

The Quality is in the Conversation: A Collaboration Between ECEs and Primary Teachers in Fort St. John

BY JAIMELIA TURNER AND STEPHEN PETRUCCI

What does the early learning “community” look like in your city? Are ECEs and kindergarten teachers working together to support families and each other? In School District 60 (Peace River North), we are experimenting with the notion of community. We are fostering partnerships and communication between the early learning community and primary teachers. As we are seeing across the educational spectrum, conversations about quality learning experiences are key to initiating change. These conversations between educators, parents, and the children themselves co-construct our understanding of what play-based learning is and what it accomplishes.

For several years, kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators in our community have spoken with us about how similar our work is but how separated we are from each other. From our parents, we are often asked, “How do I get my children ready for kindergarten?” as if early learning serves only to prep for “real” learning. We, as educators, understand that children are always learning, regardless of age or environment. Yet our messages to parents are not consistent and the importance of play across the learning spectrum is unclear. We started looking for ways to clarify our messages. We decided to begin with a conversation.

At the May 2012 ECEBC conference, we attended a session on the Investigating Quality Project from the University of Victoria with Kim Atkinson and Danielle Davis. During that workshop, Kim and Danielle demonstrated a practice called pedagogical narration whereby they openly describe a moment in their practice to a group of peers. More specifically, the educator tells a story—often accompanied by images of the child/children—among colleagues who then ask questions or make comments about the story. This is not a problem-solving process; it is a pure reflection that is articulated and discussed among colleagues to gain insight into children and how we interact with them. It is about finding the questions, not the answers. This approach is also strongly supported in the BC Early Learning Framework in similar language. We were inspired by this collaborative approach to reflecting on practice and subsequently invited Kim and Danielle to Fort St. John. Fortunately, they agreed! This also set the stage for us to create related opportunities in our district.

By applying for existing collaboration funds to release teachers and by inviting community ECEs to participate, we were able to offer two novel opportunities to educators in our community. First we opened 30 spots to work directly with Kim and Danielle during two dates in Octo-

For several years, kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators in our community have spoken with us about how similar our work is but how separated we are from each other. We decided to begin with a conversation.

ber and February, re-examining our image of the child and learning to use pedagogical narration to capture and report our observations of emergent curriculum. The second opportunity is for six ECEs and six kindergarten teachers to come together four times over the school year to pilot a community of practice. We wanted to further explore pedagogical narration and identify common understandings to share with parents. We anticipate the extra meeting time will accelerate our implementation of pedagogical narration and the shift in focus that it ignites. We also hope that the continued contact and professional support we offer each other will translate to improved communication between the ECEs and teachers involved.

Articles

Although Kim and Danielle challenged our deeply held beliefs about who controls the agenda in our classes, it was easy to see the potential benefits of a change in perspective. After sharing a pedagogical narration on young children using moveable materials to drive their own learning, Kim posed the question “What parts of the kindergarten curriculum are being addressed in this example?” The overwhelming response was that it addressed most areas of the curriculum. In fact, one teacher noted, “It would be easier to tell you what it doesn’t touch on.”

As teachers, this was a powerful moment for us. We have always prided ourselves on showing respect and kindness to students but have strictly controlled materials and the flow of the day. Like many teachers of young children, we orchestrated everything in the classroom to minimize difficulties and maximize cooperation. We also held the belief that “good” teachers have clean, organized, peaceful classrooms. All of this was brought to light during our conversations. Danielle, quoting Karen Callaghan, explained that we need to be “difficultators,” creating or leaving obstacles for children to navigate. During those moments of problem solving meaningful learning can occur. Self-driven exploration also frees up time for educators to observe more closely what is really happening with and among the students. These realizations would not have been as powerful without the active dialogue we had around the tables that day.

Lana Scott-Moncrieff, a longtime StrongStart facilitator, explained how using photographs and quick notation made pedagogical nar-

ration accessible. “I was taught to write pages and pages of observations of children. It wasn’t useful to share with parents or take back to children. It was difficult and time consuming. Everything we learned with Kim and Danielle is useful and manageable. I have already started watching differently.” One of the most important elements that we

One of the most important elements that we took away was the concept that young children are not the citizens of the future, they are “citizens now”—competent individuals who don’t simply follow our linear understanding of them.

took away from our workshop with Kim and Danielle was the concept that young children are not the citizens of the future, they are “citizens now”—competent individuals who don’t simply follow our linear understanding of them. This image of the child as a competent driver of their own learning was a common theme in our quality observations, as well.

In a similar way, our pilot community of practice group, comprised of six early childhood educators and six kindergarten teachers, had their first meeting in September and shared anecdotes of high-quality learning experiences. We looked for common themes in our data and found much to unite us. A common question was how we could increase

the opportunities for observations and consequently the frequency of quality moments in our classes. We are eagerly looking forward to meeting again next month to share our first attempts at narrations.

Intriguingly, the quality conversations we are having are not unique to early learning. The BC Ministry of Education is already addressing a change to curriculum design with the introduction of five key cross-curricular competencies. These competencies are communication, problem-solving, creative and innovative thinking, personal responsibility, and social responsibility. In other words, an exploration-based learning approach, as opposed to a curriculum-driven approach, is being recognized as a quality instructional strategy at all grade levels.

Viewing students as co-creators of learning rather than receptacles of learning, is a major paradigm shift. Giving voice and choice to students, whether it is in a StrongStart centre, a kindergarten class, or a grade 12 class is an effective way to create expert learners and problem-solvers. Curriculum, therefore, becomes a vehicle for student-led learning rather than an end result. As is often the case, educators of young children are showing us how to reinvent our practice—one pedagogical narration at a time.

Jaimelia Turner is an enthusiastic educator, teaching in School District 60 since 1999. She has been the early learning coordinator in Fort St. John for three years.

Stephen Petrucci is the director of instruction in School District 60. He started out as a French immersion teacher at the secondary level in 1994.