

## ***Inquiry is the medium; narrations are the message.***

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Our path to documentation started when we met Kim Atkinson and Danielle Davis, founders of the Images of Learning project, at the ECEBC conference. Their webpage and conference sessions inspired us to question how knowledge is constructed in early childhood settings and how to assess learning. Kim's article, "Pedagogical Narration: What it's all about?", moved us to learn more about documentation. In the fall of 2012, we invited them to work with a group of ECE and Kindergarten teachers in Fort St. John.

Kim and Danielle taught us a protocol for preparing and sharing narrations. First we took photos of ordinary moments of play. We recorded our observations, impressions, predictions and questions. When meeting monthly, one person shared a narration while colleagues listened. The group then asked questions and offered comments while the speaker listened and took notes. Finally the speaker responded to the group, not answering each and every idea but speaking to the entire experience and what intrigued them. This structured communication routine gave us freedom to process information and deepen our understanding.

This method, however, requires practice and our first year of meetings has been consumed with learning the ropes and building trust. At first, the narrations were the entire focus of our learning and took up a lot of time and energy. But with practice, the narrations are becoming a manageable, rewarding tool for learning about the children in our care and about learning about ourselves.

Lana Scott-Moncrieff, an experienced StrongStart facilitator, expressed concern over her choice of a "moment", whether her observations were valid or if the presentation was professional enough. We all agreed that sharing our initial narrations was an emotionally risky endeavor. What surprised us, however, was how much support we drew from the group, both professional and personal. We are all committed to proceeding on this project together yet there is an uncertainty about what we are accomplishing in the long term and where we go from here?

A foray into inquiry action research provided us with an opportunity to focus our attention while playing with narrations. For those new to action research, it is a method for people to engage in systemic inquiry and investigation. It allows us to 'design' a plan to meet a goal and then evaluate its effectiveness. The 'plan' is devised by following a simple recurring three-step cycle of *look, think, and act*. (Stringer, 2007). Narrations caused us to 'look' at things differently. This new way of looking led us naturally to a cycle of inquiry.

Last winter, between January and May, Lana and I started a research project in StrongStart with playdough, using photographs and narrations as our assessment tool. At first, it seemed that we had bitten off more than we could chew. How could we do our regular jobs, add on narrations and complete a research project? Surprisingly we found that the research project, instead of being a burden, provided a structure and scaffold for the rest of our regular tasks. It lightened the load somehow because we got so excited.

Although Lana and I have worked together for five years, we have never collaborated directly. As co-researchers, we forged a new kind of relationship. I was curious about the use of novel materials and sensory experiences with playdough while Lana wanted an authentic opportunity to practice narrations in her StrongStart program. The shared project gave us a genuine reason to sit down together. We called each other more often and texted almost daily. Our communication became more natural and working together was invigorating, not an extra chore. It was fun.

On a weekly or sometimes bi-weekly basis, we switched scent, colour and texture in the playdough and presented natural materials for families to use. Lana took many photos and wrote notes, approximately three moments per week. Some observations got typed into formal narrations while others remained hand written notes. Several observations did not progress beyond sticky notes and photos placed into a binder for later reference. It wasn't a precise process but each step was relevant and valuable. We were learning and thinking actively about our decisions. More specifically, we started examining our thinking not just our actions. This is called meta-cognition. It was a professionally rejuvenating process.

The project changed the way we take photos. Over the years, we've accumulated binders of photos of smiling faces, cute costumes and perfectly completed crafts. We now watch for clues to what children are thinking or testing. There are a lot less orchestrated, perfect pictures and more panoramic shots to include context to the situation. The narration photos value the process, not the product, which we believe was often being photographed as praise. The photos have meaning beyond the moment. They are research data. We have started displaying them on the walls, not just as art, but as conversation starters.

Our action research prompted Lana to share her narrations with StrongStart families. This took a lot of courage and accomplished several interesting things. It gave Lana some concrete examples to share with families of learning through play. It gave her an authentic reason to engage families in conversation about their child's strengths and interests. This opened the door for conversations about multiple intelligences and temperament. We've found that narrations allow us to look at learning through new eyes. It gave us concrete data of equal or greater value to parents than memorizing the ABCs and 123s.

During this inquiry project, I really appreciated having an assessment tool that was visual, qualitative and formative. The photos, even without written observation, provided information for students, parents and educators about engagement. The written assessments were about questions, motivation, emotions, knowledge and creativity, not just a measurement of comparative development or time on task. They were personalized, not generic. They tell a story. Each observation led to more questions and greater investment in the student's thinking, not a judgment of their product. The narrations highlighted competencies in communication, problem-solving, creative and innovative thinking, team work and collaboration and cross cultural understanding. These competencies are the focus of the BC Ed Plan driving curriculum change in schools. This shifted focus promotes an evolution of the traditional "Kindergarten Readiness" conversation.

The action research project was also a great equalizer of power within our learning community. When discussing the research, the playing field was leveled. It was not administrators and teachers talking, not teachers and students, not

educators and parents, but people sharing ideas as co-researchers. We were communicating diverse and equally valid perspectives on a topic of mutual interest. Action research facilitates a democratic, participatory, liberating and life-enhancing approach to research. It “envisages a collaborative approach to investigation that seeks to engage ‘subjects’ as equal and full participants in the research process” (Stringer, 2007).

What we’ve learned from pedagogical narrations has challenged us to rethink materials and physical environment, speak authentically with families and promote metacognition in children. It is a career-altering tool. Action research has empowered us to use narrations consistently and for a specific reason. It generated professional excitement. Surprisingly, it also fostered a friendship where before was a professional politeness.

This year we discovered that inquiry, assessment and relationships go hand in hand. Action research was the medium; narrations are the message, friendship was the icing on the cake. We learned that changing materials changes play. For the most part, novel, beautiful, natural materials increase engagement and sustain play but not for everyone and not all the time. Some materials deter play and we learned to respect that. Interestingly, focusing our questions and methods of gathering data has deepened our perception of play as research. And we now believe that if we take risks and conduct our own research, it motivates and restores us. It’s another form of play. That is what we also want for children. If we conduct research, they will too.

*Want to hear more about our project or learn more about action research? Email [jturner@prn.bc.ca](mailto:jturner@prn.bc.ca) or [lscottmoncrieff@prn.bc.ca](mailto:lscottmoncrieff@prn.bc.ca).*

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## What is Inquiry/Action Research?

Here are some basic steps in the cycles of research and meta-cognition.

1. Observe your environment. What do you notice? What are you curious about? Define and describe your situation with photos, journaling and notes.
2. Do some reading. Talk to colleagues. Explore and analyze how and why things might be the way they are?
3. Make a plan to change something. Keep it simple and concise. Implement your plan. Record your observations, feelings and ideas as you go through the process. Evaluate what happens, both inside yourself and in the environment.
4. Share what you learned, especially if it surprised you! Speaking and writing about your research is both motivating and rewarding. This is a collaborative process.
5. Start again! What do you notice now?  
(Stringer, 2007)

## References

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