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**Shifting Mindsets About Educating Young Children**

We are two teacher educators, one situated at a university (Tara-Lynn) and the other an experienced kindergarten teacher and professional learning facilitator (Lotje). For several years, we have taught/co-taught a six-week early years elective open to cross-divisional teacher candidates (K to 12) within the second year of a 2-year Bachelor of Education degree program in Northern Ontario, Canada. Our shared intention as pedagogical leaders was to design a learning community where teacher candidates take a reflective practitioner stance fitting of current early childhood perspectives and encouraged by Ontario’s early learning policy documents (The Kindergarten Program, 2016; How Does Learning Happen, 2014); where they could take ownership of their reflective practice for sustainable and long-term shifts in thinking. The course was premised on an asset-oriented view of young children as capable learners (Fraser, 2000/ 2012, Rinaldi, 2003, Malaguzzi, 1994) with the understanding that children and their experiences are more than just learning about child development (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2005). We sought to engage teacher candidates in discussions around how we view and value children, while at the same time exploring concepts central to the global landscape of early childhood education. Pedagogical leadership regards educators (pre and in-service) as agents of change.

Our pedagogical framework of this early years course embedded six key understandings as central to foundational professional learning (Table 1). These key understandings become an integral lens to vet resources to be offered as provocations to the teacher candidates. In our initial offering of the course, teacher candidates maintained a blog to record their evolving thoughts in

relation to early learning theory/practice and to notice and name their pedagogical thinking, that is, they were encouraged to make their thinking visible (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011).

*Table 1.* Key Understandings and Intentional Pedagogical Moves

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| **Key Understandings** | **Intentional Pedagogical Moves** |
| An understanding of child development | * Leading with the Why: *How will new learning have an affect on instructional practice and on student learning and development of the whole child?*
* Encouraging reflection on personal experiences
* Noticing and naming learning experiences that promote the healthy development of the whole child
* Providing key words and excerpts/quotes to explore one’s image of children and to discuss evolving understandings about young children and learning
* Documenting collective thinking during professional, collegial and collaborative discussions
* Modeling how we, as co-facilitators, were observing, learning, planning, teaching and assessing in partnership
* Providing choices that promote ownership of learning
* Sharing voices from different vantage points (e.g. guest speakers, photos, videos, children’s authors, artifacts, etc.)
* Providing opportunities to plan for learning indoors and out that foster a healthy and sustainable relationship with the environment
* Offering resources and experiences that honour all learners, and celebrates equity with meaningful connections to curriculum and policy documents.
* Establishing an openness to multiple perspectives in a culture of trust
* Using children’s literature to prompt professional thinking (e.g. *I Have the Right to be a Child* by Alain Serres to reflect on the rights of children with a global perspective; *No One But You* by Douglas Wood to empower children as explorers of their world and storytellers of their experiences)
 |
| An informed view of children and their learning |
| A stance of reflective practice and a culture of collaborative inquiry |
| A respect for multiple perspectives (child, family, co-educators, etc.) |
| An appreciation for the potential of the environment as central to early learning |
| Recognition of relationships as central to how young children experience learning |

After co-teaching the first offering, we found ourselves deep in conversation about teacher candidates’ understandings of teaching/learning in the early years as reflected through the course. We noticed teacher candidates naming shifts in their personal and professional thinking as they reflected upon and revisited key pedagogical understandings within the course. These shifts in thinking appeared to mirror global conversations about innovative pedagogies within the increasingly more complex and changing landscape of early childhood education. Engaging in a collaborative inquiry (see sidebar), we took up the call from *How Does Learning Happen* (2014) to “engage in critical reflection together…(to) discover multiple perspectives and deeper understandings” (p. 20), a tenor we encouraged within the course. Our inquiry led us to uncover 5 key shifts, which further prompted us to unpack the instructional decisions contributing to these shifts in educator thinking (Table 1). Each time we teach this course, we see a similar returning to these same key shifts in professional thinking, in particular for those with little experience who are coming to understand young children (personally and professionally) in new and powerful ways. In this paper, we elaborate each shift evidenced by key quotes from teacher candidates. In natural alignment with the *Conditions for Success, Transformational Processes* and *Rigorous and Inclusive Content* from the *Revised Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2020), we explore more deeply the pedagogy of early learning. These shifts, along with the key understandings and intentional pedagogical moves shared above, offer pedagogical leaders a starting place to encourage educators to explore their own meaningful and sustainable shifting mindsets.

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| **Methodology Sidebar:** This article draws from data collected during a collaborative inquiry.Participants included 9 teacher candidates: 5 were in the primary/junior stream (grades K-6) and 4 were in the intermediate/senior stream (grades 7-12).Sources for reflection included: screenshots of blog entries with identifiers removed (9 entries each for a total of 81), course outline, readings, slides and artifacts of learning. Our analysis process was iterative, involving three components: (1) reading and rereading blog entries in relation to reflective questions (2) in-depth conversations about our partnership and practice, including uncovering our intentional pedagogical moves, and (3) considerations of next steps regarding early learning and building community both within and beyond the course.  |

**Shift #1: Viewing Children as Capable, Competent and Curious**

With an equity lens, an educator’s commitment to all children is foundational and integral to effective and continuous professional learning; the motivator to explore new ways to reach and serve each child (see Learning Forward, 2020). Each text used in our course (whether quote, children’s book, or video of learning in action) emphasizes a deep respect for the young child. We consistently observe teacher candidates’ realizations about the ways in which young children are capable, competent and curious (Avery, Callaghan & Wien, 2016; Callaghan, 2013; The Kindergarten Program, 2016; Wien, 2004). We recognize educators in the field may come with limited experience or traditional views of young learners that are deserving to be challenged. Jesse, one of our teacher candidates seeking qualification to teach in the intermediate/senior grades (seven through twelve) noted: “I have been asked time and time again to reflect on my philosophy of education... I have seldom been asked to reflect on my image of children” (Blog, Entry 1). Jesse went on to identify children as “strong, creative, intelligent, competent, curious and powerful beings”. In her final entry, Jesse returned to the image she held of children, but with greater confidence in her newly held beliefs:

...I have been constantly challenged and reminded to re-examine my pre-existing view of children (in this course). In doing so, I now wholeheartedly share the view that, “all children are capable of complex thinking, curious and rich in potential and experience,” (The Kindergarten Program, p 10). (Entry 9)

Pondering how teachers came to take ownership of their practice in relation to the policing of behaviour, an article that strikes a chord with many of our teacher candidates, Wien (2004) highlighted the words of Karyn Callaghan:

‘To start with the view of the child is pivotal.’…When teachers see mismatches between their newly explicit image of what children can do and their teaching practices, they begin to see openings for doing something differently that better honors their values. (Wien, 2004, p. 7)

Jesse, in particular, noticed these openings and her quotes share the profound change in her thinking that resulted as she shifted the ways she looked at teaching and learning.

**Shift #2: Recognizing the Environment as Third Teacher**

A second shift involved a heightened appreciation of the learning environment, indoors and out. Our teacher candidates also recognized intentional choices we, as teacher educators, made within the design of our learning environment (e.g. resources, experiential experiences) to mirror the values of wonder and discovery (see Heard and McDonough, 2009). Each resource emulated our belief that when learning environments act as the third teacher, they are “... responsive to the children’s interests, provide opportunities for children to make their thinking visible and then foster further learning and engagement” (Fraser, 2012, p. 67).

For some teacher candidates, the concept of environment as teacher is new. Shelley reflected, “I’ve been in classrooms that are overwhelming to even me, so I can imagine they’d be overwhelming to children. For example, too many colours, way too much stuff hung all over the walls and too much stuff crammed into a small classroom” (Blog, Entry 3). Jesse pictured her own ideal learning workspace as one with “organic materials, natural light, soothing colours, an appealing aesthetic, and room to move,” which led her to question, “So why do we assume that young children feel any differently? (Blog, Entry 3).

Most teacher candidates initially focus on the pivotal role of the educator in setting up the classroom before shifting their mindsets to consider learning spaces for their potential to “...facilitate inquiry, exploration, and the formation of relationships” (Blog, Entry 3). Emma saw this change in thinking as a goal: “I need to shift my thinking from teacher-setting-up-my-classroom-in-September to teacher-as-designer to invite students to contribute to their own learning environment” (Blog, Entry 4). Elly set a similar goal for listening to students and learning about their interests to “allow for the environment to truly be conducive to their learning, because it was really designed by them for them” (Blog, Entry 8). Meg also felt “educators we should take advantage of using the natural environment to spark this curiosity and passion in learners” (Blog, Entry 8). Recognizing the outdoors as a natural extension of the classroom (see Hives & Scheffel, 2020) deepened understandings of environment as third teacher.

**Shift #3: Valuing The Power of Documentation**

The design and delivery of our course drew upon listening, observing, documenting and reflecting as norms in our learning community. Documentation as evidence of learning has become embedded in professional learning throughout Ontario, and elsewhere, over the last number of years. For some of our teacher candidates, especially those being certified to teach junior and intermediate grades, the concept of documentation is sometimes intimidating and a daunting task. Cara shared, “I was unfamiliar with the term and thought it simply consisted of writing down notes regarding student progress. I realized it is much more than that” (Blog, Entry 7). Cara’s shift in thinking sheds light on the reach of pedagogical documentation in “valuing learners and learning” (Campbell, Brownlee & Renton, 2016, p. 4) and making “the child’s thinking and learning visible…” (The Kindergarten Program, 2016, p. 36).

Emma also noted a “shifting focus from achievement to growth in learning” that she correlated to her new understanding of the child as competent, capable and curious. She discussed the changing role of the educator in a co-learning stance “as a researcher first” to “give students a voice in their own learning” (Blog, Entry 6). Perhaps this is why Emma observed:

On a much grander scale, pedagogical documentation aims to shed light on the learning process. It serves to inform the learner and the educator, to create points of reference for learning, to track questions, explorations, provocations and to provide evidence for learning. (Blog, Entry 5).

Experiencing the process of documenting emphasized how educators notice and name learning with children, and how this evidence (narratives, photos, videos, artifacts) is shared to communicate learning with families. It became evident that the teacher candidates had taken up the invitation offered by pedagogical documentation - “to be curious and to wonder with others about the meaning of events to children” (Wien, 2013, p. 28) - an invitation we hoped they would take with them into their future teaching/learning experiences, regardless of the grade.

**Shift #4: Embracing the Challenge of Inquiry**

Jesse questioned, “How can we plan (long-term or short-term) for student inquiry? How can we ensure that students meet curriculum objectives if their interests determine the content? What does an inquiry-based model even look like?” (Blog, Entry 4). Moments such as this highlight the uncomfortable space that comes at the beginning of a shift in thinking; a place of uncertainty. Creating a space where educators can name perceived challenges to their practice begs for a meaningful response to overcome barriers of pedagogical understandings. Leanne shared how reading examples of inquiry (see Krechevsky et al., 2013) helped “...to understand the power of inquiry and the wide range of learning opportunities that can stem from a problem, or a student asking a question.” (Blog, Entry 4). Elly pointed to a “...shifting from being the ‘teacher’ who in the past...was viewed as the source of all knowledge, the expert, and the one with all the answers….(to) more of a facilitator or better yet, a ‘provocateur’” Blog, Entry 9). Engaging in the co-creation of provocations, teacher candidates were challenged to reframe their responsibilities as provocateurs of learning (see Callaghan, 2021). They noted specific challenges in relation to inquiry-based learning/teaching.

From our experiences, our teacher candidates’ reflections on student inquiry mirror the reflections of educators in the field from Early Years to Grade 12 across the province and internationally. Discussing play and inquiry within a drama centre, Hope-Southcott (2013) writes, “When teachers let go of their preset plans, they are free to tap into children’s own agenda, trusting in the environment to act as a third teacher and in the children’s interests to guide classroom learning” (p. 43). Educators are being prompted to think deeply about pedagogical approaches that are flexible, responsive, engaging, and that reflect global competencies. In doing so, the intersection and relational aspects of play, inquiry, documentation, environment as third teacher and the image of the child takes on greater visibility.

**Shift #5: Owning a Reflective Stance**

Several teacher candidates noticed and named being in a reflective stance. Shelley shared: “I feel that I grew in my learning by developing a deeper understanding of young children, ... refining my ability to reflect on myself, and developing provocations to encourage wonder and curiosity in the classroom” (Blog, Entry 9). Shelley’s description portrays a self-directed and empowered professional learner. As Doan (2016) found in her work with early childhood educators, “Initiative, strong relationships and senses of belonging, and the ability to reflect are critical for those in communities of practice” (p. 47). Hope-Southcott (2013) explains: “As teachers critically reflect, they dig deeper to better understand the assumptions, beliefs, and values that shape their practice” (p. 40).

Within this reflective stance, teacher candidates recognized their own rethinking, growth and next steps for exploration as educators. Jesse’s ongoing reflection of the image of the child, for example, demonstrated the “constant state of (re)learning” (Iannacci & Whitty, 2009, p. 22) that took place as teacher candidates shifted perceptions and challenged previous assumptions. Teacher candidates, like Emma, began to see children as “capable and ready to contribute to designing their own learning” (Blog, Entry 4). Elly shifted from seeing the teacher as having all the answers towards someone who facilitates learning. In doing so, Elly recognized the need to move beyond assumptions about children’s thinking, a shift described by Dewhurst (2016):

When speaking with children, rather than assuming that I know what they mean, I listen to learn more about their idea and the thinking behind it...Rather than *allowing* children to do something, which puts me in complete control, I consider how I can *enable* them to work through their own ideas. (p. 59)

This quote affirms our beliefs as teacher educators. We strove not to be in control of our teacher candidates’ learning but to enable them to work through their ideas. It is this ownership of the continual cycle of professional inquiry that leads to sustainability and longevity of impact.

**Looking Forward**

Observing how the teacher candidates noticed, named and articulated their changing assumptions about educating young children has been powerful for us. Engaging in collaborative inquiry ensured that we, as leaders of professional learning, were active listeners as well. And as reflective leaders, the qualitative data or evidence we collected, informed our intentional pedagogical moves and deepened our understandings in skillful and responsive ways. This holds true for early learning and beyond. For, as Emma said so beautifully, “The more directions my questions take me, the more they bounce back to me from unexpected angles, giving me a more complete understanding of who I am as a reflective practitioner…” (Entry 7). Emma’s quote is an invitation to think about how shifts in thinking happen for pre- and in-service educators, and the ways that intentional pedagogical moves act as excelorants for professional learning in support of student growth.

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