

Beyond the two-hour workshop

Teachers in Saanich participate in a year long professional learning process to reflect and share ideas and build a community of practice.

by Kim Atkinson

What does critically reflective practice mean for a teacher in a primary classroom? How can long term professional development support teachers in enhancing pedagogical practice? And how could the practices envisioned in the *BC Early Learning Framework* be made more visible to teachers? These are questions Diana Wiseman, Instructional Support Teacher in the Saanich School District was pondering. She and her colleagues had been discussing ways to build a culture of inquiry-based learning within the district. They wanted to engage teachers in professional development that would move beyond the latest ‘technique’ or ‘tool’ for teaching and invite teachers into a deeper conversation about children, teaching and learning. And they were interested in finding out how using a process called pedagogical narration could invite teachers to become more reflective observers of children’s learning.

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Diana met with Danielle Davis and me to discuss joining her in a long-term professional development project. Danielle and I are the co-coordinators of the *Images of Learning Project* and we work with educators and teachers in communities around BC to discuss cultural and historical perspectives on children and education, facilitate dialogue on practice and inspire educators to engage in observing and recording ordinary moments using a process described in the *BC Early Learning Framework* called pedagogical narration.

Six teachers were invited to participate in two-and-a-half hour monthly sessions over the course of a school year. The goal was to give teachers the opportunity to reflect and share ideas together over a long period of time, to create a community of practice.

The project also incorporated classroom visits. Danielle and I wanted the opportunity to visit teachers in their own settings to think together, reflect on their individual questions, values and discuss ways to bring the ideas from our group discussions into daily practice.

Our intention in these sessions, and in the visits, was not to 'teach' teachers how to practice, but to pose questions such as:

- What is our image of the child?
- What is the role of the

teacher?

- What is knowledge?
- What is the purpose of education?
- How do children learn?

We wanted to consider classroom environments, materials, rules and routines and to question why these were in place, who they were for.

Danielle and I introduced the practice of pedagogical narrations, stories and photographs of ordinary moments of a child's day. Recording ordinary moments allows us to listen intently to what children are expressing not only with words, but also with other modes of expression such as art, sculpture, movement and by being attentive to bodies, gestures, the spoken and the unspoken. Teachers were asked to bring pedagogical narrations to our sessions and these became the focal point of discussion. Through asking questions and reflecting on these small

moments teachers began to see children as complex and capable, and to consider what theories children might be working with, what knowledges they are constructing.

As we discussed the narrations these ordinary moments became more complex as layers of understandings and different perspectives emerged. We did not expect to find one answer, one story of a child and the learning in that moment, instead the multiplicity of interpretations led to more questions. These discussions led us to consider how we might extend the child's thinking, how we might facilitate and plan for deepening the child's knowledge. One participant observed: "Documenting learning in this way allows for deeper reflection of situations—broader context and opportunity to share with students and parents. Images + reflections + discussion/questions = RICH MEANING."

As we and the participants came to know one another and share our stories, we built trust. The conversations became deeper as we examined our assumptions and our understandings. These meetings became a safe place to challenge, be challenged and find support to make shifts in teaching. Participants began to share how by listening and

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Richard Williams

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observing children more intentionally they were seeing learning happening in unexpected ways at unexpected times. A teacher noted: *“I changed my role from conductor to participant. I learned to observe the child at work, recognize the learning paths being taken in my presence, and question where these paths might take us as a community of learners.”*

The teachers shared stories of shifts in how they viewed children. They became sensitive to the knowledges and theories children bring with them, began to see children as researchers who investigate materials, the environment and their own interests. As the teachers view of the children shifted, they began to see their role shift. Instead of being ‘transmitters of knowledge’ the teachers took on a new role, that of facilitator, or co-structor of knowledge alongside children providing an environment rich with opportunities for extending the interests of children, rather than imposing preplanned activities. One teacher made this observation: *“This process (pedagogical narration) gave me the permission I needed to put the child in the fore-front of learning experiences. Validating my beliefs about children and focusing on the child as competent and capable learner changed my classroom into the kind of place where many ideas could be explored, shared, and expanded on by me and my students.”*

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of the certainties of pre-planned curriculum. They opened up spaces and opportunities for children to delve more deeply into inquiries, to follow their own interests. They began to find that the outcomes they wanted could be achieved in many, many ways. One teacher described it this way: *“I gave myself and my students the opportunity to take down boundaries, test new waters and experience success and failures necessary for growth. By doing this, I have found that the children are achieving the outcomes I had hoped and much more.”*

Another teacher found that she had been caught up in what a classroom was ‘supposed to be:’ *“While reflecting on my beliefs about children, I realize that I always view children as competent and capable. But in my pursuit to create the “ideal” classroom, I often put those beliefs to the side and listened to my cry for structures, planned, teacher-led learning experiences. I utilized my creative mind to present diverse and interesting lessons but the structure was mine and the outcomes were pre-determined.”*

This teacher noticed a shift in her role: *“The best part of this project for me is realizing how much is missed when I “supervise” instead of being part of the play with children. I have become a keen observer of child play. Instead of using a “wide angle” lens, I more often choose the “zoom setting. I have discovered wonderful things about my students – I have been able to re-write a story to show a student in a positive story, instead of a negative one. Listening in to the dialogue of chil-*

dren playing is a fascinating privilege and experience.”

As we discussed how to create space and time for children to investigate and explore we reflected on routines and environments and materials. Do our routines allow for long periods of time to become immersed in a project? What values are expressed in our environment? Does the environment inspire us and provoke thinking and collaboration? Do the materials invite us to engage creatively and to explore ideas? Are the materials, routines and environment intentional, reflective of my values and my community? Participants began to view their classrooms with new eyes, considering aesthetics and values, relationships and engagement. One teacher commented, *“My classroom has changed 100%.”* Another said *“I was inspired to change my classroom space and this freed me to create an intentional environment. I’d like to do even more of this.”*

At the end of the 10-month long project all the participating teachers had engaged with pedagogical narration, all had made significant changes to the their classroom environment, and all expressed new understandings of children, learning and the role of the teacher. All the teachers indicated they would continue to work with pedagogical narrations and all wanted the project to continue. Participants credited long term collaboration with colleagues as crucial to implementing change. As one participant put it: *“This project gave me a valuable opportunity to share ideas with colleagues who are grappling with many of the same “big questions” about teaching. It provided a ‘safe’ place to share concerns and successes. It is the first professional setting that gave that kind of learning opportunity, rather than “here is the latest methodology/series of strategies to implement in your classroom.”*

This view of the benefits of long-term professional development is supported by the findings of an international research project conducted by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture on quality, competencies and professionalism for those working in early childhood. The final report concludes that pedagogical practices are enhanced by “comprehensive and long-term in-service professional development initiatives”. The report states: “*Short-term in-service training courses (e.g. a few days per year), ... are not sufficient. This demands a re-think of existing approaches to continuing professional development towards more sustained and comprehensive approaches. ... practitioners can substantially enhance their reflective practices through participating in continuing professional development programs within the framework of practice-based research and action-research projects.*” Core Final Report 2009 (p51)

Here in British Columbia researchers also acknowledge the importance of recognizing new conceptions of professional learning. Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert have

been studying networked schools in which “Learning-oriented leaders place a high priority on designing and demonstrating enthusiasm for professional learning as a way of life in their schools and participate in professional learning with the staff as co-learners, as leaders, or as both.” They stress that professional learning “is strongly shaped by the context ... (and) ... wider school culture and the community and society in which the school is situated.” Providing leadership to create thoughtful and inquiry based learning opportunities becomes critical. These leaders, assert Kaser and Halbert, “have a sustained interest in the deeper forms of learning that they use to build the unique learning identities of their schools. In their work, they are constantly aware of the critical importance of building trusting relationships with their adult colleagues – teachers, support staff, parents and community members.”

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The Ministry of Education in BC has introduced changes to curriculum with three key cross curricular competencies that invite students to engage in “deeper learning” and “encourages students to look at things from different perspectives, to see the relationships between their learning in different subjects, and to make connections to their previous learning and to their own experiences, as members of their families, communities, and the larger society.” (For information on the Ministry’s Rethinking Curriculum, visit the website at <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/rethinking-curriculum>)

It is fitting that teachers work and think with these same principles. By engaging in long term collaborative reflective engagement teachers are creating communities of practice, a place of shared vision where ideas and deeper thinking can be explored. And they are creating classrooms where students are invited to do the same. 