

# Shifting mindsets about educating young children

BY TARA-LYNN SCHEFFEL AND LOTJE HIVES

**T**eaching young students requires more than just learning about child development (Samuelsson et al., 2005) — it requires understanding children and their experiences. As teacher educators, we have seen a lack of such authentic understanding among future and current early childhood educators.

We set out to change that in a bachelor of education degree program in northern Ontario, Canada. For several years, we have taught a six-week elective course premised on an asset-oriented view of young children as capable learners (Fraser, 2012; Rinaldi, 2003; Malaguzzi, 1994). During the course, which is open to K-12 cross-divisional teacher candidates, we engage candidates in discussions about how they view and value children while exploring innovative pedagogies within the increasingly complex and changing landscape of early childhood education.

After co-teaching the first offering, we found ourselves deep in conversation about teacher candidates' understandings of teaching and learning in the early years. We noticed teacher candidates naming shifts in their personal and professional thinking as they reflected on and revisited key pedagogical understandings.



Our inquiry led us to uncover four key shifts, which we continue to see each time we teach this course. We find these shifts to be particularly pronounced for those who have little experience with young children and are coming to understand them in new and powerful ways.

These shifts offer pedagogical leaders a starting place to encourage educators of all levels and settings to explore their own mindsets about young children. We share key quotes from teacher candidates that explain these shifts, drawing on data collected during a collaborative inquiry with nine teacher candidates (five preparing to work in K-6 and four preparing to work in grades 7-12).

## **1 Viewing children as capable, competent, and curious**

With an equity lens, an educator's commitment to all children is foundational and integral. This lens should serve as a motivator to explore new ways to reach and serve each and every child in a comprehensive and nurturing way.

Each text used in our course (whether a children's book or video of learning in action) emphasizes a deep respect for the young child. When we apply this lens, we consistently observe

teacher candidates' realizations about the ways in which young children are more capable, competent, and curious than they initially believed based on traditional or outdated views of young learners (Avery et al., 2016; Callaghan, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016; Wien, 2004).

For example, Jesse said: "I have been asked time and time again to reflect on my philosophy of education ... [but] I have seldom been asked to reflect on my image of children." Jesse went on to identify children as "strong, creative, intelligent, competent, curious and powerful beings."

In her final blog 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' " (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 10).

## **2 Recognizing the environment as third teacher**

A second shift involved a heightened appreciation of the pedagogical role of the learning

environment, indoors and out. Most teacher candidates initially focus on the educator's role in setting up the classroom, rather than on the potential of the classroom to be a learning space. But our teacher candidates came to see this potential, in part by recognizing intentional choices that we, as teacher educators, made within the design of our course environment to mirror the values of wonder and discovery (see Heard & 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. "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," said Emma.

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." Meg felt "we should

take advantage of using the natural environment to spark this curiosity and passion in learners.”

Some candidates focused on specific aspects of the environment that could impact children. “I’ve been in classrooms that are overwhelming to even me, so I can imagine they’d be overwhelming to children,” said Shelley. “For example, too many colors, way too much stuff hung all over the walls, and too much stuff crammed into a small classroom.”

Jesse pictured her own ideal learning workspace as one with “organic materials, natural light, soothing colors, an appealing aesthetic, and room to move,” which led her to question, “So why do we assume that young children feel any differently?”

### 3 Valuing the power of documentation

The design and implementation of our course drew on norms of listening, observing, documenting, and reflecting. Documentation as evidence of learning has become embedded in professional learning throughout Ontario and elsewhere. It is also a core component of model early childhood education approaches such as the Reggio Emilia model (Edwards et al., 2011).

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. “I was unfamiliar with the term and thought it simply consisted of writing down notes regarding student progress,” said Cara. “I realized it is much more than that.”

Cara’s shift in thinking sheds light on the reach of pedagogical documentation in valuing learners and learning (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 4) and making the child’s thinking and learning visible (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 36).

Emma 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. “Pedagogical documentation aims to

shed light on the learning process,” she observed. “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.”

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 and learning experiences, regardless of the grade.

### 4 Embracing the challenge of inquiry

Teacher candidates came to recognize the value of engaging in inquiry to make meaning, both for themselves and their students. At times, this shift was uncomfortable. For example, Jesse wondered, “How can we plan (long- 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?”

But creating a space where educators challenge pedagogical understanding can help. Leanne said that 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.”

We were encouraged to see candidates embrace the challenge of inquiry. For example, 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.’”

Educators are being prompted to think deeply about pedagogical approaches that are flexible, responsive, engaging, and that reflect global competencies. This, in turn, further

enables the shifts described above.

### LOOKING FORWARD

As teacher candidates took on a reflective stance, they 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.

Elly shifted from seeing the teacher as having all the answers to 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, p. 59): “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.”

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.

Engaging in collaborative inquiry ensured that we, as leaders of professional learning, were active listeners as well. And as reflective leaders, the qualitative data we collected informed our intentional pedagogical moves and deepened our understandings in responsive ways.

As Emma said, “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.” Emma’s comment is an invitation for all of us to think about how shifts in thinking happen, regardless of our career

stage, and the ways that intentional pedagogical moves act as accelerants for professional learning in support of student growth.

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