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Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario's Kindergarten Program

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Abstract

In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Education began phasing in a new full-day kindergarten program for 4- and 5-year olds across the province. In this article, I reflect on my participation as an elementary school principal in Professional Learning in Early Learning during our school's transition to this new program, which incorporates a play-based and inquiry approach. First, I discuss the learning conditions that were in place at our school, which helped in our successful implementation of the new program. Next, I share the different types of professional learning that guided our journey. This professional development not only transformed my view of children, but also of teaching and learning for both children and adults in our quest for lifelong learning. It is my hope that this information will help readers see the importance of professional learning and that early years educators (classroom teachers, early childhood educators, and support staff) are an integral part of any school-wide initiative.

The 21st century is changing more quickly than at any other time. The world that our students are facing is requiring them to be lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and flexible and creative problem-solvers who work well collaboratively and independently. They will need to be responsible global citizens, open-minded, and able to communicate effectively with people from all over the world. Students need to develop habits and strategies that will help them to embrace change with enthusiasm, wonder, and a critical eye – all while becoming quite technologically savvy. Educators (including administrators) in early learning programs have the opportunity to help children acquire these abilities from the start, as they are seen and treated as partners in the learning process.

The past 6 years have been transformational in early learning in Ontario, Canada elementary schools, as we have implemented the province's new kindergarten program. The practice in many Ontario public schools had been to offer a half-day program, either for the morning or afternoon. From the onset, the new kindergarten program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) was not meant to just increase the amount of time that young children came to school, but to make the time meaningful. That is, the province responded to research that clearly indicates that a play-based, inquiry approach based on children's natural curiosity would be pedagogically the most effective program, as opposed to having students participate in "cookie-cutter" crafts and worksheets.

An integral part of the new kindergarten program was the opportunity to include early childhood educators (early years professionals registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators) to work alongside kindergarten teachers (elementary teachers certified through the Ontario College of Teachers) as they both scaffolded learning opportunities throughout the day. There was some apprehension about being one of the first schools to implement the new full-day kindergarten program, but we embraced this long-awaited initiative knowing that it would result in positive change at the school. We embarked on this journey without a roadmap. But along the way, we discovered that authentic learning, both for children and educators, is our road map, and that there is not one model that will work for all schools.

I was a principal in a kindergarten to Grade 8 school where staff had been involved in using a collaborative inquiry learning model quite successfully before we began implementing full-day kindergarten. Collaborative inquiry differs from traditional models of professional learning in that student learning needs define the focus of inquiry in an authentic manner. It is more than a group of self-directed educators working together in a cooperative or collaborative manner. Collaborative inquiry is an opportunity to share questions based on practice, observations, and research, while at the same time challenging thinking and practice. It can include a cycle of planning, action, and reflection and often leads to more questions. So the conditions were set to continue with this model for our professional learning with our full-day kindergarten team, which included teachers, early childhood educators, and support staff. We wanted to take what was working well and continue applying these conditions to the new program.

Our first inquiry focused on accountable talk, as we realized the importance that oral language plays in learning. With accountable talk, students take a more active role in their learning as they listen to one another, build on ideas, and ask questions to clarify and expand their thinking. Our inquiry, "How can we support oral language and accountable talk using intentional teaching in an inquiry-based classroom?" led to increased awareness of not only the importance that oral language has on learning, but in making it meaningful, authentic, and accountable. Part of this inquiry was to help parents to support language learning in the home. This inquiry later included Grades 1 and 2 as we worked to expand our early years team. Our young students also participated in our school-wide inquiries that were rooted in social justice

issues. For example, using the big idea, “Go Make a Difference,” the school embarked on a learning journey in which each grade investigated questions that were generated from class discussions. For their part, the kindergarten classes discussed how to be a good friend and made friendship bracelets for our school celebration.

We always began with student needs, aimed at making improvements in teaching and learning. Then we also looked to Ontario Ministry of Education documents, research, and video clips to guide our own professional learning. Observations in the classroom were critical to this learning; we used the Japanese Lesson Study model (Doig & Groves, 2011) where a group of teachers would observe in the classroom with a focus on what the children were saying and doing. We would then meet together to discuss our guided observations, the pedagogical documentation gathered, and determine next steps. Our collaborative inquiries were usually in 4- to 6-week cycles and we found that we needed at least three large group meetings for our own learning to be effective. We would meet at the beginning to gather information and set goals; after 2 to 3 weeks we would meet to monitor and make changes; and finally, we met at the end to share new learning, successes, and next steps. It was important to include teachers, early childhood educators, and support staff as co-learners as we broke through boundaries. Our discussions were truly collaborative. We were able to move from thinking that collaborative was being “nice” to one another to a place where questions and differing opinions were part of our learning. In order for co-learning to truly be effective, I had to participate myself as a co-learner, as my participation validated the learning for staff. In doing so, we worked as an effective team, developing leadership in many of the early years educators.

In our second year of implementing the new kindergarten program, we participated in an Ontario Ministry of Education initiative, Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry (EPCI), with two other schools in our board. EPCI provided educators with opportunities to participate in early years (K-2) classroom-based inquiries about teaching and learning. There was a focus on connections among the educators by building capacity in collaborative inquiry skills, as we inquired about evidence-informed practices that improve student learning. Collaborative inquiry drives teachers and administrators to change their practice. We are now thinking differently about teaching with a focus on the process of learning and how we can capture those conversations with our young learners. As our staff met, they collaborated and had courageous conversations about their own observations as they came to new understandings. We learned that we begin with student needs and that helps to form the question. In an ongoing cycle, we always came back to student need to see if what had been tried had impacted students. Our learning made us all aware of the particular competency of oral language – especially quality talk in parallel play moving towards cooperative play. It challenged the educators’ planning, thinking, and assessment methods, which required us to be more reflective and flexible, keeping learners’ needs and background knowledge/experiences in mind at all times. Collaborating with colleagues allowed us to challenge one another’s thinking and our own and to build on each other’s thinking to come to deeper understandings. Thinking about our own thinking, where teachers, ECEs, staff, and administrators were given many opportunities to reflect on their practices and on the thinking of others, was vital to this process. This collaborative inquiry increased confidence in delivering effective instructional strategies.

New learning was also spread through our principal focus learning teams (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2014). This model of learning, where a group of people comes together to learn with and from each other and then seek to act on what they learn, had been very powerful with teachers and it had great possibility for administrators. Our ongoing inquiry was for the sake of improvement – learning from one another. Professional learning for administrators

focused on creating an authentic learning environment based on student interest in full-day kindergarten. Our conversations began with three key documents: the first version of the new kindergarten curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010); *With Our Best Future in Mind*, a report from the provincial premier's Special Advisor on Early Learning describing a plan for early learning in the province (Pascal, 2009); and *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007), which provides the framework for Ontario early childhood settings. These documents and other resources served as road maps for the journey.

Transforming our view of children did change our practice by aligning our practice with a view of children as competent citizens in a democratic classroom. Professional learning was the catalyst for getting the thought process moving. The way to achieve change is to engage the entire community in "thinking about thinking." By thinking with others about their own thinking, by questioning, by seeing other inspired educators, we began to see that it is all possible and achievable. Professional learning is the catalyst for getting the thought process moving. And in doing so, we brought alive Hargreaves' vision as described in *The Fourth Way*:

A democratic and a sustainable path to improve that builds powerful, responsible and lively professional communities in a largely self-regulating profession where teachers set high standards and shared targets and improve learning through networks from evidence and with each other. (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 107)

This is realized through improvements that build from the bottom and steer from the top. My professional learning in early learning has not only transformed my view of children, but also of teaching and learning for both children and adults in our quest for lifelong learning.

Suggested Resources

Capacity Building Series is a collection of brochures with information to support instructional effectiveness in Ontario, produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat:

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/capacityBuilding.html>

The Capacity Building Series brochure on Collaborative Teacher Inquiry can be retrieved from:

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_Collaborative_Teacher_Inquiry.pdf

Charles Pascal's Early Learning webpage contains links related to early learning in Ontario and research on the new kindergarten program: <https://charlespascal.com/early-learning/>

The EduGAINS website provides a collection of learning resources, including videos used in our collaborative inquiries:

<http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/fulldaykinder/videolearningenvironment.html>

<http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/fulldaykinder/videoflowotday.html>

For more on the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry (EPCI) Initiative:

<http://find.gov.on.ca/?owner=edu&lang=en&q=EPCI>

The Learning Exchange is a collaborative space for educators: <http://thelearningexchange.ca/>

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