

## Nurturing the enthusiasm and ideals of new teachers through reflective practice

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The first job for a new graduate is a time of powerful learning. Ideally, it presents the opportunity to try out ideas that have been generated based on the reading, discussion and experiences they have had in their course work and on field placements. They can then use the knowledge gained from their own and their new colleagues' experience to inform their future efforts. Programs and schools can benefit from the fresh ideas and enthusiasm that rookies can bring. They can help us to remember why we chose this profession.

Unfortunately, socialization away from innovative or theory-based practices occurs for many students during their field placements, and for rookie teachers during their induction year, if their co-operating teachers or teaching partners do not use or support such practices. The rationale given for decisions is simply "That's the way we do it here". The rookie then adopts a survival mentality that is antithetical to growth for all involved. It has been said that teacher ideals drop as much as 85% during the first year of teaching. Recently publicized findings from a Canadian study called "You Bet I Care" indicated that a high number of early childhood educators flee the profession early in their career (Philp, 2000). Although low wages undoubtedly play a role in this, perhaps disillusionment is part of the picture. Herbert Simon (in Schon, 1983) presented a view that professional work involves change and designing things to be better. If we are to develop as a profession and make the real world better, this loss of new grads and the stagnation of some of those who stay are issues we must face.

"Forget what you are being taught at the college. This is the real world". I have taught Early Childhood Education at a community college for eighteen years. These words had been said by a co-operating teacher to a student I was supervising on field placement several years ago, and I have heard them many times since. I was taken aback. It is no small irony that oftentimes the teachers who are saying this are our own graduates, while demonstrating practice that falls short of high quality and contradicts what they were taught – graduates who, as students, expressed concern about what *they* were seeing in centres on their placements. This would seem to support the view that there is a strong tendency toward protecting the status quo: tomorrow's teachers are mentored by today's (Goodlad, 1990). In some cases, where the educators are superb, this may be good news. However, in other cases, it is cause for despair. It is important for educators to consider the role they play in the mentoring and support of new teachers. We lose opportunities for development within our classrooms and as a profession if some graduates abandon the tenets of good practice they learned

as students of education, and become part of a mould they had condemned, rather than helping to change the mould. How can we support new graduates so that their ideals are not lost? Teachers who strive to do this may, in the process, sustain or rediscover some of their own ideals. We can all become agents of change.

Although they may be idealistic, students and new grads are aware of the political issues surrounding childcare. They know that it is severely underfunded, and that this takes a toll. There are certainly elements of quality that are directly affected by this. However, the practices which students find to be unacceptable but are told are “the real world” are linked not to funding but rather to respect for children, and are within the control of the individual teachers. We have discussions in class about respecting children’s feelings, but too often they hear children being told, “Put your tears away.” We talk about children’s tremendous creative potential and explore the many benefits of meaningful art activities that encourage use of media to express ideas and feelings, but they still see pre-cut shapes and photocopied illustrations to be coloured, and stereotypical busy work that fits a theme. We learn about developmentally appropriate practice, but many see preschoolers enduring daily calendar circle (see Katz and Chard, 2000, pp. 23-25). New grads are often expected to fall into step with such practices in centres and do not have the confidence or support to question them aloud. Instead, they are told to forget what they were taught. The ECE program can encourage reflection, but this inclination has little hope of long-term survival if it is not encouraged and modelled in their workplace.

Early childhood education is a profession where there is tremendous potential to have impact. Early childhood educators are the creators of curriculum. There is no provincial document to blame. We also create the environments in our programs. Certainly, factors such as ratios and group sizes and other similar quality-linked variables affect what we do, and fall under the jurisdiction of legislation. But the quality of care that children experience is strongly affected by the teachers in the room. This was shown to be true in the study done at the Johnson & Johnson Child Development Center in New Jersey, where ratios, group sizes, and staff training were all better than average. Nevertheless, it received a poor score on sensitivity of caregiving. After the centre went through the accreditation process of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, there was a dramatic improvement in the quality of interactions between teachers and children, with increased sensitivity and diminished harshness. This change was attributed to the extensive self-evaluation requirements of the accreditation process. The teachers became more reflective about their behaviour (Howes and Galinsky, 1996). This finding is cause for celebration, as it confirms that a significant degree of control over “the real world” of ECE lies within the educators.

If reflective teachers provide better care, we should be looking at ways to create communities of inquiry within childcare programs. In Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon’s (1998) survey of research into teacher education programs, it was found that where students were supported by program, peers, and classroom situations, and where deliberative exploration and reflection were

encouraged, there was a flowering of empowered teachers. “These were beginning teachers who were not afraid to experiment, struggle, and make mistakes – teachers (who) expressed a sense of joy at their emerging understanding of what it is to be a teacher” (pp. 159-160). They found that continuous growth was experienced by rookie teachers whose construction of knowledge “developed and evolved through a *sustained conversation* during their first year of teaching” (p.158, italics added). Both students and rookies need to see functioning decision-makers and inquiring reflective teachers in the workplace, where colleagues use knowledge to inform and question their work.

The programs in Reggio Emilia are models of reflective practice. The educators there have inspired us to consider our view not only of children, but also of teachers (Malaguzzi, 1998). If we see ourselves as co-learners and researchers, we will have an attitude of inquiry. If we are to have sustained conversation, it is clearly a collaborative venture. Everyone has a place at the table, with rookies and veterans bringing different perspectives, making the conversation richer. With few exceptions, childcare programs provide great opportunity for meaningful collaboration because the work is seldom solitary. However, this potential is not automatically realized. Having a partner often translates into simple division of labour, alternating weekly who plans circles and who set up the art activities. Collaboration is work, involving deliberate effort and intent. It requires explicit understanding that the shared goal is ongoing growth and learning for everyone in the program. It goes beyond mere friendliness. It means gaining comfort with provocation. I was deeply impressed hearing two educators from Reggio Emilia talk about their teamwork. They had worked together for ten years. At first, they said, there was much conflict – not the nasty backstabbing kind, but the prodding and challenging kind – the kind that leads to reflection and meaningful discussion. Now, after all these years together, they had no more conflict, and so they agreed that they should split up because they weren’t learning from each other any more. This is a very different perspective on teamwork. In our culture, we strive for harmony, even if only on the surface. Could we come to embrace an atmosphere where everyone has a responsibility to help everyone else to be the best she or he can be?

Reflection can occur within individuals and among partners, but it can also take place within entire centres. Perhaps in the statement of philosophy for the centre, it could be identified that this is a community of learners. We could then encourage and support the kind of sustained conversation that promotes ongoing learning for rookies and veterans. The staff and parents could be involved in discussion about the practices that would make this philosophy real. Time could be allocated on the agenda at every meeting to discuss the “knots” that educators are working on and what they are learning about themselves as learners and teachers. There could be discussion of an article that every member of the staff has read. A new grad can be a good resource for these articles. The teachers and supervisor could revisit other aspects of the centre’s philosophy to see how accurately it is being reflected by the practice in the centre, and get input from parents and students. An ongoing question for these discussions is “How are we making things better?” The learning curve for the rookie teachers is

steep, but these are practices that have been part of their preparation, and demonstrate and celebrate the fact that everyone is learning.

Programs in our community that have begun to explore the Reggio Emilia approach have been engaging in sustained conversation about their practice and using these techniques. It is interesting to hear them speak about the transformation they have experienced. "We stopped saying, 'That won't work here' and started saying 'How could we make that work here?' We realized that we were really good at *justifying* what we do. We're getting better at *questioning* what we do." Each of these centres had a fresh look at the rules they had for controlling children's behaviour. One centre discovered to their surprise that they had over twenty-five outdoor play rules. Another had close to fifty! In the process of discussion that included input from students on placement and new grads on staff, they realized that they had not been consistent with the rules, and that rules were often devised as a result of one incident. Over the next few staff meetings, they pared these down to fewer than five, and agreed to have ongoing discussion about rules, involving children and parents and students on placement. An outcome of this has been that the children are better behaved and spend most of their time enthusiastically engaged in collaborative activities. One centre reported a significant decline in the number of accidents. The teachers have found that rather than policing, they are able to use their time in much more meaningful and satisfying ways, talking to children and documenting their activity. Their focus is on the quality of their listening and their interactions with the children. This is consistent with what students and grads have learned in their ECE program. Moreover, attempts to take a fresh look at old practices can be aided by the perspective brought by a new grad. This gives them a meaningful context for application of their ideas. Although it can be unsettling at first to rethink and reconstruct, these educators are adamant that there is no going back. Their sense of themselves as professionals has grown.

Opportunities to hear veteran teachers talk about their ongoing development can help to combat the notion that teachers should not need to ask for help with teaching practice (Gratch, 1998). The transition from student to teacher can be stressful, especially if the rookie senses that she or he is supposed to know everything. Exploring not just the *how* but also the *why* with a new grad is a helpful provocation for all. The students on placement have come back to the college impressed with the atmosphere in these programs. "They are talking about teaching and learning *all the time*...and I was included", one student said. The subject matter of the dialogue has included other aspects of practice such as the physical environment, the schedule, and documentation. The sustained conversation is accompanied by an excitement that is palpable in these centres. These are educators who are engaged in what they are doing. Their hearts and minds and spirits are in their work. A supervisor in one of these programs was pleased with the integrity of the teamwork. In the past, the teaching teams in each room had worked together reasonably well, but each team was a unit unto itself. "Now, the centre is a community", she said.

This sense of community is spreading beyond the walls of individual centres. The teachers and supervisors in these programs have also been active

participants in a series of free professional development sessions over the past four years, providing support to anyone in the community who is interested in sharing in the journey. These sessions were initiated by two members of the faculty at the college to provide the community with the opportunity to join in our exploration of the Reggio approach. Our students and new grads were excited about the ideas we were discussing in class, but most centres had not heard about Reggio Emilia. We did not want their enthusiasm to be dampened by an understandable feeling of alienation or defensiveness among centre staff whose ECE program had not included exposure to these ideas. The interest has grown, and now these sessions are hosted on a rotating basis in the centres that have begun to explore the Reggio approach, so others can see what these teachers are doing. They are excited about their journey, and it is contagious. There were over fifty early childhood educators at the last meeting. There was also a full page-and-a-half article about these programs in the newspaper – the Saturday issue, no less, on the front page of a section with colour photos of the children’s artwork. These educators are celebrating their ongoing learning while creating a new kind of ‘real world’. What a stimulating environment for both rookie and veteran early childhood educators!

New grads were employed in two of these centres last spring. When I spoke with them recently about their rookie year, they both identified that it had been exhilarating, and that the seeds planted during their ECE program were being nurtured every day. They were supported and challenged as co-learners, and able to contribute their own questions and insights to the sustained conversation. The Reggio Emilia approach has served as a catalyst and inspiration for these particular programs. But a program need not necessarily be pursuing the Reggio approach to engage in this type of process of ongoing reflection and collaboration. Ultimately, children will benefit from being in the care of thoughtful enthusiastic educators. When we support reflective practice, we support students, rookies, veterans, and the children in their care. We all grow.

In many jurisdictions in this country, early childhood educators are struggling for professional recognition. It is hard not to be hopeful that we are on the verge of seeing greater support and resources and recognition for early childhood education. If this is to happen, we must be ready. We must be functioning as professionals, not as babysitters. This means we must be involved in reflection, in making things better in the real world. It means we must support our students and rookies so that their idealism catches hold. If we believe Annie Dillard’s (1987) message that no child on earth was ever meant to be ordinary, we should do everything in our power to see that each extraordinary child and educator is supported in extraordinary communities of learners.

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