



INQUIRY PROJECTS: MY JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

A person has experiences, beliefs, and to change one's thinking becomes a journey. This booklet describes my pedagogical travels from the very beginning of my teaching to how I came to understand co-creating inquiry projects with my classes.



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Introduction

The Very Beginning

This story starts at the heart of Beatlemania, with me as a fresh young teacher, with only two years of university. My Grade 1 class was set up in rows, class management was a non-issue, and whole class instruction was the norm for all subjects. For reading, I had three groups, and we chose different selections from an authorized reading series. The principal walked by and nodded if my class was quiet, and I was proud. The only professional development was the teachers’ convention.

The Need to be Authentic

Every afternoon, I would start to yawn from boredom. I was seeking some alternative way to bring life into my teaching, and so when a spark of interest developed in the caterpillars outside, I set up a little habitat for them. I tried to hide my fear of caterpillars when the kids asked more questions and wanted to see them up closer. I brought one caterpillar out to the table at the back of the room, and put him on a paper, so we could observe him better. I had a

magnifying glass, but that caterpillar was on escape mode and was crawling so fast, no one could see him. Ridiculously naïve, I thought if I taped down the back of his body to the paper, he would remain still so that all the kids could study him up close. As I was snugging the tape closer to his body, he reared up in defense and self-preservation. I threw my hands up in shock, and slapped the boy standing nearest to me... I will never forget the look on his face – of utter disappointment. I learned so much from that incident – the need to be authentic and real as a human being; the true desire of kids for the “real” in learning; and that each living entity deserves respect and dignity.

We held a class meeting after we set the caterpillar outside. How much better it would have been had I had a carpet area, so I could have gathered the kids in close. I confessed apologetically to them my fear of caterpillars and why I reacted so strongly. The conversation that developed from that meeting guided me on my conversion of teaching styles – and opened me to learning from the kids. You see, the children forgave me, and told me stories about things that they were afraid of. Then we problem-solved to see how we could investigate caterpillars more closely but keep their dignity intact. We created a habitat in an old aquarium, and it grew and grew as children brought in more species with more plant life to feed them. We learned to let them go after a couple of days because we didn’t want any to die. That is the first memory I had of authentic good teaching.

Seeing Different Classrooms

Because those were my childbearing years, I moved on to substitute teach and saw so many different classrooms – some stale and stagnant, where the children were given discrete tasks for the entire day – completely teacher controlled and managed. Other classrooms were more open – with the teacher leaving comments like, “depending on the children’s response...” that showed me ways to build in the voice of the child into everyday learning.

Lessons from my own Children

I left teaching with the birth of my third child in three years and became an educator mom. How soon I learned another lesson – from my children. So many times, I planned a great recreation activity for us, and it seemed to fall flat. But the days when the blankets came off the beds and a fort was created in the living room, real adventure happened. When I followed the lead of my kids and brought in materials or a drama role or extension learning opportunities - that was when our days passed full of happiness and fun.

Following the Interests of the Child

I returned to university as a mature student, with four children at home, and specialized in Early Childhood. I finished my B.Ed. then went on to get my Ed. Dip. in Early Childhood. That was the

year I found pedagogy that matched my own learning and understanding, and life was exhilarating. This was the year that I learned how important it was to observe children, to determine their interests, needs and skills. We had a practicum at the University Lab School, and I had so much fun developing an area of interest in cars for the boys in the block area. For our assignment, we had to describe the week of learning, and write about what curriculum was covered. I could not believe just how many of the outcomes were met, just by facilitating this dramatic play. This style of teaching just made perfect sense to me after my life lessons as a fledgling teacher and as a mother.

Constructivism

I continued my studies to acquire my M. Ed. in Early Childhood and became very familiar with Vygotsky, constructivism, and emergent learning philosophy. I had learned to think on my own, finally. The research for my thesis was done in grounded theory – hermeneutic phenomenology – looking at children’s work to see what could be learned from it. The wealth of knowledge I discovered filled my thesis... and I soared high with excitement. Children’s learning is enhanced by the adult role in setting the environment and encouraging exploration and discovery. Provocation by asking questions and having dialogue stimulates further cognitive growth in a child’s learning. The role of the adult is to observe, engage, and document the evidence of learning. Using photos, video, and observation notes, the adults can share the child’s learning experience.

Transitioning from University Cocoon to the Classroom

Now as I transitioned from the university ideological embryonic cocoon into the real school world, my confidence was shaken. I had 25 children in my Grade 1 class, many of whom had exceptional needs and differences. They had already learned to follow the teacher’s direction from their kindergarten classes and did not trust that I truly wanted their input into the choice of our studies. I was struggling to meet the needs of the literacy curriculum yet honor the interests of the children. I vacillated from beautiful learning scenarios to teacher-controlled full class instruction, not knowing how to bridge from one extreme to the other.

By the end of the year, I was holding on to control of the literacy and math in the morning and doing more open-ended project work in the afternoon. I assumed all failures for learning were my fault – that I hadn’t had my act fully together. So, a couple of children never reached their full potential in reading. I hadn’t let the parents know about the challenges they faced in learning to read. I had hoped it would all come together by the year end. My lesson that year was to be truthful with parents from the beginning, knowing that a full partnership will lead to more success for each child. I brought in parents into my classroom from that time on with an

open-door policy because I knew now that parents really want their children to succeed, no matter what their learning skills and challenges may be.

Early Childhood Education Council

Finding a community of peers is vital to shore up one's beliefs. I joined our province's specialist council for early learners – the Early Childhood Education Council, which focused on children's learning from K-Gr. 3. This was my passion, to join with other teachers to expand my own learning, and to share the learning experiences from my own classrooms.

Engagement in this community found me in leadership roles, in my own Edmonton region, but also provincially. Serving as president and Conference leadership challenged me to be a true advocate for children and for developmentally appropriate learning. This group honored me with two acknowledgements: the Early Childhood Education Award, and the Recognition for Service. In this time frame, I also received the provincial award of Excellence in Teaching.

Finding Reggio Inspired Learning

I moved into kindergarten after that year, and because the curriculum was so much more flexible, I found my niche for emergent curriculum, and thus start my learning adventure stories. After 15 years of teaching kindergarten, I moved back into Gr. 1 and found a way to merge the heavy mandated curriculum with emergent curriculum.

One pedagogy and philosophy that helped me move along was the Reggio Emilia wealth of resources and inspiration. **Reggio inspired learning** includes documentation, environment as the third teacher, image of the child, teacher as researcher, 100 languages of children, social constructivism, emergent curriculum, and community connection. I learned ways to make my teaching better which continued until my retirement. That was my truth – **the best teachers are the kids** in my classes.

I was able to attend two weeklong workshops in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The first one was based on the book *100 Languages of the Child*. Pedagogistas shared stories of how they created learning environments and discovered the many languages that children use to show their learning. It was different from typical North American traditions in schooling.

In one session, I had a very deep insight, a confluence of my past knowledge integrating the new understanding. ***As the child learns, so too I learn.*** Teaching is no longer a separate me-them relationship. We are entwined in a classroom community and co-create the learning together. As they learn, so too, I learn from them. Their interests, their languages of expression, their constructed learning, my knowledge of curriculum, and together we document and talk about the learning.

The second session was about *continuity* for children moving from kindergarten to Gr. 1. We had tours of a typical elementary school, and it shocked me with the differences compared to our North American classrooms. We have an abundance of literature, technology, resources like manipulatives, tables vs desks, materials, carpets. The Reggio classes for preschool were so beautiful and full of resources, so the paucity in the regular Gr. 1 classes was challenging to absorb. Reggio teachers were in the process of designing an enriched Gr. 1 program but that was not yet up and running when I was there. When I came back to Canada, it was a celebration to realize the richness of our class environments and the opportunities for children's learning. It was a time of realizing that what we were doing in early learning was valuable and front edge learning. It was thinking outside the box and implementing these ideas in Gr. 1 and beyond.

The Child's World

My experience has helped me to know certain things. I know that children have many broad interests about living things which include animals and plants and nurturing them - including creepy crawlies, birds, reptiles, dinosaurs; they are curious about their life cycles.

Weather, especially severe weather, fascinates them – the sun, clouds, shadows, reflections, wind, snow, temperature, northern lights. They love building things out of any material – especially boxes; and the bigger the project, the more they love it.

Space intrigues them – the moon phases, planets, stars, galaxies, nebula; and travel in space draws them like a magnet. Water calls to kids – the rivers, lakes, seas – and the appealing unique creatures that abide in the water.

The earth in its splendor intrigues them – canyons, volcanoes, rocks, mud, and hills. Kids wonder about other places around the world – not just their own neighborhoods – but in the North, Africa, China, or Australia.

Connections to their out-of-school experiences cross over into the classroom – sports of all kinds can become a major interest, as well as pets, music, dance, skating, cooking.

The world they live in now is shrinking – what used to be beyond their experience is no longer. Using technology, we can bring the world right into the classroom for up close and personal encounters – and this is the expectation of our young kids.

Literacies

Stories, books, and video fan these interests, and so my classroom was full of books of all kinds. If the interest is high, children are so motivated to research and find answers to their questions that they almost learn to read through osmosis. Books are only one print media and thanks to technology, we have far more rich media to supplement research materials.

- quality fiction to draw them into the world of story
- non-fiction books to give them the background and hook their thirst for knowing, for the pictures and research
- magazines for visual research
- Internet for the most current info and resources and to access experts
- newspapers for local reporting

I wonder...

My favorite words during the year were, “**I wonder...**” in which I modeled pondering, thinking, pausing, taking time to just think of possibilities. By taking a few moments at the most interesting statements that you’ve read, talked about, viewed, we open imagination and free thinking – which leads to a more involved questioning and hypothesis-making attitude.

My big idea objective/goal for my class was that EACH child could walk out the door in June and say to themselves, “**I can learn anything I want to.**” Believing that they are capable learners that can take on any challenge that interests them is the foundation for success for the rest of their lives.

The bulk of my memoir contains learning adventure stories. These are not themes, not curricular outcomes. They are special projects based on the interests of the children, and because they were in-depth and extensive, they no longer felt like a topic study – they took on a life of their own. They became an adventure that was being created by kids and teachers alike – both co-creating the story line.

Goals and Intent

The intent and goals of my inquiry projects, my learning adventures is:

- to tell stories – as if I was sharing teacher to teacher, or teacher to parent
- to recreate the magic of learning that occurred with emergent curriculum with various classes
- to show provocation with adult role, materials, interventions, challenges
- to highlight children’s responses
- to know where to start
- to showcase literature
- to integrate technology
- to integrate subject areas

These are lofty goals, but the stories themselves just need to be told.

Each book, each learning adventure, describes children's interests in a specific topic. But as each classroom community differs from another, how they approached that interest, or how they chose to document their learning varied greatly.

The stories are collected by topics, so projects might be from kindergarten and Gr. 1 classes throughout my years of teaching. The latter years of teaching have the most resources to share with you, along with rich documentation. This is evidence of my lifelong growth as a learner.

There are several shorter stories, but the longer ones are found in my store, for purchase. What I would recommend is starting with the smaller booklets, so you get a sense of my style of teaching and documentation. From there after, please just select the topics that interest you. The ideas that are developed can be applied to other interests that are specific to your learners. E.g., construction ideas, documentation

My hope is that you see familiarity and recognition of the learning and of children's engagement and that it inspires you to soar with possibilities.