

AN EARLY LEARNING JOURNEY: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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An Early Learning Journey: A Social Constructivist Approach

When great things happen, there is often a tendency to analyze the conditions that allowed for it. I believe that this is often in an attempt to replicate those conditions so that one can allow for it to happen again. But this is rarely, if ever, possible. The circumstances that allow for the emergence of a particular event or understanding are quite serendipitous. It is the ways in which people come together and create an environment for great things to happen, for change, that is constructed by them, for them, for their own ends. Social construction, in a specific shared context, cannot be replicated, and when tried the product is typically superficial and contrived. There is no formula or prescription; there are intricate strands of trust, desire, knowledge and experience that weave people together.

The beginning of the journey

The Ministry of Education Introduced the Kindergarten/Grade 1 Collaborative Inquiry project in the fall of 2009 in an attempt to bridge the gap between the kindergarten program and the grade one curriculum and to highlight the continuum of learning for students. It was driven by an agenda intended to engage teachers in conversation with one another around how to ease the transition for students, see commonalities between the programs and spotlight inquiry.

As the program consultant on a team comprised of a superintendent, a principal and two French immersion classroom teachers, my role was to work with and support the teachers as they investigated the impact of exploration centres (Cadwell, 1997) on students' oral language development in their respective classrooms (Stegelin, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). While we were investigating the impact of exploration centres in the classroom to support oral language development, we also had a desire to see oral language develop in a second language. When I became part of this team, I could not have predicted the various extensions that would flow from this opportunity. Perhaps, in this case, it was that very unknown that provided the possibility.

Over the course of a few months, our K-1 team met several times to plan, discuss and reflect on what was emerging in the classroom as children encountered the exploration centres. Notably, team members were at various stages in their understanding of a social constructivist approach to learning

An Early Learning Journey...

(Vygotsky, 1978) and in different stages of implementation of the exploration centres. At these meetings, the idea of extending this project into an invitation to other teachers was often discussed, although at those times no forum was decided upon.

It was during this time that the Early Learning-Kindergarten Program was surfacing. The Rainbow District School Board had committed to offering a full day kindergarten program to all four and five year old children. In accordance with this new full day program, the Early Learning-Kindergarten (EL-K) program was also going to be implemented in selected schools throughout the board. In this model, based on several recommendations made by Charles Pascal (2009), there would be a teacher and an Early Childhood Educator in each EL-K classroom. This design would roll out provincially over the next five years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

With the introduction of the EL-K program and a desire to share the learning we were experiencing with the K-1 Inquiry we decided to start a book study, and held our first meeting in March 2010. Initially, the group was comprised of one of the two teachers who were engaged in the K-1 Collaborative Inquiry project, the kindergarten teachers in the six identified EL-K sites, one itinerant arts teacher and the superintendent responsible for Early Learning in Rainbow District School Board (RDSB). As the study progressed, invitations were extended to more teachers who were assigned to EL-K classrooms and to early childhood educators in those classrooms as well.

Questions

There were two questions I began to explore as the book study began: First, what conditions allow for a change in thinking and/or practice as it pertains to the implementation of the EL-K program? Second, how does a book study support the possibility of change?

Through the work I had already been engaged in as program consultant, I had become very aware of the conditions that existed within many of our kindergarten classrooms. Current kindergarten teaching practice in most classrooms consisted of a heavy emphasis on academic achievement with an intense focus on explicit direct instruction in literacy, particularly reading and writing. There was, at times, an absence of focus on the whole child (Pascal, 2009) or developmentally appropriate practice (Gestwicki,

2007). Most teachers focused on content delivery instead of student learning. This problem was compounded by the Teaching Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP); kindergarten students were administered pre, mid and post assessments that ideally would have been used to assist teachers in focusing instruction throughout an eight week cycle. One of the intentions of the TLCP is to provide teachers with a focus for instruction and to measure the direct impact of that focus in order to show an improvement in student achievement. Implicitly, the goal of the TLCP is to bring about a change in teacher practice, but unfortunately this message is diluted, for various reasons relating to the parameters around the kinds of feedback teachers receive about their practice.

In kindergarten classrooms what transpired was that students were often sitting for extended periods of time in “mini-lessons” related to the pre-chosen cluster of expectations that the teacher had decided to address over the eight week period. These lessons were often followed by a writing task. Because of this, many kindergarten teachers felt either a disconnect between the kindergarten expectations and how they measured kindergarten achievement qualitatively, as required and designed by the very nature of the pathway, and/or pressure to have students produce work that may have been beyond what would be developmentally appropriate for this age group at a particular time.

With these conditions in place many teachers started to engage in a re-examination of kindergarten programs and began to question the effectiveness of the TLCP processes as they had been implemented in their classrooms. This, I believe, provided a springboard for some teachers’ willingness to participate in the book study. It certainly created a willingness in most teachers in RDSB to explore new possibilities for their teaching practice and to consider concepts that were much more student focused. Change was needed in the kindergarten classrooms of the RDSB and teachers were seeking alternatives; the Ministry of Education’s announcement of the new Early Learning – Kindergarten Program provided a catalyst for this discussion and a sense of hope that things could be different.

Preparing for the EL-K

The K-1 project team had been exploring a social constructivist approach to learning. The superintendent on this project had travelled to Reggio Emilia, Italy just prior to the beginning of this

research. Reggio Emilia is a municipality recognized worldwide for excellence in their approach to early childhood education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2008). The superintendent saw a link between the work the teachers in the K-1 project were working on and the Reggio Emilia approach. Through her experiences there, she was able to provide a context for further exploration into the theory and concepts introduced in Reggio Emilia preschools.

At the end of January 2010, we attended a two-day conference at Bishop Strachan School (BSS) in Toronto hosted by the Friends of Reggio Emilia. BSS had embraced the Reggio Emilia approach to education and the ideas and concepts of Reggio Emilia schools were deeply embedded in their programs. Three concepts resonated deeply with the work we were starting in RDSB kindergartens: the image of the child as being competent, strong and intelligent; the social constructivist approach to education; and the way the Reggio Emilia approach makes visible children's thinking, understanding and learning.

With the announcement of the EL-K we decided to start thinking about what the Reggio Emilia approach would look like in RDSB schools. So, in early February, a group of teachers went to Toronto to visit some classrooms that were implementing a Reggio Emilia approach. The teachers who went on the trip were chosen based on two criteria: first, that they were teaching the kindergarten program in a site that had been identified as an EL-K site for the 2010-2011 school year; and second, they had indicated an interest in seeing the Reggio Emilia approach in a classroom setting.

It was after this trip that teachers who had participated in this trip, and others who had indicated interest in this trip but could not attend due to funding limitations, were invited to participate in the book study. All but two teachers who were invited accepted the invitation.

The book study

The book study began in early March and ran twice monthly through to June. Initially, there were fourteen participants. Through the duration of the book study the participant number grew to nineteen. The group included teachers with a wide range of teaching experience, and there was representation from each of the EL-K identified schools. As the participant number grew, each one of the teachers who had

An Early Learning Journey...

been assigned to an EL-K classroom for the fall of 2010 was participating in the book study. Participation was completely voluntary.

The teachers who participated were incredibly diverse. Most noted was the various levels of enthusiasm for the EL-K program and the accompanying attitude with which they approached the program. There seemed to be three distinct groups that emerged. First, the enthusiasts: these participants displayed a high level of excitement and willingness to take risks, often attempting to implement the ideas being discussed at the book study in their classrooms. These participants spoke openly and candidly during the book study sessions. Second, the observers: these participants listened and sometimes contributed to the dialogue during sessions. However, they did not necessarily apply any of the ideas or shared learning in their classrooms. These participants often remained on the periphery during the dialogue but would occasionally engage. These participants were often curious and hesitant. Third, the critics: there was a very small proportion of the participants who were often resistant to the ideas introduced in the sessions. **Whether or not their age or teaching experience is an indicator, it is worth mentioning that these critics were often the senior participants both in age and in experience.**

One of the concerns I had that continued to resurface throughout the duration of the book study was the impact that the critics had on the overall tone of the sessions. There were times that the only voice that was heard was that of the critics. Other participants expressed their discomfort and reluctance to engage in the dialogue because they felt uneasy about the climate and didn't always trust other participants due to the negative attitude of the critics.

The participants in the book study were at various points in their understanding of the Reggio approach and in their willingness to engage with and embrace the ideas presented through the session with an open mind. For many participants, social constructivism was a new concept when reflecting on their practice. It was difficult to gauge whether or not participants fully understood the implications for practice should they desire to explore this theoretical framework in greater depth. In the sessions, we talked about the role of the teacher as observer, researcher, documenter and participant in the learning. It is my belief that participants' understanding of, and willingness to entertain, these teacher roles varied

greatly. In many ways, we merely scratched the surface in our understanding and examination of these roles.

For all of the participants, the Reggio Emilia approach was brand new. We examined several themes as participants read through the readings. The themes included: the use of the environment as the third teacher, the use of materials, the arts in the early learning program, relationships, emergent curriculum and documentation. For all of the participants, these concepts were reflective of new learning. Many participants fully embraced and wanted to explore these ideas at deeper levels. For these participants, I was able to provide extensions for implementation through the K-1 Collaborative Inquiry project.

What was most interesting about the book study was that in most ways all participants were at the same starting point in the knowledge component. What was obviously different among the participants was their willingness to engage, and to what depth. What was also different was the attitude with which participants approached these concepts and the degree to which they would examine their own practice as they learned more about social constructivism and the Reggio Emilia approach.

My goals for the book study

At the onset of the of the book study, the goal was to begin exploring the Reggio Emilia approach. I had a deep rooted desire to see a change in the approach to the kindergarten program to ensure that the program that was offered in Rainbow schools was of the highest quality and that the EL-K program, and the expectations outlined in that document, could be implemented in a social constructivist approach to early learning.

One of the differences or changes in thinking that I hoped would emerge was the image of the child. One of the pillars of the Reggio approach is the image of the child as strong, intelligent and competent. The image of the child, or what is believed about the condition of the child, directly impacts the kind of instruction or the approach that is possible. If one believes that the child comes to school with experiences, understanding, knowledge, skill, competencies and abilities, then teachers can focus on the extension of this pre-existing intelligence. If one believes that the child is an empty vessel, absent of

An Early Learning Journey...

knowledge and deep thought then the task becomes filling the child with the teacher's level of intelligence and those things that the teacher deems important, relevant and meaningful (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Project Zero & Reggio Emilia, 2001). I hoped that through this book study the teachers involved would start to see children in a manner that was reflective of the Reggio Emilia approach.

I firmly believed that if teachers began to question their image of the child, then the way in which they taught would also come into question and would create an opportunity for deep reflection on practice. I hoped that teachers would see that their view of the child influenced their pedagogy. One of the criteria that would allow me to have an indication of this changing perspective would be the degree to which teachers were willing to listen to and observe children and provide opportunities for children to be self-directed in their learning. Another indicator would be the degree to which teachers would "step back" from their practice and begin to relinquish some of the control. Doing so would allow teachers to observe and listen to the children more, and in turn begin to reflect on the many ways that children could demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. This would also allow children the opportunity to take the reins on some of their learning and construct meaning with one another, as opposed to meaning being constructed by the teacher with a predetermined format for evidence of student understanding. It was my hope that the reading selections and the dialogue with others would provide teachers with a forum in which they could explore and reflect on these concepts.

There was never an explicit expectation placed on teachers to begin implementing the ideas that were discussed during book study sessions. The expectation of book study was merely to read and be willing to dialogue with others about what was read. However, implicit on my behalf was a hope and a gentle prodding to have teachers change some of their practice to reflect their growing understanding of a social constructivist model and to incorporate some of the philosophies of the Reggio approach. It was to my great satisfaction that this began to occur.

My personal goals

Throughout this project, I also had personal goals. As a consultant, one of my main areas of responsibility is to facilitate a change in teacher practice. This begs the question: what conditions need to

An Early Learning Journey...

exist in order to facilitate a change in teacher practice? I am driven by a deep curiosity as to what role, if any, does social construction, like that within a book study, play in bringing about a change in beliefs that translates to a change in practice (Wenger, 1998)? I am curious as to how constructing a shared meaning or understanding about how children learn and make meaning can create a change in teacher practice and, fundamentally, in beliefs about how we learn. What is at the heart of this inquiry is the teacher's ability to question and reflect on the impact that they have in the classroom.

Research Methods

This research is a self-study looking at how my leading of the book study impacted the lives of the teachers who participated. It was action based and I made adjustments to the research model and questioning as the research progressed (Zeichner & Noffke, 1998). The evidence collected was attendance at the book study, teacher reflections, and teacher participation in dialogue as evidenced through my own reflections and anecdotal records, and teachers' willingness to take risks by implementing some of the ideas discussed in the resources we were reading. This data was collected at each of the monthly book studies and analyzed for patterns using a constant comparative method (Cresswell, 1996; Patton, 2002). These findings were then shared with a small group of the participants of the book study as a form of member checking.

Based on what I was finding in my research I would pose questions to the book study participants for reflection on the readings. These questions were often emailed to the participants ahead of time so that they could contemplate them while they read. I was intentional in my questions in that I tried to pose questions that would target the beliefs that teachers held and the implications that those beliefs had on their practice. Occasionally I posed additional questions to the group during the book study. In many cases these questions came out of concerns I was noting about the various levels of understanding of the participants. Many times these questions were an attempt to gauge where teachers were at in their thinking.

An Early Learning Journey...

Another strategy that I used throughout the entire process was asking particular teachers to share some of the things they had been trying out in the classroom. I tapped into the enthusiast group and tried to provide them with extensions that would allow them to implement and engage in a hands-on way. I was able to do this as an extension of the K-1 Collaborative Inquiry project. In one instance, two grade one teachers explored the use of open-ended materials in their classrooms and how open-ended materials provided children with an opportunity to collaborate with one another and build oral language skills as they communicated about the materials and interacted with one another. As suspected, this group demonstrated a desire to do so and was eager to share their experiences with the group, reporting on their findings with the book study group and with the Ministry of Education through a face-to-face forum.

Participation was critical for success. In my mind, the degree to which the EL-K program vision could be implemented was dependent upon the degree to which teachers were willing to attend the study and hear more about the direction for early learning. One way I was able to encourage regular attendance was to follow up with participants, either by asking them to share something specific they had been doing, or by encouraging them and supporting them through email. I genuinely invested in each one of the participants and tried to ensure that when they attended book study their presence was valued and appreciated

I recognized that although the book study began as a result of my initiative, I could not be the sole owner of it. The participants needed to feel some ownership over the process and the resulting artifacts for them to take ownership of their own learning and for a community of practice to form (Wenger, 1998). So, I made a conscious choice to rely on the participants' contributions to drive the book study. I was also keenly aware of where my expertise lay and where I too needed to continue in my own learning. Acknowledging the strengths and skills that others brought, and allowing those participants a voice in the sessions gave the participants ownership over the book study. In turn, others were able to demonstrate their skills and have an opportunity for leadership within the sessions. Providing a forum for others to share their ideas and experiences allowed for further social construction of the experience and allowed multiple perspectives to come to light and to truly create a community of practice.

To attempt to measure the degree to which people have changed practice as a result of participation in the book study would be difficult and would be dependent on the participants' willingness to divulge that information. I recognize that for some participants this would not be an issue, and many did so voluntarily, but not every one in the group. Interestingly, during my classroom visits I found that a couple of participants who I thought were skeptics due to their periphery position during discussions were actually engaged, albeit at different levels of implementation. This was a welcome surprise. It was only because of my visits to these classrooms that I discovered that indeed these teachers were beginning to implement some of the practices that we had read about.

I had the opportunity to witness the quality of work in five different classrooms. Each of these teachers participated in the book study sessions with regular attendance. Two of the teachers taught grade one, and three taught kindergarten. I noted two trends within these five classrooms. The first was the willingness of the teacher to observe students more closely, and in doing so to assume the role of facilitator. Second was the degree to which the children were able to dialogue with one another, ask questions and solve problems. It is my belief that these two findings are directly related. This was an unexpected but rich source of data for this study.

Indicators of success

One of the main indications that the book study had made a difference in teacher practice was the degree to which teachers could articulate their understanding or their change in thinking about the themes that were discussed in the book study. Their willingness to engage and speak candidly and openly about their questions, their reservations and their excitement would be an indicator of the success of the sessions. Knowing that people have different comfort levels in these settings and that trust is a major factor in one's willingness to engage were also extenuating factors.

Attendance at the book study, regardless of level of participation in the dialogue, was also an indicator of success. Book study participation was strictly voluntary and was scheduled outside of the workday. Teachers' participation was strictly on their own time and, given the frequency of the sessions, the degree to which participants attended the sessions was an indicator of success.

Findings

Through the various discussions during the book study, it became apparent that teachers had a desire to observe the students in their classroom but felt that direct, explicit instruction was the greater responsibility, thus leaving little time to observe what students were saying and doing. Teachers were concerned that colleagues or administrators would question their behaviour if they were to enter the room while observation was occurring. There was also some dialogue about what exactly teachers would be looking for during these observation times. The challenge then was to take the risk and just watch children in their interactions with one another and in their interactions with materials.

Learning from children

The book study group had spent half of the sessions exploring the use of open-ended materials in the classroom, through the book Beautiful Stuff!: Learning with Found Materials (Weisman, Topal & Gandini, 1999). Many teachers had begun introducing open-ended materials to the students. One teacher remarked that had she known the impact of such materials when addressing math concepts, she would have “introduced them in September.” I approached two grade one teachers and asked them if they would be willing to present an invitation to students to use open-ended materials (clay and various recycled or reusable building materials) and document their students’ conversations as they explored these materials. I also asked if they would be willing to share these findings with the other book study participants and with the K-1 Collaborative Inquiry team during the face-to-face session with the Ministry of Education. Both teachers agreed.

As the teachers documented the students’ interactions with the materials they noted the degree to which students used new language to describe what they were feeling through their senses, especially when interacting with the clay. They also noted that students used the materials in ways they did not anticipate, as students were not given specific instructions on how to use the materials. For many children, it was their first experience with clay and they needed time to experiment with its properties before attempting to construct anything. What teachers also noted was the engagement in dialogue among

the children. The children were eager and excited to talk to one another as they explored the materials. They assisted one another, provided support and suggestions and encouraged one another.

An example of the change in perspective that this approach produced

In one of the grade one classrooms where open ended materials had been introduced three boys were working with various building materials (toilet paper and paper towel rolls, string, popsicle sticks, glue, etc.) in order to construct a bridge. They were engaged in active negotiation with one another regarding the construction process, which materials to use and how to reinforce the structure. During this time, one child had a moment where he recognized the dynamics of working in a group and the joy in doing so. There was an awareness of the various roles people play in a group and the recognition that his role was critical. Following the explanation of the challenge, to build a bridge using the found materials, M and O moved directly to the materials for exploration. D began to look through the reference book:

M - I think we can use long sticks and put popsicle sticks across.

O - but we will need glue

D - I think we should make this one (referring to picture of a bridge in the book).

M - How about that one? But you would have to break it like a sidewalk. Oh – that's a gate so the boat can go through. It goes up and down. The boats have to wait until it goes up.

D - Let's get started. We need string and tape. We're gonna need some toothpicks.

Now we're gonna be handymans! Kid handymans!

M - We're mixing materials — do you remember? It makes them stronger, like in the 3 Little Pigs.

D - I know. You do the bags and sticks, the big ones, and I'll do the popsicle part. We're working like a team.

O - The tall stick is wobbling.

D - If you tape it like a flower it might be stronger. Look.

M - If we add popsicle sticks to the side it might be stronger too.

D - Yeah! It's working!

O - Mrs. S. Try to wobble it after I tape both of these sides! See? It's strong.

M - It's getting more stronger. Tape and sticks makes the bag stronger. I'm making the road of the bridge. It goes like this.

O - But how are the men and the cars going to get up there?

M - Oh, we can make a sidewalk for them.

M - But I don't know why it is causing the bending in the middle. (He proceeds to turn his bridge deck over and reinforce it from the back.) That's better.

D - We can make a opening handle controller to open the bridge. You have to use your hand. Roll it like this. That way the tall boats can go through.

D - I'm working on the posts. We need a cap so it doesn't rain in there.

M - Let's use bottle caps! I'll get some.

That will work.

Not that size.

Perfect!

An Early Learning Journey...

M - O, shouldn't you be working?
O - But I'm making a boat.
M - Oh. D, are you going to finish the bridge thing what goes up and down – the gate?
What else do we need?
D - I have an idea!
M - These can be the docks for when the boat stops and the people climb on.
D - Oh yeah! Nice thinking!
M - But how will the people get down? We need something to get them down, like stairs.
D - We are almost down. Then we can do the details.
M - (stops what he is working on) Oh, this is a detail. I'll finish it later.
O - We need a flag. We need to make it New York. It's the New York Bridge.
D - But this is the New York Bridge. (Pointing to a photo in the book)
O - There's 2 New York Bridges. This is one too! It's a Brooklyn Bridge.
M - Why is it a Brooklyn Bridge?
D - Because it's by a city called Brooklyn.
M - Where's that?
D - Maybe by where our pen pals live? I think anyway. Yeah.
M - Do you agree with me D? Should we cut this off so it won't be in the boat's way.
Maybe we could make it short.
D - You just gave me a idea for the boats! Let's test the boat out. Good thinking. It's
working. Yeah shorter is best.
O - Try it! (On encouraging the team to test the car over the bridge.)
M - Oh, it fell. It's falling. We need tape.
D - We need more lines, more triangles. They're strong. Look in the picture (referring to
book). There are Xs. Lots of Xs. Let's try some.
M - Xs are the strongest part.
O - Time to try it again.
M - The back wheels don't fit. (About the car)
D - I'm going to have to take the back wheels off. Who made it? Is it okay if I take the
wheels off? I'll make them shorter. M, didn't you make the car?
O - I'm making a part of the Brooklyn Bridge. It's a big triangle on top. See? (Takes M &
O to book to see).
M - It's different. It's like a drawbridge. Look.
O - Oh. It's okay. We can have the triangle part too. Ours can be different that way.

Day 2

O - Hey everyone, we need to have another road and stairs so the people can get up to the
sidewalk. They can't just get up from the ocean! Aagh! Maybe we can build an elevator?
M - Yeah, the guys can go down the slide, but they can't get up.
D - That's the problem. That's it! Let's build a tall ladder. Let's get started on it now.
D - When I'm finished with this part of the ladder, I'm going to attach it.
O - D, do you want to come help me buddy? I need to make the cable wires. You can make
them however.
O - M, you work on the ladder. I work on the cables with D. We're working together right?
Working on different things is working together! You do that, I do the ladder and we're still
working together--- just different jobs.

The teacher working with these students reflected on how this conversation may have never occurred had she provided the students with explicit instruction on how to construct the bridge or what materials to use,

An Early Learning Journey...

and had she grouped them herself. She also reflected that she did not have to intervene with this group as they worked; due to the level of engagement, the children were very motivated to problem solve on their own. She also mentioned that she might not have captured this conversation if she had not been intentional about observing the children while they engaged in this activity.

In my own reflections on her work, two things stood out. First was how her intentional choice of materials allowed the students an opportunity to develop various skills related to both science and mathematical concepts, but also how the materials allowed the children to problem solve, use their imaginations and negotiate with one another. Second was how the children connected these experiences both to their background knowledge and their experiences with literacy. They were able to reference literacy materials in a very authentic and natural way. This allowed the children to develop their awareness about the purpose and usefulness of reference materials.

Teachers Sharing

After this experience, the teacher and I shared with one another the various curriculum expectations that we felt had been demonstrated over these two days. We were both astonished and thrilled that not only were there an excess of twenty specific expectations that were noted, but that they crossed four different curriculum learning areas including math, science, language, and visual arts.

This teacher shared her reflections with the book study group during one of the following sessions, along with other teachers who had introduced open-ended materials to their class. The teachers shared that the use of open-ended materials allowed them further insight into their students. In some cases, students who were typically more introverted found their “voice” and participated with greater enthusiasm and dialogue.

In speaking with these teachers in regard to their practice, they expressed a strong desire to continue using open-ended materials in new ways with their students. One teacher stated: “I will continue with the intentional focus of materials for discovery/exploratory centres. [They are] sources of motivation and a context for exploration and experimentation that enhances language and learning.” We discussed how intentionality with materials would allow students to expand and deepen their understanding of

An Early Learning Journey...

concepts they had begun to explore. We talked about the bridge building and how providing the students with other materials, such as wood, could broaden their skills and allow them to experiment with various concepts regarding strength and stability. We also discussed that allowing the students time with new materials is essential before they can begin to represent, and that there is a skill base in working with materials that students need to develop as well.

During the book study, each of these teachers noted that their observation of students allowed them to bear witness to the depth of understanding that students demonstrated. One kindergarten teacher shared her strategy for observation and documentation. She talked about how, for her, it was more beneficial to position herself at the materials and document which children engaged with them and to observe what they did rather than trying to observe all the children and follow them around the room. What the teachers agreed on was the importance of stepping back and just watching what children were doing and saying. One teacher commented that in doing this she was able to better see where different children were at in their understanding, and could then better plan for individual next steps.

All of the five teachers agreed that their students' dialogue with one another was richer than they had anticipated. All five teachers commented that the children used words to describe their experiences that they had not expected. In many cases, when the teachers had documented the conversations that children were having, the more advanced children were scaffolding the learning for the others by providing language and experiential knowledge to help others problem solve and explain their thinking. What began as a simple invitation to read turned into one of the greatest learning experiences of my career.

My own growth

My own learning came as a result of several circumstances. It was my intention to use the book study sessions as my own classroom and to learn from the participants as I would my students. This allowed me to investigate the power of intentionality. I had to be thoughtful about what concepts and ideas in the readings would be topics for dialogue. I was intentional in asking questions to the group both

An Early Learning Journey...

during the sessions and as they read the various selections of text. I was very intentional about the articles I chose to support the reading, and mindful of the references and research I shared.

I explored intentionality deeply and in ways I never had before. I thought about how the choices I made as a facilitator impacted the group and the way they engaged. I also thought about how my questions either invited or inhibited the conversations that were occurring (or not). I came to understand that the choices I make have an impact, whether consciously or unconsciously. When thinking about my past practice in the classroom, I came to realize how my values and beliefs about children and the way they learn were visible in the classroom and, in turn, imposed directly on students. I have a much greater awareness of the impact and implications of the role of the “teacher”.

Implications

As I begin to prepare for facilitating the book study next year, I will take into consideration the importance of group norms. It was evident that not all participants were reading the selections. Some participants recognized this and thought it unfair that they were taking the time to read while others were not. I think that at the onset agreement from group members about reading is important. I believe that developing consensus regarding reading will be critical for participants and their willingness to attend and engage. Notably, it is difficult to have rich dialogue about a particular concept or idea if only half the group is familiar with it; that said I need to be intentional about making sure that we have the opportunity for rich dialogue regarding the readings in my planning.

I will continue to invite group members to share their expertise. I believe that shared ownership is crucial to success. I also believe that I have much to learn from others and I learned a great deal from the teachers involved in the book study this year. As a consultant, I rely upon the classroom practice of others to inform my own learning. I am dependent upon classroom teachers and their feedback for my own learning.

In response to the desire of the participants involved in the book study, I ran a Summer Institute to explore social constructivism and the Reggio Emilia approach in greater depth. The Summer Institute was a two-day teacher workshop provided in the summer that was funded by the Literacy and Numeracy

An Early Learning Journey...

Secretariat division of the Ontario Ministry of Education. I received special permission from the secretariat to specialize this workshop for early learning/kindergarten teachers with a play-based learning focus. Typically, attendance for a Summer Institute is quite modest. Given that it is run during the summer, during teacher vacation time, there is usually a small turnout, often ten to fifteen teachers. I was both excited and overwhelmed when the Early Learning sessions exceeded forty participants.

The two days focused primarily on overarching themes of play-based learning, including the value of play, the use of open-ended materials, arts integration, observation, exploration and inquiry and assessment. It was a weighty agenda and although there was an overwhelmingly positive response, I did note that some teachers felt overwhelmed and a little unsure of how play-based learning fits along with balanced literacy and explicit instruction which has been the “push” for instructional practice in the past, even in kindergarten. This is something we will have to address in the upcoming year.

Next steps

I recognize that throughout the next year the EL-K classrooms will be models for play-based learning as it is conceptualized in RDSB. On more than one occasion teachers have commented that they need to “see it in action” in order to better understand the concept. Many teachers also commented that they weren’t confident that they could articulate the actual learning that was taking place in a play-based scenario. I have confidence that the more opportunities that kindergarten teachers have to dialogue with one another, visit play-based classrooms and see the benefits of this model, the greater the confidence and ease they will feel.

It is clear from this action research that there needs to be a continuation of and addition to book studies. The core group of teachers who participated in the initial book study will be invited back, along with Early Childhood Educators that are working in partnerships with these teachers, to again participate in a book study. Two books have been chosen for these book studies: Designs for Living and Learning (2003) and Learning Together with Young Children (2007), both by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter. Currently the plan is to offer one after school session a month, for a total of ten sessions throughout the school year. During the Summer Institute, several teachers expressed a desire to continue the dialogue

they had begun with colleagues, and to address this groundswell of interest we will expand the book study to include all interested kindergarten teachers in separate, geographically local book studies.

There several things I have learned as a result of both the K-1 Collaborative Inquiry project and the book study. Although my focus has been primarily on teacher practice, I believe that the decisions, beliefs, and values that teachers hold directly impact student success. The degree to which we see the child as capable, intelligent, full of potential and possibility, and the degree to which we see ourselves as having a major influence on the emotional, physical and academic success of a child, can enhance or inhibit that child's success.

My personal change

My practice has changed as a result of this research. First, I recognize the impact of my position as a consultant and that it very much mirrors teacher impact in the classroom. I have come to be very mindful of the ways in which I articulate my thoughts, ideas and beliefs as it can often determine how a relationship with a particular teacher will unfold. I have learned that as a consultant my job is very much about relationships and trust. What I have come to understand in greater depth is the parallel between my role as a consultant and the dynamics of the relationships I hold with teachers, and the dynamics that occur between teachers and students in the classroom. For me, the relationship I have with teachers, and my ability to assist them in their practice, plays a significant role in the development of the relationships that those teachers have with their students. Throughout my own study of the Reggio Emilia approach, I have come to understand that education is about relationships. It is about the relationships that children have with teachers, their families, each other and their world. In turn, a large part of my role is to develop relationships with teachers that in turn will allow them to develop deeper, truer relationships with their students and their students' families.

I have always believed in the strength of a child. Throughout the book study and this research my ideas about the intelligence and strength of children has been further reinforced. I have come to believe, at its most fundamental level, that when teachers operate from a place where they see each child as significant, intelligent, thoughtful, and even as a teacher, then the possibilities to engage in a reciprocal

An Early Learning Journey...

learning experience fuelled by inquiry and exploration, for both the child and the teacher, are limitless. When we begin with the idea that through constructing meaning together (both teacher and child) we are able to deepen one another's learning and understanding and, in doing so, continually build a relationship so that the interchange of ideas and thinking is fluid and continuous, then we are able to truly teach one another.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this inquiry I was curious about the circumstances necessary for change in teacher practice. There were a couple of questions I began to explore as the book study began. First, what conditions allow for a change in thinking and/or practice as it pertains to the implementation of the EL-K program? Second, how does a book study support the possibility of change?

It appears as though one of the main components that allowed for a change in some teachers' practice was an opportunity for, and permission to, change. When I think of the "enthusiasts" in the book study, these teachers only needed an opportunity to come together, share their thinking, ask questions and formulate their thinking in order to create change in their practice. These teachers wanted information, and in some cases a model, in order to feel as though they could change their practice. I should also state that these teachers were willing to take risks and in doing so were able to remain open to the concepts and ideas that would require them to change.

I also believe that it was the social setting and a relatively risk-free environment that allowed teachers to feel like they could make some changes, even small changes, to their practice. For some teachers it was beginning to use open-ended materials with greater frequency, in other cases it was a re-organization of the classroom, or allowing students greater choice and opportunities for self-direction. The book study supported a change in teacher practice because it provided teachers who wanted and were willing to change with information and with the opportunity to exchange ideas. For those teachers who perhaps were more resistant to the ideas or more reluctant to change, it provided an opportunity to hear about how it was unfolding for others.

An Early Learning Journey...

What remains is that the teachers who implemented a change in practice in this particular study changed their practice because they felt that they could. There was enough support in place, they had enough information, they had a desire to change and, collectively, they found meaning and reason through the exchange of ideas with others.

The book study provided a low risk forum for change. It provided a forum where taking risks was encouraged and teachers felt they had permission to try new things. It became apparent in this study that teachers do not want to feel like they are “doing it wrong” in their teaching. Throughout the book study there were several occasions where teachers asked the question, “Are we allowed to do that?” For me, this was always an intriguing question. I often let that question hang in the air. Thankfully, the ongoing support of senior administration provided teachers with the backing that they felt was needed. It was this support and the environment created at the book study that gave teachers permission to experiment in their teaching and make real changes to their practices.

I know that it is impossible to replicate this year’s experience, but there are several lessons we can take forward and apply to next year’s book studies. Most importantly there needs to be an environment that encourages risk taking and gives teachers permission to experiment with their pedagogical practice. There needs to be a sense of collegiality where all members of the various books studies feel they belong and where they actively participate, sharing their various areas of expertise. Each book study will be different because the people in the groups will be different; each member will bring their own interests and needs. This will provide new challenges for me as I prepare for the upcoming year, but it will also offer new opportunities for me to learn and grow as I build new relationships in each group and as we construct our learning together.

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An Early Learning Journey...

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