis to work with students one-on-one, and in the case of university or high school this would be significantly more difficult. Still, its benefits are so great that it is worth trying to connect individually with students as much as possible. In my practice, I have taken on the mindset that one-on-one time with each student several times a week is a necessity, not an option. As such I have been working to find strategies to ensure this happens, particularly visiting with or pulling students aside during periods where I do not need to be focused on managing behaviours.

2.10. Conclusion

Relationships are a fundamental component of schooling. I have been fortunate over the course of my schooling to connect with many wonderful educators who have left a lasting impression on me and have inspired me to leave that impression on my students. In other instances, I wonder what could have been different if I had been able to make a connection. Perhaps if I had a math teacher who offered some extra one-on-one help after school or at lunch, I would not have struggled with math in the way that I did (and still do). In the other examples, experiencing a negative connection helped me recognize how not to go about connecting with students in my own practice. I was able to learn from the mistakes of others.

Kindergarten teachers have a somewhat unique role over other educators because in many cases, kindergarten teachers are the first people that children work with in their schooling lives. Children may have attended preschool or daycare, but kindergarten teachers are the first people that they interact with in their K-12 experience. This is the time when children make sense of school, and the transition from home to school can be a difficult one for some children (Lam, 2014). Building strong relationships can help ease this transition.

The importance of relationships in teaching and learning at every level have been the focus of several other self-studies. Kitchen (2005) devised the term “relational

teacher education” which refers to teacher education being grounded in authentic relationships. He discusses being respectful of the personal knowledge that each individual brings with them to the teacher education program, and also shared a letter of introduction that he shared with his students. In the letter he encouraged his students to think about the knowledge that they bring with them, then went on to express his “...personal professional commitment to developing meaningful and respectful personal professional relations with each [one of his students]” (p. 200). Martin’s (2017) article was not solely focused on relationship building, but as part of an investigation into how to improve practicum learning, she deduced that modeling relationship building to teacher candidates can help those teacher candidates then create strong relationships with their own students. Having been taught by so many expert teachers in my years of schooling, I have been able to witness the modelling of excellent teachers.

Writing this chapter has helped me recognize positive and negative relationships and connections from my own education, and then learn from those experiences. As educators we hear about the importance of student-teacher relationships, but it can be difficult to build a connection with each student in the class. After identifying these relationships and connections, I was able to look for larger themes to extract and consider. In what little experience I have teaching, I have already learned that as an educator, it is usually those who require the greatest effort to build a relationship with who need it the most, and my hope is that these strategies can offer some guidance.

Chapter 3.

Turning Points as a Learner

When reflecting on his experiences with education, Ritter (2007) said, “[m]y successful experience as a student had already taught me that schooling was more of something for me to endure than it was something for me to learn from” (p. 10). In many ways, this was the case for me. I do not recall what my opinions were in elementary school (although I do recall never loving school), but I know that I viewed high school as a hurdle to get over. While I was initially excited to attend post-secondary and looked forward to the dialogue and learning that would happen, it quickly became apparent after only a few classes that the majority of my undergrad would also be about enduring and jumping through the hoops to make it to the end of my degree. Paulo Freire’s (1970) banking method, the traditional style of education where the educator deposits knowledge into their students, has in my experience been largely used.

There are moments, however, that I look back at with fondness. I borrow the term “turning points” from Bullock and Ritter (2011), to refer to points in time when I found I was extremely excited about what I was doing and came to better understand myself as a learner. These events are powerful to me because I may or may not have had an interest in the topic beforehand, but for various reasons I found myself extremely engaged in learning. As I looked back at these moments for this project, I came to realize that, in many cases, the impact that these points left on me have already been infused into my pedagogy without me realizing it. This chapter looks at seven turning points to see what, if any, conclusions can be drawn. As I looked at each moment, I asked myself the following questions:

1. What made this moment memorable?
2. What can be learned from this memory?

3.1. Turning Point 1 – Music: Interest Integration

Music has always been a significant part of my life. While I wasn’t especially talented with regards to playing instruments or singing, my parents always had music playing in the house, and so I grew up appreciating it. I listened to a wide variety of

genres growing up, attended many concerts, and spent some of my time after school watching music related shows on television. Additionally, my brother played the drums in a local rock band through elementary school and high school. Many band practices were held at our house, and I often spent my weekends helping with setup and watching the shows. It's hard to imagine that any of my teachers were unaware of my passion. With such a strong love of music, it's not surprising that anytime music was brought into the classroom I was especially interested in what was being done.

During preschool and kindergarten, my teachers used songs to help teach the curriculum. I still distinctly recall one song in particular that I learned in Preschool that covered the different continents. In Grades 3 and 4 I did not particularly enjoy reading, so silent reading was a difficult time. To keep my interest during this time, I started to read the lyrics from my songs for choir. Again in Grade 7 I resorted to reading music when I struggled to find books that I liked, but this time I read the lyric booklets that came with CDs. My Grade 7 student teacher was passionate about music, and he would frequently play his guitar as we had class sing-alongs to songs by Green Day and Oasis among others. For one of our writing assignments, we were asked to write the lyrics to our own song. It was challenging, but tremendously engaging. There were several other assignments in my high school classes that allowed for the opportunity to incorporate music if desired. For example, a Grade 8 French project asked students to create a biography of our idol in the form of a poster. Naturally I chose a musician from one of my favourite bands who also ran a clothing company, started his own record label, and had an English Bulldog (these were three of my aspirations at the time).

What made these moments memorable?

Having been such a prominent part of my life, anything related to music piqued my interest. The use of songs in my early childhood helped me with the memorization of concepts in Science and Social Studies, as well as French vocabulary among other areas. Assignments that allowed for music to be incorporated in some way were highly engaging and fun for me. I had the feeling that, "wow, this project was made for me" and felt as though my teachers really did care about and value my interests. In the instances where the incorporation of music wasn't teacher directed, I appreciated that my teachers allowed me to engage in the activity (in this case silent reading) in my own way.

What can be learned from these memories?

In this case there are several smaller memories that have all been fit under the one umbrella memory because at their core, there is my passion for music. From these turning points, there are two main conclusions that can be drawn.

1. The importance of music in the classroom.

As a new teacher with no music training, incorporating music into the classroom was something that I initially left up to the Music teacher. I was self-conscious of my own singing abilities and also felt a great deal of discomfort trying to teach a song to students. We would sing brief songs about the weather, days of the week, or months of the year in my kindergarten class, but that was the extent of our songs. When I taught Grade 5, music was used even less, but I would sometimes have it playing quietly as students worked or I would turn it on for dance parties. I never had the class sing songs. Several co-workers had brought up singing in the classroom, but I brushed off their comments because of my own discomfort.

The literature shows that this mindset is more common than I had expected. Rekha Rajan (2017) found that teachers valued music in the classroom, but limited resources, education, and a lack of confidence from the teacher resulted in few “child-centered music activities”. While working on my self-study over the summer, however, I have come to realize just how beneficial the use of songs were for me in the classroom. Therefore, I recognize the disservice that I was doing to my students by leaving that element out of our classroom. Thus, to start the new school year in my kindergarten class I have made it one of my goals to incorporate songs on a regular basis. This remains an area of continued monitoring and requires a conscious effort, but currently there are several songs that we sing each day, and a number that we have learned as various themes and topics arise.

2. Incorporate student interest or allow students to incorporate their interests when possible.

Music has played a reoccurring role throughout my education. By incorporating music in some capacity, my teachers were able to gain my interest and attention. They made me feel as though they took notice and cared about my passions. Additionally, in the cases where the teacher was also interested in the same music, as was the case

with my Grade 7 music teacher, that helped me find a connection and form a better relationship with him. In some instances, it didn't require any work from the teacher to include music in the classroom, as I found ways to incorporate it myself. What it did require, though, was for the teacher to give me the freedom to do so. Reading lyric sheets from choir was an unconventional way to approach silent reading, but by letting me do so I was happily reading during what was, at this particular point in time, a difficult part of the day for me.

3.2. Turning Point 2 – Victoria

The main fieldtrip for Grade 4 students at my elementary school was a trip to Victoria. We were taken on a tour of the parliament buildings and got to meet our Member of Parliament for our hometown. As someone interested in the workings of the government, this was quite exciting. We all gathered on the steps to take a group photo to commemorate the day, and then we explored and ate our lunches in Beacon Hill Park. Many of us were quite excited to see the turtles and ducks that lived there. We then went to the Royal BC Museum, though, all I recall from that portion of the trip was seeing a mammoth on display. I wonder, perhaps, if the museum was a little too advanced or 'boring' for me at the time. Aside from Grade 7 camp, this was the largest and most complex field trip that my elementary school organized. It was an extremely long day as we left early in the morning for the ferry with our grade group and a large number of parent helpers. We spent the day doing lots of walking and exploring, and I was busy taking pictures of everything that I saw. I was exhausted by the time we finally returned to the school later in the evening.

What made this moment memorable?

This was my first time going to Victoria, so everything that I saw and did was a totally new experience. This connects to the importance of hands-on learning and creating those unique experiences for your students. It was also a fun and unique experience to be there with my peers and teachers. Additionally, my mom was a parent helper which made it that much more exciting and memorable for me. Growing up, I was fortunate enough to have my mom (or dad) attend almost all of my field trips. I really appreciated having one of my parents always there to share the experience with me. This trip was the highlight of my Grade 4 year.

What can be learned from this memory?

This experience reinforces the importance of parent involvement. While not all parents are in a position to be able to be involved in classroom activities during the day, still making opportunities available is a great way to build a community and allow parents to see what goes on in the classroom and feel involved. Looking specifically at field trips, I always loved having one of my parents join us. It was reassuring for me to have them there, plus I enjoyed getting to share the experience with them. By attending field trips and volunteering around the classroom, I felt as though my parents were invested in my learning.

3.3. Turning Point 3 – Ukrainian Easter Eggs

My Grade 5 teacher was Ukrainian, and for Easter she decided to share one of her family's traditions; decorating Ukrainian Easter eggs, otherwise known as Pysanky. Having thirty students make these eggs was quite an undertaking as it is a challenging activity that also requires a number of supplies/tools including an egg, a pencil, a candle, matches, beeswax, a kistka instrument, and dyes. Many of us struggled with the intricacy of the activity, which uses wax to cover desired parts of the egg shell, so that multiple colours can be used when dyeing an egg. This was the first in-class activity that I recall experiencing something culturally different than what I was used to (aside from a grade-wide potluck in a previous year). It also felt like an authentic and unique opportunity to learn from someone who grew up doing this beautiful artform. It was the first time that I began to wonder about other cultures and different places in the world. I cannot recall the pre or post activity discussion/lesson, but I distinctly recall the activity including the materials, how I felt while doing it, and the processes involved.

What made this moment memorable?

What made this event so memorable was the stark contrast that it left between this activity and the rest of my Grade 5 year. My teacher was quite traditional in her practice, and I remember few hands-on activities. I recall the phrase “nose to the grindstone” being repeated multiple times in a day to the class. Work was always done at our desks and few projects or experiential activities were done. Painting our eggs was a special activity and the passion that came out when talking about the eggs was not

something that I saw in her often. Looking back now, for her to have organized an activity as involved as this was quite impressive and is one of the only lessons that I recall from my Grade 5 year. From all of these pieces, the lesson that I have taken away is the importance of hands on learning experiences. They can take more time to organize and plan, but as this moment shows, they leave a lasting impression. It was also memorable because it was a unique cultural experience. It was the first instance where I recall learning about a different tradition to celebrate the same holiday that I was accustomed to (Easter). It was not a simple cut and paste art activity or a potluck. These two pieces put together made for a memorable experience.

What can be learned from this memory?

Given that it was the hands-on and experiential nature of the activity that made it so memorable, the insight that this moment provides us with is the importance of these sorts of activities in the classroom. Additionally, whenever possible take advantage of and arrange for authentic learning experiences, such as this one that require the use of special tools and learning the steps of a traditional practice.

3.4. Turning Point 4 – Grade 8

Unlike the majority of my other high school classes, I distinctly recall so many aspects of my Science 8 class. My teacher was new to my school and was only teaching one block of Science 8, with the rest of his schedule being filled with more senior classes. At first, everyone in my class was a little bit nervous to have an unfamiliar teacher, as all of the other Science 8 teachers were well known and had taught the class many times before. While I entered the class with some hesitation, within a few weeks I felt lucky to be in this individual's class. He was incredibly passionate about the subject which, as a result, rubbed off on all of his students. He told us that he believed that one of the best ways to learn was to do and see, and so he ensured that we completed an experiment once per week. To ensure that we felt like true scientists while doing this, he also purchased lab coats for each student to use. To finish the year, our teacher had an awards ceremony where he gave out various awards to students and each award came with a non-fiction book. Being my first experience in a true science class, I was so excited about the material and what we were learning. It was engaging, hands-on,

thought provoking, and got me interested in a subject area that had never previously been much of an interest of mine.

Through my education classes, I came to truly appreciate all that this teacher had done for his students. His class was my favorite high school level class and I often reflect on the learning experiences that I had, trying to create experiences for my own students that can allow them to eventually feel that way as well. Beyond the fun and memorable experiences that I had in his class, looking back now I also think that the class was a model for how to successfully teach. I, and many others in the class, received very high marks both in the class and on the mandatory provincial exam. As an educator who now understands many of the qualities that make someone a master teacher, this individual had them.

To understand what educators can learn from this moment, I have picked out the pieces that I believe not only made this a successful class but helped shape my pedagogy as an educator today. This teacher, without a known reputation at the school, was tasked with guiding newly welcomed Grade 8 students through the science curriculum. He could have taken many approaches to this task, but he decided to put a great deal of energy (and as an educator now I also assume money and time), towards making this a memorable and engaging experience for his students. By buying lab coats for the class, it felt as though he was investing in us. He wanted us to actually feel like scientists. Putting on the lab coat put the class in a particular mind frame and appeared to even get the more reluctant students to participate and be excited. I entered the classroom without any particularly good or bad feelings on science, but thanks to the dedication and effort made by my teacher, I left loving science.

There was also his attitude; he was eager to teach and answer questions. When he spoke, he was excited about what he was talking about. He was always available if extra help was needed and also planned a field trip, which I came to learn was rare for high school. When he passed out the awards at the end of the year, I still recall thinking that he must have put a great deal of thought into each award recipient. Furthermore, by including a book (mine was a detailed book about insects), it felt as though he was passing us a torch to continue on and love and explore science. After one semester at our school, my teacher moved to another school. I'm not sure what school he moved to; in fact my mother seems to recall that he may have even moved school districts. After

completing my Professional Development Program, a time when I thought back to that class often, I attempted to track down my old teacher to thank him for all of the hard work and time that he put in to teaching me but was without luck.

What made this moment memorable?

My Science 8 teacher worked hard to create an entire semester that was memorable. We had many hands-on learning experiences, once again reinforcing the importance of creating those sorts of learning experiences for students. What was most memorable about this semester was his enthusiasm. He was passionate about science and therefore many of us were passionate about science too. When I think about the teachers who simply taught, I recall significantly less from their class than those few teachers who radiated excitement and curiosity about the subject area and topics that they were teaching. It is because of this teacher, and others like him, that I came to love learning.

What can be learned from this memory?

The attitude of my teacher had a huge impact on my learning. By offering a positive, curious, and fun attitude, I too tended to feel this way. I could sense that he was genuine in these emotions, which helped with student buy-in. In contrast, I can recall teachers who came across as bored, tired, and uninterested. These were some of the emotions that I felt while in their classes. The importance of modeling is often commented on in teaching, but it is important to remember that modeling does not just include modeling how to perform a task or how to act, it can include modeling an outlook and attitude as well.

3.5. Turning Point 5 – Cooking

Cooking was another memorable high school course. I only took cooking in Grade 8 because in Grade 9 students had only one elective to pick and I decided to continue with textiles, but it was such a practical and unforgettable course. I can recall every recipe that we made from apple crisp to stir fry to a Greek dinner. In preparation for a lab, we would need to copy out the recipe in our books, review the supplies needed, and be introduced to any new tools (if applicable). We would then try out the recipe at school in groups and be marked for our work. We received bonus marks if we

tried the recipe at home. With the extra incentive to share the recipes with my family, I was able to include them in my learning while also reinforcing those skills that were learned.

What made this moment memorable?

When considering why this course was so memorable, I attribute it to its hands-on nature and easy real-life connections. I also valued the various cross-curricular components that come with cooking. It gave me an opportunity to draw on and practice many skills in a practical setting. Furthermore, the frequent movement throughout the classroom also helped to keep me engaged.

What can be learned from this memory?

This turning point highlights the importance of cross-curricular lessons. Cooking is naturally cross-curricular, but when thinking about how enjoyable cooking class was, I am reminded of how engaging cross-curricular lessons are as well as their benefits for students. The clear practicality of the content served as a true benefit to the course as well, because I knew, unlike with other subjects, how this was benefiting me. There was no doubt that learning these skills would be useful. For teachers, it can be easy to forget to cover the ‘why’ with students. Why are they learning what they are learning? How will it be useful for them in the future? What are some real world uses? Whenever possible the why should be shared with students, but even better would be if students were shown the why. With cooking, students can (or at least should) be able to see why what they are learning is valuable to them. Integrating other skills into the curriculum whenever possible can help make that clear for students.

3.6. Turning Point 6 – Undergrad

How a teacher presents an activity or learning experience to students is extremely important. For as long as I can remember, I have been terrified of public speaking. I can do it, but it is not without days or weeks of butterflies leading up to the event, and a red face during the presentation. Following a presentation, I almost always entirely forget what I said during my speech. This is still something that I am working to overcome, but there are instances where I felt more comfortable doing a presentation. One of those instances was in my undergrad. When considering why this presentation

felt less intimidating, dare I say even fun, there are several factors that I believe played a role.

The professor teaching the course did a fantastic job at creating a sense of community in the classroom. Typically, the classes that I had been in jumped right in to the syllabus and content after a brief introduction by each student (e.g. name, major, and why you're taking the course). While I cannot recall the specifics of how our first class started, I do recall the professor providing a great deal of useful insight into her background. She was very open and seemed legitimately interested in what students said. It was a class on multicultural education, which can be a tricky subject, but she worked hard to create an open place for dialogue and questions. I do acknowledge the role that class dynamics play in establishing a positive classroom community, yet I still feel this professor worked to create a certain atmosphere. Being typically reluctant to speak up in classes, I excelled in this class with regards to meaningful class participation.

The presentation itself was to be a PechaKucha, which consists of 20 images shown for 20 seconds each. The intention is that the presentation is concise, quick, and entertaining. When the parameters were presented, I admit that it sounded like an absolute nightmare. After providing the specifics of the presentations, the professor was quick to reassure us that it would be manageable and that we were free to pick any topic that interested us as long as it fit within the course parameters. For me, being able to choose a topic that I wanted to present on automatically made me feel more reassured.

It was still an intimidating presentation to do, but it has been my favorite in-class presentation to date. I presented on the education of aboriginal children living on reserves, and I felt extremely confident about both my images and the content of my speech. Although I had not explored this topic in-depth prior to my presentation, it was a topic that I was interested in and one that I felt needed to be shared. On the day of the presentation I felt excited to present as opposed to my usual feelings of dread. With the time restrictions on the presentation I knew that I needed to stick to exactly what I had practiced, and by having the slides automatically move it kept me on track. Along with the inevitable feeling of relief after the presentation, I also felt proud of my presentation and was curious why this presentation style was not used more often, particularly in undergrad, to help students be concise and thoughtful in their presentations.

From this experience I can draw several conclusions about what factors made this a successful experience for myself. The role of community building should never be overlooked by an educator. Whether it be in a kindergarten class, a high school class, or a post-secondary class. As a teacher myself, I fully understand the time constraints that educators are under, as well as the amount of content that is required to be taught, though I have seen what happens when educators do take that time to build a community. There are more honest and thought-provoking discussions, less nerves in the room, and students build friendships. In relation to my presentation, I felt more comfortable to stand in front of the audience and talk having already built good relationships with many people in the room. By opening up the presentation topics to anything related to the class, students were able to pick something that they were passionate about. Finally, by offering such a structured presentation style, the expectations were clear. I didn't have to worry about being under or over my time because my various images kept me on pace. The professor of the course did an excellent job at setting students up for success with this presentation.

What made this moment memorable?

This moment is particularly interesting given that no other memory connected to a presentation is a positive one, yet this memory is a fond one. What separated this presentation from others were both the parameters that had been clearly set (a PechaKucha) and the class atmosphere and attitude that the professor had worked to develop. I was able to present on a topic that I had become passionate about in a set format that allowed for some creativity but also pushed students to be concise and meaningful when presenting. Furthermore, I presented in front of a class that I was fairly comfortable with because of the supportive environment that had been created.

What can be learned from this memory?

This made me think about the ways in which educators can work to push their students outside of their comfort zone, while still reassuring them of their abilities along the way. In the K-12 system, this would be having students work in the Zone of Proximal Development. Extremely clear instructions, because of the presentation style, helped by allowing little room for uncertainty in how the presentation was set up or presented. This moment also highlights the importance of creating a positive classroom environment

where students feel comfortable to speak and share their thoughts with their teacher and peers.

3.7. Turning Point 7 – Volunteering

The final turning point to be looked at happened during my two years of volunteering in a primary classroom at a local school. Having no prior connections at the school, I simply went to the office with a letter, explaining who I was and what I was hoping to do, and asked to speak with the principal. After speaking with the principal, she said that she would put an email out to the teachers and see if anyone was interested in having a volunteer in once per week. The teacher that ended up agreeing to have me in her room was on an incredible learning journey that I found inspiring to watch and be a part of each week.

Her classroom was Reggio Emilia inspired, an approach that I had previously never heard of. Right from when I first walked into the classroom I was fascinated. There were so many elements of nature brought inside including a large tree and other various smaller plants, and a vase holding branches. There were provocations out at each table and students did not have assigned seats. The more that I was in the classroom the more I noticed how few sit-down formal lessons there were, and how few worksheets I saw. At the same time, I witnessed high levels of student engagement and learning.

Over the years her practice evolved as she ventured into outdoor education through “Wild Wednesdays” and explored inquiry-based learning. Since first deciding to go into teaching I was excited at the prospect of having my own classroom and had a vision of what a typical classroom looks like. After spending time in this room, however, my vision for primary education completely changed. I felt relaxed and inspired upon entering the room and based on my observations it seems that the students did as well.

By leaving provocations on the tables, students were guided towards a learning goal, but were able to explore in a way that they would like with access to a wide variety of materials. By asking strategic questions, the teacher was having students develop their thinking to the fullest extent. By having students do hands on activities as opposed to work on worksheets, there was a great deal of creativity and conversation among both staff and students.

At the time of my volunteer work, I was an undergrad student who hoped to get into PDP but had only taken a few education classes. This meant that the bulk of my understanding on teaching and what that looked like came from my own experiences. Going into that classroom was completely transformational. I had never seen teaching done in this way, but I was fairly certain that this would be the approach that I would take, as long as the literature supported it as well.

What made this moment memorable?

This final moment, which is actually made up of many moments over the course of two years, was memorable for many reasons. This was the first classroom that I was in where I was looking at the room from the perspective of a future teacher. I had not been in a K-12 classroom since graduating high school, and while I did not have any teacher training during my volunteer experience, I entered the room with a different mindset. I took note of how the room was set-up and how I felt when I walked in. I was conscious of what caught my attention and why. When students were present, I watched to see how they responded to the classroom environment and the materials that were out. The creativity and problem-solving skills that I saw among students was striking, memorable, and something to aspire to.

What also made this moment memorable was the way in which the teacher interacted with students. I noticed that she showed real interest in what students were showing or explaining to her. She also responded to students in ways that required the child to fully explain and develop their thinking. For example, instead of looking at a piece of student artwork and saying, “that’s a beautiful picture”, she said things like “what can you tell me about your art?”. Her word choice was very strategic.

Finally, the documenting of student learning was done tremendously well. Having been accustomed to traditional bulletin board displays to show student work, I was surprised to see that the showcasing of student work went well beyond the bulletin board. Students’ work was displayed throughout the room, with even the alphabet line being created by students. In the event that students constructed something out of Lego or other available materials and had not finished building by cleanup time, students were able to put their work on the side counter with a little stop sign and their name to return to the next day. To update families on the on-goings of the classroom, the teacher had

an online platform that she would use to post pictures and write blog posts about student projects. Students were also taught how to use technology to take photos or make videos to post on their section of the platform as well.

What can be learned from this memory?

This turning point illustrates the importance of being inspired. It shows how impactful presenting material and objects in a certain way can be. Even as someone in my early 20's, I wanted to read the books that the teacher had displayed. I wanted to construct and use the materials that she had out. This experience made me further consider how critical presentation is. The ways in which items are presented to students can not only guide their thinking, but it can also dictate whether or not the materials are even used by students. Currently there is a trend, particularly in primary grades, for the use of open-ended materials and loose parts in the classroom. While the intention is to inspire children to be creative and use the materials in whatever way that they wish, how they are presented is an important piece to think through.

Furthermore, what happens during and after a student has used the materials is important. Educators should be asking, whenever possible, questions that ensure that a student's thinking has been fully developed as opposed to just giving a compliment in passing. Additionally, students should take pride in their work, so whenever possible student work should be displayed or saved for a time.

3.8. Themes

While each moment offers its own unique insight (offered under "what can be learned from this memory"), there are larger themes that can be identified. In almost all examples, the experiences that I had were hands-on and experiential. Other common themes include field trips and being outdoors.

Hands-On Learning

The idea of hands-on (also referred to as active or experiential) learning is by no means a new one. In 1903 Dewey wrote the following;

What is primarily required for that direct inquiry which constitutes the essence of science is first-hand experience; an active and vital participation through the medium of all the bodily organs with the means and materials of building up first-hand experience. Contrast this first and most fundamental of all the demands for an effective use of mind with what we find in so many of our elementary and high schools. There first-hand experience is at a discount; in its stead are summaries and formulas of the results of other people...The school has literally been dressed out with hand-me-down garments – with intellectual suits which other people have worn (p. 200).

Despite this being written over 100 years ago, Dewey's sentiments about science education remain largely true today. Bulunuz (2013) examined how kindergarten students in two kindergarten classes within the same school in Turkey best learned science concepts; through science-based play or through instruction (question and answer, demonstrations, etc.). Concepts covered included living/non-living things, colour, water, magnets, air, and gravity. The results of the study showed that students who learned science through play made greater improvements than those who received instruction. Through play, students started to develop an understanding of scientific processes. While Dewey specifically refers to science education in his quote, other subject areas benefit from a hands-on approach as well.

Marley and Szabo (2010) conducted a study with 38 kindergarten and 38 Grade 1 students. Four 20-sentence and one 6-sentence training stories were developed for the study. Two recall strategies were tested: listening with manipulation (listen to an event in the story and then performing an action with Playmobil manipulatives) and listening with pictures (listening to an event in the story and then looking at a picture with the playmobile already set in a picture). The results of the study revealed that manipulation significantly helped students with story recall. The study goes on to explain how these findings can be used in the classroom to help students with difficulties comprehending stories.

In a study focusing on guided play with a literacy focus in kindergarten, Cavanaugh, Clememnce, Teale, Rule, and Montgomery (2016) had students work in small groups and utilize different materials. The control group was given a set activity, meanwhile the test group learned the set activity, but were then asked to invent their own games or activities. The authors found that the experimental group had an advantage over the control group on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy

Skills (DIBELS) assessment. Other benefits were also found such as utilizing new vocabulary, sequencing ideas, as well as communication and negotiation skills among others (Cavanaugh, Clememnce, Teale, Rule, and Montgomery, 2016). By being able to create their own game, students became actively involved in their learning.

There is a substantial amount of literature examining the role of manipulatives while teaching Mathematics. Based on my experience during PDP and prior to examining the literature for this paper, I believed that having ample math manipulatives for primary students to use was a must. In fact, when I first stepped into my kindergarten room there were very few things left there for me, but there were bins of colourful plastic teddy bears, buttons, links, semi-transparent counters, double-sided counters, and cubes. I found out from a co-worker that they were part of a kindergarten start-up kit. I put these items out available to students thinking that these were math tools and that they would use them as such. I was shocked when my research revealed this was not the case. Using manipulatives in math is commonly believed to be beneficial for student learning, thus manipulatives of all kinds can typically be found in classrooms. Skoumpourdi (2010) explained that manipulatives are known to help students move from the concrete to the abstract. She looked at how auxiliary means (manipulatives), specifically cubes and number lines, were used in a kindergarten classroom with 20 students when students were given a series of mathematical tasks. It was expected that students would use the cubes successfully, whereas the number line would be used unsuccessfully. This was not the case, however, as despite being used more often, the cubes were often used incorrectly. By not understanding how to properly use the materials, student learning may not be successful.

Research shows that manipulatives can be a beneficial tool, but there are certain steps that must be taken to ensure their effectiveness. My students did use the manipulatives all of the time in many creative ways, but rarely in their intended use. Through this self-study, I came to realize that students were using the manipulatives as toys, not as tools. The usefulness of manipulatives in math education is dependent upon the reflection and discussion that goes on about the students' actions during and after their manipulative use (Sarama & Clements, 2014). Manipulative use in math must be accompanied by well-planned instruction from the teacher (Sarama & Clements, 2014). This means that the teacher should be modeling using the manipulatives and encouraging appropriate play with the materials should students wish to play with them

outside of math instruction (Sarama & Clements, 2014). Sarama and Clements (2014) also emphasized the importance of ensuring that manipulatives are used to represent mathematical ideas and that educators use fewer manipulatives in their classroom but use them well. One example of a challenge that can arise with manipulatives in math can be that students may be using the materials (arranging and moving them), but they could be doing so without actually thinking about the intended concepts (Sarama & Clements, 2014). Though they possess benefits, the evidence shows that a thorough understanding of how they can be used should be researched prior to use.

Field Trips

While not necessarily regularly accessible for some, learning experiences that occur beyond the school walls also help to create memorable moments. In a study conducted in Hungary, Füz (2018) examined how out-of-school learning experiences are used in Hungarian primary schools, what the attitude is towards them from students, teachers, and principals, and what, if any, obstacles exist for schools to overcome. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings showed that students preferred OSL significantly more than in-school activities. In order for students to benefit the most from OSL, any experience should complement what is being learned in the classroom (Füz, 2018). Field trips were often some of the most anticipated events in the school year, and now in my own classrooms I see the excitement that builds around special trips.

In response to a decline in field trip bookings for museums, Green, Kisida, and Bowen (2014) conducted a study that sought to determine whether or not culturally enriching field trips were beneficial for K-12 students. Approximately three weeks after visiting an art museum, students were surveyed with the hopes of measuring how attending the museum benefited their critical thinking, historical empathy, knowledge of art, and sustained interest. The results showed that students retained a substantial amount of factual information about the paintings weeks later. They showed greater critical thinking skills when asked to write a short essay responding to two questions about a painting that they had not been shown at the museum. They also showed an increase in historical empathy, tolerance, a greater interest in visiting art museums, and a higher number of students would recommend going to art museum to friends. The results from this study shows that field trips to cultural institutions have notable benefits.

Outdoor Education

If available, outdoor spaces on or off school grounds also provide an alternative location for excellent learning to occur. Playing outdoors, particularly in a forested or natural area, provides students with an evolving play setting and offer opportunities for “risky play” (Zamani, 2016, p. 186). Nonetheless, mixed areas with some natural components and some man-made pieces, as well as all-human fabricated playgrounds do offer opportunity for certain skill development such as skipping, running, and so on (Zamani, 2016).

Elliot and Frances (2017) established what is perhaps Canada’s first public nature kindergarten program in British Columbia. Once established, many benefits were realized. A strong sense of community developed among the students. A “community of safety” also developed where students were, to a degree, responsible for their own safety which helped them better understand their own limits (Elliot & Frances, 2017, p. 385). Nature also provided students with countless invitations for learning. “By moving kindergarten outside, the children along with their educators have the possibility of rich opportunities. To construct their identities as learners, community members and beings among other living beings” (Elliot & Frances, 2017, p. 383). The outdoors offer a tremendous number of learning opportunities.

3.9. In My Practice

These seven turning points are a few of the most memorable and positive experiences of my schooling. When I consider experiences or events that have inspired my pedagogy, these are the first experiences that come to mind. I had never considered, however, why these events were influential or how they come through in my pedagogy today. Since conducting my research on turning points, I have made changes to my practice. This section will look at what I have done in my own classroom as an early career kindergarten teacher.

When creating assignments or activities, I try to look at how the students in my class might approach it. Can they bring in any of their interests? Am I teaching either topics that students are interested in or at least teaching in an interesting way? On the very first day of kindergarten, all of the kindergarten students (approximately 80) rotated

through four of the kindergarten classes and completed an activity with the adult(s) that was with them. In my classroom students were asked to share one thing that they would like to learn about in kindergarten and write it on a star for our bulletin board collage. Through this simple activity I was quickly able to see what topics students were interested in and what areas overlapped. After the two week long gradual entry schedule, classes were set, and I continued to explore student interest. In the time since I have been working to cater, as best as possible, to the interests of students so that they too feel the way that I felt when music was incorporated into the curriculum. Furthermore, since conducting my self-study I have been working on being open-minded with the ways that students approach a task, even if it is not the way that I had originally anticipated. If students are engaged in what they are doing and are still reaching the intended learning outcome, then educators should be flexible in their thinking and value the creativity within their students.

Working at an inner-city school means that parent involvement can be quite limited. Knowing how important parent participation is, I try to provide ample opportunities for parents to be involved. There are some instances where parents are required in order to make activities possible such as many of our field trips and our special craft mornings. Other activities do not require parent volunteers, but they do enhance the learning experience for students such as guest readers and classroom task preparation (this usually involves just being in the classroom and helping cut things, organize, etc. in order to prepare for a class activity). For parents who cannot come to the school to assist but do want to be involved, I sometimes send home little jobs for them to do, that way they too feel included and helpful. It has been my experience so far that students, particularly in kindergarten compared to Grade 5 (the previous grade that I taught), take great pride in whatever their parents are doing around the classroom, whether that be helping with in-class activities or prepping an activity at home and sending it in.

Since entering the teaching profession, hands-on learning has been a term that I have heard constantly, and it is something that I strongly believe in. Hands-on, experiential learning engages those who may struggle with traditional schooling, and I have had great success with it in this regard. When given the opportunity to do hands-on learning, student behaviour decreases. The difficulty is that from my experience, creating hands-on learning experiences can be time consuming and costly. As a teacher in my

first-year teaching in my own classroom, I have struggled to avoid reverting to a more traditional approach because it is generally what I have experienced and what works for some students. On days where I am exhausted both physically and mentally, photocopying some paperwork is more tempting than spending hours looking for or coming up with and then prepping ideas. Through the experience of writing my self-study and appreciating just how influential hands-on learning has been for me, I have realized that in order to best support my students, I need to push myself to give students those experiences. This is an area where I feel significant progress has been made, though there are still subject areas where I find this more challenging, such as printing. I anticipate that as I gain more experience, I will become more comfortable in implementing hands-on experiences and activities.

I have also come to realize that I was misguided in my understanding of manipulatives in mathematics. After reading numerous articles, I have begun to reevaluate how manipulatives are used in my classroom. They are no longer on the shelf available for students use whenever they wish (particularly during free play), and I have given away many items so that I am able to focus on teaching how to properly use the few manipulatives that I find most valuable. Looking beyond the lessons that specifically pertain to manipulatives, this speaks to the larger issue of trends in education. Manipulatives have been a popular topic in workshops and many teachers speak highly of them, but this experience has taught me the importance of verifying with evidence before “jumping onto a bandwagon”.

Through reflection and analysis about what made my Grade 8 science class so memorable, I have become especially aware of the attitude that I am portraying to my students as I teach. I have been making a conscious effort to have a positive attitude about each lesson that we do while also emphasizing my own curiosity and wonder for students to see. If students ask a question that I do not know the answer to, then I am honest with them and find a way to figure out the answer together. Either we simply look up the answer online, conduct an experiment, or we find another appropriate research method. My hope is that by modeling this sort of behaviour and attitude, students will approach questions or problems in the same way. Teaching kindergarten is a special job, as it is the first introduction to school for many children. In addition to completing the regular academic learning requirements, my main goal is to give students a fantastic first

year and to show them that learning is enjoyable and something that we want to have a positive attitude about.

The revised curriculum for British Columbia seeks to encourage cross-curricular lesson planning. Many content pieces from various subjects can be woven together. Furthermore, with an emphasis on place-based learning, it is becoming easier to show students why they are learning what they are learning. In my classroom, we have Wild Wednesday, where I take students outside from recess to lunch to do our learning. We work on a wide variety of subjects while outside, and students are able to learn all about their local environment and community. While outside we frequently discuss why what we are learning is important and valuable. Families are also invited to join us on our adventures. With a curriculum now focusing on these ideas, it can be easier for teachers to include some of these key elements.

Creating a positive classroom environment can be a challenging task, but in my classroom, this looks like reinforcing the importance of respectful listening and speaking with students. Students are given regular opportunities to share with the class in an open circle environment should they wish to do so. We work on a wide variety of activities that require teamwork, and there is choice seating so that students can sit wherever they wish at any given point in the day. Students often sit with a number of different children throughout the day, which helps them build more connections in the class. When doing presentations in front of the class, there is an equal mix of either presenting on something familiar and personal to them (such as sharing) and academic work (such as the special helper of the day work like leading the calendar, weather, etc.). The hope is that students will become increasingly comfortable with their peers, support one another, and build solid friendships to move into the coming years with.

When presenting or talking in front of the class, some students require some extra support. In order to encourage those students to share, I frequently work to scaffold their sharing by prompting them with questions or providing words of encouragement. If a student does not want to share for a particular reason, then sometimes they are given the option to pass. Students are frequently encouraged in all subject areas to try their best, and if I know that a student struggles in a particular area, I check in regularly to ensure that they are feeling supported. I have also been working on

providing very clear and broken-down instructions, followed by a check-in for understanding.

Social media has played a substantial role in how I go about attempting to inspire my students. Through platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, I have been able to follow teachers from around the world as they explore different provocations and materials in their classrooms. As they inspire me with their work, I work to inspire my students both with materials and the questions that are asked of them. If a certain material does not go over as well as I had hoped, I reflect on how it was presented to students and what I could do differently next time. Thanks to social media, teachers can collaborate on a much larger scale to create and test ideas.

Starting this self-study with a focus on turning points has helped me to uncover what aspects of certain memories were so impactful on me and why. Why were these events memorable and how can I, and others, work to use what I have learned in my practice? As I conclude this chapter, I am left feeling inspired and relieved, while at the same time also somewhat overwhelmed. While I believe that I am on the right track in many aspects, I see several areas that need improving. The area that I have been focusing on the most this year is the integration of more hands-on learning experiences. Having my own classroom for the first time has meant that I have the freedom to create many more experiences for my students, but it also means that I am still, and likely will be for many years to come, navigating how to go about doing so.

Conclusion

The turning points discussed in this chapter are some of the most treasured memories that I have from my schooling. Bullock and Ritter (2011) wrote, “[a] turning point might...be characterized as a situation that challenged the authors’ prior understandings of a particular context or situation; these situations turned our thinking toward new perspectives” (p. 175). The turning points that I referred to from my early years in school were not, at the time, moments when I had grand realizations. They were simply things that I did or participated in that left an impression on me. As I began studying education and encountered similar moments, specifically in my undergrad and during graduate studies, then I was conscious of the turning points that I was experiencing. I knew that they would leave an impact on me as a teacher.

Chapter 4.

Identity in Learning to Teach

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss connections and turning points from my schooling that left an impact on me in one way or another. They have all helped contribute to my various identities, and most have contributed to my teaching identity. Bullock has done extensive work using the self-study methodology and has looked at identity formation in a number of those studies. This chapter will trace the different factors that have influenced my identity, while using the work of Bullock as a point of reference.

4.1. What is Identity?

Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz, and Gutierrez (2014) wrote that there is a post-modern view of identity in which identity formation is a process that results in different identity identifiers, some of which align, some of which do not, but still work together to create some coherence.

...[I]dentity is defined as a 'way of doing', a 'performance' or staging, to use a term taken from the visual or performing arts. These performances tend, therefore, to be contradictory, changing, and under construction. Discourse is the primary way in which identities are constructed and negotiated given that it is always performed with others, and those others are the ones who are able to legitimate a given identity. (p. 449)

Focusing specifically on teaching identities, it is not only theory and content related to the teaching profession that are influential. Knowledge and perceptions from personal surroundings also play a significant role in teaching identity development, which means that the process of identity formation begins before professional training (Correa et al., 2014). This is echoed by Clark and Flores (2014) who concisely defined the development of a teacher identity as, "an intersection of different experiences and social interactions within the self, the family unit, the cultural community, and the schooling process" (para. 5).

4.2. Athletics

The role of non-formal education on our teaching pedagogies and our teaching identities as a whole is one that cannot be denied. Bullock (2014) has examined how his long history practicing martial arts has affected his teaching pedagogy. In his article, Bullock (2014) recalls three particular events (which he calls “episodes”) from his personal history of practicing martial arts: practicing judo in elementary school, practicing karate in secondary school, and then karate again in university. These three episodes prompted Bullock (2014) to make connections to the challenges that come along with learning to teach during practicums, the process of becoming a teacher, and the importance of revisiting “professional knowledge” (Bullock, 2014, p. 113-114). Bullock (2014) references the work that has been done to show the influence that prior experience such as being a student and being a teacher has on teacher educators, and he goes one step further to say, “[i]f we accept the idea that prior experiences as a student and as a teacher influence our work as teacher educators and professors of education, then our prior experiences as a learner in non-formal settings offer a rich context for additional analysis through self-study” (Bullock, 2014, p. 114). Furthermore, Bullock (2014) points to the substantial amount of evidence indicating that when trying something new such as judo or teaching, we rely heavily on former identities to build our confidence in the new and unfamiliar setting. After reading this piece I began considering how my own experiences with non-formal education have influenced my teaching identity. Through this consideration I realized that the influence of my identity as a (former) soccer player is traceable in my teaching identity. My passion for sports and fitness in general has meant that movement and physical activity is present in my classroom beyond just when we go to the gymnasium. The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (2019) recommends that students aged 5-11 get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity each day. With rising obesity rates among children in Canada, taking students to gym a few times a week may not be enough to help ensure that students are meeting these guidelines, particularly for those students who live more sedentary lifestyles once they get home from school. Furthermore, there are known benefits of regular movement on student learning as well. Physical activity promotes changes in the brain that help connect brain cells (Reilly, Buskist, & Gross, 2012). “Movement has been shown through countless studies to reduce behaviour and mental health issues, improve attention, and create more

engaging, meaningful classes. This is due to the brain's release of four key chemicals during movement: Serotonin, Dopamine, Endorphins, and Cortisol" (Blackmer, 2019, p. 12). My interest in spreading this information and bringing movement into my classroom has resulted in me taking on the role of being a "Movement Ambassador" in the school that I work at. Through this role I have been working to encourage more movement in our classrooms while also helping provide guidance for teaching physical education such as how to teach foundational movement skills.

4.3. Outdoor Enthusiast

"Well she sure likes wood". This was a comment that I heard from an unknown kindergarten parent on my first day teaching in my own classroom. For the first day, we (the group of kindergarten teachers) had all of the incoming kindergarten students and their parents move through each of the kindergarten rooms to complete an activity. When I heard the comment, I chuckled. It is true; I do like wood. I have a long, thin branch hanging from the ceiling to hang student-made creations from. I have a shelf filled with sliced wood discs and other neat pieces of wood that might come in use for students when building during centres, story workshop, or STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) activities. I also have pencil holders made from tree branches that have been drilled into, a little table made from a stump, and a neat piece of bark on my desk that is purely decorative. In addition to those various pieces of wood I have four smaller plants throughout the classroom that the students care for and a "wonder tray" where students can bring in pieces of nature that they have found and would like to investigate. Bringing in pieces from the outdoors provides an opportunity for exploration. I have been told by a number of visitors that the natural elements make them feel calm upon entry into the room. I feel this as well. My passion for the outdoors has come through in my teaching identity with the learning environment that I work to create, as well as in my lesson plans. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I have Wild Wednesday in my class where I take students outside to learn for several hours on Wednesday. In addition to the vast amounts of evidence that supports taking students outside for the many benefits including mental health, attention, and so on, I also take my students outside because then they can build a connection with the local environment. I hope that my students come to be as fond of the outdoors as I am, and as such treat our environment with the care and respect that it deserves.

4.4. Student vs. Teacher

In another self-study, Bullock and Ritter (2011) focused on their transition from doctoral students to assistant professors. The authors had originally intended to look at pedagogies, but the focus evolved to identity construction. Both Bullock and Ritter expressed difficulties balancing researching and teaching. When considering priorities, Ritter (2011) said,

I have to admit that seeking answers through self-study largely escaped my attention during my first semester. That probably indicates something about my sense of “everything changing” as a full-time faculty member – and not in a good way. After all, I am someone who values self-study and has experienced its power in helping me to purposefully think about my practice. But I felt so overwhelmed learning my new role and trying to stay ahead of the curve in terms of my research that I am afraid I let my priorities shift a little away from teaching. (March 27, 2009, p. 176)

Through reading the article, I began to recognize the tensions that I have been struggling with this year as my position as a new teacher and my role as a graduate student have both been contending for my time. With this being my first year teaching my own class, I am eager to implement and use all that I have learned.

I think back to a discussion that happened in one of my first master’s classes where the idea of teaching being a vocation was the theme of the week. In one of the readings for the week, Hansen (1995) said,

The idea of teaching “occupies” the person’s thoughts and imagination — an image that contrasts with the more familiar one of a person occupying an institutional role. Again, this suggests that one conceives teaching as more than a job — more than a way to earn an income. (para. 13)

Quotes like this led to a conversation about what an exceptional teacher looks like, and how many of us involved in the discussion who were teachers struggled with the unrealistic expectations that appear to be set for teachers by society. In the mainstream media we hear about outstanding teachers, but we were left wondering just how many of those teachers were in a relationship, had children, a close group of friends, participated in leisure activities, and so on. I strive to be the best teacher that I can be, but difficulties arise when I try to set boundaries. Being a teacher means that I never feel finished. There is always one more thing to do or that I could be doing to better myself as an

educator and provide the best experience for my students. I struggle with the lack of a “finish line” in this profession. I love what I do, but it can become all encompassing.

For the last three years, as I work to navigate the world of teaching in the K-12 system and develop my teaching identity, I have also been balancing my role as a student. From elementary school to high school to undergrad to the teacher education program, and then into graduate studies, my role as a student is one that I have had for many years. With that role comes certain expectations that I set upon myself. In the case of graduate studies, I was excited to be labeled as a “grad student”. The research, the coursework, it was all interesting to me. I was eager to begin my studies and learn as much as possible. Balancing my work identity with my student identity was manageable during my coursework, but this past year when I began work on my thesis while also starting in my first 100% continuing contract, I found balancing the two almost insurmountable. With both identities vying for my full attention, I reached a point where I could not give my full attention to either. If I was trying to focus on planning the school year, my mind was wandering to my thesis. Similarly, when I sat down to write my thesis, I was constantly having thoughts about my class. The constant clashing of these identities made it difficult to feel successful in either area, as some of my priorities were pushed aside.

4.5. New Teacher

In addition to being a teacher, I often find myself referring to or being referred to as a *new* teacher. That new teacher identity means trying new things for the first time daily and it means having limited experience to draw on. With most activities and lessons/units, there comes a certain degree of self-criticism and doubt. Am I doing this correctly? Is this the most effective approach? Are my students learning what they should be? Fletcher and Bullock (2012) also questioned themselves during their self-study on being new teacher educators and teaching physical literacy and science literacy respectively. They spoke to the tensions that they felt around putting theoretical knowledge into practice and being the “experts”. At a certain point, there was a realization that they were just transmitting information to their students, which is not a common characteristic of their practice. I too have had moments where I suddenly become aware of the fact that I have slipped away from my intended teaching-style of hands on, experiential, movement-based lessons, and into “transmission mode”

(Fletcher & Bullock, 2012, p 30). This happens in the moments when I am not entirely confident in whether or not I understand what exactly the curricular competency is saying, or in instances where I feel pressed for time. The more that I become aware of this tendency, the easier it is to catch myself.

I resonate with McAnulty & Cuenca (2013), because there were also times in my first year of teaching where I found myself trying to imitate or “regurgitate” (p. 44) lessons that I had experienced or had seen as a student and thought were successful. My thinking was, if it worked for me then, it should work for them (my students) now. This desire to recreate lessons as I had witnessed them came from, what I believe, was a sense of insecurity in my abilities. There was a certain level of nervousness to try something different and not know if the necessary learning would come out of it. Now I realize that every lesson, even if it had previously been successful, is susceptible to failure. What worked well for one group of students may not work for another.

Being a new teacher brings about this anxiety in me surrounding whether or not my teaching is successful and effective, but my newness to teaching has also served me well. I consider myself fortunate to have entered the profession at a time when the province of British Columbia was implementing their redesigned curriculum. My first-year teaching was the first year that it was mandatory for all teachers in the province to follow the redesigned curriculum (in the years previous it has been optional for teachers to transition from the previous curriculum). When I started working in schools, I heard the redesigned curriculum referred to as the “new curriculum”, but experienced teachers frequently spoke up saying that nothing is new about the curriculum at all. Whichever the case, with the changes in the curriculum coming in just as I was starting out, I was able to look at the redesigned curriculum with a fresh perspective. I was without any thoughts of the old prescribed learning outcomes and “the way things used to be done” in my mind unlike so many of my colleagues. Feeling as though the redesigned curriculum aligned well with my credo meant that I felt empowered to be bold in my teaching.

Being seen as a new teacher pushes me to prove to myself, and others, that I can stay away from the more traditional approaches and teach in a way that I believe is engaging and effective. The dismissal of “she’s just a new teacher and will learn that teaching the traditional approach is the best approach” gives me extra motivation to prove myself and the approaches that I have studied. It has only been in recent years

that more teachers have been experimenting with outdoor education, loose parts, and so on. While an increase in workshop offerings, study tours to places such as Opal School in Portland and Reggio Emilia, Italy indicate that these ideas are gaining in popularity throughout my district, there are those who are doubtful of their effectiveness and that is fine. Being the new teacher with these “new ways of doing things” is a piece of my identity that I fully embrace.

4.6. Kindergarten Teacher

My kindergarten teacher identity tends to receive one of two opposite responses from the general public. When I share that I am a kindergarten teacher, some individuals commend me. They comment on how much patience I must have and how I must be energetic to be able to keep up with so many 4-6-year old’s each day. Parents often say things like, “I don’t know how you do it”. Alternatively, the other response that I get, either explicitly mentioned or subtly implied, is that I am a babysitter. This sentiment is one that is present in the literature on kindergarten and early childhood educators (Zhang & Yu, 2017). Having taught Grade 5 just last year, the differences in the reaction that I have received when discussing what grade I teach has been incredibly interesting, and in many ways frustrating. The identity that I held last year as a Grade 5 teacher received little commentary from people besides the odd comment about the potential moods that I must have faced from students. This is in contrast to the “it’s just kindergarten” mentality that is so popular and was even once said to me by an administrator. When these comments are made, I cannot help but feel de-valued as an educator, and I find myself working into the conversation somehow that I previously taught Grade 5, as if to prove to them that I am a real teacher. In reality, I think that what I am really doing is trying to reaffirm to myself the fact that I did complete just as much schooling as a Grade 12 history or biology teacher.

Luckily, in a group of kindergarten teachers the mentality is very different, and I am eager to share all of the trials, tribulations, and successes in my kindergarten classroom. We joke about how easy it is to point out a kindergarten teacher because they (we) are constantly saving odd scraps of ribbon or toilet paper rolls for crafts or special projects. Despite the misunderstandings from some regarding what kindergarten teachers do, it is an identity that I intend to hold for many years to come.

4.7. Institutional Identities

The institutions that I have been associated with have also influenced my teaching identity. Sabatier and Bullock (2018) worked as critical friends to understand how their identities as teacher educators and their teacher education pedagogies have been shaped by different factors including their colleagues and students. Sabatier, from France, and Bullock, from Ontario, worked together at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. In their self-study, both expressed an “outsider status” at SFU that they were not accustomed to. Sabatier initially thought that this was the case for her because she had come from France, however, even Bullock, who was trained and worked in Canada, felt the difference upon moving to SFU. It was believed by some that because they were educated and had experience teaching elsewhere as opposed to the local area surrounding the university, their expertise was limited. This led to, what is referred to in the article as, a “sense of a professional identity crisis” (Sabatier & Bullock, 2018, p. 263). In response to this, Bullock had his Ontario teaching credentials recognized in British Columbia and then as well in the United Kingdom when he moved there. In addition to having their own identity questioned, Sabatier and Bullock (2018) discussed the heavy focus on teacher identity formation, as opposed to content in the teacher education program at the university that they were teaching at. There was a level of informality in the program that both were not accustomed to. The differences in focus between teacher education programs, as well as the school’s location geographically, ultimately effects the identity of those who attend. This could be the identity that an individual identifies themselves, or it could be the identity that others have placed upon them.

The first time that I experienced an identity placed on me because of the location of a school that I attended was during my undergraduate degree. When I shared with others where I grew up and the high school that I attended, I was regularly met with negative and judgemental comments. My first reaction, like that of Bullock’s, was a bit of an identity crisis. I had never before felt so much judgement from others. Noteworthy as well is the fact that growing up, I was not one to care about what others thought of me. I was confident and comfortable with who I was, and that was enough for me. Suddenly in my first semester of my first year of university I was bothered by the comments that others were making, and I felt a need to defend where I came from. Those making the

comments rarely seemed to know anything about the city beyond what they saw on the news and given the large geographical region that the city takes up and the vastly different areas, I felt compelled to fight the stereotypes of the city that I had lived in my whole life. Eight years later and working as a teacher in another city, I am proud to be from the city that I am and am no longer bothered by any derogatory comments. In fact, for a number of different reasons, I feel fortunate to have grown up where I did.

When I first began working at my current school, I again experienced an identity being given to me by others. I work at a school located in a low socioeconomic area. We have breakfast, lunch, and weekend food programs for students. There are also extra clothes and personal health products available if needed. As a result, the school has a certain reputation in the district as being an undesirable school to work at. There tends to be more students with behaviour challenges, little home support, and fairly regular staff turnover. Initially, I worked part-time at the school and worked as a Teacher Teaching on Call (TTOC) on my days off. In a number of conversations, other teachers would ask where I worked. Once I told them, common responses would be “oh wow, if you work there you can do anything” or simply “oh dear”. I still feel somewhat awkward when we are asked to share which school we work at during workshops because although most of those comments have stopped, I still feel the sense of pity from some. This inner-city school teacher identity is not one that I expected to be given, but it is nonetheless one that I have come to identify myself as.

An identity that I have held for eight years now is a student at Simon Fraser University. I have gone from undergrad to PDP to graduate studies all at SFU, thus, who I am today has been significantly influenced by all of those parts of my life. During my undergrad I became particularly interested in history and decided to focus on history as my major. I decided to major in History following a course on African History that left me feeling inspired and curious. Prior to that course I enjoyed history, but I had no intention of making it my focus. Once in PDP, my teaching identity began to develop further. Surprisingly, PDP did not result in the major teaching identity development that would have been expected. When I consider what I believe makes up my teacher identity, I see strong influences from my volunteer work, my undergrad studies, workshops and professional development events, and my own experiences as a student growing up. In fact, surprisingly little of my teaching identity was shaped by PDP. This is interesting given that I attended the teaching program described by Sabatier and Bullock as too

focused on identity formation. The practicum component was the most influential aspect of PDP in forming my teaching identity. Finally, through graduate studies I have been able to further research areas of particular interest, such as the Reggio Emilia Approach and this self-study, which have had a significant impact on my teaching identity.

4.8. Conclusion

Identities are not fixed and are always being re-established and negotiated (Sachs, 2001). Individuals can identify themselves as a part of a larger group, like teacher for example, but then their identity can be further broken down into smaller subcategories such as kindergarten teacher (Sachs, 2001). Beyond the identities that one may give themselves, our identities are constructed by those around us. Glimmers of some identities show up in others such as my identities as an outdoor enthusiast and an athlete that come through in my teaching. I am seen by others as the teacher who helps run the movement program or the teacher who does “Wild Wednesday”. I also chose to differentiate between teacher and new teacher because I believe that while they are closely related, they are two separate identities. There are different perceptions between a teacher and a new teacher, and in time that new teacher identity will be gone.

Conclusion

Tensions in the Early Years of Teaching

Berry and Van Driel (2012), conducted a small-scale study that looked at the expertise that science teacher educators have developed through personal and professional experiences that they then bring to teacher education. They used three research questions to guide their research. The first question asked the teacher educators about their own fears of teaching pre-service secondary science teachers. All teacher educators expressed concern about the overall quality of science teaching in schools. They were concerned that it was being taught in a way that was uninspiring and was not fostering a lasting interest in science. The second question asked what teacher educators emphasize in their approach to teaching about teaching. Teacher educators agreed that putting students at the centre is required, which includes engaging students and making science more relevant. The final question asked teacher educators how their personal and professional experiences have shaped their approaches to teaching about teaching. The responses for this final question revealed that personal backgrounds and career paths resulted in different pedagogies among the participants. Those science teacher educators who had experience doing research or using research often used research to inform their practice. Within their practice, they typically focused on critical thinking with their preservice teachers. For those who had years of experience working as a school teacher, but little to no research experience, practical knowledge was the focus. This study confirms what other research has revealed; the identities of educators and their practices are informed by their personal and professional experiences (Berry & Van Driel, 2012; McAnulty & Cuenca, 2013; Bullock, 2014).

The experiences that I have had, both positive and negative, have helped to guide me as I develop as a professional. The field trips or in-class events that had myself and many of my peers engaged have left me with the motivation to create that sort of learning environment and those memorable experiences for my students. I felt engaged, curious, creative, and excited to learn, which helps to establish a life-long love of learning.

Berry (2007) refers to tensions that she encountered as a teacher educator. “It was apparent that teacher educators regularly experienced particular tensions as they attempted to manage complex and conflicting pedagogical and personal demands within their work as teachers of prospective teachers” (p. 119). Borrowing the term from Berry (2007), I suggest here that it be used in the context of teaching. When considering the importance of relationship building and the key themes that were extracted (availability, interest, awareness, communication, and one-on-one attention), it became evident that emulating these themes that I found so valuable is a feat. Tensions here exist between what my desired approach to teaching is (which can essentially be summarized as offering students all of the support that they need to learn best) and what actually happens. One-on-one attention is limited due to class sizes and limited support from teaching assistants. I attempt to make myself available before and after school as much as I can, but that is not always possible with commitments outside of work.

Tensions continue to arise in the themes that arose from examining my turning points as a learner, many of which are intertwined with those previously mentioned. Hands-on learning experiences in the classroom are something that I strive to offer my students, but I often struggle with the cost that can come with creating these experiences. Limited classroom budget means that I have to be more conscious about how I spend the money that I am given. This inevitably means that I eliminate some activities that I would otherwise like to do with students to create a memorable and engaging experience. Similar struggles ring true for field trips where financial and geographic barriers can make planning field trips difficult. There is then the issue of the actual availability of different locations and programs for classes to attend that creates a competitiveness among teachers attempting to book the field trip of their choice before it fills up. Initially I felt tension surrounding outdoor education as I knew that it was beneficial for students, but I occasionally struggled with working up the motivation to plan outdoor outings (that required a site check ahead of time, brainstorming any possible dangers, and so on). Then there was the issue of actually taking the kids out in what some might consider less than desirable weather. Clearly tensions from both internal and external factors were and are at play. Finally, there are my identities as a student and as a teacher that are often at odds with each other. I frequently feel myself being “pulled in different directions” (Berry, 2007, p. 119) and unable to give my full

attention to either one. Fortunately, my other identities tend to complement each other as opposed to come into conflict.

Final Conclusions

Teachers unique life experiences come through in the values that they emphasize in their classroom, but it can be a struggle to implement those values. The self-study methodology allows professionals to examine and improve their practice, while also becoming aware of how their beliefs come through in their teaching. For educators at any level, conducting a self-study is an imperative step in ensuring that an individual's practice is aligned with their beliefs. It can be easy for an educator to fall into "transmission mode" (Fletcher & Bullock, 2012, p. 30) or have their intentions misunderstood (Sesese, 2005).

As an early career educator, self-study has led me to look carefully at my evolving practice and pedagogy. It has allowed me to reminisce, reflect, and think critically about many experiences. Teaching is unique in that pre-service teachers have spent tens of thousands of hours watching teachers teach, except it is viewed through the lens of a student. The work of Lortie (1975) and his conception of "apprenticeship of observation" (p. 61), has been cited in many research articles. Lortie (1975) stated that in some ways, being a student is like being an apprentice. Although students only see what happens in front of them in the classroom and not all of the work that goes into teaching, as students are taught they make judgements about good teaching versus bad teaching. Typically, students see teachers more than any other occupational group (Lortie, 1975). With so much exposure to the profession, it's unsurprising that teacher candidates enter teacher training programs with opinions about how teachers should and should not be teaching. I entered the program with many ideas about what makes a 'good teacher'.

The relationships and connections that I have built over the course of my education have had a tremendous impact on not only my professional development, but those relationships are the very reason that I became a teacher. Until the beginning of Grade 12, I had envisioned myself in another field; the field of law. When it came time to apply to universities, someone had suggested teaching. After a great deal of thought, I decided that teaching did sound intriguing and was perhaps, for me, a more suitable

career path than law. As a precaution, I proceeded through my first few years of university taking classes that would also be applicable if I did decide to change my focus. After being in several classes with fantastic education professors who inspired me, I decided that teaching would be my focus.

By reflecting on the relationships that I treasure, I was able to pick out key themes that have served as reminders for me. With each theme heading comes a reminder about what I should strive for as a teacher; making myself available to students, providing one-on-one support when possible, showing an interest in students and their lives, being observant of student's needs, and watching how you are communicating to students both verbally and nonverbally. Though tensions exist, working around or through these tensions is something that I am currently attempting to improve upon.

The experiences offered to me in my schooling that I have reflected on have highlighted the importance of hands-on learning, field trips, and outdoor education. There is strong evidence supporting the benefits for children in each of these three areas. Beyond the three larger themes, each individual turning point offers an analysis of what made the turning point memorable and a lesson that I have taken away. In some cases, the lessons proved to be something that I have subconsciously done in my classroom already without realizing where the influence may have come from. In other instances, the assumptions that I made about learning (e.g. having an abundance of math manipulatives is beneficial for students) were proven to be not entirely correct.

Together, these experiences and relationships have contributed to the construction of multiple identities. These various identities as an athlete, an outdoor enthusiast, a kindergarten teacher, a new teacher, and so on intersect and are evident in my personal and professional life. As time passes, they are evolving and changing. As circumstances change I will no doubt have new identities that are either self-constructed or constructed by others.

I am hopeful that the insight that has been provided about my personal educational experiences and my professional development can contribute to a larger body of self-study work conducted by early career teachers. This process has helped me understand where my passion for some pieces of my pedagogy, such as outdoor

education and hands-on learning, have come from. It has also led me down a path of analyzing *what* specifically I found so helpful and authentic about my relationships with some of the educators that I have encountered over the course of my schooling. On the other end of the spectrum, I determined what was detrimental in other relationships. I became more aware of tensions that can exist not only for myself and potentially new teachers, but teachers in general. By sharing my experiences, I hope to start a conversation about how our experiences influence our pedagogy as an early career teacher. Similarly, I hope to introduce or reinforce the value of conducting a self-study for professional development.

Throughout this thesis, I have periodically referred to the credo I developed at SFU. While in PDP, my classmates and I were introduced to the idea of a credo. Emphasis was placed on considering what was important to us as a teacher and writing a concise statement of beliefs. It was an experience that I thoroughly enjoyed. Some time was provided in class to record our initial thoughts, but I found myself returning to my credo after class frequently early in the program to make minor amendments. The credo that I developed prior to beginning my short practicum at the end of October was as follows:

While I am teaching my students, they are teaching me. As a teacher, I must reflect often to better my practice and do my best to meet the individual needs of students. It is my responsibility to create a classroom and community that is welcoming and inclusive. It is also my duty to develop relevant and meaningful lessons that can reach all learners. In my class, academic abilities are not the only abilities, and learning through experience is incorporated whenever possible (October, 2015).

I distinctly recall viewing this task as an important step in becoming an educator. By writing down my thoughts and carefully considering what was most important to me as a teacher, I was providing myself guidance as I moved into the world of teaching and faced the challenges that came along with it. I wanted each word to be intentional and impactful, while also being something that I could quickly reference to remind myself of my values if needed.

Returning now to my since untouched credo four years later and after completing my self-study, I find myself in agreement with what I had previously written, but also see room for clarification and additions. I am pleased to have included an aspect on reflection. Reflection is a significant component of PDP; however, I struggled with the

authenticity of being asked to reflect at a certain time and within a particular time frame. The freedom of reflection now, outside of PDP, allows for what I believe to be more honest and impactful reflections. As such, I would just change the wording surrounding reflection in my credo and expand a bit more on the importance of reflection to me. Through my self-study I have come to better understand myself and my values as an educator, which now allows me to offer a clearer outline of the learning experiences that I value and hope to provide students with. Field trips, hands-on activities, and lessons that take place outdoors are a priority of mine as I strongly believe that they help create memorable and impactful experiences for students. In light of my findings, I have now made an adjustment to some of the wording for this line, “[i]t is also my duty to develop relevant and meaningful lessons that can reach all learners”. In an effort to reduce some of the pressure that I put on myself, I have adjusted the wording to reflect doing my best to reach all learners, as opposed to strong language indicating that I must always develop lessons that can reach all learners. Finally, I would add a piece on the importance of relationship building. At the time of writing my credo during PDP, I did not realize how critical relationship building is. Even during my two practicums, I failed to fully understand the importance of taking time to build relationships. Now, as a result of my first three years of teaching and the completion of my self-study, I know how important taking the time to build a connection with students is, and believe that this important piece must be included in my credo.

In addition to what I value as a teacher, I am adding a piece on why I decided to become a teacher. My intention for including this in my credo is that teaching can be difficult and at times educators can feel powerless and ineffective. It can also be tempting to fall into the status quo during those times. Including why I have become a teacher serves as a quick reminder for myself that it is important to continue following my beliefs because it is the desire to provide a better experience for my students that brought me to teaching in the first place.

After making the changes mentioned above, my new credo is as follows;

While I am teaching my students, they are teaching me. As a teacher, I must reflect regularly in order to meet the individual needs of students, while also continuing to develop and understand myself as an educator and learner. It is my responsibility to create a classroom and community that is welcoming and inclusive. I must do my best, working within the means that exist, to develop relevant and meaningful lessons that attempt to reach all

learners. Field trips, hands-on activities, and lessons that take place outdoors are priorities in my classroom. I entered the teaching profession with the desire to provide students with an educational experience that is overall better than my own. I want my students to love school and be excited to learn. In my class, academic abilities are not the only abilities. Taking the time to develop relationships with students by spending one-on-one time with them and learning about their interests is a critical early step in a successful school year and, perhaps, beyond.

Though the skeleton of my credo remains largely the same, by revisiting and making the necessary changes to the document in light of completing my self-study, the piece now feels significantly more personal. Important statements have been clarified and an essential aspect to my teaching, relationship building, has been included. As well, a reminder to myself about why I have become a teacher.

Through the work on my self-study, I have come to better understand myself as a learner and educator. This process has helped me identify turning points in my learning and factors that led to positive memories surrounding my education. I can now more easily identify the ways in which my identities, my relationships, and the turning points in my education come through in my teaching. Through this research I have become aware of just how much of the self is present in teaching, despite my previous understanding that teaching is somehow supposed to be an unbiased act where teachers actively try to take themselves out of their teaching to some degree.

The very act of completing this study has shown me how much there still is to learn about myself, as a learner, a teacher, and ultimately as an individual. There is a tremendous amount of work that can still be done to further understand the role in which my informal education, to provide just one example, has influenced my teaching today. Although the work on this self-study has come to an end, my work of better understanding learning, self, and teaching are very much still ongoing. The work is unfinished, but part of this process has been coming to realize and accept that it is both respectable and expected.

During PDP there are ten goals that are at the heart of the program. The second goal of PDP is, “the development of a clear commitment to lifelong and lifewide learning” (Simon Fraser University, n.d., “10 program goals”). I left the program with an understanding that being a lifelong learner, particularly in the teaching context, meant continuing to attend professional development opportunities, perhaps completing

additional coursework, following educational research, and so on, then adjusting my practice according to what I learn. I also understood that reflection was a necessary component of being a lifelong learner; however, I understood reflection in terms of considering how a lesson went, how to adjust practices to better reach students, and so on. What I have only just recently come to realize is that continuing to be lifelong learners about ourselves, learning, and teaching is also a component of this goal.

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