Teaching for Social Justice

Vancouver—Coquitlam—Maple Ridge
Teacher Research

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“Silence is the prime indicator of oppression.”

Paulo Freire, 1985

We are pleased and privileged to have been invited to edit and publish this book of research by teachers on teaching for social justice. It may seem ironic that one has to advocate for social justice, but one cannot assume that an idea or cause will be embraced because it is just, fair, or compassionate. We as a society often put self-interest and personal gain ahead of compassion and the communal good. Teachers understand this from their lived experiences working with children and the research work of the sixteen teachers published here underlines this fact. In their stories we hear both their voices and the voices of their students on critical social justice issues facing them.

There are a number of themes that emerge in the articles, but one of the most striking is that these teachers care about their students. Teaching involves caring deeply about students as human beings and, at the same time, caring just as deeply that all students have rich opportunities to learn and succeed. This sense of caring by teachers comes from their strong beliefs about the importance and value of success for all students, the ethics of teaching and the future of our communities and society.

Different words have been used to capture the passion of this kind of commitment to teaching—teaching for social justice, teaching for social change, and teaching for social responsibility. It has been said that changing schools is hard; changing them to change society is even harder. Undoubtedly, teachers cannot fix the problems of society by teaching better, nor can teachers alone, whether through individual or group efforts, change the opportunities for future success of the children they teach, particularly if the larger issues of structural, institutional, and cultural inequities, lack of economic opportunities, and racism are not addressed. Teachers cannot substitute for social movements aimed at trans-
forming society’s fundamental inequities but their efforts, like this work, can and do contribute to those movements in very concrete ways.

Teaching and learning are social and relational processes. They occur within socially and culturally constructed contexts and depend to a great extent on the establishment of relationships between teachers and learners. As members of a university graduate class in action research, these teachers created, with the support of their professors, a learning community with a focus on developing new knowledge about teaching and learning based on their own lived experiences. As it can be seen from reading their stories, this process enabled them to rediscover and reflect upon the social significance of their teaching in relation to their own values and personal sense of meaning and at the same time made it possible for them to take concrete actions to address critical issues of social justice confronting their students. We hope this will encourage other teachers to consider undertaking similar projects based on their needs and interests.

We want to thank Elizabeth Lambert and Louise Spencer in the Professional and Social Issues Division of the BCTF for their help in editing the articles. The cover design was done by Dale Costanzo and the layout design for the publication was done by Ruth Hansen of the BCTF Graphics Department. We thank them for their creative work.

Mohammed Shamsher
Elaine Decker

January 7, 2003
PREFACE

Teaching for social justice
Teachers inquire into their practice

Gabriella Minnes Brandes
and Deirdre M. Kelly

Socially critical action research in education is informed by the principle of social justice... It is not simply a matter of challenging the system, but of seeking to understand what makes the system be the way it is, and challenging that, while remaining conscious that one's own sense of justice and equality is itself open to question.

(Tripp, 1990, p. 161)

Over the years, each of us has been engaged in various teaching and research projects that focus on social justice concerns. Teaching with social justice at its heart highlights the importance of the teacher’s role in imagining and working towards a more equitable society. We began to talk about our “own sense of justice and equality” (to echo Tripp) some years ago. The occasion for our conversation was the desire to start a cohort-based teacher education program that centred on teaching for social justice. Our dreams came to fruition when we helped to found the Humanities and Social Justice Teacher Education Program (HSJTEP) at the University of British Columbia in 1998. While we learned a lot in the process and have enjoyed working with student teachers, we wondered how more experienced teachers, who were already well established in their schools, would translate a concern for social justice into their practices.

Therefore, when an opportunity to develop a teacher inquiry course arose in the Urban Learner program, we eagerly seized upon it. The magistral-level Urban Learner program is cohort-based and designed for experienced teachers, many of whom teach in inner-city schools.
We assumed (correctly, as it turned out) that teachers confronted with the daily realities of poverty, racial discrimination, and lack of support for children and caregivers for whom English is an additional language, would resonate to a thematic focus on teaching for social justice. This focus was broad enough to encompass a wide variety of concerns arising from teachers’ own practices, and led to the various inquiry projects included in this issue. We hope that these stories from the field will instruct and inspire both new and experienced teachers. We believe that teacher inquiry plays an important role in teachers’ professional development and provides an important avenue for teachers to develop “some understanding, influence over, and responsibility for the social conditions and outcomes of education” (Tripp, 1990, p. 165).

**DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND ANTI-OPPRESSIVE EDUCATION**

Teaching for democratic citizenship is a key element of teaching for social justice. Living in a democracy calls for civic responsibilities and, in particular, active interest and involvement in the community. Teachers play a crucial role in preparing students to take on these responsibilities. Teaching for democratic citizenship focuses on democracy as a moral way of life (Henderson, 1999). Teaching for democratic citizenship emphasizes inquiry, choice, and action (Kincheloe, 1999) as teachers and students pose questions, make meaning of curriculum, school, and society, and confront social problems.

Understanding and attempting to address societal inequities make up the second element of teaching for social justice, anti-oppression education. Anti-oppression education highlights diversity in schools and society and proposes ways of using the multiple perspectives brought forward by the diverse student population as an integral part of teaching. Teachers, therefore, need to foster “productive dialogues about the inequities and the possibilities for social reconstructions in the communities within which [teachers] and their students are developing” (Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002, p. 2).
Teachers cannot fix the problems of society by “teaching better,” nor can teachers alone, whether through individual or group efforts, alter the life chances of the children they teach, particularly if the larger issues of structural and institutional racism and inequity are not addressed. However, while teachers cannot substitute for social movements aimed at the transformation of society’s fundamental inequities, their work has the potential to contribute to those movements in essential ways.

(Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 116)

Among the key roles teachers can play in addressing inequities is inquiring into their own practice and its context within the educational system. Teachers have a particular responsibility for understanding the role schools play in perpetuating economic and cultural dominance.

Overly narrow (e.g., Eurocentric) curricula and various other institutional practices—standardized testing, ability grouping and tracking, in-grade retention, repeated failure, suspension, expulsion—selectively discourage, stigmatize, and exclude young people from school. Both inside and outside of schools, societal inequalities based on class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability place further limits on “actually existing democracy.”

(Fraser, 1997) (Kelly, 2003)

TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND TEACHER INQUIRY

When teachers inquire into their practice, they often make decisions about teaching and learning as they develop knowledge (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 2). They reflect, theorize, and examine their theories continuously as a part of teaching (Schon, 1983). Teacher-researchers make this process of inquiry more systematic and often public. When teachers engage in inquiry about their practice, they do so from the “inside,” using their own sites as the focus for their study (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994, p. 2). They pose a question, systematically
collect data about the question, analyze the data, draw conclusions, and report on them publicly. This process of researching their practice provides teachers with the distance necessary for an investigation, as they make the familiar unfamiliar so that they can examine and analyze it. We believe that teacher inquiry, informed by a concern for social justice, should be oriented towards reflective action and positive change in the classroom, the school, or the community.

Teachers who conduct research in their classrooms need to ask questions about the status quo and uncover their own beliefs, assumptions, and biases. They should be willing to critically examine their practice as well as the practices of their school. Teacher inquiry has the potential to help students learn better (Patterson & Shannon, 1993) as well as “reform classroom practice by prompting powerful intellectual critique of assumptions, goals and strategies” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 35). This kind of inquiry is less daunting when done in collaboration with like-minded teachers (Wolk, 1998, p. 13).

**OUR PROJECT: TEACHER INQUIRY AND TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The reports in this volume are empirical studies that include collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that focus on particular classrooms and schools. Twenty-one teachers, most of whom teach in elementary inner-city schools, undertook a year-long course entitled, “Teaching for Social Justice: Teacher Inquiry,” that we had team-taught as a part of the Masters of Education program (Urban Learner II cohort) at the University of British Columbia. The teachers came to our course with varying experiences and interests in teaching for social justice. One had been a member of the B.C. Teachers’ Federation’s Social Justice Committee, others had engaged in activism through other venues, while still others had thought about the issues raised in the course in less formal and systematic ways.

Together we examined various social justice frameworks and the complexities of translating them into educational
practices. We identified and reflected on various inequities (e.g., sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, and poverty) that operate within classrooms and schools. We also analyzed the multiple traditions of practitioner research in the field of education, and the teachers who participated in the course were invited to learn the rudiments of critical teacher inquiry, including: developing a research question, conducting a literature review, submitting an Application for Ethical Review at UBC, exploring methods for conducting a small-scale inquiry, and analyzing and sharing the results of such an inquiry. Thus, as a part of the course, the teacher-researchers investigated and reflected upon their practices, and some considered action to mitigate inequities, being careful to document their results.

The teachers spent considerable time selecting topics and questions for inquiry. Knowing the sustained effort that would be required for this undertaking, we urged them to select personally meaningful projects. We encouraged the teachers to reflect on their own backgrounds, particularly as these connected to their views of diversity and teaching for social justice (some of these reflections ended up in the final project write-ups; see, e.g., Beale; Eng; and Stirk). Adapting advice from Sleeter (1996), we also asked the teachers to include writings by, or interviews with, scholars or other experts who were members of the marginalized groups that figured into their research topics. For example, for those whose topic or research context involved Aboriginal students or parents, we suggested that they consult articles published in such journals as the Canadian Journal of Native Education or the Canadian Journal of Native Studies.

All told, the participants in our course worked on fifteen projects, and ten are published in this volume. The teacher-researchers used a variety of methods in their inquiry projects; observation, questionnaires, analyses of students’ work, photography, and interviews. To varying degrees all the projects can be seen as contributing to anti-oppression education, teaching for democratic citizenship, or both.
According to political philosopher Iris Marion Young:

*Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes, which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people's ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.*

(1990, p. 38)

She discerns five major forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Taken as a whole, the ten projects presented here can be seen as attempts to counter at least four of these forms of oppression: marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

**Marginalization**

In various ways all the contributors whose projects are featured in this issue speak to the value of including all students in class activities. Each teacher-researcher identifies and reflects on various inequities that negatively affect classrooms and schools: sexism (Beale; Eng; Hait; Pinsonneault & Malhi); heterosexism (Beale); poverty and unequal access to resources (Costa; Hait; McIsaac; Stirk); racism (Beale; Pinsonneault & Malhi; Stirk; Teeuwsen); ableism (Beale; Hait; Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart); ageism (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Croll; Hait); and discrimination by language and immigration status (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Teeuwsen). Thus, they recognize that, historically, certain social groups have been excluded from “useful participation in social life” (Young, 1990, p. 53).

The majority of the students in Don Teeuwsen's class belonged to racial minority groups; yet they did not find many images of themselves reflected in the school and the wider society, a situation that Teeuwsen, citing bell hooks (1992), attributes to “white supremacist culture.” In his project, Teeuwsen asked students to incorporate both writing about what they learned from their parents and “a teaching” their parents wanted to share into an artistic
representation. He sought to fully include those students, for example, who spoke English as an additional language and were relative newcomers to Canada.

**Powerlessness**

Conventional schooling has been organized in ways that allow young people little say in what and how they learn or in shaping the rules that govern their behavior. Often, “they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them,” and, given their position at the bottom of a hierarchy, they are allowed to “exercise little creativity or judgment in their work...and do not command respect” (Young, 1990, pp. 56-57).

Darrin Clarke, Sibli Gill, Miranda Hounsell, and Bill Urquhart direct our attention to the missing voices of students in their research on co-operative learning. They believe that co-operative learning activities can shift the current hierarchical structure in most classrooms. “Co-operative activities give [these] students a chance to shine in a system that often legitimizes the best readers, writers, and athletes, but does not see the inherent value in asking our students to care for each other.” Susan Croll's project investigates ways of empowering parents and students who often do not have a voice either in the assessment of students’ learning or in the attendant reporting procedures in school. Croll notes the injustice of conventional evaluation practices, which make the learner, and the learner's parents, passive recipients of the judgments of teachers as the sole experts.

Although in some contexts teachers may seem relatively powerful, in others they themselves are treated as having no expertise or authority. M. Costa notes that the “voice of teachers” was often “forgotten” in the debates over open-area school design in the 1970s. Her project provides teachers at an inner-city school the opportunity to weigh into this debate. As advocates for their students, the teachers she interviewed insisted on linking school design to the creation of “learning environments that can enliven and inspire students of all interests and abilities.”
Cultural imperialism

Cultural imperialism involves “the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm,” which has the result of rendering invisible the oppressed group’s perspective, while simultaneously stereotyping that group as the Other (Young, 1990, pp. 58-59). Shanda Stirk’s project reminds us of the near cultural genocide of First Nations peoples in Canada. In interviews with First Nations parents, Stirk found that they identified racism as a key problem for their children in school. Aboriginal parents believed, for example, “others thought of them as the weakest culture,” and they shared their ideas about how teachers might begin to challenge destructive, yet enduring, stereotypes.

The teacher-researchers attempted to work against cultural imperialism when they interrupted the sexist, Eurocentric, socially dominant curriculum. Susan Pinsonneault and Kara Malhi analyzed the intersection of gender and “race”/culture in the ways their Grade 1 students responded to literature. Among other things, they found Indo-Canadian boys and girls both identified with an adventurous male character from India. In general, the girls in Pinsonneault’s class were much more willing to identify with adventurous male or female characters, while boys preferred high-status male characters even when these characters were less adventurous. Their findings speak to the need for teachers to help students “read against the grain” (Davies, 1993). These two projects (Pinsonneault and Malhi’s, and Stirk’s) examine the ways in which simply teaching the canon negatively affected students from non-dominant groups.

Jason Eng, who explored the experiences of male elementary school teachers, discusses the contradictory results for these men of the harmful stereotyping of women as “good with children” and “more patient than men” (and, we might add, of gay men teachers as “promiscuous” or “pedophiles”). In order to overcome this harmful stereotyping, Eng hints at the need for men to develop “new masculinities” (Bradley, 1993, p. 25).
Violence
“Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person” (Young, 1990, p. 61). Sadly, adults consciously and unconsciously pass along attitudes that help sustain this systemic violence, which then manifests itself among children. Ursula Beale’s project was motivated by her observation that children seize on differences and attempt to hurt each other by insulting each other’s families. Beale developed a unit on family diversity that prompted students to consider such issues as the stereotyping of same-sex families. She asked students to reflect on the possible connection between valuing differences and curbing schoolyard bullying.

Teaching for democratic citizenship
Each of the projects highlighted can be seen as contributing to anti-oppression education. Some can also be seen as underscoring the importance of democratic citizenship when teaching for social justice. The teacher-researchers who focus on co-operative learning, for example, critique the individualistic competition that characterizes traditional classrooms and other institutions in our society. Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, and Urquhart argue that each student in the class has significant contributions to make, and this is important for all students to learn. Helen Hait focuses on the challenges teachers face when they teach about social responsibility in a democratic society. She argues that teachers ought to prepare students to be active citizens in a society that values diversity. Hait illustrates how teaching the skills of co-operative learning, cultivating communication across differences, and solving group problems are crucial to building a democratic and “peaceful classroom.”

As a group or individually, the projects in this collection illustrate the principles of practice that Marilyn Cochran-Smith identifies as central to teaching for social justice (1999, pp. 118-119): teachers need to enable students to learn within communities (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Hait; McIsaac; Teeuwsen); teachers build
on what students bring to school (Stirk; Teeuwsen); teachers focus on teaching skills (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Hait; Pinsonneault & Malhi; Stirk); teachers work with communities and families (Beale; Croll; Stirk; Teeuwsen); and teachers diversify assessment (Croll). We consider these projects as first steps in research and in teaching for social justice. Although at this point most projects did not “make activism, power and inequity explicit in the curriculum” (Cochran-Smith’s sixth principle of practice when teaching for social justice (1999, p.119)), we hope action, in varying degrees and forms, will be the next step for the teacher-researchers.

“THE RICHEST FORM OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT”

At the end of the second year, as the teacher-researchers reflected on their learning, they discussed what they had gained from doing research in their own classrooms and schools. Croll highlighted the importance of inquiry that relates directly to practice: “I benefited immensely from conducting action research, if for no other reason than because the research I did was directly connected to my practice as a teacher.” Teeuwsen felt a “heightened sense of purpose and significance, more clarity about the intention” in his teaching practice. The teacher-researchers suggested that they became more aware of their own perceptions and biases and how those affected their practice. Stirk suggested that research made her “examine...[her] own perceptions and teaching practices, and helped [her] identify how to effect change in [her] own small place.” Pinsonneault summarized the impact of such inquiry on her practice: “Doing action research in my classroom raised my awareness of gender issues. As a result, I see gender biases in the words and actions that play out in my classroom more clearly now.”

Teeuwsen highlighted how paying attention to the familiar in his classroom and learning to detach himself as he collected the data made him more aware of what was happening in the classroom. “There seemed to be much more I was seeing and hearing.”
Others, such as Pinsonneault, discussed their analysis:

Being able to listen to the tapes of student discussions afterward also allowed me to analyze the group dynamics in my class. It was only then that I realized how much discussion time the three most vocal boys claimed, and how they repeatedly dominated class discussions.

After this process of analysis, Pinsonneault shared her findings with her primary students and took action that changed her practice:

One day I presented the class with some of the results of our survey. I cut a 100 cm strip of paper in segments to represent the percentage of comments made by each of the three vocal boys, the remainder of the boys, and all of the girls. The class was quite shocked with the visual image. Afterwards I took steps to ensure that all students had a share of time to speak during discussions.

Reflection, inquiry, and action are interrelated and emphasized differently in the reporting of each project. One emphasized the unique features of the context, another question formation and data collection, while yet another focused on the reflections and implications for further action. Some had to learn how to manage their time in order to be able to teach, observe, and record data for their study. Beale discusses the challenges as well as the benefits of doing research in her classroom:

Doing research in my own classroom required enormous energy, concentration, and focus. The constantly changing classroom situation from day to day asks for extreme flexibility. However, the challenge of exploring and honing research questions became stimulating and left me with more energy than I thought possible.

Pinsonneault summarizes the way in which the research made her more aware of, and ultimately changed, her practice as she focused on creating a socially just classroom:
Participating in action research in my classroom was the richest form of professional development that I have experienced so far in my teaching career. It has given me the opportunity and time to examine, study and reflect upon my own teaching practices. Investigating these teaching practices has shed light on aspects of my teaching that I took for granted, bringing them more fully into my consciousness. Because I participated in action research, I realize more fully how important it is to make a deliberate effort to create a more equitable environment for all students.

Although all the teacher-researchers indicated that they had learned from doing research in their classes and schools, they also faced a number of challenges as they investigated their practice with social justice in mind. Some, for example, faced resistance from parents, staff members, and others from administration and the school board. In one particular project, the teacher-researcher, Scott McIsaac, and his Grade 7 students examined the links between a healthy learning environment and school design. They compared the green space and play areas in their own school, located in a low-income neighbourhood, with others in high-income areas, carefully documenting their observations and calculations. As students reflected on the apparent inequities, they related them to the socio-economic gap between the neighbourhoods. At the outset of this project, however, the school board raised concerns about the initial plan to incorporate student protest. Moreover, the teacher-researcher and we were determined not to leave students with a sense of hopelessness about their lived reality. McIsaac addressed these concerns by inviting students to develop and create replicas of their ideal schools. In retrospect, this encouraged students to respond to resource inequalities that they had documented with imagination, creativity, and hope.

Teacher inquiry that focuses on teaching for social justice often pushes the boundaries and challenges the status quo. Fear of consequences and self-censorship may sometimes limit teachers’ visions of the possible. We invite teachers to continue to explore their practice
and inquire into teaching for social justice. This issue illustrates the value of such work, the importance of collaborating with teachers who share similar concerns, and the worth of building coalitions with progressive teachers and administrators, caregivers, students and community members.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


As a teacher I’m always searching for ways to make students more tolerant of each other and more accepting of their own lives. Family seems to be a subject close to everybody’s heart. We all love our family. That’s why I think bullying children by making fun of their families seems to stir up so much emotion and to be particularly hurtful. Who, if you work in a school, hasn’t heard a variant of:

“Richard’s said my mother is fat!” Leslie, barely audible, whispers in between heart wrenching sobs.

“Gaylord!” screams Darrell as he zooms around the corner looking back at his follower Adrian.

“Cara’s a retard like her sister!” Lauren casually states to Kari and Susanne as they file in after recess.

Yes. Leslie’s mom is obese, Adrian’s dad is gay, Cara’s sister is a student in a wheelchair, and Lauren is a new student at our school. I hear these casual, emotionally loaded insults. I talk to the particular students, have them apologize, and hope that they won’t do this in the future.

However, in my heart I know that apologies and hopes for something better are only band-aids and don’t address the root of the problem. What are the roots of intolerance and hatred of difference in our society? Anger is a normal human feeling. Do we have to take it out on others? Do we have to express it by insulting people’s families?
Why do children do this? Why do adults? Do we feel so insecure about our families and ourselves? I wish I had answers. In an ideal world we could all accept our differences. Perhaps our schools have an important role to play in the process of gradually changing intolerance of differences.

**MY PHILOSOPHY**

“We don’t make fun of anybody’s learning” is my only classroom rule. We do lots of co-operative learning activities and always start the day with class meetings where we sit in a circle of chairs on the carpet. These circle meetings seemed to provide an ideal environment in which to discuss families in more detail. I strongly believe classrooms are never neutral. Children pick up feelings from their teachers and other adults. So, if we were going to discuss this issue, I knew I couldn’t hide behind the teacher’s façade. I was forced to struggle with my own beliefs and feelings. It is my strong belief that knowing thy neighbour as yourself helps tolerance, acceptance, and, hopefully, can also curb bullying, and eventually racism. But I had to start by doing some soul searching.

**PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

We all come to teaching with a value system. For me it was a white, middle class, European value system that originated in the homogeneous Switzerland of the 1950s. It was a system where a family consisted of a breadwinning dad, a stay-at-home mom, and children. I do vaguely remember adults around me talking about divorce, single parenthood, gays and so on. However, this was always done in a whisper. I just knew something was not quite above board about these subjects. This belief system came with me to Canada in 1967. Here my belief system started to crack. I entered a common law relationship with a divorced man—facts that weren’t mentioned any time we visited Switzerland! I wanted a child, but was not prepared to have it out of wedlock, so we got married. Now I was a stepmom to my husband’s two sons from his first marriage. After nine months our
daughter was born and we became a blended family, at least during the summer when the boys came to spend time with us. During the next 18 years both of us worked. I also went to school to study for a Bachelor of Music and eventually my teaching degree. In retrospect, I realize that my life was considerably different from my mom’s. She stayed at home, used her seamstress skills to sew clothes for us and occasionally for neighbours and friends. My dad was the main breadwinner.

Despite the reality of more and more separated and divorced families, I did not struggle much with my belief system and the well-entrenched view that “the nuclear family is best.” After 23 years, my marriage came to an end. The struggle of finding a place in society became painful. I wasn’t a family anymore. I became a divorced, single parent without a child at home (our daughter left for university at the same time). Those labels hurt. I was still a caring human being, but I felt like I was in limbo without a place in society.
TEACHING BACKGROUND

While I was struggling to redefine my role in the absence of my nuclear family, one of my childhood dreams came true. I became a teacher in a classroom. Despite the fact that my experience with life in a nuclear family didn’t play out in its ideal form, I still carried the subconscious belief that the nuclear family is best for children. I presumed I was going to teach children who were mostly from traditional families perhaps mixed in with some children from “broken” families. I believed that the latter ones were going to be the ones with problems. Teaching in Vancouver I knew I would encounter families from many different cultures. Despite the fact that I was divorced, I still assumed that most children would have a mom, dad, and siblings.

In my first year of teaching I encountered students from “broken” families. Again, I assumed that “broken” meant from divorced, single, gay or in any other way “odd” families. I assumed that those students would have problems. These assumptions were also taken for granted in the staff rooms. “Broken” only had to be mentioned once and by magic other teachers somehow knew what to expect. Never was this assumption questioned.

Yet, over the years I taught youngsters from “broken” families who were excellent students and a joy to be with. I also encountered students from traditional families who had major problems. Why? Was it possible that family structure had nothing to do with whether students had problems in school or thrived in it? Was it possible that the presence or absence of a caring, loving environment and not family structure per se was responsible for how students fared in school?

Gradually over the years I met the adults who were responsible for all of my students. I started seeing them as interested, caring, humorous, and loving individuals rather than filing them into categories based on their “legal” family situations. I gradually became much more comfortable with diverse family types.
A PASSION FOR LOOKING AT FAMILIES

When it came to choosing a topic within the overall theme of social justice for my Master's of Education research project, I was ready to look at family diversity with my students. My earlier reluctance to tackle this topic stemmed from the fact that it is not an easy subject, but is rather one that invites a great deal of controversy. Also, the research literature on teaching a unit on family diversity in the classroom is extremely scarce. In fact, I could not find one such project. However, much has been researched and written about the family itself, and about the ways in which its shape and composition have changed over the last half century.

Questions like: What is a family in the 21st century in the Western World? Does the nuclear family still exist? What exactly is “broken” about different family configurations? Should a child who has a mom, dad, and siblings at home feel out of place? Does a child from a gay family have to be secretive about it? Should children be stigmatized according to the adults they live with? Should any child
feel bad about their family situation? and, Do children choose their families? started popping up in my mind.

I believe that my job as a teacher in the public school system is to inform students, make all students feel good about themselves and the environment they grow up in, and give them the courage to speak up and stand up for themselves and to question the status quo. By doing this unit on family diversity, I wanted to find out how young students feel and think about their family environment. I wanted to facilitate discussions and exchanges of personal experiences.

Judith Stacey, a prominent cultural critic of changing family paradigms in Western societies, states in her book, *In the name of the family*:

> At the current moment in Western family history, no single family pattern is statistically dominant, and our domestic arrangements have become increasingly diverse...Once the family modernization thesis predicted that all the societies of the globe would converge toward a singular family system—the modern Western family system. Ironically, instead we are converging internationally toward the post-modern family condition of diversity, flux, and instability.

(pp. 45-46)

My strong belief is that if we know the people we spend five hours a day with in the classroom better, and if we are learning from each other, family insults will be harder to deliver when we do get angry. I also support the view that teachers have a responsibility to struggle with their own views on family diversity before they actually teach and discuss those changing paradigms with their students. In my estimation, addressing family diversity in schools could help prevent negative, derogatory, bullying attitudes and behaviours toward each other and thus help stabilize our communities.

Judith Stacey examines the vulnerability and insecurity of family life within our communities today and challenges the rhetoric and politics of family values. She writes:
The uncertainty principle that now governs our work lives—who will have employment, for how long, and with what risks and rewards?—also governs our most intimate relationships, severely disrupting domestic tranquility and seeding nostalgia for those better times which The Family has come to symbolize. (p. 2)

She goes on:

The challenge of post-modernity, as of democracy, is to learn to live with instability and flux as responsibly, ethically, and humanely as possible. To do so we must cultivate individual resilience, flexibility, courage, and tolerance while we work collectively to provide the best forms of social and cultural supports we can devise to cushion the inevitable disruptions and disappointments, the hardships and heartaches, that all families and humans must inevitably confront. (p. 13)

My objective for this study was to collect and analyze data about family diversity. What do my students know about family diversity? What do they feel and think about their own families? What are my students' attitudes, opinions, and views about different family configurations?
Could knowing about family diversity possibly lead to increased tolerance of classmates, and thereby improve the school environment and our collective sense of community?

If I, as a teacher of young people, am preparing them to become good, critically minded citizens for the future, I have to be able to struggle with my own beliefs, traditions, and opinions. I don't have the right, nor do I want to pass moral judgements on any of my students’ families. All families have a right to their own beliefs. I've always believed in change from within. By examining my own beliefs, I could be of more benefit to my students than I could be if I had my head buried in the sand, in this case ignoring family diversity. However, taking on this issue calls for courage. Family diversity in our culture is still a hot, emotional subject, highly political and extremely controversial. The initial approval for this study that I received from the Vancouver School Board's research committee was a “cautionary approval.” Their concerns revolved around two points. Firstly, that parents/guardians would be made aware of the specific ways the concept of “family” was going to be presented to students; and secondly, that the voluntary nature of this study would be made very clear to all participants.

A number of authors explored this controversy in more detail in the book *The family in America: Opposing viewpoints* (1992). In it, David Popenoe wrote that the decline of the family is negatively affecting the quality of life for children. He writes:

> Virtually every child desires two biological parents for life...child rearing is most successful when it involves two parents...traditional family may be flawed...millions of people are comfortable with it and it seems to work...we should reinvigorate the cultural ideals of “family,” “parents,” and “children” within the changed circumstance of our time. (p. 23)

In the same book, Dennis K. Orthner, offers a contrasting opinion when he asserts that only the “family” is in transition, and that the desire to care for children has
not changed. He states:

What has changed are the ways people choose to live with each other... There still is a strong desire among the young to have families. VALUES have not changed drastically but the NORMS of family behaviour have undergone dramatic transformations. (p. 29)

MY SCHOOL, CLASS, AND STUDENTS
My school, the identifying descriptors of which have been obscured to protect the confidentiality of my students and their families, is a small neighbourhood school with a multicultural mix of students. We are located amongst a mixture of single-family homes, condominiums, and apartment buildings, on a block that also houses a community centre. The neighbourhood has many heritage homes in it and the residents take pride in the plantings
they make in their little gardens, on the street roundabouts and even by the sidewalks. Several small parks are located within walking distance. Looking out of our classroom windows we see grass, trees, flowers, and a minimal amount of concrete. Because of the day- and after-school care facilities provided by the Community Centre, a number of students are cross-boundary. The majority of our students come from employed or self-employed working families in a variety of professions, businesses, and trades. The student population is reasonably stable.

When I started exploring family research in my classroom, I was delighted to realize diversity was blossoming under my nose. We had a variety of blended families, mixed-race families, families with heterosexual and with same-sex parents, single-parent families, families consisting of a single guardian, and one family with a special needs child. Our families were working families, adoptive families, stay-at-home dad or mom families, and families that were “extended” in a variety of ways, including with the addition of pets. I was amazed when I realized this. No doubt my subconscious paradigm of a family that consisted of mom, dad, and siblings played a part in this surprise.

At the time I did this research I had 26 students in my class, 13 Grade 4 students and 13 Grade 5 students, one-third of the students were girls, and two-thirds were boys. One student was a special needs student in a wheelchair who was unable to take part in either discussions or written activities. Due to the imbalance of girls and boys, I made no gender distinction in the research answers. I felt that would call for a separate research project. Some days not all students were present for an activity. We have several immigrant students from the Philippines, one each from Brazil, Puerto Rico, Hong Kong, and China. In our class were also students of mixed races who were born here, one each of: Japanese/Canadian; Jewish/Korean; First Nations/Canadian; Chinese/Malaysian; and Chinese/Filipino background. The other students were born in Canada of immigrant parent(s) from Denmark, Italy, the Philippines, Japan, and England. Overall, the students
were wonderful, enthusiastic, very social, and warmly caring young people between the ages of 9 and 11 years.

Reflecting on my diverse class made me realize that this was not going to be a theoretical teaching unit but a hands-on experiential sharing of life unfolding. However, I was still interested in finding out if the students were or were not comfortable with family diversity and how knowledgeable they really were about it.

INVESTIGATING FAMILY DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

I decided to do 11 research activities over a period of eight weeks, from February 11 to April 4, 2002. Initially, with the knowledgeable and enthusiastic help and support of my school librarian, I put together a basket of books about “family diversity” for the students to read and share informally with each other. The times chosen for the more formal activities were random, depending on my daily teaching schedule. I did feel strongly that it would be important to leave some time between activities so that the children would be able to digest the information they received from the activities and formulate questions raised by them.

To start the project, all 25 students drew a 22 x 28 cm picture of what “family” meant to them. I loved watching the care they took in portraying their families.

Later the students also wrote a paragraph on their view of family. One young student even felt moved to write a poem using animal metaphors to describe family:

A tree with branches of joy and happiness
An eagle with wings of care and love
A gazelle with the leap of courage
A snake with the eyes of help
That’s what I think family is.

At this point, the slight doubt I had entertained about capturing the interest of students with this subject vanished. The students were extremely open and keen
to learn about other families. Many in the class do have firsthand experience with different family configurations through their own situations, visiting a friend’s home, or talking to each other in school, and they were eager to explore these.

For teaching purposes I used many different pictures on a wide range of family structures. After each reading we had extensive discussions and after some of the readings students also filled out questionnaires and posed written questions of their own. The further into the unit we got, the more at ease the students felt in sharing their own situations and asking each other questions.

To review what we had learned through books, discussions, and the sharing of personal experiences, I showed two excellent videos. *That’s a family!* is a film for kids about family diversity by Debra Chasnoff. *Sticks and stones*, produced by George Johnson, sensitively addresses stereotyping of same sex families and helps to nurture respect for a full range of family models. More discussions and questions followed. I was particularly interested in finding out what the students’ opinions were in response to the question, “Do you think learning about family diversity might be helpful to increase acceptance and tolerance amongst students and perhaps decrease the chance of bullying?”

Only five students felt it wouldn’t decrease bullying, because, “most bullies would just not listen,” “people don’t always bully due to family structure,” or “the bullies might just take the discussions for pleasure and continue with the bullying.” All other students felt, in one way or another, that it might help. Reasons they cited included, “...the bullies will find out that everyone’s different,” and “...people only bully others because they don’t understand them.”

As the final activity for this unit, the students had to work in their tribes (five groups) to compose a definition of “family” that took into consideration all we had talked and learned about for the last eight weeks. They briefly discussed this with their group and then wrote their
definitions. All five groups came up with definitions which were all-inclusive in terms of the kinds of family structures that would fit them.

A family is someone that loves you, gives you food, someone that is kind to you, someone that reads to you and that tucks you in bed at night, someone that gives you comfort. Someone that takes care of you and gives you stuff like Toys, Love, Kindness, Happiness, Food, Comfort and more and that’s what a family means to us (Me)!!!

Family is co-operating, learning and sharing. Family is bringing life to the world, making history and working together. Family is in everybody. We are born with it and it will not go away no matter what. Even if you are an orphan or have parents who aren’t very kind, you still have it in you, everywhere. Family makes memories that won’t go away. Family is when your family is planning on having a barbecue and then it rains so your family just has a party inside anyway. That is family.
I found that many students in my classroom already knew a great deal about family diversity. According to those students, their parents or guardians had taken the time to talk to them about different family structures. Slightly more than one-third of my class (10 students) indicated that they were not surprised at anything we discussed. Overall however, I found that my class seemed much more at ease with each other; more open and ready to bring up joys or problems either individually or in our class meetings after we finished the research study. They seemed more aware of each other, were more astute with their observations, and appeared to have become bigger risk takers in all their learning. During our discussions (we always sat in a circle), they started looking at and addressing each other much more. Initially, they directed their comments to me only. Towards the middle and certainly by the end of the unit we always ran out of time because so many students wanted to share their experiences. In general, the oral participation of all students, even the more reluctant ones, increased in all subjects. This was also noticed by other teachers. Students appeared less concerned with making mistakes and offered their opinions and views more freely.

**MY RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is no doubt in my mind that teaching about family diversity is necessary, important, and extremely relevant. My Grade 4/5 students were not only interested in each others' families, but also felt empowered as learners because they were able to contribute their own family backgrounds to the discussion with comments such as, “It felt good [to share about my family] because if you see other kids have the same situation and that person said it you will have the courage to say it too,” or “It helped me because I don’t get a chance to see my dad but now I know I’m not the only one in the class that doesn’t.”

The students were mostly familiar with the lingo associated with different types of families, but were far from competent in terms of understanding the meaning of the language. “What exactly is a blended family?” “What's the difference between half-siblings and step-siblings?”
“Why are lesbians also called gay?” These were common questions raised once the students felt more comfortable asking them.

As “Family Life Education” is part of our expected B.C. curriculum, we have an open venue in which to teach about family diversity. In doing so, the emphasis should be on teaching for knowledge and for valuing all family diversity. By talking about “broken” families we devalue that family system. According to most of my students, what you need to make a family is, “...a group of people who look after children with care and love, and provide for them.” I also maintain that every family has the right to believe in and teach their own children their own moral code. At the same time, the children do have a right to know, understand, and ask questions about their whole environment.

I highly recommend that anyone who teaches family diversity be clear about his or her own attitudes and intentions when they do. As one of my students very astutely remarked after I asked if they thought it would be helpful for other teachers to teach this unit, “It depends who teaches it.” This particular student felt that some adults say things but don't really mean them.

The success of such a unit might also depend on the demographics of your school, the whole school environment, and the larger community in which it is situated. Is your school population and wider community a homogeneous or heterogeneous one? What is the general culture like, including family configurations and beliefs? I am very lucky to be able to teach in my diverse neighbourhood. Otherwise, I might have wanted to consult with the community health/school nurse, and a variety of community groups before embarking on such a unit. Adaptation to your environment is absolutely necessary, particularly when teaching a sensitive subject like family diversity.

In essence, you have to ask yourself, “What does it take to provide an informative but also safe environment for teachers, students, parents, and that whole community?”
CONCLUSION

I was simultaneously surprised at how much the students already knew and had experienced in terms of family diversity, and at how many questions they still had and continue to have about it. Just because we know the words doesn’t guarantee that we fully understand them. I keep asking myself if I will still hear insults like the ones I cited at the beginning of the paper. Now, the students definitely have more vocabulary to work with, but will they remember what the words mean? Even if they don’t remember themselves, will one of their classmates remind them? There are definite delays between the time we know something cognitively, and the time our feelings and habits reflect what we know. Should they choose to use family insults again, will they do it with the understanding that to do so is wrong, and eventually stop doing it?

I learned that, with discussion with their peers, students can become much more relaxed, at ease, comfortable and accepting of their own family situations. Without much prompting, they became more and more interested in how their classmates live, what they feel like, and what their opinions are. The official research study might have ended, however, the effects seem to linger on in our classroom. Just yesterday one of my students asked, “Can you read aloud the book on the gay uncle coming to visit? I like it. It’s so funny.” Everyone agreed. We all had a good laugh at the stereotyping that goes on when we don’t know anything about people. Now, we all know better.

If we as teachers are to achieve a greater awareness of each other in our classrooms, we need to start with our own feelings about our own environment, our attitudes, and knowledge. Once we do this, we’ll no doubt pass that understanding on to our students. For now I am pleased that I have been able to increase awareness of my students’ own families. One student wrote it very simply, “It gave me a better understanding of my families’ importance to me.”
POSTSCRIPT
The realization, even beyond my expectation, of the importance of family to my intermediate students was heart warming. It also confirmed for me that teaching something meaningful and close to students’ hearts engages them easily. They love to talk to one another and teach each other. I listen and mediate when necessary.

Doing research in my own classroom required enormous energy, concentration, and focus. The constantly changing classroom situation from day to day asks for extreme flexibility. However, the challenge of exploring and honing research questions became stimulating and left me with more energy than I thought possible. When I realized the sincere interest of other educators in both research as a pedagogical tool and in the importance of family diversity to students as an avenue for inquiry, my excitement grew even more.

Doing this project has contributed to my effectiveness as a teacher. It provided me with the structure I needed to examine what I consider to be the most important element of teaching—creating a classroom that is accepting of social, cognitive, and personal differences. It also confirmed for me that teaching Family Life as mandated by the B.C. Ministry of Education is worthwhile. My students were highly engaged and together we learned about the sensitivity needed to debate and discuss issues that really matter. They were disappointed when I finished the official research.

Family insults have not stopped. However, now it doesn’t take long for the particular student(s) to understand what was inappropriate about using these insults and I feel their apologies are more sincere. I am convinced that with each incident they gain the kind of strength they will need to remain aware, watch for, and stand up for the injustice that is inherent in word calling, sarcastic teasing, and bullying using family insults. They seem motivated to create a more accepting and trusting environment for themselves, their friends, their families, their classmates and, hopefully, for all humanity.
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^ All names in this article are pseudonyms.
, too, have mixed feelings about report card writing. On one hand, it allows me the time to think carefully about each child. On the other, it is incredibly time consuming. While you might assume that thinking about each student individually would be a given for teachers, it is actually a luxury because there simply isn’t enough time in a day to think about each student in the ways that they deserve. But the amount of time report card writing takes is overwhelming. Each report card can take up to two hours to write and with twenty-two or so students in a primary class, time spent on reports adds another forty hours or more to the work week. Furthermore, unless time is put aside to meet with parents, there really is no guarantee that either the parent or the child understands the report card in any meaningful way, and that too takes time.
Uninspired by the typical report card writing process, I began to ask myself questions about report card writing in particular, and assessment and evaluation practices in general. I wondered why, for example, if assessments and evaluations “drive” teaching and learning—and I believe that they should—the reporting process remains so disconnected from the day-to-day lives of students. I wondered why, if report cards are supposed to be about students, students are often absent from the construction of them. I also wondered what parents thought of report cards. And I wondered if parents have an adequate sense of who their child is as a learner.

**ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION—A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE**

What disturbed me most about the standard approach to the report card process was that many students, even primary students, showed anxiety and fear as report-card time neared. They were afraid that they wouldn't receive a “good” report card and that trouble would follow. I was surprised because I write report cards with a student’s strengths uppermost in my mind and because I believe that report cards should essentially describe a student’s learning, not pronounce a moral judgment on their character. I realized that part of their trepidation was due to being left out of the process. They felt report cards were “done” to them, in a way that’s similar to the patient who undergoes a battery of medical tests and waits for the diagnosis. Like the medical model that excludes or minimizes input from the patient—the very person the tests are all about—the typical report card process does the same to the student. The student, like the patient, moves from being the subject to the object as reports are written. The doctor declares the state of the patient’s health, sometimes without asking the patient how she or he is indeed feeling, just as the teacher writes about a student’s progress (or lack of it) without even asking the student to express an opinion about their own learning experiences.

Exclusionary assessment and evaluation practices may be examples of poor pedagogy, but since these practices also
prevent students and their parents from participating, it becomes an issue of fairness and opportunity, placing it in the realm of social justice. Exemplary teachers have called for more student involvement in assessment and evaluation during the last decade or so, but few have framed it in terms of social justice. Social justice issues in the educational arena have mostly been about equity funding and opportunity for poor and minority students, and deservedly so. However, if social justice is about fairness, equity, opportunity, and freedom from oppression, then much of our teaching practice could be scrutinized through the social justice lens. And, unfortunately, the way most teachers learn to approach assessment and evaluation leaves the student, who is in the spotlight, right out of the picture.

I was fortunate to have joined a school staff that was also contemplating similar kinds of questions, looking for alternate ways to report to parents. We wanted a format that included and involved both students and parents. We believe that students take greater responsibility for learning if they are involved and included in assessing and evaluating their own work. We believe that if students are consistently involved in assessment that they become conscious of themselves as learners. They begin to realize their own strengths, understand their own learning, and set their own goals. This is true whether they are in Grade 1 or Grade 12. Judy Taylor (1999), a Grade 2 teacher who hesitantly agreed to try student-led conferencing, a process that involved leadership by the student, was initially concerned that her students would not be able to explain their work to their parents. After observing her students conduct conferences with their parents, her worries evaporated. She summarizes, “What we learned from this experience was that not only can second-graders conduct parent conferences, but they can do it far more effectively than we!” (p. 80).

I also wanted to move away from a philosophy and practice that considers the teacher as the sole expert in a child’s education. I recognize the authority that we have as teachers, but I did not want this authority to
intimidate either parents or students. Instead, I view the child’s learning and education as a shared responsibility that actively involves the participation of the student, their family, and the school staff. I believe that involving the students and their parents in the assessment and evaluation process helps to democratize or “flatten out” the traditional hierarchy that was based on assumptions of “teacher knows best.” In a study, reported in *Educational Leadership* (1989), that examined the relationship between schools and families, Jane Lindle concludes,

> All families, regardless of socioeconomic status, have similar preferences about the nature and the conduct of school communications. The responses of parents to questions about their contacts with school reveal that they view “professionalism” on the part of teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, or principals as undesirable. Parents mentioned their dissatisfaction with school people who are “too businesslike, patronizing, or who talk down to us.” (p. 13)

Friendliness and welcoming attitudes may put parents at ease and set a good tone for a school, but I wanted to put real social justice concepts into practice. I began looking at different reporting models. Since I wanted parent participation and student involvement in the actual writing of the report card, I needed a different format than the student-led conference. While students are bursting with pride as they show their parents their work, and parents are equally proud of their children when they do, there is little time available at student-led conferences for meaningful or informative conversation that includes all three partners: the teacher, the parent, and the student. When Carol-Ann Carlson (1993-94), a Mission, B.C. teacher asked parents at her school what they thought they needed to be in place for good communication about children’s progress, parents responded that they had participated in student-led conferences in the past and wanted more from the teacher. They felt there was “room for more teacher commentary” (p. 69).

With that very clear comment from parents in mind, I understood that I needed to implement some kind of
hybrid format that allowed students to first show parents their work and then have students and parents meet with me, the teacher, to discuss it. It seemed to me that this just made plain common sense for parents to want to have a conversation with the adult who spends at least five hours a day with their child!

I remembered hearing about “three-way conferences” when I was a student teacher. I thought the idea was intriguing yet daunting. In this format, the student first showed their parents their schoolwork, then they met with the teacher, and together all three parties wrote the report card on a laptop computer. I decided to try implementing this format but without modern technology—I was sticking to pen and paper!

THREE-WAY CONFERENCES IN ACTION
Essentially, my three-way conferences look like this: the student demonstrates key concepts learned throughout the term, leading her or his parent(s) through a variety of centres or stations which involve “hands-on” demonstrations. For example, at the Math station the student shows, with base ten blocks, how to regroup, adding and subtracting large numbers. At the Literacy station the student completes a Morning Message thereby demonstrating spelling and editing skills. The student passes and stops the soccer ball at the Physical Education station, moving through the stations, and sharing work from all of the content areas. At the Art station students share work that they have previously assessed themselves. All of these demonstrations are deliberately planned to show parents concepts and skills that were introduced to their children throughout the term. These demonstrations typically take half an hour. When the student is finished showing and sharing, the student, the parents, and I meet to discuss and write the report card.

The report card is written on an 11 x 17 inch sheet. As we discuss the student’s academic and social development, I write down the salient points we have agreed upon. We each sign the report card when the discussion and writing is complete. It is then given to the principal who
also signs it and writes a comment about the student’s learning. The report card is photocopied and the original is given to the students and parents. This three-way conference process, including the demonstrations, takes about an hour to complete.

I have conducted these kinds of conferences for the past three years and find the process, as many other teachers have declared it, worthwhile and valuable. Don Konsmo (1992-93), a B.C. primary teacher who was initially reluctant to organize conferences in which the child assumes leadership, came away from his experience with the process feeling heartened. He states, “Observing the conferences strengthened my appreciation for the parents and the importance of their involvement in their children’s education” (p. 48). Other teachers and researchers echo Konsmo’s sentiments. Barry Ricci (2000), a principal at a Rhode Island school, reports that parents also feel that these three-way conferences are worthwhile (p. 54). A parent involved in a similar kind of conferencing testified that they are able to get a “picture of my son as a learner that would not be possible from merely a report card, a portfolio viewing, or a typical conference” (p. 54).

RUMINATION, REFLECTION, AND FINALLY, ACTION RESEARCH!

Even with the increased participation afforded by the new shared report card development process, as each reporting period came to a close, I had a nagging feeling that something was missing. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I was left with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. I decided it was time to explore this uneasiness. Through much discussion with my peers and periods of mulling and reflection, I decided that the problem I was wrestling with was a lack of “parent talk.” Parent contributions were minimal during the discussions and hence their ideas were not being recorded in the report card. The students, not surprisingly, tended to contribute more than their parents. Was it because the conversation and the report card were about them and their work? Was it because the children had rehearsed the demonstrations...
in class? Was it because they had previously assessed their own work and were better prepared to speak about it?

More questions plagued me, especially concerning the parents. Were parent contributions few because parents saw me as the sole authority? Did they not feel that their contributions were valuable or insightful? Were the parents not receiving enough information prior to the conference to feel sure about their role or how to participate in the process? Was it because of the way I facilitated or conducted these conferences—was I too formal—too informal? Was the gap between the home and school so wide that parents felt disconnected from their child's school experiences?

I realized I could not “second guess” what parents were thinking or feeling so I decided to ask them some of these questions directly. Specifically, I wanted to know if parents wanted to become more involved in this process and if so, how to encourage and facilitate that involvement. Consequently, I developed the research project that I report on in this paper.

**SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS**

Our school is located in a working-class neighbourhood in Maple Ridge. We receive supplemental funding because we are classified as an inner city school. I conducted my research with Grades 2 and 3 students (ages 7, 8, and 9) and their parents.

**DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

I asked parents and students to complete separate questionnaires. The parent questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions. I asked the children four questions—also open-ended. I felt that going “straight to the source” and asking parents and children to complete questionnaires was the most direct way to receive information from them. There were 21 children in my class. Nineteen of the children’s parents attended conferences. Fifteen out of 19 parents completed questionnaires and 14 out of 19 students returned questionnaires.
THE PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Not all parents answered each question, however, overall, the parents’ responses to the survey are interesting and thoughtful. It was evident after reading their responses that the majority of parents value the three-way conference process. Parents believe their involvement is important to their child’s learning. I was pleased to read the parents’ positive comments, but since I wanted to understand the “parent experience,” I needed to examine their responses more systematically.

I knew that I needed a way to organize the data that was simple and straightforward. I decided to create three categories that classified their answers as: favourable, unfavourable, or suggestions. The results of this form of categorization are contained in Table 1, below.

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<th>Question (summarized)</th>
<th>Favorable</th>
<th>Unfavorable</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
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<td>How important/beneficial is parent involvement in report-card writing? Why?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>How prepared are you? What helps/hinders your preparedness?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>What would help you feel more prepared?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>What barriers limit your contributions?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think/feel about the teacher’s conduct during the conference?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>What changes would you make to increase involvement/benefit?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional comments</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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The eight questions I asked parents can be divided into three groups. The first group asked parents how beneficial they thought and felt their contributions to the report-card writing process were. Responses included:

- It gives your child a feeling of importance as well as showing him/her that communication between parents and teachers is crucial to their learning.
- As a full-time working mom, I feel that this was wonderful and gave me some idea of how my child's daily school life is going, and felt my input was appreciated.
- I feel that being involved in the conference is important. However the only part of the report-card writing that I think the parent should be involved in is the setting of goals.

The purpose of the second group of questions was to find out how prepared parents felt for the conferences. Responses included:

- Reviewing my child's report card that was sent home prior to the conference helped me in the preparedness. (Note: I have used preliminary report cards on two occasions. The purpose of these is to prepare parents for the conference by giving them background information about their child's progress. These reports mostly reflect self assessments the children have completed about their learning in literacy, math, and social responsibility).
- Viewing the stations with my child helps prepare me for the report card writing.
- I do not feel prepared for this part of the conference. I want the teacher to tell me what and how my child is doing at school.

The last group of questions asked parents to identify barriers that hindered their participation and to suggest ways to improve the conferences. Their answers included:

- I felt very much involved and wouldn't change a thing. My child felt very involved as well.
- The stations were a great idea.
- I think the report cards are a bit too general. I would like to see some sort of grading system to see where they fit in.
- Not feeling knowledgeable enough.
• Getting a basic report card beforehand so you can have questions ready.

A SNAPSHOT OF PARENT RESPONSES
Most parents appreciate the opportunity to discuss and contribute to their child’s report card. Specifically:
• Some parents feel more confident than others about contributing to the three-way process.
• Parents who feel prepared or knowledgeable have a good understanding of their child’s day-to-day school life.
• Parents who feel less prepared need more information about their role and what is required of them when they come to the table to discuss their child’s progress.
• Parents feel it is useful to receive the preliminary report before the three-way conference.
• Some parents prefer to have the report card written by the teacher and want to write only the goals together.
• Some parents want time alone, without their child, with the teacher to discuss their child’s progress.
• Parents feel that the teacher conducts herself appropriately and facilitates the conversation effectively.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES
I gathered limited information from the students’ questionnaire. All 14 of the children stated they felt, “good,” “fine,” “great,” or “cool” about contributing to their report card. Many of them indicated that they felt proud when they took their parents to each station and showed them their work.

RESEARCH LEADS TO ACTION
I had an inkling of what some of the barriers that hindered parent participation in the construction of student report cards were, yet it was the parents—and rightly so—who articulated them. When
teachers at a school in southern California wished to increase the involvement of Chinese-speaking parents, they decided to survey the parents to identify barriers (Constantino, Cui, Faltis, 1995). They found that the involvement of Chinese parents increased dramatically as they conducted their study and intervened to remove the barriers they identified through the process. They conclude that, “By opening the channels of communication and providing an environment that was non-threatening to both parents and teachers, interest and participation elevated to new levels” (p.50). Although my research is quite different, my goals are similar. I value the participation of the students’ parents as the students learn and grow. I also believe, as the researchers at the California school did, that in order to discover the barriers that affect a specific group, the researcher must start with the group itself. Those whose voices have been quieted must have the opportunity to speak and to be heard. I therefore decided to implement the following changes, based upon the parents’ suggestions:

- Inform parents about the three-way conference process in September when parents and teachers meet for Input Conferences.
- Revise the letter I send to parents explaining three-way conferences to clearly delineate their role.
- Continue to send home preliminary report cards before the three-way conferences take place. Attach a template on which parents and students can write comments, questions, and goals. This template will be brought to the three-way conference.
- Remind parents that they can request a meeting with the teacher at any time during the school year.

Essentially, my research demonstrates that there is widespread approval for three-way conferences and for parent contribution in this process amongst parents and students. Both students and parents want to be involved in determining what is written on report cards. The three-way conference process addresses the social justice principles of fairness and opportunity. Instead of a reporting process that is “done” to children, three-way conferences allow both the learner and their parents
(guardians or whomever) to become an integral part of the process of drafting the report card. The student's and the parents' perspectives are taken into consideration and valued during the reporting process. Therefore, it's a participatory and “negotiated” process, rather than one in which I exert sole authority as the teacher “expert.” I believe that if assessment and evaluation becomes a more inclusive and participatory process, it becomes a fairer process too. It reaffirms that students and their parents have a real role to play in assessing and evaluating student development.

I hope that by implementing the suggestions I got from parents during this study, the three-way conference process will become more inclusive, more participatory, and that both students and parents will feel that their contributions are a valid and integral part of describing student progress.

**POSTSCRIPT: ONE YEAR LATER**

Much can happen in a year and a half. Our union, the B.C. Teachers’ Federation, and the group representing school boards were in negotiations for a new collective agreement. After a time, the government chose to rescind collective bargaining and imposed a legislated agreement. Many gains negotiated previously by the union were lost leaving teachers feeling bitter and disillusioned. In response, teachers cut back on some of the “extra-mile” work they voluntarily perform.

I decided to scale back my three-way conferences in a way that I believe doesn't demean the integrity of the process. Students still lead their parents through demonstrations, showing them their work and completing hands-on activities. I still meet with parents but for fifteen minutes instead of half an hour. The chief difference between this conference and the ones I've previously organized is that I now write most of the report card. However, I do not include the goals. Instead, the report card is sent home before the demonstrations and the conferences take place. Self-assessed work by the students is also sent home. I also include a letter asking
parents to discuss the report card with their child, and to come to the conference with goals for the next term in mind. I include a template for them to record goals, as well. The parent(s), the student, and I subsequently discuss the child’s growth and set and record new goals at the conference. The report card is then given to the principal who comments and signs it and the original is given to the parents and students.

How do I feel about this process? Students, parents, and I still have the ever-important conversation about the student’s progress. We all participate. Students and parents come to the conference with a focus. Parents seem more prepared. It also shortens my “extra-mile” meeting time by about ten hours. In a time when teachers are asked to do more for less, time is important.

How do parents feel about my revised conference process? I would need to engage in more action research to find out! Nevertheless, I know that most parents want to be involved and contribute to their child’s conference. I know this because all of the parents of my students accompanied their child to the demonstrations and the conference. Most parents came to the last two sets of conferences with some, if not all three goals, written down. Students are still very excited about the conferences and are proud to show their parents their learning.

As a teacher, I benefited immensely from conducting action research, if for no other reason than because the research I did was directly connected to my practice as a teacher. It allowed me to reflect upon an important part of assessment and evaluation and to engage students and parents in the process of making change.

I will most likely stay with the three-way conference process unless I can find or design another format that encourages just as much or more parent and student participation. This practice fits with my belief that assessment and evaluation should not be “done” to children, but rather should be participatory, democratic undertakings.
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Effective instruction for creating a classroom community

A brief study of contributing factors in group work

Helen Hait

A starting place for addressing inequities in society is recognizing the value of each individual in our classrooms. Underlining and woven throughout my research is a theme of respectful interactions in building a community of learners. Within a body of culturally, personally, and academically diverse students, I have explored how respect can be most effectively encouraged and taught in the context of group work.

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN A CLASSROOM

A group of children quietly work and learn, alone and on their own in a schoolroom setting—a class of students. Another group of students interact, help, discuss and
communicate and, in so doing, learn and grow together in their knowledge of and respect for each other and the world around them—a community of learners. There is a vast difference between the two.

From a global perspective, to survive successfully today, there is a growing awareness of the need to co-operate more closely with others, to understand interdependence, and to demonstrate respect for the diversity that our shrinking world encompasses. The values of community sharing, interacting, and connecting with those around us, which were an accepted and necessary part of life in the Agricultural Age, have largely been lost to the promotion of individualism and competition which became common with the onset of the Industrial Age. This pattern of isolation continues to be espoused today in many organizational systems, including schools (Gibbs, 2001).

Mako Nakagawa (1986), a multicultural educator, states clearly the challenge with which all teachers are confronted. It is the one that, in the context of this changing world, I am presently trying to address in my classroom research:

*If we are to succeed as a nation both in international trade and in leadership for democracy, we need to use the diverse cultural laboratory of our own country as a training ground for producing citizens who value differences, respect the validity of our own perspectives, understand the independence of people and who have interpersonal skills to effectively communicate across all spectra of ethnicity, nationality, language, culture, gender, values and even political ideology.*

(Cited in Gibbs, 2001, p. 34)

What does it take in a classroom to create an environment which meets Nakagawa’s challenge? Am I giving my students, in my short journey with them, the knowledge and as many of the skills and abilities as I can to help them live and work in the world as we know it now and as it will be in the future? What are those skills? What
is that knowledge? How does that relate to building a community of learners?

Jeanne Gibbs (2001) articulates some of the skills and abilities I believe to be of the greatest importance for children today, “The ability to listen attentively, express ideas, solve group problems, resolve conflict, make decisions, research and analyse material and encourage others are democratic skills needed within families, work settings, government and all organizational systems” (p. 20). This view is reiterated by Johnson and Johnson (1990) as they state what they feel is key for students: “The ability of students to work collaboratively with others is the keystone to building and maintaining the caring and committed relationships that largely determine quality of life” (p. 18).

**GROUP WORK: A FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING A COMMUNITY**

One of the most powerful factors contributing to community building is group work. It is in the context
of groups where social development can be most easily facilitated, encouraged, and taught. Some of the personal and social benefits for the children of learning in this type of arrangement include developing more positive attitudes towards others as they interact and work with classmates, growing in understanding and appreciation of the differences and abilities of others, and developing a more positive sense of who they are as they gain confidence in themselves as learners and as active members of a community. Being an appreciated team member becomes a reality for them and they grow in their ability to work more effectively in a group situation. Strengths and weaknesses can be seen more clearly and by accepting these in a context of growing together, change, where needed, is seen as an attainable goal which they help to set and monitor (Clarke, Weideman and Eadie, 1990). They also learn the pro-social behaviours of sharing, helping, and taking care of others within the context of interactions with other children. Hearing and discussing perspectives other than their own with peers helps them progress from stages of egocentrism to more mature, advanced levels of social and academic development. Far more time is given to each student to talk when in a group than is possible in whole class discussions or in working on individual projects. Through interactions and relationships with peers, children can clarify their own values and attitudes and, in the process, develop a healthy frame of reference for their own identity (Johnson and Johnson, 1990).

**MY CLASS**

My group of 27 Grade 5s and 6s illustrated the typical diversity found in most Vancouver classrooms. It was composed of many students from China as well as others from Korea, Iran, the Philippines, Russia, and Japan. There were two designated special needs children, many others who needed learning assistance, and a small group of gifted students. Three students began the year with no English skills at all, and another group required some continuing daily English language assistance support.
MY RESEARCH

Part I
Initially, for the purposes of my research inquiry, I wanted to know what my students’ definitions of community would include. Their responses to the questionnaire which I had them fill out revealed a very clear understanding of the importance of positive social interactions, predominantly in terms of how they responded to class members around them. The most common phrases which appeared discussed communications of some kind between students. Often repeated phrases were, “helping each other,” “interact with each other, socializing, talking,” “working and learning together,” and “treating others the way you want to be treated.” Opinions described by other phrases such as, “Treating people nice, showing kindness, getting along with each other,” “friendly...,” and “respecting each other,” also expressed their community building criteria. Apparent also in the section on differences and similarities was an appreciation both for the diversity which was reflected in our class because of the variety of cultures in it, and of the contribution these differences made to our individuality.

From this point, my questions narrowed. How do I take a group, already very aware of themselves as active members within a group structure, and further help them to be an even more effectively functioning and thriving community? What are the factors in group work which would enable them to do this?

Part II
My research then involved looking specifically at how four different types of grouping situations or activities, varied in their structural and teaching components, contributed to the building of community within our classroom. The types of groups I utilized were:

1. Changing table groups
2. Discrimination activity groups
3. Co-operative groups, and
4. Literature circles
I made anecdotal observations of the children as they worked in these groups over a period of about six weeks. I noted such things as overall group functioning, specific interactions, comments between children, and any problems that were hindering positive group dynamics. In the midst of the group activities or after they were completed, I also had the children answer three general questions about the group work itself. The students were asked:

• Did this type of activity teach you about others or help you in your thinking about other people? If yes, how? What did you learn?

• How does this new knowledge affect what you will do when relating to others in the class and outside the class? How are you different now?

• How effective was this activity in helping to create a community of learners where respect for differences and kindness and understanding towards one another is encouraged?

They answered this third question on a scale from one to five with one being “not very effective” and five being “highly effective” and then explained why they rated it this way. Some self-evaluation comments were also considered in the data collection process. These responses included information about what the children liked about the group exercises, what they were learning and what they, as individuals and as a group, needed to work on to improve their groups.

**CHANGING TABLE GROUPS**

This first grouping arrangement involved the physical layout of the class. The children were arranged in clusters, mostly of six students, at hexagonal tables. These groupings were changed every month or so to provide opportunities to meet and to get to know different classmates. Before I decided on the group members I used a sociogram to ensure the children always had at least one friend at their table.
The results on the rating scales indicated they seemed to feel that this type of grouping was quite effective for community building. Twenty out of 23 students responded with a three or four rating of this activity.

Different comments from the children seemed to indicate a variety of social benefits from this type of grouping arrangement. Because of opportunities to connect with more classmates, there appeared to be an improvement in general social skills. “I have more people and topics to talk about,” was one student’s comment. From another student came a similar statement, “Joe’s sister just got her first birthday so now I might ask, is she walking or talking?” A part of maturing social development is becoming more “other-centred.” “I have at least one thing in common with everybody,” stated one student and, “We know each others’ likes and dislikes...” reflected another. There seemed to be a growing acceptance of more students as evidenced by comments such as, “...helped me by getting to know people. I got to know some people better and learn who they are and accept them like that. I even like them better now.” Friendships were developed. “I didn’t know Angela last year. I got to know her and we became friends,” said one child. Other comments voiced similar reflections. “I had no friends at the beginning of the year but table groups helped me make friends” and, “We sometimes get together out of class” and “I started playing with people at my table.”

**DISCRIMINATION ACTIVITY GROUPS**

The discrimination activity consisted of a set of four very structured lessons about marginalized groups and related to:

- disabilities
- ageism
- sexism
- classism or poverty issues

The activities all involved working with one partner who changed each time and included a teaching story or video, answering questions with the partner, some role
playing and whole class discussions. The role playing, for example, included pairs working together with one member, whose eyes were closed, being led around by the other. In rating the effectiveness of these activities, a total of 16 out of 23 students chose either a four or five.

Almost all of the children's responses indicated a growth in their understanding of those with disabilities or disadvantages of some kind over the course of these kinds of activities. Their increase in empathy was clearly evident in often repeated comments such as, “It helped me imagine how other people feel,” “I learned how hard it is for people with disabilities...,” “...they might have suffered,” “It made me very sad because they have to go through a hard and rough life...,” and “We tried it and couldn’t even stand a few minutes but most (disabled) have to live with it forever.”

The exercises had succeeded in enabling the students to feel what others who are disadvantaged experience. As Kevin Kumashiro (2000) states in his article on anti-oppressive teaching methods, this was a one-time attempt at disrupting the partial knowledge which the students had about the “other.” Empathy is important but it is only a starting place that hopefully challenged the children to want to learn more.

CO-OPERATIVE OR ONE-PRODUCT GROUP

Although there were aspects of co-operative learning reflected in each of the types of groupings, this particular set of exercises was designed with all of the following co-operative principles in mind, that students:

• work in positive interdependence
• work in small, heterogeneous groups
• are accountable for their own and their group’s learning
• learn through opportunities for meaningful conversations, and
• learn and practice co-operative skills as they work through and learn the subject matter together (Clarke, Wideman and Eadie, 1990).
In this set of activities, I included math problem-solving questions done in triads, and different creative thinking exercises conducted in pairs. For each activity, the group handed in one finished product. Members of the math groups were also assigned roles as reader (of the problem), encourager (that everyone was doing okay) and checker (that everyone understood the problem and had their work written out).

The average effectiveness rating for this type of group was three, a rating chosen by most of the children. Many of their comments demonstrated that they saw the value of working together to help each other understand a concept, particularly as it related to the math triads. It was not only okay to help someone or to need help, it was expected that everyone would work together to ensure the individuals in the group all knew how to explain the answer. Being in either position—teaching or being taught—was fine. One student’s comment, reflecting a common perspective, was, “Everybody will understand and know how to solve the problem and not just one person. I know people will help you when you need help and will check if you got it.”

**LITERATURE CIRCLE GROUPS**

Once a week the children participated in four or five member, non-changing groups to discuss one or two chapters of a novel. The four roles the children took in these groups were rotating and involved different levels of leadership. The roles were: Artful Illustrator, Discussion Director, Passage Picker, and Word Hunter. Each role required the students to present their thinking and reasons for their thinking. Although one product was not the goal of each meeting, each group member was expected to present a different perspective of the chapter for the group task to be completed. Evaluations at the end of each session gave the children an opportunity to discuss how their work was presented and what might be improved in the group dynamic for the next time.

The ratings given for this group activity were mostly fours and fives—the highest rating compared to all other
groupings. The children’s comments about the grouping were very positive and linked their involvement in this type of group with valued social and academic outcomes. A number of participants expressed a growing level of confidence in and an increasing understanding of themselves. Others wrote about changes to their behaviour because of their interactions in the group. From my observations as well, I could see their involvement and level of social maturity grow in this exercise during the few weeks of observations. They worked on specific group dynamics such as improving eye contact, using appropriate voice levels and responding to each others’ ideas with comments like, “Do you mean...,” or “Well for me...,” or “I disagree because...” and in keeping each other on track, “Okay, group, back to...” In their responses, one student summarized observations I had made of many of them. She wrote, “I like everything about it. It is fun. I used to need to work on eye contact and a loud voice. But now every week I get better...” Another girl, who often used put-downs, recognized significant growth in her own attitude, “First, I don’t want to be in the same group as... Now I know more about him...he made the group more fun... This affected me a lot. It also teaches me don’t judge the person until I know the person really well because you might be really wrong about them...It helped me think in many ways instead of just my own way.” Another response reflected growth about seeing others’ perspectives, “I like to listen to other people’s ideas because you actually gain interest in their ideas because their thinking is unique...and different. You might change your thinking...”

A couple of students also summarized an important aspect of heterogeneous grouping related to the benefits of changing roles. This was similar to Elizabeth Cohen’s idea of multiple-ability orientation (1994). In this approach to group tasks everyone has some of the abilities necessary to complete the task for that exercise but no one person will have all the abilities. All students are needed to complete the task successfully and thereby a mixed set of expectations for competence is created.
This addresses the problem of what she calls “high-status,” more verbal, controlling students dominating a task and making decisions. Students referred to this with comments such as, “…There are different roles, so everyone can prove themselves at what they are good at. Everyone knows exactly what to do, so the group can function very well and fulfil its purpose fairly quickly,” and “I learned Malcolm is very helpful…[and] If I would need help on a drawing project I could ask Matt for a few tips.”

**DEALING WITH PROBLEMS OF GROUP WORK**

One of the greatest deterrents preventing teachers using group work more in their classrooms is a belief that the children will encounter frustrations or difficulties when working with each other and that this could result in more management problems for teachers. Keeping students separate is easier, quieter and simpler for them and helps to maintain better control. This can be the case and it certainly is quieter. While group work can create management problems, this is not a good reason to have the children avoid group work. Rather, the frustrating or negative situations which result when students are together reflect “classroom life” and real world situations. These can be used as opportunities for walking the children through the dilemmas and teaching them how to handle them constructively.

It is crucial to monitor how groups are functioning on a regular basis, to be honest yet respectful about what is not working well and to work through the difficulties together. Sometimes a quick class reminder is all that is necessary, such as, “Please remember to keep your answers interesting and to the point.” At other times it will take more specific interventions with individuals or groups or more direct and longer teaching sessions. Knowing strategies for handling a problem respectfully is empowering for the students because they are learning important life skills.
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My research into the factors in group work which most contribute to community building in a classroom revealed a few major themes: physical layout of the class; varied grouping opportunities; self-evaluation of group work; and curriculum issues. All of these are connected to each other and revolve around what the children had made clear was the most important element in defining a community—respectful interactions.

Physical layout of the class
The physical layout of the class makes a statement about the teacher's philosophy of effective education. Does the teacher value the children being close enough to each other to talk easily? Does she believe that, if close to each other and able to talk easily, they will be able to work quietly without talking when necessary? The changing table groups allowed my students to interact and to get to know more children on a personal level than they might have were they not given this opportunity. Judging from the responses of the children and my own observations of this more casual, non-structured grouping arrangement, there was value in continuing with this practice. It did make a difference. A stage was set for the other interactions which occurred throughout the day.

Varied grouping opportunities
Providing the children with numerous opportunities to interact in different types of grouping situations with various classmates is a must in creating a community of learners. This affords them practice in knowing how to handle themselves with friends, with acquaintances and with those they may not know well or even want to know. A tone of comfort and a valuing of the practice of group work is set when interactions with others are expected and are a common part of every day for the children. In all of their responses to the different types of grouping arrangements, a growing maturity and developing social awareness was clearly evident. Students became increasingly familiar with what other classmates were like. They liked finding out what their opinions were about work
and play, and they enjoyed learning how to talk and interact with them effectively and more often. Respect, overall, was increased. Differences were acknowledged and sometimes celebrated and often minimized in the context of the importance of the similarities they saw in each other as they worked on common tasks. Getting to know each other as people became important.

One of the most effective types of grouping arrangements for this was Literature Circles. Every child was expected to contribute some part towards an end product which was, in this case, a “whole picture,” a representation of a chapter in a novel. This type of group gave each child ongoing practice with providing a piece of the puzzle. Doing this seemed to minimize the occurrence of “high” and “low status” students contributing differentially to the group dynamic (as discussed by Cohen, 1994). Some parallels here can be drawn to conclusions Slavin reached in his work on harmonious interracial relationships. He found that having multicultural groups of students work together on group product tasks produced the “high quality, positive interpersonal interactions...[which led to] interpersonal attraction and seeing similarities as more important than cultural differences” (cited in Cohen, 1994, p. 18).

**Self-evaluations of group work**

Children need to know that their responses to their group work and their learning are valued and will help to direct some aspects of their instruction. Self-evaluations could contribute to instructing the teacher in how to make things better. Teachers encourage children to take responsibility for their own learning when they present opportunities to evaluate the processes they are being taken through. A sense of building a community is enhanced when the students’ comments and recommendations for what works well and what might need to be improved are shared and discussed.

**Curriculum issues**

Social responsibility is a part of the required curriculum for students. In the past, I have often dealt with it in
only incidental or fractured ways. Ongoing group work provides numerous opportunities to teach important aspects of social responsibility. For groups to function smoothly there must be a concerted effort to teach the social skills required for respectful interactions with others. With numerous opportunities for interactions must come the varied types of accompanying instruction necessary for positive and constructive communications to occur. Direction, guidance and teaching these skills need to be ongoing. For example, direct instruction on the issues of disabilities, ageism, sexism, and classism proved to be helpful in sparking students' interest in these issues and dealing with some aspects of the partial knowledge they expressed in these areas. Teaching about social justice issues brings a greater awareness of inequities which students need to address in their own behaviours. Again, respect for all is crucial.

From “com”—a prefix from the Latin meaning “with, together,” we have “to combine,” “to make a composition from parts toward a whole;” and “communication between others” in forming and sustaining “a community.” Through my brief journey as a researcher I caught a clearer glimpse, as an educator, of what I am attempting to create and develop: a peaceful classroom where all know they are welcome; a safe place where students know they will be expected to express their opinions and can trust they will be heard; a space where diversity is recognized and celebrated; a place where talking and learning from one another occurs often throughout the day and where interactions are respectful and kind; an energetic environment where learning—social, emotional and academic—is maximized; and finally, an arena where there is an awareness of growth as an individual but also as a responsible, contributing member of a vibrant collective whole—a community of learners.
REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH AND HOW MY TEACHING HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY IT IN THE LAST YEAR

In my 20 plus years of teaching, this research project proved to be one of the most helpful and effective tools for me to examine and improve my teaching practices. By taking the time to read about group processes and ideas, by implementing some of those ideas and by closely observing and analyzing the resulting interactions and evidence of student growth, my understanding of the importance of group work in a classroom was greatly enhanced.

Whereas my class from last year modelled some exemplary social behaviours, even before our focus on group work and social growth, this year’s class revealed an entirely different social make-up. Being one year younger, and mostly Grade 5s, also contributed to significant differences. In the first months of this year there were nine or ten children who needed extra reminders to practice socially responsible, respectful, and kind behaviour. Although group work with this class resulted in more altercations, rudeness with each other, arguing and other inappropriate interactions, it was through these social situations that training in proper responses to each other was facilitated. They worked very hard at learning polite and respectful ways of interacting and at the time of this writing, just a week after student-led conferences in March, I can truly say that I am thrilled with the efforts they have made and with the progress I have seen them achieve. I see evidence of their progress in their willingness to help each other more, use respectful words and voice tones, demonstrate care towards each other, and monitor tendencies to criticize each other.

Group work is a key structure in supporting and building a community in the process of learning and growing together. After observing this carefully in action for over a year now, I am more convinced of the truth of this than ever.
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If teachers want their students to learn mutual assistance, collective decision making and shared responsibility for task performance, they, teachers must practice what they preach in the classroom.

(Thomas F. Logan, 1986)

While we each had a great group of students in our respective classrooms, there was incredible diversity in terms of student attitudes towards school and each other, and student ability levels reflected within those classrooms. When each of us attempted group work, it seemed that the same students were always chosen first to be in these groups by their classmates, and others were always chosen last. The hurt looks on the faces of the students...
chosen last was very difficult to see. We often found ourselves forming the groups and insuring the inclusion of those usually chosen last, but in the process we were taking away any say that the students had in their workmates.

We also noted that there was often conflict during group work that manifested itself as students who were not listening to each other or as one student doing all the work and using their own ideas without any input from their partner or group members.

When we observed our classes, we saw that our students did not have the cohesiveness and positive attitude towards each other that we knew was possible. Hence, our decision was to look towards building a more inclusive environment in our classrooms.

As a co-operative unit of four teachers ourselves, we decided to attempt to change our classroom environments through co-operative activities by having students work in teams to complete tasks. We felt then, and still do now, that to teach for social justice teachers must include every student in a meaningful and positive manner. For us, social justice means that all students feel included and that the contribution to class work of each student carries an equal amount of weight and importance. We feel that co-operative learning activities allow our students to showcase their individual strengths through reading, writing, drawing and acting. We were hoping to shift the existing power relationships that were in our rooms and allow every student's talents to be shared with their classmates. Co-operative activities can give a sense of power to those who feel that they do not have a voice. This includes the students who don't ever speak in front of the large group or the artist who can't read and who does not have a regular forum to share his or her talents with others. Co-operative activities give those students a chance to shine in a system that often legitimizes the best readers, writers, and athletes, but does not see the inherent value in asking our students to care for each other.
The activities that we carried out in our classrooms asked students, some for the first time, to listen to each other and also to rely on each other to make contributions to the activities.

CONNECTING TO THE RESEARCH LITERATURE
Having discussed with one another what co-operative learning meant to each of us, the next step was to read what the literature had to say about co-operative learning.

Delving into the research, such as the work by Slavin (1990), Slavin and Stevens (1990), and Kagan (1990) resulted in finding a great deal of support for co-operative learning. No one advocated against co-operative learning or even expressed reservations with it. There were authors of papers who acknowledged that there was some controversy amongst proponents of co-operative learning, but this was mainly focused on differing methods of measuring results. The authors were still in favour of co-operative learning, but questioned data collection, comparisons, and which elements to define as crucial (e.g., leadership, trust, decision making and inclusion) to co-operative learning.

Our main goal was to develop a more inclusive classroom, so we turned to co-operative learning activities because they have been found to improve inter-group relations and improve social acceptance of all students (Slavin, 1990). Slavin also found that co-operative learning opportunities resulted in gains in self esteem, the liking of school and of the subject being studied, increases in time-on-task, and improvements in attendance.

For co-operative learning to be successful, certain elements are required: face-to-face interactions, individual accountability, group processing, and interpersonal skills (Schultz, 1990). Throughout the literature there is an emphasis on the positive impact of group goals and individual accountability on improvements in student achievement. However, the literature does not address
questions of whether or not these same elements are essential to improving inclusion (Stevens and Slavin, 1995).

The research does support the use of co-operative learning opportunities generally to move a classroom towards inclusion, noting that students who have experienced this type of learning demonstrate social behaviours such as active listening and effective conflict resolution more often than do students who are studying competitively or individually (Andersen, Nelson, Fox, and Gruber, 1988).

But, for co-operative learning groups to function well, the social skills that students need in order to work collaboratively, such as leadership, communication, and conflict management, need to be taught. Too often teachers mistakenly assume that students have the skills necessary to interact effectively in a group. To be effective, these social skills need to be taught, assessed, and the transference of them as learned behaviour skills promoted, before beginning co-operative group work (Andersen, Nelson, Fox, and Gruber, 1988).

According to studies by Slavin (1990) and Slavin and Stevens (1990), groups of two or three are the best for students engaging in co-operative learning. Also, heterogeneous groups (such as mixed ability levels) are more productive than homogeneous groups; it is recommended to assign to each group a student drawn randomly from high, medium, and low ability groups to foster heterogeneity (Andersen, Nelson, Fox, and Gruber, 1988).

Our experiences make it hard to embrace this generalization. At times, it is in the best interest of the students to work in groups which allow them to benefit from the richness of the diversity, but at other times this richness can be overwhelming for a student with more limited skills, who may, in the face of it, shut down. Grouping based on similarity of needs is sometimes the route to go.

To implement co-operative learning, Kagan (1990) recommends the use of organized structures. Structures usually
involve a series of steps with proscribed behaviours at each step. Structures lend themselves to any subject area and are exemplified by such teaching strategies as “round robin,” “think-pair-share,” and “jigsaw.” Individual accountability and working towards a common group goal are inherent in structures such as these, giving students experience with these crucial elements.

Having reviewed the literature, the common themes that emerged for us as necessary for co-operative learning to occur were:

- common group goals
- individual accountability
- social skills training

These are the elements we worked to ensure were in place in our classrooms when we set up our co-operative learning situations.

Throughout the literature, the “success” of co-operative learning was measured by the achievement of students taught in co-operative learning situations as compared to that of students in control groups who were not. However, co-operative learning also has a positive impact on inter-group relations, self esteem, attitudes towards class and school, and the ability to work collaboratively with groups (Stevens and Slavin, 1995). The “success” of co-operative learning processes should also give consideration to gains in these areas.

Unfortunately, also lacking from the research was the voice of students. It appeared that no data were obtained from students working in co-operative situations with regard to their feelings about co-operative learning or their preferences for co-operative learning in relation to other teaching and learning strategies.

**FOUR SITE EXPERIENCES**

After having achieved a better understanding of the dynamics necessary for successful experiences with co-operative learning, we decided to try it out with our classes. The four snapshots that follow represent our
individual experiences with co-operative learning and inclusion in our classrooms. The first two explore themes from student responses in a Grade 3 and Grade 2 class, respectively. The last two focus on observations of student interactions, one of a Grade 3, 4, 5 multi-age grouping and the other in a Kindergarten/Grade 1 split.

From the classroom of DARRIN CLARKE
I am a teacher in a suburban elementary school. I have been teaching for seven years, the last six at my present school. In my school district, elementary school is Kindergarten to Grade 5. Over my six years, I have taught every grade from K to Grade 5. When I conducted the research for this study, I was teaching a class of 22 Grade 3 students. The class consisted of low to middle class students. There were a few students who had recently emigrated from Eastern Europe, the rest were second or more generation Canadians. Within the class there were 14 boys and eight girls. The academic range in the class was fairly narrow, with all student achievement profiles fitting within norms for that grade.

Having spent time equipping the students with common group goals, a sense of individual accountability, and the interaction skill of listening—all key elements for successful engagement in co-operative learning—it was time to engage the students in co-operative learning activities. After each activity the students in my class reflected, in a written format, on their experience in the group. Some guiding questions that they considered while they were reflecting included:

1) Rate the group on how they worked,
2) How did you feel?
3) What did you like?
4) What did you not like?
5) What would you do differently next time? and
6) How did this activity compare to the last one?

What follows is an analysis of the data gathered from those reflections.

“...I felt great because everyone participated...”
(Mike)
After reading over the students’ reflections, four themes emerged: Group Size, Interaction Skills, Decision Making, and Emotions/Feelings.

The first topic that resonated throughout the students’ feedback was Group Size. Here is a sampling of what they had to say:

**Jane:** It depends what activity we are doing then I can decide if I want to be in a partnership or group.

**Karen:** It would be hard because with only two people you would not get a lot of ideas.

**Jay:** It is easier when there are four or five people in a group.

**Jay:** Next time I would like to have more people in the group.

I was pleased with the students’ consideration of group size. I found the comment by Jane “... it depends what activity we are doing, then I can decide if I want to be in a partnership or group ...” to be particularly powerful. Through experiencing a variety of co-operative learning scenarios this student was able to conclude that her learning was based on subject/topic expectations and these would determine which learning circumstances would best suit her needs: partnership, group of three or group of some other size. This voice both supports and contradicts Anderson, Nelson, Fox and Gruber (1988) in their findings that suggest groups of two or three are ideal. Their findings reflect data on achievement only. Jane’s voice points out that, yes, sometimes groups of two or three provide the best conditions for learning, but at other times, and for a variety of reasons, a larger group is better. The student’s insights on group size go beyond the literature I have read. Students recognize that they, as individuals, can and need to decide how they can best work. As Emily expressed it, “... I liked there were only two people ... it wasn’t too noisy ... better than last time because there were too many people ...” Similarly, Jay perceived that the work was easier in a group of
four. Students realize that partnerships lend themselves to positive interactions, but that ideas are constrained in them by the limited number of people. They also recognized that larger groups are challenging because of the turn taking and listening dynamics involved, but that the responsibilities in them are shared and they hold out the potential for a more expansive idea pool. I think that these observations reflect important distinctions that could only be made by students who had gone through having the experience of participating in different co-operative groupings.

The second topic that dominated student feedback was that of Interaction Skills. Some of the comments students made in this area were:

**Cory:** I felt happy because everybody got to talk, we did this by talking in a circle.

**Bob:** One thing I did learn was that if you all talk at the same time you won’t get anywhere and your presentation won’t be that good either.

**Arthur:** What I like about this group is that before we went to something else we would first see if everyone agreed.

**Tim:** ...next time we should try to use better listening skills and give everyone more of a chance.

**Cory:** I learned to listen more doing this activity.

**Cam:** ...next time I’ll choose a group that I know will listen.

The literature highlighted the importance of social interaction skills in preparing for co-operative learning opportunities. It wasn’t until I read the students’ reflections that I understood that this feature is critical. I was quickly reminded that successful social interactions are based on active listening. Therefore, before the students engaged in further co-operative learning tasks, I taught active listening skills. Students contributed ideas and suggested
behaviours that demonstrated active listening. These included appropriate body language and paraphrasing. In the words of Cory: “I felt happy because everybody got to talk, we did this by taking turns in a circle.” Conversely, students such as Bob noted that a lack of social skills had a negative impact on their sense of success, “… one thing I did learn was that if you talk at the same time you won’t get anywhere and your presentation won’t be that good either …”

The student feedback pointed out that social skills go beyond active listening and that time needs to be spent on taking turns, providing positive feedback and engaging in conflict resolution. Teaching these skills is important because, as educators, we cannot assume that students possess these abilities. Even teaching listening skills does not guarantee that the students will employ them as Cam indicated: “… next time I’ll choose a group that I know will listen …” To equip my students to have successful, positive, co-operative learning experiences, I need to teach other skills, like decision-making, too.

The third topic that emerged in student comments was Decision Making. What follows is a sampling of what they had to say:

**Mike:** I felt good because there was no arguing and I listened.

**Bob:** It was tough working with this group because I was the one who usually had to calm everyone down.

**Karen:** …tough…putting the story together because we had a lot of ideas and we couldn’t put all the ideas in.

**Cam:** …we didn’t work together … we had to use rock, paper, scissors.

When students don’t possess appropriate decision-making skills, they resort to what they know, decision-making processes that don’t involve reason, like rock, paper scissors. Students recognized that the most challenging
aspect of co-operative learning is making group decisions. As Karen noted, it was “... tough putting the story together because we had lots of ideas and we couldn’t put all the ideas in ...” Students also felt the power of effective decision making when they encountered it. As Mike observed, “... I felt good because there was no arguing and I listened ...”

The fourth key topic was students’ Emotions/Feelings. This theme was carried in student comments such as:

Karen: I felt happier because I did not have to talk to three other people and I got a chance to write a lot.

Mitch: ...felt great...everybody was listening to me.

Karen: I did not feel very good because not everyone in the group was listening to me.

The range of emotions experienced by students covered a broad spectrum. Some reported they felt great and good while others, like Karen, reported negative emotions, “I did not feel very good because not everyone was listening to me ...” Interestingly, most of the feelings the students described related directly back to the use (or lack thereof) of interaction skills. Students felt good when being listened to and heard, and poorly when there was a breakdown in the use of positive interaction techniques. This reinforces the importance of teaching interaction skills, and of ensuring that transference of them is encouraged in a wide range of situations. If co-operative learning is going to work to achieve inclusion, then students must be properly equipped to handle the responsibilities (e.g., of being members of functioning groups). Clearly, when students do not have the skills to work in groups, groups can become emotionally charged, a situation which leads to a poor learning environment which, in turn, certainly does not contribute to a sense of inclusiveness in the class.

At the outset of this project, my goal was to create a better sense of inclusion in my classroom. The problem with assessing my success in relation to this goal is that
there was no baseline data on inclusiveness in my classroom against which to make a direct comparison. In my professional judgment, my classroom did develop a greater sense of inclusion following the development of interactive skills and the use of co-operative activities. Initially, one of my concerns was that groups had been formed based on popularity and friendship, without considering any other factors. However, the latest examples of my students forming into groups demonstrates that group formation is more than the simple finger pointing at friends that it used to be. It has become a thoughtful, dynamic and successful experience for students, one that takes into account different needs in different learning contexts.

From the classroom of
BILL URQUHART

I am a primary teacher in a suburban elementary school located in the city of Port Coquitlam. I have been teaching for seven years, the last six at my present school. In my school district, elementary schools are arranged from Kindergarten to Grade 5. Over my six years I have had the opportunity to teach grades from Kindergarten to Grade 3. At present, I am teaching a class of 21 Grade 2 students. The class consists of a group of low to middle class students. Within this class there are 11 boys and 10 girls and the academic range is quite broad including students working at a late Grade 3 level in many subject areas and others working at a beginning Grade 1 level in all academic areas. Overall, this group of students interacted very well with each other.

My continuing quest is to gain a stronger understanding of co-operative learning. For this study, my goal was to expose my students to co-operative learning tasks that would encourage group formation in a more spontaneous, inclusive manner than they had been using to date.

For the purpose of this study, students were asked to participate in the following: 1. a series of five language arts-based co-operative lessons, 2. class debriefs, and 3. reflection worksheets.
As I reviewed the students’ written and oral reflections after each co-operative activity, as well as my own observations, I began to note themes of Decision Making, Inclusion, Leadership, Academic Support, and Off-Task Behaviours emerging. Each of these themes is explored below.

As the following student comments suggest, a major concern for students centred on the issue of Decision Making:

• “Everyone said their thinking—we had a vote—no one fought—only one choice.”

• “Our group was good because we [didn't fight] over who should go first. We voted and [stuck] with it.”

• “…we first decided if we wanted to vote or not and we decided yes. We voted for Sue's ideas...”

As a teacher observer, I noticed students:

• using a voting system of raising hands, secret ballots to decide which story version they wanted to share with the class.

• negotiating participation opportunities. One student exclaimed, “If you get to write, then I get to circle the words!”

• using a tally sheet to record peers’ story choice.

I was impressed with how students created processes, (e.g., secret ballots, raising of hands, tallies, etc.) in order to solve various problems such as who gets to handle the pictures first, whose story will be used for the purpose of sharing, who gets to write first and, who gets to handle the pictures/props first. This act of “decision-making,” as indicated in the students’ reflections, had an impact on all of them as they worked in their co-operative groups. Moreover, this was an area of co-operative learning in which students needed to further develop their skills. Researchers, Bonnie K. Natasi and Douglas H. Clements
(1991) further support this assertion when they suggest that teachers must teach and model conflict resolution skills such as negotiation, compromise, and co-operative problem solving.

A second theme emerged around the topic of Inclusion. Students noted:

• “It was fun because we usually don’t get to work with partners.”

• “I think it was [great] to get to work with the people I never get to work with. It was kind of like a way to make people have friends.”

• “I liked how we worked together and I liked how everybody was co-operating and listening.”

• “What was good I think was my group all got to arrange a part of the story.”

As an observer, I noticed the following examples of “inclusion” as the co-operative learning activities played out:

• Claire, shy student, is handed a piece of paper. She is slow to respond, but her group moves around her in a very positive and supportive manner.

• Sylvia, weak student, sharing her ideas. Her partners are sitting and listening patiently as she slowly expresses her thinking.

• Sally, while organizing the pictures, attempts to involve Joe, weak student, by asking him, “Joe, you tell us what you want.”

The literature strongly supports my finding that co-operative learning activities help to create a more inclusive environment (Natasi and Clements, 1991, Gilles and Ashman, 2000, and Slavin, 1987). As a result of doing these co-operative activities many students felt more included.
A third theme focused on Academic Support. Students said:

- “We all came close together to listen and help people write and listen to their story.”
- “People were helping to figure out a story or helping to spell words.”
- “I felt good working with my partner because we took turns writing and when one person was writing the other was thinking of a story and telling it.”
- “Billy told me how to spell words. It was great!”

These students’ reflections, and my own observations, reaffirmed the important role that co-operative learning tasks can play in supporting the academic development of children (particularly those who are academically challenged). Researchers Robyn M. Gilles and Adrian F. Ashman also support these claims. They assert that when students with academic challenges interact with their peers, they receive feedback and support (scaffolding) that help them clarify issues and build understandings (Gilles, Ashman, 2000). Similarly, they suggest that these reciprocal interactions probably serve to maintain the interest of low-achieving students in group tasks, while at the same time supporting their efforts to solve problems and construct new understandings (Gilles, Ashman, 2000). I couldn’t agree more!

A final theme that emerged focussed around Off-task Behaviours. Students shared the following comments:

- “One kid in our group wasn’t listening and we had to retell the story again so that person could learn the story. That’s why I found it challenging.”
- “Tony was not listening to Sally and he kept on switching the two pieces of paper [even] when Sally told him no... he kept on doing it.”
- “I saw my partner talking to Alyssha...”
• Janice and Lisa were bothering us by playing with my stuffed animals and goofing off so it was very hard to work. So I picked the number 5.”

• “Sometimes they were being so goofy. And sometimes they were so noisy. Next time we do this I want a new desk group...”

When I reviewed the students’ reflections and my own observations, it became very apparent to me that many students lacked the necessary skills to complete parts of a co-operative activity successfully. I’ve realized that although I’ve always been a big advocate of co-operative learning, I haven’t really taught my students these skills. Students didn’t really know what was expected and I could see off-task behaviours that I would attribute to this skill gap. My quest now is to take steps to reduce the amount of off-task behaviour that continues to take place during co-operative learning activities. For this I will depend heavily on the many suggestions for helping support students become more aware of the interpersonal skills and group behaviours required for successful co-operative learning that can be found in articles by Slavin (1987), and Gilles and Ashman (2000).

From the classroom of SIBLI GILL
I teach in a school that encourages teachers to collaborate in their planning and teaching, and I team teach with another Grade 3, 4, and 5 teacher. At the time of the study, my class consisted of 23 Grades 3, 4 and 5 students who were from a variety of cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Most students were designated English as a second language learners; a few were English as first language learners. Student achievement levels in the class were within the widely held expectations for children of their ages for all except three students whose achievement levels were academically lower than all other students. There were no students with an official special needs designation in my class. Through observation over the school year, I have noticed no cultural barriers among the friendships within the class. Culture, original language
and religion did not figure in who the students mixed with socially and this extended into the classroom when they chose people to sit or work with. Not coincidentally, the students who I feel were isolated from the other students were the three students who have significant learning issues. These three students were socially able and were included in play at recess and lunchtime, but when it came to student-chosen groups to work with in the class, these three were consistently left out.

During my observations of the group work for the activity “Building from Clues” I focussed for a few minutes on one group. This group included a little boy named Tim who is academically far behind his counterparts. As I observed him sitting passively, and listening and watching the other students in the group boisterously doing the activity, the question I asked myself was, “What is Tim gaining right now?” As I continued to observe, I noticed that Tim wasn't passive, but was actually engaged; his eyes were bright, he was keenly aware of his group and their ideas as they shared them, and twice he gave a yes or no response to the ideas of the others. This realization reminded me that not all students can and should play the same role in group situations. Students who need to, will quietly observe until they are ready to step into another role and feel comfortable enough to do so. In this case, Tim needed to see the modelling available from other students as they engaged in co-operative group work many more times before he would be ready to take a more active role in that work. So the answer to my question, “What is Tim gaining right now?” is that he was gaining valuable time to observe his peers and to learn from and with them.

Although my initial perception about this student was that he was very passive in his role in the co-operative group activities, I now believe that students like him gain much more when they are quietly observing members of a group than they do when they are alone. Students working on their own are not always engaged in active learning. Further, by working alone they miss the opportunity to see, and therefore learn, many skills like organization, communication, facility with language, and critical think-
ing. I believe that all students learn differently and the role that they play in a group is the role that they need to play in order to learn effectively at any particular time. This does not mean that some months or years later the role will be the same; quite likely it will change and this will be due to the modelling that they have seen in the past. Consequently, I have revised my outlook on all students and instead of trying to make them fit into some standard that I think as a teacher they need to reach, I believe it is much more valuable for these students to do what they need to do in order to be successful learners.

One of the essential features of co-operative learning is that the success of one student helps other students be successful. Co-operative learning supports all learners because the structure and activity associated with co-operative learning itself allows for contributions of many different kinds: artistic, verbal, social, written, and beyond.

Inclusion in the classroom is an important step towards social justice. Students can be taught that working together and making everybody feel included is an important endeavour because it allows us all to feel good about each other and about ourselves. The responsibility for teaching this life lesson is one that is shared by everyone in the classroom, not just the teacher. Hopefully this understanding and this sense of responsibility translates into actions well beyond the confines of a classroom. Robert E. Slavin suggests in his book *Co-operative learning: Student teams* (1989), that when students are taught that the classroom is a place of individualistic competition, it follows that it is also a place of embarrassment, of anger and of an established pecking order. In such a place, students are unwilling to help each other and may go as far as calling each other names when one performs better than the others. Slavin then asks the reader to imagine a structural change in the classroom. In this restructured classroom, students are asked to work together. Now, the goal is to see what they can do while working together. In this situation, students will want to make sure that everybody in the group has a good understanding of the activity. They will each feel responsible for each other’s learning.
Thomas F. Logan’s (1986) states that, “if teachers want their students to learn mutual assistance, collective decision making and shared responsibility for task performance, they, teachers, must practice what they preach in the classroom” (Logan, p. 125). My students are able to see how my teaching partner and I work cooperatively to plan and teach the classes. This modelling will encourage students to help each other, teach each other and make more of a group effort.

From the classroom of MIRANDA HOURSELL

I teach in a small annex on the East Side of Vancouver in an area that draws students from a range of ethnic communities. Every one of my students speaks English as their second language. The neighbourhood is working class, but my class includes students from households that range from very needy to quite well off. This year my class consists of 14 Grade 1 and four Kindergarten students.

I was surprised to find out how much I enjoyed “spying” on my students. It was freeing to be able to sit back and really focus on the conversations between the students instead of feeling the pressure to step in, interfere and keep the students on task and working towards completing an assignment. Frankly, I was curious to see how they worked together and not whether they finished the task to the best of their abilities.

For purposes of ensuring everyone contributed to an activity using Venn diagrams, the comparison of their favourite things was the perfect topic. Everyone was on task because they each needed to contribute their thoughts to be able to complete the task. Each team was unique and brought a different approach to the task. One group recorded only the things that they had in common. Other groups were looking at anything and recorded each favourite thing, whether they had it in common or not. They seemed excited regardless of their findings.
Jesse and Steven were the group that seemed to struggle the most. Steven, who is a high functioning Kindergarten student capable of writing a perfectly spelt sentence or two, was fooling around and off topic. Jesse, who is an emergent speller in Grade 1, struggled to keep Steven on track by asking him questions about things that he liked.

On the carpet for the debrief I asked the students what they thought about working with a teammate. Steven put his hand up and responded that he really really really really really really liked working with a teammate. I responded by asking him to, “Tell me more. What was the best part?” He said he liked having turns. Steven rated group work on the 0 to 10 scale as 100.

Before sending them off to their journals to record in writing and drawing what it was like to work with a partner, I told them I hoped that they would share their honest feelings. If it was hard then I wanted to see a zero. I wanted their true feelings and thoughts; I didn’t want them to rate the activity a 10 because they thought that is what I wanted. To encourage honesty, I made sure that students knew their journals would not be shared with any other students.

For many of my Kindergarteners and Grade 1s, writing is still a struggle. They are able to be far more expressive and verbose in their feelings orally. The actual job of writing bogs them down. So, as the students worked, I walked around and talked to some of them, feeling as though I might get more out of them through the more informal medium of conversation in which they could more comfortably express themselves. I was particularly interested in what Steven was going to say, because of the striking difference between what I had observed during the activity and what I had heard in the debrief on the carpet. Looking in his writing book I saw that Steven had given the teamwork a zero and said, “My partner did not let me do anything.” I wasn’t too sure what to think. I went to look at Jesse’s book and he had rated group work a 10, and had written down “It was fun.” At this point I became aware of how vital on-the-spot observations were going to be for me.
Looking back I can see that if I am looking at this study as a way to include every student and encourage them to have more caring attitudes towards each other, then it was reasonably successful, even though Steven's journal entry suggested he wasn’t overly thrilled with the experience. What I saw was two students who don’t choose to play with each other talking and exchanging ideas, even if they were off topic and discussing Pokemon cards! Jesse showed a great deal of persistence in attempting to recapture Steven's attention and to focus him on their assignment.

**REFLECTIONS**

Where do I even start to describe what I have learned through this experience? I don’t think that there is an easy answer to that question. I have learned the importance of action research. I always felt that I could just read a book, talk to my colleagues or instinctively know what was best for my students, but I have come to realize that there is a whole wide world full of practical researchers who are there (like my teachers) to offer assistance and guidance with both practical questions and processes that enable you to research your own questions. These guides are there to light my way and to give me perspective and some insight into topics about which they have much more information than I do.

An article by Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson called “How can we put co-operative learning into practice?” (1987) spoke to me directly as a practising teacher who is interested in delving into co-operative learning. It deals specifically with questions that I had, and it helped me focus on where I might get started as a researcher. It encourages teachers to replicate well known studies on student interaction, saying, “Every careful replication adds to our understanding” (p. 47). They share their own research topics and carefully explain the questions they have and how they are going to go about answering them. For example, they think that co-operative learning best suits situations that involve problem solving, decision-making, and critical thinking, and they wonder why co-operative groups “handle these
tasks better than students working alone” (p. 48). This question was similar to the one that I started with in the beginning. After combining the background knowledge from articles and my own experiences with implementing co-operative learning situations in my classroom, I have come to the conclusion that co-operative learning does help shape a more positive classroom environment.

The more time my students have spent working co-operatively in a variety of groups, the less time I have had to spend working on social problems. Mistakes that the students make are now more often shrugged off with the words, “That’s okay, we all make mistakes” than they were before they had experience with co-operative learning. One of my students, who is a non-reader but an extremely talented artist, was able to shine in each of the groups in which he worked. Other students noticed his abilities when working with him, and commented on them. No longer did he feel that he had nothing to contribute to group work, he had his artwork, which opened other students’ eyes to both his amazing imagination and keen intellect. I can see that it could have been extremely easy to lose this student because he felt that he did not measure up to the others in terms of his reading and writing. These activities have opened all of our eyes (his, the other students, and my own) to the fact that everyone has talents in different areas, and everyone can contribute to learning. This student has become more confident in all aspects of school life and is making wonderful progress, not only in his reading and writing, but also in terms of his behaviour. For him alone this research has been such a positive experience that I would continue to use as many co-operative learning activities as I can in the future.

It is true that the more you do co-operative learning activities, the easier they become for the students. You have to experience an activity a number of times before it becomes familiar enough that the students are comfortable with the format and can relax and truly experience co-operative learning. The more my class was thrown together in co-operative learning situations, the easier it was for them. The atmosphere created by co-operative
learning activities carried over into other aspects of classroom life as well, and we all began to refer to ourselves as a team. Our team worked together when problems with students from other classes arose out on the playground, as well as when they had to choose partners for games during their free time.

Our co-operative ethos also spilled over into how the class lined up. A discussion began when one student asked whether they had to save someone's spot in line when a student had to go back to get something that they had forgotten. As a class we sat and discussed the relative merits of saving a space and not saving one. Those who shared their ideas for saving a spot in line used terms such as “we are a team,” “it is nice to be friends with everyone,” and “sometimes people make mistakes and that’s alright.” All of the positive support that I had hoped to see at the beginning of this investigation was coming out and pervading all aspects of our class.

I plan to scream what I have learned through this study from the rooftops. This is important because we teach more than academics. So much time can be spent fixing little problems and complaints that you feel more like a social worker than a teacher. I truly believe that a positive classroom environment means everything. It allows the learning to happen for every student. Listening to other teachers in the staff room, many of the problems they are having are social ones, like the ones that I have seen in my own room. These problems can be addressed, and student attitudes and behaviours can be changed in positive ways. I have seen such a massive change in terms of these things in my students already that I know that co-operative learning activities can help do this in other classrooms too. I now cannot wait until September. I will be starting these activities with my new class and can only imagine what might be.
BRINGING THE FOUR VOICES BACK TOGETHER: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the initial objective the four of us shared was to create a more inclusive tone in our respective classrooms, we discovered that, while we worked towards that goal, our focus shifted to co-operative learning and the skills necessary to achieve it.

As a group we found that the literature we read on co-operative learning was consistent with our research findings. Common group goals, individual accountability and social skills training did appear to be necessary ingredients for successful co-operative learning to occur.

Our research was twofold involving: our experience as a group of collaborating teachers, and the work we did in our individual classrooms to give our students opportunities to work collaboratively with each other through co-operative learning activities. We found our experience of collaborating on this project, and our decision to conduct research as a group of four practicing teachers, was a powerful demonstration for us of what we were reading in the literature. We are able to see the workings of our group dynamics, the four of us, and the parallels of our working relationship in our classroom practices. In the process, we recognized trust as a necessary ingredient in successful co-operative learning. At this time this is an element that requires further investigation. Trust seemed to be naturally present among the four of us; our question is: how can trust be built in a classroom setting? This issue was not addressed anywhere in the literature we encountered.

Reflecting over our action research, we are reminded of the importance of bringing the student voice into research, and of the major themes that emerged from students’ reflections and our classroom observations. Students consistently, in all four classes, reflected upon the elements of Decision Making, Listening Skills, Talking, Academic Support, Inclusion, and Feelings of Exclusion. As a result of completing this action research, we have come to value the following. We believe that:
• co-operative learning is one avenue which teachers and students can embark on to create a more inclusive and socially just classroom

• students need to be explicitly taught skills in order to be successful co-operative learners

• it’s important for each school and class to have its own unique voice

• using co-operative activities in a consistent manner from Kindergarten to Grade 7 will create a more inclusive, socially just school

• we, as teachers, need to model the expected behaviours related to co-operative learning in the context of co-operative learning activities and beyond them.

To better facilitate an inclusive community in our classrooms we would start using co-operative learning activities at the beginning of the school year, and carry them on throughout the year. Co-operative learning activities helped us create that inclusive environment we were seeking.

We are working toward social justice in our classrooms and schools by constantly asking questions, looking at our practice, giving students varied learning experiences, and by teaching co-operative learning.

As inquiring practitioners we are left with some of the following questions:

• How do we go about teaching the interpersonal skills and individual behaviors needed for successful co-operative learning?

• Is it realistic to expect that students with cognitive and social challenges can be taught to work effectively within a co-operative group setting?

• What resources are available to help us develop and strengthen students’ interpersonal skills and individual behaviors needed for successful group co-operation?
It is with these questions and a strong desire to be reflective practitioners that we are hoping to make positive strides in our teaching development.

Looking back we never imagined the power of co-operative learning that we discovered over the course of this investigation. In our classrooms it has, and will continue to, influence our personal pedagogy.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Teacher adaptations
to an open-area
teaching and learning environment

M. Costa

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND TEACHING

As teachers, we advocate for our students (Fairbairn, 2003). We seek help for students who are victims of poverty, neglect, and abuse. We campaign for the rights of special needs students, and we fight against racism, discrimination, and prejudice in schools by encouraging students to explore, understand and value human diversity. We raise funds for special school projects, and we tailor our instructional programs to the needs of our students. We coach student teams, we support student clubs, and we promote and organize student concerts and plays so that students can discover, develop, and nurture their interests and talents. We supervise student playgrounds and we plan field trips to places that excite and inspire our students. We buy school materials to support curricular programs and we work hard to make schools effective and compassionate learning places for all students. We treasure the experiences and knowledge that our students bring to school and we change our educational practices as we learn from them. We strive for an educational system that emphasizes equality, fairness, and social justice for all (Fairbairn, 2003). We know that our students’ success in school depends on teachers advocating for them.

As teachers, our main goal is to have all students fully participating in learning environments that are
shaped to meet their emotional, intellectual, and social needs. This is a challenging task that requires teachers to translate the best in educational research and practice into real classroom settings (Taylor, 2003). The aim is to create learning environments that can enliven and inspire students of all interests and abilities. Learning environments normally require schools and classrooms to have physical layouts capable of supporting student learning, curriculum programs, and a variety of pedagogies (Taylor, 2003). Learning environments usually need a wide range of learning spaces, clearly defined for their specific purposes within a school, so that teachers can take advantage of the different learning styles of their students and deliver meaningful and authentic learning (Taylor, 2003). Small enclosed learning spaces, for example, can provide privacy and intimacy to some students and invite others to engage in thinking skills that demand quiet reflection and analysis. Alternatively, large open learning spaces can lure students into group activities where they can develop social skills and acquire a sense of belonging and community. The physical layout of schools and classrooms is intertwined with the structure and function of the learning environments (Taylor, 2003).

**OPEN-AREA CONCEPT: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Open-area school design was controversial when it first appeared, and the debate that has continued since over its worth is reflected in the various research reports and literature reviews included in the appended bibliography. It is noteworthy that research in this area was conducted and published within a relatively short time span. The majority of available texts and research reports date from 1970 to 1975. After 1979, there appears to have been very little published on the topic of open-area schools. This cessation of published material probably corresponds to the fall from favour that the open-area approach experienced then.

Most research on open-area learning has been typically written from the viewpoint of proponents of open-area design. Often, the voice of teachers has been forgotten
in the final analysis of data and, consequently, some false conclusions have resulted (George, 1975). For example, in a study conducted by Kyzar (1971), sound levels in open-area schools were investigated because teachers believed that the noise level was interfering with teaching (George, 1975). Kyzar measured and compared the noise levels in open-area schools and conventional schools, and he found that the noise level varied from a low of 65 decibels in conventional schools to a high of 70 decibels in open-area schools. He concluded, therefore, that there was no significant difference in the noise level (George, 1975). Unfortunately, Kyzar was not aware that sound in a contained classroom is more controllable than it is in an open-area, and a simple comparison of decibel readings does not provide a basis for concluding that open-area teachers were imagining things, which was his final conclusion. Attempts were also made to compare contained classrooms and open areas in terms of mobility of students. In one study, Edwards (1973) compared the pupil-to-pupil and pupil-to-teacher interactions in contained classrooms with those found in open-area schools. Observers, standing at the back of the classroom, made little ticks on a chart when a certain student was engaged in specific categories of behaviour. The study concluded that student interactions with other students in open-areas were more frequent than in contained classrooms. However, had the researchers discussed their findings with teachers, they may have discovered that student interactions more directly relate to the philosophy of the teacher and the school than to the shape or size of the classroom. All too often, comparisons between schools with open-area areas and schools with conventional classrooms suffer from uncontrollable, controlled for, or unforeseen proliferation of extraneous variables, such as location of schools, nature of student populations, and philosophies of teachers.

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH SITE

The elementary school studied in this project was built as an open-area school in the 1970s at the request of the local community. Therefore, no inside walls were ever built to create a clear delineation and differentiation of
learning spaces within the large open-area or to define clear hallways for the movement of students, teachers, parents and visitors. The community adopted an open educational pedagogy since the new school was thought of as a smaller community within the larger local community. The belief was that the open plan classroom would allow for flexible groupings and independent movement of students, and shared teaching and learning spaces throughout the school building. However, more than twenty years later, the commitment to an open-area school has faltered. Principals and teachers who started the project in the 1970s have since left and interest in open education has declined among many parents. The school district stopped construction of open-area schools, having experimented with the concept through the late 1960s and into the mid 1970s.

The elementary school is located in a lively, bustling area of the city. The peculiar combination of health food stores, espresso bars, small ethnic restaurants, shops, and community services makes this community a vibrant and caring place in which to live and raise a family. One of the city’s first innovative medical clinics is nestled in among the street’s restaurants, coffee bars, and shops. The community complex provides a wide variety of services, facilities, and educational programs for infants, young children, teenagers, young adults, parents, and senior citizens. The elementary school is an integral component of the community complex enjoying easy access to its many and various programs and facilities.

The school is a study in contrasts. It is a component of a well-known Community Services Centre, yet the interior still appears unfinished to staff and visitors. It is an elementary school, yet the internal design of the learning environment provides some noisy and visually challenging situations for learning. It is a learning environment for children ages five to 13, yet the physical setting of the school appears to be mostly pavement and concrete. It is an open-area school, yet the floor space is divided by an assortment of makeshift screens into separate teaching areas. The true art of teaching is molding the physical environment and imagining the pedagogies that will
make the act of learning a successful experience for every student at school. This is a school where the contrasts have led to the best in educational practice and authentic learning, and where the contrasts have greatly defined the meaning and value of teaching as an art.

Some of the visual and spatial characteristics of the open-area design might appear to present the school with certain challenging effects. Some of the physical aspects of the school building that seem striking at first sight are: windowless interiors, unusual ceiling patterns, low ceilings, peculiar angles and unexpected walls and windows (sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque), and narrow passageways leading off into the distance. Occasionally, “walls” are made up of cabinets with teaching materials arranged along the tops. Between the lights and the ceiling is a unique combination of air ducts, aluminum-coloured fire sprinkler pipes, electrical conductors, computer network and telephone cables, and water pipes. There seems to be no apparent pattern in the school when one surveys the building superficially, and occasionally one who is new to the school might find it difficult to feel a sense of location or direction in this assortment of partitions.

The lack of walls and the absence of barriers above the lighting fixtures might appear to facilitate the transmission of sound from area to area, giving the feeling that it is being amplified through sheer aggregation. The combination of voices, furniture movement, cabinet doors opening and closing, footsteps, pencils sharpening, public address system announcements, occasional cries and shouts, laughter, and conversation all appear to combine to enliven the building with a mixture of unexpected and sudden sounds against a constant background of noise and hum generated by students learning in unison.

**GOAL OF THE PROJECT**

When the school was built in the 1970s, the open-area design was chosen because the belief, at the time, was that open learning spaces would foster student initiative and independence, nurture student interpersonal skills, and
create flexible teaching and learning spaces throughout the building. However, the nature of the instructional responsibilities of teachers are such today that the open space configuration of the school seems to make it more difficult to meet those goals. The aim of this action research project is to analyze the pedagogical solutions advanced by teachers to create boundaries and separations between learning areas in the school in order to eliminate noise and visual distractions, define learning spaces, and create a sense of structure.

**DATA COLLECTION**

Data were collected through interviews, as well as through a series of observations, discussions, and photographic studies of the building. Four teachers, who had taught primary and intermediate classes as well as in open and contained classrooms, were interviewed. Teachers were asked to identify the ways in which the interior of their current school had been altered in order to implement successful programs of instruction based on their experience in teaching in previous schools with conventional classrooms and hallways. They were also asked to reflect on the changes to the school since its original construction, and to give their views as to how and why the changes came about. Photographs of teacher adaptations to the open-area were analyzed. The photographs and initial findings were later presented to the five research participants for their reactions, suggestions, and further input. Several informal conversations also took place with former teachers, parents, and management staff from the school. The aim was to collect data by observing the school environment through the eyes and voices of the people working in the school.

**FINDINGS**

Teachers in the study felt that the absence of walls and doors in the school made it a little bit more problematic for students to listen to each other and to the teacher. As well as auditory distractions, the open-area design seemed to present students with some visual distractions, as classes and groups of children moved through the building and crowding and tight proximities between classes made this situation more challenging. As a result,
teachers have improvised with furniture placement and makeshift screens to try to section off areas for specific kinds of instruction and block off any noise and distractions within these areas. The partitions erected by the school district, after the School Accreditation process, have also greatly minimized auditory and visual distractions and given students a sense of privacy.

Even though the open-area school was promoted as fostering spontaneous and flexible uses of space, the arrangement of electrical outlets makes it a little difficult to actually be flexible. The electrical plugs mounted into the concrete floor of the building's open-area and columns limit some of the options available for placement of student furniture. Student movement and foot traffic tend to make some of the floor-mounted receptacles inaccessible in some areas of the school. The structural brown wood columns, spread throughout the open-area, are used for mounting additional receptacles, but sometimes the receptacles do not work because gravity pulls the cords down. However, the school district has closed, repositioned, and added a few more receptacles in some learning spaces in order to provide teachers with more flexibility in furniture arrangements.

The designers of the building did not foresee the degree to which the process of schooling would become dependent on network connections and the provision of electrical power to computers, tape recorders, radios, and overhead projectors. The building is being adapted to include these functions. In the meantime, teachers have used some creative solutions in order to connect cables to classroom sets of Internet computers. This has included using lighting fixtures and beams to support and guide the cables to the classrooms.

In addition, there are some physical features to the open-area design, such as the large wood structural columns spread throughout the building, that seem to defy adaptation but are ingeniously included in teachers' instructional practices and activities. These columns may appear in the middle of a hallway, in the middle of a doorway, or in the middle of teaching areas. They are often decorated
with students’ work or used to affix gentle reminders about school expectations. Some columns are decorated as trees and others as Greek columns depending on the unit being taught in class. The columns prompt teachers to arrange student furniture in such a way that the columns become an integral part of teaching and learning.

The nature of the interior of the building has prompted teachers to explore instructional practices and activities that can successfully intertwine the physical layout of the school with curricular programs and the needs of students. The lack of visible physical structure and the absence of implicit boundaries has led teachers to embody pedagogical philosophies that successfully create a sense of order throughout the school. For example, teachers have elected to institute in the morning a school-wide program of direct skill instruction in literacy, using a structured reading program. This program addresses the needs of the students, and eliminates noise and visual distractions. Also, curricular programs that require direct teaching, quiet reflection, and analysis, as well as independence from students, are delivered in the morning. In addition, teachers learn each other’s timetables, and they plan noisier activities for the afternoon. By designing and implementing programs that are able to simultaneously combine the needs and abilities of students and eliminate noise and distractions throughout the school, teachers have been able to impose order, structure, and boundaries in the school.

CONCLUSIONS
Open-area design might be overwhelming to some students due to its vastness (Monahan, 2002). Since the open space lacks implicit structure in the form of walls and hallways, there appears to be no clear and quick indication on how to generate specific spaces within the large open space for the different kinds of learning (Monahan, 2002). However, screens and partitions can be used to create a sense of direction, privacy, and intimacy. In addition, classroom identity and pedagogies can be developed and implemented with the intention of not only supporting learning but also of delivering a rhythm that provides students with a sense of structure, order, and calmness.
in the school (Monahan, 2002). This is the true art of teaching. Silence is not the key, and there is no attempt to imply that silence equals learning or that walls and rows of desks bolted to the floor imply structure and order. However, at times, some students might gravitate toward learning spaces that can facilitate exploration, discovery, sharing, and thinking in a more private and intimate learning setting.

The school has benefited tremendously from the support of the school district in the form of funding and additional staffing. A few years ago, the school district erected partitions which greatly helped minimize noise and visual distractions and provided a sense of physical structure to the interior of the building. The partitions also created private and intimate learning spaces for students. Moreover, the school district has continuously provided additional teachers and teacher specialists to the school facilitating the implementation of programs, lowering class size, and allowing flexibility in the placement of students each year. In addition, the school district has provided funds which have greatly facilitated the development and choice of programs by teachers. Hence, it is a school that is continuously and successfully making efforts, with the help of the school district and community, to adapt to new realities in educational research and the changes in student population.

**EPILOGUE**

Every school day, the school district, the school's administrator, and staff collectively transform this open-area school into a place of learning where students feel welcome, valued, and challenged intellectually. A school is more than a physical environment. It is a living learning environment that depends on its teachers to be able to search out, explore and adapt new teaching practices that can transform any physical environment into an effective, stimulating, and compassionate learning environment. Advocating for students relies on us being able to reach them through our educational practices and philosophies, and when that does not happen, it requires us to learn from our students and our environment and allow them to change our core philosophies.
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A dot on the horizon
A study of First Nations families and education
Shanda Stirk

INTRODUCTION

A bitterly cold day. School was closed. Minus 35 plus a windchill factor of ten. The wind howled around the corner of my classroom. From the window I enjoyed the scene of a huge pristine field of large, white snowdrifts and sparkling hoar frost on the trees and link fence. A tiny dot of yellow moved into the frosty scene. A kindergarten child dressed in a thin yellow spring jacket, zipper undone, and ragged blue jeans propelled me outside. There were no socks in the slip-on running shoes and no mittens on the hands holding the sharp-edged top from a tomato soup can which she licked like a lollipop. The feeling of severe cold and the outline of this little figure remain embedded in my memory.

Each year of teaching First Nations students in similarly difficult circumstances has deepened my desire to examine and understand why inequity in educational achievement and socio-economic conditions between First Nations students and their classmates exists. Kumashiro (2000) states that researchers need to examine inequities that create difficulties for oppressed groups of people. It has been well documented in various research articles that First Nations people were colonized through oppression of cultures, languages, family structures, and education. They were forced to learn the way of life of the “colonizing power.” To give a child a warm jacket and drive her home is helpful, but will not effect change to the underlying structures that continue to oppress First Nations people.
The initial research for this project was conducted by myself, a classroom and special needs resource teacher, and Kelly Cooksley, someone who has observed many First Nations children struggle with participation, commitment, and self-confidence in after-school programs. We noted that other children in these programs did not struggle as significantly with these issues, and observed that many First Nations students from various cultural backgrounds have struggled immensely with these same issues in our classrooms. Accreditation statistics during the school year of 1997/98 showed that 90 out of our school's 325 students received Learning Assistance support for reading or mathematics from three resource teachers. Only 27% of our school population is made up of First Nations students, but 54% of the 90 students receiving Learning Assistance were First Nations students. We asked ourselves, “Why have First Nations students had difficulties in our school?” Kelly and I worked together on our research project to answer this question.

As educators, it was necessary to remind ourselves that “requirements for school success, which involve mastering the school curriculum, learning to speak and write standard English, and exhibiting ‘good’ school behaviors, are interpreted as white society’s requirements” (Ogbu, 1998, p. 178) and that various cultures do have differing objectives and goals for their young to reach. Kirkness (1990) also urges mainstream educators to understand the importance of changing objectives and goals to better correlate with those held by Aboriginal parents. In light of this, we decided to focus on teachers’ and First Nations parents’ expectations for supporting success in school. We wanted to listen to what parents felt was most important for them regarding their children's education. We completed the research by April 2002 and I wrote our findings for this publication.
LITERATURE WHICH INFORMED OUR UNDERSTANDING

We undertook this project to look at what Aboriginal parents and teachers of Aboriginal students think is needed to support success for First Nations students. Our brief account of personal experiences and research helps us to understand some of the difficulties experienced by First Nations families today and, therefore, of the legacy of historical events as they are played out in contemporary classrooms.

Mary Lawrence (1996) likens her experiences in residential schools in southern British Columbia to those to be found in army barracks—one hundred beds in a single room, each with a gray blanket on top. Awakened at 6:30 a.m. by a whistle blowing and a nun yelling to get up, Lawrence would get dressed and go to Mass followed by a breakfast of rigid cold oatmeal at 7:30 a.m. She recalled getting the strap often, because after lights were out, she would be caught in her sister's bed—a few rows from her own. Lawrence rarely saw her brother due to the separation of males and females in dorms, classes, meals, and during recreation times.

Rosalyn Ing’s (2000) doctoral thesis is a combination of research concerning First Nations people in Canada’s beginning years, and the experiences of First
Nations people who either attended, or had a parent who attended, residential school. The policies and acts passed by the Canadian government in the late 1800s and early 1900s, described in detail in Ing’s thesis, were designed to effect colonization and assimilation of First Nations culture and people, and to suppress Aboriginal culture. Reading this description opened my eyes to a history I had not studied in school or at university. Added to these policies, fatal diseases introduced by white men such as smallpox, starvation due to the loss of buffalo, the purposeful introduction of alcohol, and the expulsion of First Nations people from traditional lands caused immense suffering in every part of First Nations peoples’ lives, making them vulnerable to domination by the colonizing power. Centuries-old cultural events were banned and parents were forced to send their children to residential schools where they were forbidden to speak their own languages as part of a plan to totally assimilate First Nations cultures. This loss multiplied over the years, leading eventually to the disintegration of entire communities where children who came home could no longer speak their parents’ languages, and parents could not speak English.

Hare and Barman (1998) state that children in residential schools spent less time on academic study because they often did chores related to the upkeep of the school. In these schools an insufficient curriculum was provided, children were hungry because of poor nutrition, and cultural and family ties, and the identities of the children were purposefully suppressed as First Nations children were taught a “superior culture.” Many First Nations children experienced trauma and witnessed horrific atrocities enacted on their siblings and friends. This made recovery and return to normal life extremely difficult after school was finished. Hare and Barman (1998) cite weak curriculum, poor nutrition, cultural suppression, trauma, and learning a new language as contributors to illiteracy rates for First Nations youth of 40%, which compared to rates of 2% for non-Aboriginal Canadian youth in 1921. Clearly, these harsh conditions led to a serious loss of self-confidence, loss of culture, and a loss of identity, which could not be easily retrieved.
Corenblum (1996) reviews many empirical studies involving white children, who are usually in the majority of the population, and Aboriginal children, who are usually in the minority. In these studies, children had to choose between white dolls or native dolls, and select one that looked most like themselves. The results did not change regardless of the age of subject samples, location of studies, time period of research (1974–1986), racial group of experimenters, language used, or children’s accuracy in labeling dolls or pictures.

Native children chose pictures or dolls representing majority group members when answering questions about own and other group members... According to this perspective, minority group children wish to symbolically join the high status majority group, and by so doing, enhance their social identity and maintain self-esteem. According to this perspective, choosing white dolls reflects Native children’s desire to close—at least symbolically—the distance between themselves and those whom they perceive to be high status, in-group members. (p. 88)

Corenblum concluded that if the minority feels the majority does not approve of their group, self-esteem and identity can be threatened.

Hare and Barman (1998) describe the “family unit as the center of Aboriginal society” (p. 3). Because families were pulled apart for such a long time, “many of the problems endemic to Aboriginal communities, such as family violence, alcoholism, suicide, and poverty, have their roots in assimilation and colonialism, in which residential schools played a major role” (p. 17). Hare and Barman state “negative attitudes towards schools today” (p. 17) come from the past experiences of generations of First Nations people. They also state “Aboriginal children persevere in educational systems which are paternalistic, racist, and do little to address their needs” (p. 23). External control of funding and curriculum by governments, failure to recognize or value the uniqueness of various First Nations cultures, lack of culture woven into curriculum, and not enough Aboriginal staff in schools
are some of the features of schools that Hare and Barman point to as ones that perpetuate racism and the struggle of First Nations to succeed within the institution of schools.

**METHODS**

We used field study methods to collect data on the goals and objectives First Nations families and teachers set for elementary-aged students. We assured parents and teachers about confidentiality within a brief individual presentation about our study. We made ourselves available in person or by phone to answer any questions participants had before committing to the project. Each potential participant was assured that there would be no adverse consequences if they decided not to participate in the interview. Consenting participants were asked to meet with one of the co-investigators for approximately thirty minutes to an hour, and most agreed to have the interview tape-recorded. A letter of consent, including a clear description of our research project, was hand-delivered to participants. We asked five teachers who expressed an interest, and had two to four First Nations students in their classrooms, to complete an interview. Participating teachers had assignments that ranged from early primary to late intermediate levels.

The First Nations Support Worker was involved in asking parents to participate in this study and in explaining the research to them. Three parents agreed to be interviewed. I wondered if more parents would have agreed if a First Nations person had conducted the interview, or if the interviewer had not been someone from the school system. The parents I interviewed were initially a bit nervous, but towards the end of each interview, felt more comfortable, and seemed pleased to have had an opportunity to express their viewpoint.

Five teachers and three parents represent a very small sample of our school population, and of a large school system. Although the interviews give a limited amount of information, the information that was gained did provide some answers to how we could support success for Aboriginal students in our school.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The three parents and five teachers were asked similar questions. Parents were asked to tell us about their own experiences at school to help them feel more comfortable at the beginning of the interview. Teachers were asked to briefly describe their teaching experiences related to First Nations students. Parents were asked how they thought their children learned best. All interviews contained questions regarding the most important things First Nations children need to receive at school to support success in achieving academic goals and participation in extra-curricular activities. Parents and teachers were asked whether or not they felt the current education system meets the children's needs. Finally, each person was asked if they would like to add anything or if there were any resources they thought would be helpful to support First Nations students.

PARENT EXPERIENCE WITH THE SCHOOL SYSTEM
All three parents said their own school experiences were full of instances in which they had to endure name-calling, being picked on, “getting looks,” not being acknowledged, and being left out of activities they saw other children enjoying. One parent said, “Other students treated me differently because I was Native, and teachers were busy with other children and didn’t seem very concerned with what was going on with us.” Another parent grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan where hers was the only Native family. She remembered a single Asian family that was more accepted than her family was. “I guess my school years were very lonely, because I never got to enjoy the same things other kids did.”

The parents all reflected on their lack of self-confidence. One father said he “felt stupid” when he could not understand what the teachers were talking about when he attended parent-teacher interviews. “Our people feel so ashamed that they don’t have those same skills.” One parent felt she was talked down to when attending parent-teacher conferences, but found that conferences were more helpful than report cards.
One parent cited residential school experiences as a reason why parents play a minimal role in schools today. Relationships and parenting skills were lost when families were separated by distance and time. One parent whose mother attended a residential school described her relationship with her mother as “not being close” because her mother missed the training that a parent-child relationship often provides.

Racism was the strongest theme emanating from the parent interviews. The three parents felt that racism permeated their own and their children’s experience at our school. Parents believed others thought of them as the weakest culture. “First Nations families—are not good. I think it is hard to break that [perception].” One parent said her children seemed to seek each other out at school and played mainly with friends who were First Nations. A parent told her children “to stay away from kids that don’t treat them right,” when the children were called names. Parents felt racist attitudes emanated more from peers. I wondered if parents were willing to discuss racism only by their children’s peers because they were being interviewed by a teacher. I wondered if they would have mentioned racism stemming from curriculum or the school system if they had been interviewed by a First Nations person.

One parent suggested that the issue of racism needs to be addressed by staff and multicultural workers working with families at school. One parent thought that perhaps the First Nations community “plays its own part in it too, kind of a learned helplessness—this attitude—you’re not as good as everyone else, and it’s not going to change.” Kehoe and Echols (1994) found that seven groups of various ethnic cultures consistently rated First Nations people low on a test that measured attitudes of how various cultures view each other. “The most negative evaluations were by Asian-Canadians,” (p. 68). One parent felt the support available for First Nations people was not sufficient to make a difference in dispelling racism.
SUPPORT PARENTS
APPRECIATED AND NEEDED
Work sent home, such as flash cards, pictures, and books to read, was seen as helpful and parents appreciated being given these materials. “I tell my children they are very lucky. It’s a lot different than when I went to school. I think they know that.” Parents suggested that one-to-one assistance, step-by-step demonstrations, more time to learn when children do not get it the first time, and more explanations were necessary for their children to understand classroom lessons. Parents said they want to help their children with homework but often found the homework confusing. The struggle of day-to-day living was felt to be a major factor which affected parents’ lack of time spent in the school or helping with schoolwork at home. They expressed appreciation for the positive ways in which teachers treat children, especially in helping children with difficulties fitting in. Parents believed their children needed more support in all school programs. Parents sensed that their children need extra encouragement to attend programs after school and needed more instruction and time to understand and learn a sport activity.
PARENT GOALS FOR THEIR CHILDREN
Parents did not talk directly about what they wanted their children to learn academically, but throughout the interviews they suggested that they wanted their children to learn what the teachers were teaching. Kehoe and Echols (1994) stated that First Nations parents would like their own children to achieve as well as non-native students on standardized achievement tests. One parent in our study wanted her children to realize that high levels of education were available and attainable. All the parents wanted their children to have a sense of belonging within the school and they also wanted their children to participate in after-school activities.

Parents in our study were asked if they felt the teachers’ goals were the same as their own. One parent knew that the teachers had positive attitudes toward her children and thought teachers were concerned about the academic success of her children. One parent believed that her children were getting a good education and had decided not to move because other schools did not have what this school had to offer in terms of extra support for learning and after-school programs, including volunteer staff support. Parents felt that support given in primary years was crucial and would affect the children in later years where it was felt that intermediate children were so much harder to reach, even when receiving extra support.

PARENTS’ VIEWS ABOUT THEIR CULTURES
Parents expressed regret about not knowing their own individual cultures and not being able to teach them to their own children. Parents felt that moving to Vancouver resulted in a loss of what little culture parents had learned as children. Vancouver was described as a “melting pot” of Aboriginal cultures which made it difficult to teach and learn about individual cultures. Parents appreciated the school’s attempts to teach Aboriginal cultures and the different events that have been held in the last two years developed to do this; however, one parent recalled a time when another parent did not want First Nations culture
taught in her child’s class because it was different from her own. Parents valued the language, regalia, and stories that they had lost and felt their children would become more self-confident and proud if more of their culture was taught at school.

TEACHERS’ CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES RELATED TO THIS STUDY
Each of the five teachers interviewed had eight or more years experience working in inner-city schools. Over the years, they had worked with many First Nations students in their classrooms and fondly remembered the relationships they had developed with these students. Teachers were proud of the accomplishments of many of their Aboriginal students. However, poverty, addiction, inadequate nutrition, neglect, lack of role models, and absenteeism were some issues mentioned by all five teachers when they reflected on their students’ experiences. Teachers attributed these harsh conditions to the fact that they were teaching in an inner city school but added that the conditions “seemed to be compounded within First Nations families.” One teacher stated that “the difficulties often seem insurmountable because their home situation and their environment seems so complicated.” One teacher felt that residential schools had “devastated families because parents were not able to look to their own parents as role models on how to help their children in school or at home.” One teacher remembered a conversation with a grandmother who had such a difficult time in a residential school, she was unable to enter a school without feeling that it was not a good place to be.

TEACHERS’ VIEWS ON BEST PRACTICE/ SUPPORT NEEDED TO HELP FIRST NATIONS CHILDREN LEARN
Teachers suggested that literacy was a key for students’ future success. One-to-one teacher support, less competitive situations in which to learn, small-group work, repetition of work, humor, using various teaching styles, and allowing students more time to think before asking them for an answer were some of the solutions teachers
offered to help their First Nations students, and others, to learn more effectively. Hand-over-hand support, the use of manipulatives, role-playing, graphic organizers, and simple play time have benefits for all students, but teachers felt First Nations students benefited more through the use of these methods. One teacher encouraged students to believe in their abilities and their “power of choice” (i.e., to believe that their lives will reflect what they choose and therefore, that they should choose positive things for their life).

Two teachers said a structured timetable and consistency in classroom management help their First Nations students understand lessons and achieve success because they provided a clear framework for expectations. Teachers agreed strongly that they want to maintain the same expectations for every student; however, teachers would adjust their expectations so that students could achieve success. Two teachers felt parents thought their children were discriminated against when consequences (given to all students) were imposed for misdemeanors.

The teachers felt they needed more time with the First Nations Support Worker in class and working with students. This position could be crucial to bridge the gap between parents and the school. Three teachers felt that the government and Vancouver School Board (VSB) cuts make it difficult for First Nations students to be successful. Increased class size, decreased resources and teacher time for each student, and a reduction in resource staff support make it challenging for staff to attend to the individual needs of students.

One teacher deemed developing relationships and earning the trust of all parents an important part of his job. He made himself available before and after school as well as at reporting times. He felt this was important with First Nations parents because “school is not associated with a happy time in their life. With parents on board...they see how important this is for their child...it makes a big difference.” A second teacher said her students trusted her more when they knew her expectations were attainable,
“that they can do it.” She believed that building warm relationships with her students was a key factor in helping her students achieve success.

All teachers knew it was important for all students to enjoy coming to school, but believed that this factor was critical for success for First Nations students. Building up self-esteem was a focus in all five teachers’ classrooms, and all teachers mentioned working on self-esteem with First Nations students by having peer tutors, support from counseling staff, and after-school programs. One teacher felt that weaving First Nations culture throughout curriculum was crucial in building self-esteem.

**TEACHERS’ THOUGHTS RELATED TO CULTURE**

Teachers felt the school needed to do more to acknowledge First Nations cultures such as inviting First Nations celebrities, role models, artists, etc., to speak to the students. Battiste (1998) recommends not using “the ‘add-and-stir’ model of education” (p. 47), but suggests integrating First Nations cultural materials throughout the curriculum. One teacher agreed stating, “It is the building up of pride in their culture. If you don’t use these or don’t mention or display any First Nation materials, they don’t see anything to be proud of.”
Two teachers felt staff needed to learn more about First Nations issues and concerns, as well as the best teaching styles to use, and even what parts of various First Nations cultures to teach. Teachers felt a significant need for more professional development that would help them assist parents to be more involved with home study, agendas, overcoming tardiness, and forming partnerships with parents to help their children achieve more success in school.

FOUR KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED FROM INTERVIEWS
Over the course of the interview process, four key issues emerged: racism, integrating First Nations studies/culture, creating a sense of belonging, and academic success. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

Racism
Ing, (2000) quotes Fridere's definition of racism as, “the doctrine that some races are innately superior or inferior to others” (p. 14). Parents felt racism deeply affected their own and their children’s experiences at school. The B.C. Human Rights Commission Report (2001) states that “there is the repeated reference students and parents make to racism and discrimination in schools. We must be honest about the issue of racism and work in partnership to eliminate it from individual, institutional, and systemic practice” (p. 6).

Integrating First Nations studies/culture
Parents discussed how it is important that their children learn about their culture, traditions, and history. Parents and teachers think a greater emphasis on integrating aspects of First Nations culture within the school would help First Nations students build identity and self-esteem, and would assist all students in the school to appreciate and understand First Nations cultures. The B.C. Human Rights Commission Report (2001) states it is “important for non-Aboriginal students to be made aware of a more inclusive representation of the history of this country to ensure that systemic ignorance is not perpetuated” (p. 23).
Creating a sense of belonging
Parents who had struggled with a sense of lack of belonging when they were children felt that their children were still struggling with this issue. Teachers felt it was important for students to feel they belonged. Kehoe and Echols (1994) state that a sense of belonging affects achievement in schools, and correlates directly with better attendance and academic work.

Academic success
Both parents and teachers identified extra support as a key factor in helping First Nations students to be successful. Parents discussed finding it difficult to help their children and the appreciation they felt for help they received with this from teachers. Teachers recognized their need for professional development related to best practices to ensure academic success with their First Nations students. The B.C. Human Rights Commission Report (2001) states, “Education is a fundamental human right of all people, but for the Aboriginal community it may be particularly critical as a step to overcoming historical disadvantages” (p. 2).

IDEAS, SUGGESTIONS, PROGRAMS
The B.C. Human Rights Commission Report (2001) suggests examining “individual, institutional and systemic practices that perpetuate racism and discrimination within the public school system” (p. 6). They go on to say that “These structures are so much a part of the public school system that it is difficult to step back and look at them objectively” (p. 17). The HAWK theme (H—help ourselves and others, A—attitude and acceptance, W—we try our best, K—kindness and respect) we promote at our school could include a greater emphasis on racism, helping to teach children and staff how to recognize and deal with racism when it arises. These issues include: “What is racism?” “How can racism be harmful?” “What can you do about preventing racism?” and “What tools or skills do I need to overcome racism if I experience it?” Adopting such a focus will help us, as a school, learn how to recognize and change systemic practice within our school population.
First Nations parents described the lack of a sense of belonging at school for themselves and their children. Goulet (1998) suggests developing relationships “outside the formal relationships of teaching” (p. 75), will be important when working with Aboriginal communities because parents may have had painful experiences in school. Relationships between parents and teachers need to be built as partnerships, not with teachers as authority figures. Teas, teaching parents how to support their children’s learning, and having elders come in to teach Native culture are some of the strategies that two teachers in Goulet’s (1998) article used to develop relationships with parents. I have begun a “Cookie Crumb Reading Club,” at which parents and children enjoy coffee, juice, and cookies while reading together. I hope to connect with these families and affirm how much I value our partnership through activities such as these.

**CONCLUSION**

What can I do to be a teacher of social justice? Greene (1998) describes two aspects of teaching for social justice. “There is the importance of arousing the ‘sense of injustice’ and of keeping it alive... the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places” (p. xiv). I have struggled with how to respond to the immensity of the historical and present-day issues facing First Nations people, as a non-native middle class privileged teacher who does not want to alienate parents by expecting them to embrace my views of success. This study has helped me and, I hope, will help others to understand the injustices suffered by First Nations people.
Through this process I learned how to do action research and because I worked in my own school, I could not detach myself from the issues I explored during the research or when the paper was completed. The research made me examine issues as well as my own perceptions and teaching practices, and helped me identify how to effect change in my own small place. I have worked with Kindergarten to Grade 3 children as an enrolling teacher and presently support children with special needs in their own classes. The little girl walking through the frozen snowdrifts was a First Nations child in my Kindergarten class during my first year of teaching 22 years ago. This study now feels like the small yellow dot on the huge frozen field: a little bit of knowledge in a vast land.

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Male elementary teachers: Where are they?

Jason Eng

I have been in an elementary classroom for four years. It is quite lonely being one of only two men in the entire school. I feel like an outsider looking in towards a female dominated environment. Sure, they bring me along and offer support, yet I still feel somewhat excluded. I remember having only two male teachers myself when I was in elementary school. Should I have listened to some of my male colleagues and made the decision to teach high school? At times, I wonder how teachers perceive me. How do parents and students perceive me? I often find myself asking these questions. In the end, I return to the belief that students are benefiting from having a male teacher as a role model in their early years of education.

There is a major shortage of male teachers in elementary school classrooms. In *A Few Good Men*, Kathleen Vail (1999) refers to a 1999 study for the National Center for Education Statistics that found more than 90% of elementary school teachers are female. As a teacher employed by the Vancouver School Board, I am particularly interested in examining Vancouver statistics. In the Vancouver School Board Employment Equity Council Newsletter (2001), only 331 of 2166 or 15% of permanent elementary school teachers in Vancouver are male. Jim Allan (1993) refers to the significant gender disproportion that exists within the elementary grades in *Male elementary teachers: Experiences and perspectives*. He states that “within the K-6 grade sector, most men teach in upper elementary classrooms, or work across grades
in art, music, or physical education... Large elementary schools with only one male classroom teacher are not unusual” (p. 113).

The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of male teachers in elementary schools. This paper is about promoting the need for male elementary teachers and not criticizing female teachers. Historically, elementary school teaching has been dominated by female teachers. I believe that the lack of male elementary teachers is a major problem and a detriment to the education of young children. Young boys and girls are not exposed to male role models and teachers. Attracting males into the female dominated environment of elementary education will not be a simple task. Inaccurate stereotypes of what elementary education is about continue to be an obstacle to this recruitment process. However, to teach for social justice is to teach for a “heightened social consciousness, a wide awakeness that might make injustice unendurable” (Greene, 1999, xxx). That means having males in the position of elementary school teachers to generate a “sense of agency in young people...[so that they can] feel themselves engaged with those around” (Greene, xxx). These young people, and specifically more boys, may then choose to become teachers themselves.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES OF GENDER AND ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

There has been a great deal written about gender roles and their implications for elementary education. Many of my male colleagues and the participants in my research project were already aware of much of this research and the issues raised within it because they deal with it every day in schools. Jesse Goodman and Tom Kelly (1988) write about the feminization of elementary education in Out of the mainstream: Confronting the male profeminist elementary school teacher, and spend some time looking at the patriarchal system in place for female teachers and how it had an impact on the feminization of teaching. Women have faced years of oppression in all economic, cultural, social, and psychological relationships with males. They were disadvantaged in the workplace and
were paid lower wages. Female occupations were viewed as insignificant in comparison with male occupations. In *Across the great divide: The entry of men into women's jobs*, Harriet Bradley (1993) reinforces this notion by suggesting that the impact of industrialization on the sex-typing of work resulted in the dominance of men in traditional, highly skilled professions such as law and medicine, and the relegation of women to work in lower paying semi-professions such as nursing, clerical work, and school teaching. These careers became dominated by women or “feminized,” but were still controlled by men further up the hierarchy working in administrative positions. Goodman and Kelly state that although the rationale for:

...increasing the number of women within teaching often made reference to women's moral superiority, patience, and nurturing qualities, there was also the belief that women needed to be controlled...Underneath the rhetoric of women as the natural and superior guardians of children was an unspoken belief that these young women could not be trusted in the same way as male teachers of early days. (p. 3)

Perceptions of elementary education as women's were linked to assumptions of this work as an extension of motherhood. Meanwhile, men still maintained control and power over education as school administrators or as teachers of higher prestige academic areas. More specifically, men taught specialized subjects in secondary education. Any thought of males crossing over into feminized teaching jobs encountered several obstacles. First was the lack of financial incentives for men to enter lower paying professions. Second, issues surrounding damaged masculinities entered into the mix when men worked in professions stereotyped as being “women's work.” Bradley (1993) refers to the importance of having men who enter into female-dominated professions, including elementary education, work towards developing “new masculinities that may encourage men to overturn stereotypes...thus laying stress on the active role of men themselves in making choices and changing the patterns of segregation” (p. 25).
Many different perspectives on what elementary education is and how it should be carried out are shaped by stereotypes. James King’s *Uncommon caring: Learning from men who teach young children*, refers to one of these by stating that there are perceptions held by the public that “men who teach primary grades are...principals in training” (1998, p. 3). The perception is that men who are teaching in elementary classrooms do not stay there long, and instead move up the ladder to higher prestige, better paying administrative positions (Vail, 1999). Jim Allan (1993) conducted in-depth interviews of fifteen male elementary teachers working in Iowa, examining the impact of their gender on teaching in a profession dominated by women. He felt that these male elementary teachers, because of the career choice they had made to enter elementary education, were constantly under the scrutiny of others when it came to issues relating to their maleness or masculinity. On one hand, they had to display attributes of masculinity and model actions of a “real man” in a manner that was acceptable in the elementary classroom. On the other hand, however, they also felt the “pressure to conform to stereotypically feminine qualities to establish the sensitive, caring relationships necessary to effectively teach children. For these men, gender is highly problematized, and they must negotiate the meaning of masculinity every day” (p. 114). This raises other important questions: What are the characteristics that a “real man” should display as a classroom teacher, and to what degree should these so-called “masculine” attributes be displayed? Should male teachers coach athletics? Gain a reputation as a disciplinarian? Raise their voices every time they get upset? Again, these are stereotypical expectations for the characteristics and behaviours of male teachers. But these are also behaviours and characteristics displayed by some female teachers. In *The paucity of male elementary school teachers: Discriminatory hiring practices and other contributing factors*, Zeringo and Baldwin-LeClair (2001) suggest that children often do not mention teaching as a career option for men. Furthermore, they believe that within elementary schools, male teachers face prejudice from female colleagues and administrators, possibly resulting in a hostile work environment for them.
Caring is often closely linked to teaching in elementary schools. Caring is most often attributed to females, and justice and individualism are often attributed to males. King (1998) states that very few males choose to teach primary grades because of “culturally constructed factors such as attitudes about caring, gender-coded behaviour, and sexual orientations” (p. 3). This could suggest that if males lack this caring and nurturing trait, they cannot be successful primary teachers. The assumption is that caring and nurturing are learned behaviours for men, and that women engage in caring and nurturing behaviours naturally. Consequently, there can be a perception that the best primary teachers are female, and the concept of men as primary teachers engenders negative reactions from peers and society in general.

INVESTIGATING THE TOPIC

I chose to explore the experiences, choices, and feelings of male elementary teachers through the use of one-on-one structured interviews. During the month of February 2002, I conducted five one-on-one interviews with male elementary teachers working within the Vancouver School District. In the results that follow, pseudonyms are used to maintain teacher confidentiality. The five male teachers ranged in age from 29 to 46, with years of teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years. They had various backgrounds in music, physical education, special education, coaching, and acting. Four of the teachers were primary focused, and one had taught exclusively intermediate grades. I recruited teachers to interview by approaching males I knew who were teaching in elementary schools throughout the Vancouver School District, while others heard about the project through friends and expressed an interest in being interviewed. I asked them about their background in education, why they chose to pursue elementary education as a career, as well as their future aspirations. In terms of their experiences as teachers, participants commented on their relationships with colleagues, and any difficulties or problems they may have encountered which relate to being a male teacher in an elementary school. Finally, they were asked to express their opinions about why there is such a major gender
imbalance within the ranks of elementary school teachers and whether or not this is a problem that needs to be addressed and rectified.

Perspectives and opinions about education, relationships, and teaching experiences are all individualized. Each participant comes from a different background and has their own set of circumstances that led them to choose teaching elementary school as a career. Exploring the specifics of each teacher’s individualized experiences in education meant that each interview I conducted was unique. Despite this, there were several common themes recurring throughout the responses, and it is around an analysis of these themes that most of the discussion which follows focuses.

MAJOR THEMES
Conducting the five interviews of male elementary teachers exposed some very significant issues related to education that I have come across in my own teaching career. The major themes that I would like to look at more closely are: teacher relationships with colleagues, issues related to physical contact with children, the sexual orientation of male elementary teachers, and the significance of gender differences among teachers as possible explanations for the underrepresentation of males in elementary classrooms.

Relationships with colleagues
In terms of relationships with their colleagues, the teachers I interviewed gave a wide variety of responses. Some saw these relationships as being very positive, others found them somewhat problematic. For the most part, male teachers got along well with their female colleagues and mentioned positive aspects of their interactions with them. Many female teachers were described as being very helpful to their male colleagues, offering advice and help on many occasions.

Dan mentioned several of the positive as well as some negative aspects of his interactions with female colleagues from the perspective of an intermediate teacher:
I have mixed feelings. There are lots of positives. I get along with female teachers. They provide a different perspective than perhaps what I would provide. They kind of look after me. It's kind of nice. Many of them appreciate the fact that I am one of the few males on the staff so they make sure they treat me a little nicer. I do the traditional male things for them and they do the traditional female things for me, which is kind of nice. On a sort of negative side though, I find that I cannot be as blunt, or abrupt, or as truthful, in my language as I would be with men. I find that I have to sort of walk sort of a tight rope act on certain issues. To not offend anyone. You don't want to say something inappropriate, whereas with men you have more of an opportunity to just blurt it out. Women tend to be more verbal about things and I don't like that. It sucks up my time...these are things you need to be aware of in how you handle yourself.

For the most part, males I interviewed understand that gender differences do exist between males and females. As examples, it was suggested that females were typically caring, nurturing, patient, and paid close attention to detail, while males possessed attributes of aggression, independence, and physical strength. Essentially, mutual levels of respect exist among male and female teachers. It is understood that females have different strengths from males.

Furthermore, there were times when some males felt somewhat excluded from conversations or felt they were being marginalized. As the minority on almost all elementary teaching staffs, male teachers need to adjust or be conscious of the differences between male and female personalities. Doug makes some interesting comments in his interview when asked about his feelings of working in a female dominated environment:

**Jason:** How do you feel about being a male elementary teacher employed in a profession dominated by women?

**Doug:** Great. I get along with women fine. I don't feel
excluded. Sometimes the conversations in the coffee room might make me feel excluded but generally they’re okay. I think that women have different strengths than men. And I think that some people ...can try and escape the influence of their stereotypical attributes. What I’m getting at is women are often assumed to be nurturing while men are often assumed to be competitive. Males are assumed to be more violent. Women are usually assumed to be careful of all the little details...children having all their coats done up, shoes are tied, and all these little details which make for good teachers. And I think those perceptions are what keeps there being so few male teachers.

Jason: It sounds like you’ve had a pretty positive experience in the schools you’ve been at as a teacher.

Doug: I must admit that...I remember when I came to this school there were some teachers who were saying that last year the teacher had children doing things in a certain way. And they aren’t doing things in that same way this year. I feel that certain pressure to perform to the way things were done with the female teacher. And the class was apparently very quiet, very orderly.

Could these expectations and pressures be attributed primarily to gender differences among males and females? Male teachers working in elementary schools may share some of the same feelings in terms of being pressured to adapt or perform different tasks from a female perspective.

It is important to note that some teachers I interviewed spoke specifically of their experiences working with male colleagues as well. Not surprisingly, these were also positive and negative. George spoke about a difficult situation he encountered with a male colleague:

Like most elementary schools, the higher grades have more males and the lower grades have more females. That’s a tradition going way back...Women teaching the younger grades, still the second mother sort of situation. I’ve always related to the intermediate teachers because
you are doing the “guy thing” as well as coaching. I have really only had one instance where as a kindergarten teacher or as someone who enjoyed primary a lot I had to butt heads with an intermediate teacher because he didn’t think I was a guy enough or something along those lines to be coaching. He said, “Aren’t you the kindergarten teacher... I don’t know. These boys could walk all over you.” He is old school, he didn’t know me, and we didn’t relate well and we still don’t.

It is important to note that age gaps among teachers, differences in grades being taught, and varying interests in personal lives are all things to consider, in addition to gender differences, as possible contributing factors that impact teacher relationships with each other.

Physical contact with students
A second theme that most of the teachers I interviewed spoke about brought together issues related to physical contact with children. As male teachers, they talked about some of the difficulties and awkward situations male teachers are faced with when working with young children. They include being alone with children, young children asking for hugs, and any sort of physical contact with children in general. The teachers I interviewed put a great deal of thought into their responses on such issues. Based on my own experiences as a male elementary teacher, the awareness of physical contact and issues related to it are constantly on my mind. I assume that the issue is equally significant for them. I also found it interesting to listen to comparisons made with female colleagues, for whom physical contact with children and issues related to touching are not nearly as scrutinized.

George: It helps to clarify some of the awkward moments. Especially as a male primary teacher what you have to be conscious of is touch. I constantly have kids asking for hugs. You try and stay away from that but I have a girl who, when she is having a good day
will ask, “Can I have a hug?” I’ll try to stall her, or push her away because my instinct will say “yes you can” but I also know how that can be viewed... I give her a high five instead. I try to set up some very clear and definite boundaries and it bothers me because... I do think affection is an especially nurturing part of growing up.

**Jason:** ...I follow the same sort of rules in my class...

**George:** ...and you have to be conscious of it. Especially with young children... Female teachers on the other hand are hugging away...

At the same time, male teachers spoke of the discomfort felt at being alone with young children or being placed in situations where there may be physical contact. They also spoke of the ways in which they avoided such situations or set up boundaries to prevent potentially awkward or troublesome instances from arising. When interviewing Doug, he stated:

*I think sometimes little children will quite innocently run up and hug me. I want to be ready for a hug. Otherwise it could look a little embarrassing... I often wonder what does this look like. So I just like to be ready. I’m very conscious of that because touching and children in the elementary school is something that a lot of people really look at closely. One has to be very careful...*

What complicates matters further, is that in several of the interviews, male teachers believe that showing affection for young children through some sort of physical contact is an important characteristic of being a caring and nurturing teacher. Kevin mentioned needs that many of the students in his school have that could benefit from some degree of physical contact from the teacher:

*I see a lot of female teachers hug kids and give them that physical contact. I think it was my first week here I ran to my principal and asked what to do... I just heard about all these horror stories about kids going home*
and saying something to the parents. And things getting taken out of context. So for a while I would never be alone with any kids. I would be so worried. I talked to my principal and another male Grade 1 teacher and especially in an inner city school, these kids really need that physical contact... If I’m going to fly away and say leave me alone, it’s probably not going to be the best thing for these kids. Yet, I know that I don’t give a hug the way a lot of other teachers do. In this school kids know that I really like giving high fives. I don’t get into why I don’t give hugs to kids.... It’s sad because I do see kids who are down and sad...who could sometimes use a little physical comfort. I’ll do it more so when I’m around a bunch of people...as a male teacher I don’t want to put myself in an awkward situation.

Ultimately, male teachers especially need to be conscious and aware of all their actions related to physical contact with children so that nobody misconceives or interprets a situation in a potentially damaging manner. Male teachers have to play a bit of a balancing act with the degree to which they are comfortable with any sort of physical contact and the benefits that specific children can obtain from such contact.

**Sexual orientation**

A third theme that was brought up by some teachers I interviewed focused on issues related to the sexual orientation of male elementary teachers. The stereotype that male elementary teachers are gay appeared to be geared mainly towards male primary teachers. Is it because primary education is an area dominated by females, which would mean that men who are teaching primary are feminine or unmasculine, and therefore homosexual? From what I understand, none of the five participants I interviewed are homosexual, but some had some interesting things to say about having being stereotyped as gay and about what the implications of this were. George referred to one situation in particular:

*Most guys that I deal with who are teaching, when they find out I’m teaching kindergarten raise an*
eyebrow... I had one particular person that saw that if I was a male in kindergarten, that basically he was implying that I was gay and that I wouldn't be able to be aggressive at all, or strong, or whatever the stereotypes are of homosexuals.

Kevin, who had initially entered education with the goal of teaching high school, was largely unaware of the perception that male elementary teachers are gay until he entered into the primary program:

One common philosophy or mindset is that men who go into primary are homosexual. The reason that I may have a problem with this has nothing to do with a homosexual teacher. It's just that it's not who I am. I don't want someone to think of me in a way that I'm not. It's not that I want to be labeled as gay. Just don't label me as something that I'm not. It's funny that when I come across primary teachers who are guys, I don't even think about that. I'm not gay, so I don't want people to think I am...

Doug offered a different perspective in his interview when responding to the notion that male elementary teachers were homosexual:

That's interesting. Because in fact from my experience, there are a lot of homosexual male teachers. That's nothing wrong. I think they are very nurturing individuals... People have a preconception that a homosexual male is going to make a bad teacher. Just as a person has a preconception that a male teacher is training to be an administrator. All these things are stereotypes.

Overall, it could be suggested that such a stereotype prevents male teachers from entering primary classrooms, instead choosing to teach intermediate grades or work in high schools. Consequently, the status quo remains as female teachers continue to dominate primary classrooms, and young children do not get to benefit from having male teachers as role models.
Gender differences

Finally, I would like to make reference to gender differences among teachers and their significance as a possible explanation for the gender under-representation of teachers in elementary schools. Throughout several interviews, male teachers emphasized the importance of showing affection for young children, especially those in primary grades. They felt that being caring and nurturing was an important part of teaching. However, several of them referred to this aspect of teaching as a trait that women do naturally, while men have to learn it. There was the belief that primary teaching is an extension of motherhood. Robert reinforces this idea by making reference to his family situation:

I gave it more thought...but I still think men need women to do the nurturing... I have a 20 month old son and my wife makes twice as much money as I do and she is working half time to stay at home with our son.... Right from the very beginning...the child wants the mother. It's a role she takes on from the very beginning whether she wants to or not. Even at school...who are the ones who pick up the kids everyday? Nine times out of ten it is the women.

Closely related to the notion that teaching young children is about caring, is the ability to show patience. Patience is a virtue that all elementary teachers must possess, regardless of the grades they teach. Some suggested that female teachers have a much higher level of patience with young children than male teachers. Male thresholds for being patient may also be put to the test much sooner, as suggested by George:

I don't know about primary. Different things happen. Especially this year, it's been a really difficult class for me. When my patience level is pushed, my stress level rises very high and my patience is about this short and I've butted heads with a lot of the boys and some of the stronger girls. Behaviourally they reacted that way...I'm wondering if being a male in primary if the way I deal with things is a little different and how the kids react to
it...My friend, she said to me... I know why this student is behaviourally having problems. Because she is acting out and trying to get a rise out of you and you're so laid back that it bugs her and she is determined to get you...

The last gender related issue I want to touch on is the different views of discipline and how male and female teachers are associated with those views. Teachers I interviewed had different ideas about how discipline should be and is carried out in elementary classrooms by male and female teachers. From one end of the spectrum, teachers suggested that there is a perception that males make better disciplinarians and that they should work with students with behaviour problems, especially male students. Could it possibly be that these students were in need of a male role model? Dan spoke about this very issue in his experiences as a male teacher:

This is a quote from an administrator and other females as well, “This student needs to be with you because you're a guy.” Well, that's unfair, “because he needs a male role model, and that's why he needs to be with you.” Often that child is going to be a difficult child, and I have a problem with that.

On the other hand, some teachers felt that their female colleagues did better jobs of keeping control of their classes and were therefore better at dealing with issues related to discipline and solving problems. Some of these male teachers felt that the students in their classes were noisier, and more free spirited. Kevin stated that:

**Kevin:** I also know that I'm being very conscious of not being completely nurturing and like the way a typical female might be. Well, you are going to come across people who are not that tolerant... it may sound harsh, but not everyone is going to...

**Jason:** ...solve problems for you

**Kevin:** ...or give you that hug....Maybe it's just because we are guys... I typically see more females with more patience or a higher tolerance.
Possibly because they were males, they choose to not deal with certain discipline issues or shift the responsibility back toward the student. In comparison, a female teacher may intervene much sooner.

**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR CHANGE**

I want to conclude by offering prescriptions for change and why I believe they are important. Not surprisingly, barriers that have kept males out of elementary classrooms still exist today. Consequently, the number of males teaching in elementary schools remains extremely low. Children stand to benefit from having male teachers in their elementary years of school. Male teachers offer different perspectives about education from those of female teachers. Many children do not get exposed to the alternative perspectives of education that exposure to both male and female teachers would allow until they reach the upper intermediate grades or high school. Both boys and girls stand to benefit from exposure to a broad range of methods by which they are taught and the ways in which they are encouraged to learn. All teachers have different teaching styles, regardless of gender. However, it is important for children in their elementary years to be exposed to a variety of teaching styles from both male and female teachers. Having a greater gender balance of teachers in elementary schools would perhaps encourage more males to consider a career as elementary teachers.

Universities have a responsibility to promote and recruit male teachers into their elementary education programs with the goal of having more male teachers in the position of role models for young children. Hopefully, this would result in a domino effect and encourage more males to follow suit. Seeing more male teachers in elementary schools they will realize that choosing a career in elementary education is full of prestige. Although I think we need to strive for more gender balance in elementary schools, male teachers should be hired by merit and not gender. Barriers that in the past may have prevented males from entering into elementary education must be addressed. Attracting more males into elementary education may take many years, but it is a worthwhile
process as all children stand to benefit from exposure to both male and female teachers as role models in their elementary education years.

**POSTSCRIPT**
I reflect on my research project one year later and see much of the same. I remain isolated as the only male on my school staff. Parents of the students I am teaching this year are intrigued by the fact that their child is being taught by a male. Their reactions have been very positive. However, one instance has arisen that stands out in my mind. A parent requested that their child be transferred into a female teacher's classroom. The parent did not agree with my approach to disciplining inappropriate behaviour. My belief is that she thought I was not nurturing or caring enough, that I was being insensitive to her child by raising my voice when I deemed it was necessary, and that her child was being singled out for inappropriate behaviour. In her mind, my behaviour must have had something to do with me being a male. I wonder if a female teacher would have reacted any differently than the ways that I have.

I am troubled by the ongoing gender misrepresentation of elementary teachers. Barriers and stereotypes of teachers that have prevented males from entering into elementary education have not been addressed. My plan wherever I teach is to stress the importance of providing children with both male and female teachers. My hope is that all of my students, male and female, will obtain a heightened social consciousness, and feel empowered to become teachers one day if they so desire.

Being a researcher, and interviewing and analyzing the words of colleagues, has helped me grow both as a teacher and as an individual. I take a great deal of comfort in knowing that there are others who see the importance of children having male teachers in elementary schools, and am inspired to continue down the path of elementary education in whatever directions it takes me.
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We are all related
Understanding friendship and meaning

Don Teeuwsen

“We promise to provide a safe and respectful environment for life long learning which celebrates diversity, embraces the physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual integrity of each individual, recognizes and acknowledges differences and prevents discrimination in all of its forms.”


INTRODUCTION

An essential component of teaching for social justice is recognizing the individual and understanding the relationship of that individual to other individuals in whatever community they live. For teachers and students, that community is the classroom. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, writing in Learning to Teach for Social Justice (1999, 118–133), outlines six principles of practice. This project addressed
Cochran-Smith’s first five principles: provide significant work that is meaningful and interesting to students; build on what students bring to school in terms of their knowledge and interests; teach skills and help students understand ideas that they are working with; and pay attention to what sense they are making of what is being taught; and work with (not against) individuals, families and communities. These principles neatly summarize what excellent teaching practice might look like and they directed my initial reading and thinking.

This article is based on a research project that was an analysis of what Grade 3 and 4 students said they liked and learned after they had created the artwork you see here. It contains drawings, photographs, and text. The images and writing worked together to create an identity piece that contained ethical statements and symbols of culture that had significance for each student. There are 21 students of whom 17 have a first language other than English. Two other students have First Nations ancestry. While most students were born in Canada, at least six immigrated to Vancouver from a variety of other countries. They were a bright, engaging, and wonderful group of students.

I ended up with a completely different set of findings than, with my initial assumptions and biases, I had imagined I would. Because I was interested in what students said was interesting and valuable, I was obliged to pay attention to what my students were telling me. I ended up learning more than I ever expected to about relationships, meaning, and the process that makes up what happens in the classroom. Engaging in curriculum such as this artwork/memory piece energized the classroom and strengthened our classroom community. Each person was actively participating not only in the project, but also informing everyone about their own meaning and learning.

The research process turned into one of the richest and most meaningful things I have done as a teacher. Becoming a researcher took a little getting used to. Any change in the parameters of the project, however slight, made
me worry about the quality of the intended product. Qualitative research has a great deal to offer any teacher who wants to improve their practice. In the process of becoming more detached and focused, I became a much better listener. There seemed to be so much more I was seeing and hearing than would have happened otherwise. I felt a heightened sense of purpose and a significantly enhanced clarity about intentions in my teaching practice. This learning has been carried over into subsequent teaching practice.

THE PROJECT
Our class chose to work on a unit called “Community.” I used an old school textbook I found buried in the bookroom called, Creating a community (1983). While the pictures are dated and textbooks are generally considered unfashionable teaching tools for primary students, I like this book because the language is easy to read and this particular textbook is filled with questions students can discuss together. The premise of the book is that a group of people leaves planet Earth to build a new community on a different planet. One of the assignments on the first day was for students to make a list of things they would take with them if they were going on this expedition. This
project was set up as a kind of passport to be used as we set off to our new community.

Two books were used as a springboard into the assignment. The first book was *We are all related: A celebration of our cultural heritage* (1996), created by students at G.T. Cunningham Elementary School. After looking at the George Littlechild collage that served as the model for the artwork contained in the book we looked at four student pieces and their attached explanations. Then we looked at the book *Our Elders speak: A tribute to Native Elders* (1990). This book, assembled by Karie Garnier, was published to honour First Nations teaching and was originally an exhibition for Expo 86. This book was significant because it contained ethical statements that First Nations Elders believed important for all people. Students were able to identify how parts of the *We are all related* book followed naturally from *Our Elders speak*. I said that the artwork they were going to do would look a bit like both of these texts.

I wanted to engage parents in my research because I was interested in doing something in this project that involved them in a meaningful way. I had read a journal article written by Maria del Rosario Barrillas, called “Literacy at home: Honoring parent voices though writing” (2000, pp.302-307). Barrillas argues that it is critical that we invite parents to share their experiences and knowledge with their children. In addition to creating collaborative assignments, there is the added benefit of having parents use the family's first language to have a voice in their children's academic development.

One of the assignments was to have parents and children create a piece of writing to one another about a belief that would be beneficial in their lives. That was something else that I thought would work in this assignment. Barrillas advocates that students and parents need venues in which to express thoughts and feelings. Along lines of communication, the two groups would share needs, wants, and expectations. Each artwork contained two ethical statements, something students said they had learned from their parents and an ethical statement.
written by their parents that contained a teaching they would give to the classroom community. Significantly, there was an interesting overlap of beliefs that parents and students shared—but not necessarily within the same family. To avoid illiteracy issues, children were encouraged to scribe for their parents.

It was in the process of creating the artwork that I could see that making friends and understanding what friendship meant constituted the most valuable learning for the class. Throughout the project the students had conversations and visited and helped each other, and these interchanges made the project meaningful, interesting, and valuable. Students came to their own understanding that the project was about finding out about each other.

They helped each other out. Sometimes as many as five students would be working on one person’s artwork. Students used each other’s input to check the criteria for the artwork itself. They were told to make their drawings recognizable and the colours bright. They were told that many people would be looking at their work and that those people would be thinking about what they were seeing. Comments students made as they worked throughout the construction of their artwork indicated that they felt they were creating something important.

The students constructed envelopes out of paper and put their ethical statements inside one of them. I allow a considerable amount of conversation in the classroom because I think students use conversation to make sense of my teaching and their learning. The conversations also help them to negotiate getting along and to create a safe place in which to share stories and make sense of the world. They shared crayons and in some cases helped each other out, filling in the colours of the symbols and backgrounds. While the researcher in me agonized about wanting this work be their own, the contradiction inherent in encouraging them to help each other out and then insisting that they do separate work was so glaringly obvious that I held back. For the duration of the project students took breaks from their own work to look at each other’s pieces.
bell hooks in *Race and representation* (1992, p.115) writes about being able to gaze. African American slaves were punished if they were caught looking. Students loved to look at each other’s projects even when they were in the early stages. They were not just looking, they were gazing into each other’s pictures and seeing the stories embedded within them. hooks says that the white supremacist culture controls who is represented and how they are represented. Indeed, despite the number of minority students in the class, how many images do they see of themselves? What kinds of messages are we sending to those students who seldom, if ever, see themselves in books or pictures on the walls?

During the project my time was taken up with a myriad of questions and calls for help; the stuff teachers do every day. Things like helping with spelling, holding a folded paper down so that it could be glued, reassuring someone who wanted to rip their project up because they had made a mistake in the colour they had chosen for one of the pattern backgrounds, and the inevitable repairing of construction paper that tears if you are not careful and press too hard with a pencil. My class is never an ocean of calm, yet it seemed to me that they were busy and happy with the assignment. They delighted in explaining the symbols they incorporated into their work. I would be consulted on color choices, not because they didn’t have their own ideas, but rather it seemed to me, more as a way of checking in and as a gesture of inclusion.

After three weeks, when the project had been completed, the celebration of what we had accomplished provided me with one of the most emotionally important moments in my teaching experience. The presentations were electrifying. I will never forget that morning’s exhibition with its ritual and respectful coming together. We met at the carpet, sitting on chairs with our artwork on the floor in front of us. It was the first time that as a group we had a sense of what we had accomplished.

The excitement was barely containable. Everyone had a chance to hold their work up and say something about
their piece. After each presentation we all applauded. Some students self-consciously held their work up and said nothing or offered a comment about what they were doing when one of the pictures was taken. Some summarized their artist's statements. In total, this took more than forty minutes and no one asked for a break or engaged in disruptive attention seeking. For students to sit and share so attentively made me aware of how proud they were of their work.

After lunch, we met so that I could ask them what it was they liked about the project and what kinds of things they learned from doing the work. Their conversations taught me to understand what they valued and learned. I think that all voices were heard. Everyone's presence was recognized and valued not just at the presentation and evaluations but in a sustained way throughout the whole process. hooks talks of this in her book, Teaching to transgress (1994, pp.179-180) and says that if there is prolonged silence in a classroom it is because of an absence of safety. My students felt safe as well as noticed and respected.
THE ANALYSIS

I expected that students would talk about notions of respect and respecting difference while acknowledging the inherent commonalities of all persons. I thought they might talk about enjoying working together with a shared sense of common purpose. I hoped for comments about how their own notions of identity confronted them; perhaps, a comment or two about how they felt they knew themselves better after such a thought-provoking assignment. Of course, these are things I hoped they would be thinking about.

Their comments reflected the huge issues they consider on a daily basis. Students reported in their own words that the project was valuable for them because:

“This project was about people.”

“We did it so people can know about you and you find out about them.”

“Once you understand them you can make friends.”

“You start being friends because you know them.”

What followed was a conversation about how the whole school should do this and then we would maybe see each person for who they are.

The second thing that they really liked was the process of creating the collage. They loved doing the artwork. They were falling all over themselves in a rush to talk about the designs and patterns, how cool the colours were, how they learned to make interesting envelopes, and how detailed everyone’s drawings were. The words “pretty,” “beautiful,” and “nice” were repeated over and over.

They also learned about the shifting meaning of symbols. The only comments they made about difference were comments on different ways they created symbols, patterns, and envelopes. Their comments about symbols were repeated over and over too.
“People have all kinds of symbols that they use.”

“If you asked the other person they would tell you what the symbol means.”

“Symbols mean different things to other people.”

“Symbols mean words.”

“Even if you don’t know what a symbol means, it means something to them [the person who drew it.”

The next time we met, I took time to ask some questions about the comments they had made about symbols. I asked, “Everyone seems quite excited by the symbols. The symbols look like pictures but they act like words when we look at them. Is this what you think?” There were hands up all over the place now. That was it! They said it was like learning a language. The meaning of the symbols shifted sometimes just a little, but sometimes a lot. For example, Jan (all names of students have been changed) had used grass as a symbol for the music that she loves to listen to. When she was asked why, she just shrugged and said, “Because.” They talked for some time about how hard it was to understand what someone was saying, especially if you don’t know them. I asked if I was hard to understand. There was agreement all around. “When we didn’t know you we didn’t know what you were saying, but you are getting easier to understand.”

Students love making art. Students doodle and draw in their journals. They doodle on the edges of worksheets. They are as respectful of a picture as they are of the written word. John Ralston Saul, (2000, p.126) puts it this way:

*We are not all great or even good artists. But we are all intrinsically part of the imaginations inclusive nature. Those who believe in the dominance of understanding and methodology seem to miss the obvious. The tools they consider marginal—those of the arts—are in fact the tools of storytelling and reimagining ourselves which all humans use. And why do we use them? In*
order to convince ourselves that we exist as humans and as individuals in a society.

He goes on to say only art can reveal to us what we already know. It is as if we restate or retell stories about ourselves with greater clarity through artistic representation.

Students have to have the opportunity to represent themselves and share those representations with each other. Paulo Freire says in The politics of education (1985, pp.78-79) that as societies work towards transformation, artistic representation moves from prefabricated images to art that is concrete or real. My students spoke about how great everyone’s art was. It had a special quality because they were not copying someone else’s idea. A basketball in a border pattern had personal meaning. The artist had a serious reason for including it. Other students could find out just what the images did mean by asking.

Henry Giroux, writing in the introduction of Freire’s book, The politics of education, (1985, p. xx), notes that the dominant culture controls the production of culture for everyone. One of the reasons students were so engaged in this project is because they understood that they were in control of the images and of the representation. They were telling their own stories. One of the other striking things about these images is the layered quality some of them have. Images are embedded under later changes. There is a sense of uncovering form and meaning that makes looking at the artwork a profound experience.

Indeed, early on in the project one boy asked, “Don, if these pictures we are doing help us to know each other, why didn’t we do this at the beginning of the year?” It was a good question. I expect next year it will be one of the first projects we do. I also wonder if it might be interesting to work on those pictures over the year, to add to the images as we get to know ourselves better and as our understandings of ourselves change.

Another student, Lian, expressed considerable frustration about not knowing what the pictures meant just by look-
ing at them. Lian’s statement echoes the intriguing idea contained in structuralism that meaning is constructed and not the product of shared systems of signification. Meaning is not intuitively shared. Other students loved this notion of not knowing. When you are in an ocean of language, ideas, and curriculum you are expected to understand or be engaged with, the delight of being able to make your own symbols and attach your own meaning to them was, in the words of another student, “Fun.” So, added to the power of being able to tell their own stories, the students had the opportunity to control the meaning they brought to the project.

Many theorists believe that words are instruments of power and that those who control the power control the meaning of the discourse. But meaning is constantly shifting as people engage in discourse. The excitement and energy generated by discussing these ideas with my students leads me to believe that students rarely get to control the meanings of things, and that they empower themselves when they do. It might seem unsettling for some teachers to invite students to make their own meaning. E. D. Hirsh writing in *Cultural Literacy*, (1987, pp. 48-55), reviews the notion that our understanding of the outside world reflects our understanding of schemata or memory pictures we group together to facilitate our knowing. Hirsh wants all students to operate from the same set of schemata to facilitate literacy. Here is a man who is comfortable with the notion that hierarchies exist and he believes that the trick is to invite the powerless to understand the meanings and understandings of words and text so that they can succeed or at least work for those in charge.

Of course, it would be silly to suggest that everyone get together and start talking as if they are unconcerned with sharing meaning or understanding. The point is, I think, that sharing meanings requires a common language but, more importantly, requires the development of a set of relationships that allow dialogue and discourse to occur. Sharing is not something that someone imposes. Sharing implies notions of equality and relationship. Sharing implies conversation and time for each person to under-
stand and think. The single largest learning I gained through this project was the beginning awareness that normal everyday tensions for my students are magnified by the uncertainty of understanding the language. Then too, there is the assumption that the words out of my mouth have greater power, meaning, and validity than the words that come out of their mouths.

Sharing meanings in conversation is not something that only teachers have to think about. Nor is it something specific to classroom teaching or curriculum. At the 2002 Lafontaine-Baldwin lecture, George Erasmus, the great First Nations statesman, said that researchers who examined more than two hundred commissions and task force documents found that even when the same words were used, Aboriginal people and government representatives were talking about different things. What Erasmus was advocating for in his lecture was that we find ways to develop relationships with each other so that we can talk together. He suggested that it was time that we examine the inequities of power contained in the discourses in which we are currently engaged.

In my literature review, I happened upon a draft document that was looking at ways to establish performance standards for human and social development. While the document identified valuing diversity and cultural awareness and participation as important aspects of social responsibility, the paper avoided any discussion of how such concepts might be evaluated. It seems that we are soon going to be called upon to teach and evaluate student understandings of cultural diversity, as well as their understandings of cultural heritage. What kinds of curriculum will teachers use to teach these concepts? The kind of project reported on here is a good place to start teaching and learning in this curricular area. It has the added benefit of creating at the same time an opportunity to foster friendship and understanding.

I think, as teachers, we need to be ever aware of the relationships we have with our students. Some of us are more comfortable than others with the notion that we have enormous amounts of power compared to the
students in our classes. Some of us take it as a given that the curriculum is a reflection of those who hold political and economic power. We don't let students get in touch with each other. We limit the time spent in talking and fill the day with planned curriculum that is meaningless and devoid of real content and relevance. It is to our detriment that we do this daily...unthinkingly...reflexively.

For me, the issue is that each teacher should be aware of the political implications that are inherent in each of our teaching practices. This is why Marilyn Cochran-Smith's principles of education became so real to me as this project took hold of the students and myself. Teachers have control and often limit individual student autonomy and identity. More to the point, we limit ourselves to teaching the curriculum, worried about the politics of what we are doing. Many teachers are afraid to teach what is real and settle for what is concrete. I believe that what truly matters is seldom, if ever, on the page but something that comes out as process. We teach who we are. We teach the relationships we believe are important.

For students, learning how to make friends and live together is fundamental. It was in engaging in the artwork that the understandings of friendship came up. Throughout the project conversation and visiting and helping each other made the project meaningful, interesting, and valuable, and provided the students with their understanding of the importance of finding out about each other. Along the way, their own relationships were strengthened and new relationships were forged. We learned a lot together.

**ONE YEAR LATER**

One year later, I am reminded that friendship and finding out about each other represented the core learning and understanding in this project. Right now, as I write this reflection, the United States and a number of its allies are at war with Iraq. I feel the world is at a crossroads. In the past months, while thinking and reading for this paper, two articles in *The Globe and Mail* resonated personally and for me, connected to this project.
On February 8, 2003 (F6-7), there was an article about the plague of suicide bombings that routinely occur in Israel. Arin Ahmed, a would-be Palestinian suicide bomber related that:

“I got out of the car. The place wasn’t exactly like I’d seen on the map. I saw a lot of people, mothers with children, teenage boys and girls. I remembered an Israeli girl my age whom I used to be in touch with. I suddenly understood what I was about to do and I said to myself: How could I do such a thing?”

All Arin Ahmed, the “failed” suicide bomber, did was remember a real human being who she had known. How do we get in touch with anyone else? We talk to them. We listen. We pay attention. Is it such a stretch to imagine the reason that we, as teachers, engage in the projects that we do is to have the classroom community find out about one another? To create community, to build friendships, we have to talk and listen to one another.

Exactly one month later (2003, F6-7), another article appeared in The Globe and Mail entitled “Making peace one person at a time.” The article describes how Michelle Divon, the Israeli ambassador’s daughter, made friends with the daughters of the Jordanian and Iranian ambassadors. They met at school and found themselves working on a thirty minute presentation that addressed each other’s different cultures, religions and upbringings as well as celebrating their similarities.

Divon says that meeting in Canada created an opportunity for them to learn from each other and to enjoy a friendship. I knew their experience because that is what happened in our class while working on our project. Echoing the promise contained in the quote that opens this paper Divon says,

“Our similarities are far greater than our differences and I would like to provide people with the opportunity to discover this on their own. Just like we cannot shake hands with a clenched fist, we cannot make peace without looking each other in the eye.”
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TEXTS USED


How can teachers support gender equity in their classrooms?

Susan Pinsonneault and Kara Malhi

*Teachers and writers have the power to change “gender-appropriate” behavior and attitudes, yet many of us seem blind to the opportunity.*

Mem Fox, 1993

**INTRODUCTION**

Can teachers transform perceptions of gender identity by merely reading the “right” books to their students? Typically, books have shown a greater number of male characters with strong personalities and roles, while females have been less prevalent in literature and given less dominant roles when they appear in it. Could we, by exposing our students to a variety of stories in which both male and female characters play a variety of roles, help to make our students more open to different ideas or values with respect to the roles of the two genders? We began investigating this issue by reading various stories to our students and examining what they preferred to read about, and whom they identified with in the stories.

The purpose of this study was to examine which characters boys and girls identified with when they read stories containing male or female protagonists. Many authors
and researchers argue that readers identify with characters of their own gender. Since male characters dominate the majority of children’s literature, female readers lack role models and see an unrepresentative view of the world through children’s books. Fox (1993) states that both genders should act in literature the same way as they do in real life. Studies have demonstrated quite clearly that the reading materials that we expose our children to shape their attitudes, their understanding, and their behavior (Peterson & Lach, 1990). Research has found that the longer children are exposed to sex-bias and stereotypes, the more sex-stereotyped their attitudes become (Campbell & Wirtenberg, 1980). Therefore, if we as teachers and parents promote stories that demonstrate a variety of role models, children should have less rigid attitudes and beliefs about typical behavior for boys and girls.

Many studies have indicated specific trends in boys’ and girls’ preferences with regards to literature. Bleakley, Westerberg & Hopkins (1988) (cited in Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991) found that “when male and female fifth-grade students were exposed to adventure, mystery, and humorous stories, boys rated stories more interesting when the main characters were male; girls were more interested in reading about female protagonists, although their preference was less pronounced” (p. 278).

Schau and Scott (1984) suggested sex stereotyping was the reason why some boys preferred reading about male characters. Literature with male protagonists was more likely to be filled with adventure and exciting details than literature with female protagonists (Sadker, et al., 1991).

From our many and various experiences with books in classrooms and in libraries, we too have found that male characters predominate children’s literature. To promote gender equity, Singh (1998, on-line resource) recommended that teachers actively seek out books that portray “girls/women in a positive light with active,
dynamic roles” and books that do not portray either gender in a stereotypical manner. Since young children are not old enough to choose books that reflect fairness to both genders, the responsibility for doing so rests upon parents and teachers (Narahara, 1998).

After reading Chapter 7 in Davies (1993), we questioned the concept of positioning one's self in a story. Was it true that girls imagine or position themselves as female characters and that boys position themselves as male characters when they read or hear stories? We tested this assertion with Grade 1 students to see if, and in response to what kinds of literature, they would position themselves in stories as a protagonist of the opposite gender, or as a protagonist who was the same gender as themselves. Our variables of interest were gender and the level of adventurousness of the protagonist, but additional variables of culture and language came into play. We did not choose stories to reflect the ethnic or cultural makeup of the class, but as we examined the outcomes of the research, it became clear that there were variables other than gender and degree of excitement with which students identified. We have tried to discuss these additional variables as they presented themselves in the study.

At the outset of the study, Susan was optimistic about the willingness of her students to position themselves in a role that was opposite to their own gender. She predicted that both boys and girls would choose to position themselves as the more exciting and adventurous protagonist. Her prediction was based on her assumption that Grade 1 students did not yet have firm stereotypic beliefs about what constituted boys’ and girls’ behavior. Kara predicted that the boys would choose to position themselves in the male protagonist’s role and that the girls would choose to position themselves in the female protagonist’s role, regardless of how adventurous the protagonist was. Her thinking was a reflection of her classroom and personal experience.
DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

Class profile
Susan had taught at Milestone Elementary School (the school and all student names used in this article are pseudonyms) in the primary grades for three years; however, it was her first year teaching Grade 1. Kara had taught at Milestone for eight years in a variety of grades; however, she was teaching with another school district at the time of the study, which was the end of February and early March, 2002, so the sample was drawn exclusively from Susan's Grade 1 class. Milestone is located in a working-class neighborhood in central Vancouver. Approximately 560 students attended Milestone Elementary School. The majority of the students were Asian or Indo-Canadian. Seventy students were at the Grade 1 level, divided among four classes, including a Grade 1-2 split. Within each class there were 20 to 22 students; the majority (approximately 65%) of whom were boys. In total, Susan's class had 20 students; 14 boys and 6 girls. Between 16 and 18 of these students participated in each session.

The students were told that they could be subjects in a study done by their classroom teacher and her research partner which involved listening to stories and drawing a picture. Students were given a brief description of our research proposal and two release forms, one for the students and one for their parents to sign. The students were given an option to participate in the study by having their drawings and comments used in our research, or to keep their drawings and not be included in our research. Only two boys chose not to participate in our research. They listened to the stories and took part in the activities, but we did not use their drawings or comments in our data.
What we did
In each of three sessions we read two stories to the students, one with a male and one with a female protagonist, and varied the relative amount of adventure and excitement the two main characters experienced. We considered, for example, a character who was able to fly more exciting and adventurous than one who visited with elderly people. In all of the stories, the main character was human and he or she was about the same age as the students, which was about six or seven years old.

At the beginning of the first session, students gathered at the carpeted area where large group discussions normally took place. Susan read them this statement and question: “Sometimes when people read they use their imagination and pretend that they are in the story and that they are one of the characters. Do you ever pretend that you are in stories that you read or hear?” Some discussion took place and all students seemed to understand the concept of positioning themselves in a story. Then Susan gave the instructions: “I’m going to read you two books and I will ask you to imagine yourself as one of the main characters from the story. Next you will be asked to draw a picture of the main character you would like to be and you may write about your choice. We will come back to the carpet and you can share your work.” Clarifications were made and then students listened to the stories.

After Susan read the two books at the carpeted area, she gave the students a sheet of half-lined and half- blank notebook paper on which to do their drawing and writing. Students then moved from the carpet to a desk; there were two clusters of desks and each cluster had ten seats. Communal pencils, erasers, crayons, and pencil crayons were placed in the middle of the group of desks; students were accustomed to sharing the supplies. Susan sat at one cluster of desks, and Kara at the other in order to listen and make notes on the students’ dialogue. There was also a tape recorder at each desk so that we could study the students’ discussions at a later date.
BOOKS WE USED
Keeping in mind Fox’s (1993) recommendation to introduce a variety of literature that reflected real people and events, we chose stories for our research that portrayed a number of diverse backgrounds. Collectively, the stories reflect a broad sampling of the wide variety of literature available. The cultures represented in the chosen stories included Siberian, Indian, Australian, Spanish, American and Canadian.

Session One
In the first book, *The Girl Who Wanted to Hunt*, the protagonist was a female named Anga. In the second book, *The Story of Little Babaji*, the protagonist was a male named Little Babaji. We considered both the male and female protagonists’ roles to be exciting and adventurous.

Session Two
In the first book, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, the protagonist was a male named Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. In the second book, *Abuela*, the protagonist was a female named Rosalba. In this pairing, we considered the female protagonist’s role to be more exciting and adventurous than the male protagonist’s role.

Session Three
In the first book, *Selina and The Bear Paw Quilt*, the protagonist was a female named Selina. In the second book, *The Magic Hockey Skates*, the protagonist was a male named Joey. We considered the male protagonist’s role to be more exciting and adventurous than the female protagonist’s role in this pairing.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
Consistent with the findings of Bleakley et al. (1988), the majority of boys in our study positioned themselves as the male protagonists, while most of the girls chose to position themselves in the role of an adventurous protagonist, regardless of that protagonist’s gender. When given a choice between an adventurous male and an adventurous female character, most girls chose the female character (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).
Table 1
Characters chosen in Session One (A = adventurous)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Protagonist (A)</th>
<th>Female Protagonist (A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Characters chosen in Session Two (A = adventurous)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Female Protagonist (A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Characters chosen in Session Three (A = adventurous)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Protagonist (A)</th>
<th>Female Protagonist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although most boys did not choose to identify with or draw the female character Anga in Session One, they did not make pejorative comments about her character hunting and doing things that her stepmother labeled as “boys’ activities.” Neither did they question Abuela and Rosalba in Session Two, flying around New York, which led us to believe that the boys accepted that a girl protagonist could be adventurous. Students occasionally referred to characters in terms of their gender, for example, “...the girl in the story,” “Are you picking the boy?” and “What is that boy’s name?” We even heard Sanjay commenting to Ian, “Just because he’s a boy doesn’t mean you have to be him.” We feel that, in general, students acknowledged the gender of the characters.
Most students were ready and willing to give opinions; they made a total of 171 comments during the three sessions. But, when broken down in terms of gender, the girls appeared to be quite reserved, making only 10 comments (6%) as compared to the 161 comments (94%) made by the boys over the three sessions. One of the remarks made by Aneena during the book *Abuela* in Session Two was barely audible on tape and was quickly drowned out by a few of the boys’ voices. The greater number of comments made by boys was partly due to the make-up of the class (two-thirds of which was boys). Another reason the boys’ comments outnumbered the girls’ was because three of the boys in the class were quite outspoken, even with teacher intervention. The three most vocal boys made 57% of all comments over the three sessions. During the research, boys’ voices and opinions predominated and, in general, this was the norm in the class.

The discussion at the two clusters of tables focused on the male characters during Sessions One and Three. For example, after *The Story of Little Babaji* the conversation at one table centered on choosing Babaji as the favorite protagonist. One student announced that his table was “the Babaji table.” After the story *The Magic Hockey Skates*, there was a great deal of discussion about the main character, Joey. Some of the comments were as follows: “Joey is the best!” and “I want to be Joey!”
These comments may have created peer pressure for the students who had not yet decided who to draw. Most girls seemed to follow the same trend throughout; they drew an adventurous protagonist and their choice of protagonist did not appear to be affected by what others were doing. However, the three most vocal boys always drew the male protagonist, which made us question whether or not the choices of the less vocal boys were affected by peer pressure from their more vocal classmates.

We felt the following was an example of peer pressure that may have affected one boy’s choice. After the stories were read in Session Two, Sanjay said, “I like Rosalba” (the adventurous female protagonist). He seemed to be reassuring himself after initially choosing Rosalba as he said to the class, “You can be a girl if you want, you don’t have to be a boy because you’re a boy.” But, when he went back to the tables to draw his choice, he sat where the conversation centered on Wilfrid Gordon (the less adventurous male protagonist). Instead of Rosalba, Sanjay drew a boy on the monkey bars with his belly-button showing (Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge). It was possible that he changed from the female to the male protagonist because others at the table influenced him. Sanjay’s reason for choosing Wilfrid was “because he helped.”
Rita is another example of a student who changed her mind. While she worked at the table during Session One she stated, “I want to be Babaji” (the adventurous male protagonist). But when it came time to draw her picture she drew Anga, (the adventurous female protagonist), then wrote that she wanted to be Anga because she wanted to hunt and be a hunter. Of the two girls who sat at Rita’s table, one girl drew Babaji and the other drew Anga; however, the boys at her table all drew Babaji. It could have been that Rita liked both characters and after reflecting upon the stories she decided to draw Anga just because she was female. Another possibility was that she drew Anga because she was able to “shrug off” the pressure to be like her peers who drew Babaji.

It seemed that a students’ culture had an impact on their choices of characters during this study. Specifically, it seemed that students identified with characters who were from familiar cultures. For example, Sanjay, Anil and Akash, three Indo-Canadian boys, became very excited with The Story of Little Babaji because it was based in India. They cheered and repeated the name “Babaji,” which means grandfather in Punjabi. Later they positioned themselves as the character by making such statements as, “This is the Babaji table” and “I am Babaji.” Aneena also identified with her own Indo-Canadian
culture; she too chose Babaji and drew a picture of a pink skinned Babaji and a tree. Students demonstrated their awareness that skin tone is one potential difference between cultures when they discussed colouring the characters. Some of the students’ interpretation of the positioning concept was coloring the character’s skin the color of their own skin. Nick said to Ian as he began to color his picture, “Babaji’s not peach, he’s brown.” Ian replied, “He’s a little bit of peach, you’re supposed to do YOU as Babaji, you’re supposed to do yourself as Babaji.” When queried, we reiterated the positioning concept by stating, “You have to imagine yourself as the character” and left interpretation of the skin color up to them.

Language also seemed to be a concept that students identified with during our reading activities. Students felt a personal connection to the literature when they heard words from the language that was spoken in their homes. Jose pointed out Spanish words in the book *Abuela*. He proudly announced, “Buenos dias, that means ‘Hi’.” Sanjay and Akash were just as quick to point out the Punjabi symbols and words in *The Story of Little Babaji*. For example, Akash commented, “It’s the same, we call our moms Mamaji and we call our dads Papaji.” He also announced, “Miss P, remember when you said butter, you say it ‘mokun’” (correctly pronounced). Sanjay then
pointed out that there was another way to say butter, “Gai.”

We noted during our study that students commented and reflected upon objects in the stories that were personally relevant to them. During Session One, Akash commented on the turban the father wore in *The Story of Little Babaji*. He said, “It’s like Anil” (referring to a boy in the class who wore a turban) and Aneena exclaimed, “Those are Punjabi shoes” when she saw Little Babaji’s fancy new shoes. Aneena obviously identified with the dress of the character and we think that Aneena chose to position herself as the adventurous male character Little Babaji because of her Indo-Canadian background.

During the book *Abuela* in Session Two, a few students discussed the Statue of Liberty. Jose commented, “I have seen that before. You know. The news when the airplanes crashed.” We think that Jose chose to position himself as the adventurous female character Rosalba because of his Spanish background and also because he was familiar with the Statue of Liberty. By making personal connections to the stories, students seemed to enhance their involvement with, and perhaps understanding of, the stories.
Peterson and Lach (1990) stated: “Storybooks help young children learn about what other boys and girls do and say and feel” and “provide the young child with a broader social insight” (p. 189). For example, some of the boys demonstrated an awareness of altruism in Session Two by choosing the male protagonist Wilfrid Gordon, “because he helped,” and in Session Three when they chose Joey and gave the reason, “he played for his brother.” However, the boys did not make comments about the altruistic behaviour of female protagonists. We believe this was because they did not identify with the female protagonists. Perhaps, in order for some boys and girls to identify with certain traits, they need to identify with the characters first. If they have trouble identifying with characters of a different sex, it may be best for them to read about characters of the same sex who display those traits.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

We recommend that, as teachers look for ways to bring social justice into their classrooms, they try to use literature that portrays people in a variety of roles who come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When choosing literature for children there are certain factors educators should keep in mind in order
to introduce their students to a realistic reflection of the world. Teachers should consider the gender of role models being presented in stories, the ethnic backgrounds of the students and gender biases within the stories they present to their students. Although we found that, in general, students in our study related to characters of their own gender, it is important to provide students with literature that reflects a variety of cultures and languages with characters in various roles, and to discuss the roles and cultures that are portrayed within them.

Campbell & Wirtenburg (1980) and Peterson & Lach (1990) recognized the importance of a variety of role models in their research. Role models in the media have a significant impact on young peoples’ beliefs and attitudes. Domestic and childcare ideologies of “typical” male and female character traits and the roles they play in family life have been entrenched in our minds. Gaskell (1992) demonstrated that socialized patterns of behaviour continue, unquestioned by a generation who saw a majority of mothers who stayed at home and fathers who worked outside of the home. In 1977 Gaskell interviewed young women and men who had just completed high school in Vancouver and found that they perceived women to be more capable of carrying out domestic work and childcare duties than men. There are a variety of gender-based stereotypes that continue to pervade our consciousness. They must be challenged or traditional, inequitable patterns will continue. For example, Gaskell suggests that in order to help women achieve higher status they must be paid more for their work outside the home and have adequate child-care facilities. We agree. Further, we believe that when children see adults in a variety of roles, in books and in real life, then they learn to tolerate, accept and support a wide variety of roles and character traits in both males and females.

Studies that examined texts used in Canadian schools from 1970 to 1988 found that sex stereotyping continues, partly because the books reflected the fundamental reality of the unequal division of labour (Gaskell, McLaren & Novogrodsy, 1989). Gaskell et al., propose creating richer school programs that would transform the
current male-based curriculum and adding references to women's historical experiences. This “gender equitable” curriculum would incorporate “...knowledge that reflects the diverse experiences of women into what is deemed to be important school-based knowledge” (p. 38). The proposed changes would include, for example, studying female scientists, examining history from a female perspective, and discussing why nineteenth century female writers used male pen names. During our literature review we realized that there is a need for more research in the field of children’s literature and gender equity. While the studies we have cited resonated for us, the research was sparse and some of what we were able to find was potentially dated.

Teachers should be aware of language, family background, and interests of their students because students make personal connections with what they read. The results from our research provide evidence that when students find personal similarities with the characters and situations they encounter in literature, they are more likely to connect with these characters and understand what is being taught in the stories they populate. We feel that it is important for teachers to know their students' backgrounds so that they can prepare lessons that can make personal connections with all of the students in their class.

Teachers need to be aware of peer pressure in their classrooms. In our experience, there are always leaders and followers within classrooms, but it is important to allow all voices within a classroom to be heard. In terms of the characters chosen by students during our study, it was possible that peer pressure from the dominant students may have had an influence on the choices of the less vocal group of students. In order to prevent peer pressure from affecting which character students chose, we could have asked students to listen to the stories individually at a listening centre, then let them make their choice, without having heard what their peers thought of the stories.

Action research both opens up research possibilities and creates research challenges. Having more boys in the class
may have shaped the results of this study because the boys' voices were more dominant, but the realities of today's classrooms do not reflect neat sample sizes or characteristics. Action research provides us with rich opportunities to examine what is happening in the world in which we function, and how different variables play out in real-life situations.

Action research also allowed us to examine the class more closely than we could have in a regular day, and after listening to the tapes and reading transcripts of class discussions we were able to notice interesting patterns like the degree to which three students dominated classroom discussions.

In reading our results, a final cautionary note must be sounded. The small size of the group may have had an impact on the results of our research and we wonder if we can generalize our results having surveyed only 18 students. The results of other similar studies can help to solidify or challenge our results.

Our objective was to investigate which characters children identified with in a story. We believe that children's perceptions, behaviour and attitudes are influenced by the characters they see and read about in picture books. It is very important to present gender-equitable literature that promotes a variety of characteristics for both male and female characters because gender stereotypic thinking may limit children's interests and choices. Educators, publishers, and parents must be more aware of the effects literature has on children. We believe the results from this study will promote greater awareness of our students' preferences and perceptions when reading and also raise our awareness of the literature we use in our classrooms.

In order to diminish gender stereotypes, we believe that it is important to create a wider, more equitable view of the world for our students than the one that has been portrayed in the past by biased textbooks and the predominance of strong male characters in stories. Children begin to formulate their values and beliefs early in their
lives. Giving young people access to a variety of role models that they can emulate may allow them to see, and therefore have, more opportunities during their lives. We believe that it is important to reach children at a young age when their gender stereotypes are in their formative stages, allowing them to experience a wide range of literatures, including stories about male and female characters who display a variety of characteristics.

ONE YEAR LATER
(Susan’s reflections)

Doing action research in my classroom raised my awareness of gender issues. As a result, I see gender biases in the words and actions that play out in my classroom more clearly now. For example, when I read to my students, I pay closer attention to what they say characters should or should not do, based upon their gender. One boy told me that a princess couldn’t save a prince. When he saw that scenario in a story, he exclaimed, “It should be the other way around; the prince rescues the princess!” Of course we discussed the likelihood of the situation and found out that most students believed it was possible for a princess to be a heroine. I also have heightened awareness of the language used in books. Recently, when reading Robert Munsch’s *Fire Station*, I changed the word “fireman” to “firefighter” as I read the book to the class and explained to my students that women can be firefighters too.

I regularly ask students to pretend that they are the characters in stories, and now, after having done this research, I am not surprised when I see that girls are more willing than boys to position themselves as a character of the opposite sex. As I continue to explore gender issues with my students, both boys and girls seem to be growing more accepting of characters that do not follow the typical or traditional roles for males and females. After discussing what male and female characters can do, students usually all agree, “They can do anything.” I believe that with more of these types of discussions, students will grow to be more accepting of characters and people in their lives when they do not strictly adhere to traditional roles.
Being able to listen to the tapes of student discussions afterward also allowed me to analyze the group dynamics in my class. It was only then that I realized how much discussion time the three most vocal boys claimed, and how they repeatedly dominated class discussions. One day I presented the class with some of the results of our survey. I cut a 100 cm strip of paper in segments to represent the percentage of comments made by each of the three vocal boys, the remainder of the boys, and all of the girls. The class was quite shocked with the visual image. Afterwards I took steps to ensure that all students had a share of time to speak during discussions.

Participating in action research in my classroom was the richest form of professional development that I have experienced so far in my teaching career. It has given me the opportunity and time to examine, study, and reflect upon my own teaching practices. Investigating these teaching practices has shed light on aspects of my teaching that I took for granted, bringing them more fully into my consciousness. Because I participated in action research, I realize more fully how important it is to make a deliberate effort to create a more equitable environment for all students, a realization I will weave into all my future teaching practices.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BOOKS USED IN THE CLASSROOM


teach grade seven in a large inner-city school in East Vancouver. There are 650 children in my school and they come from a rich variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. If you come for a visit to the school during class time, you will see a remarkable collection of teachers, working hard to help children learn about the world and themselves. You will see children engaged and having fun. They feel safe in their classrooms. But if you come to the school during recess or lunch you may see something much different. On some days, you will see violence or bullying or excessive noise or confusion or anger. You might see blood. You might see a line-up of kids at the principal’s office, waiting to be
disciplined. You might see children breaking rules that they clearly understand and have agreed should not be broken. They may be sneaking into the school and hiding in quiet, dark, and peaceful places. You may see torn clothing on the playground or school supplies smashed and left in the hallways. Forty to fifty children will be trying to play a basketball game on the outdoor court and as many as a hundred will be trying to play soccer on the one outdoor gravel field. There will be dozens of children trying to get turns on the tire swings. And you will see that the majority of outdoor spaces are gravel, asphalt, concrete, or mud.

It is a much different place than the school I taught in before coming here. My former school had half the number of children in it and more than twice the amount of playground and recreation space. There was significantly more playground equipment and green space, covered outdoor space, gardens, and trees. There was enough space for kids to play six or seven different soccer games. There were dozens of trees to sit under or lean against. There was space for teachers to come outside and read with their kids in the shade in the twelve acres of park land that surrounded the school property. Children seemed to be happier and safer and more engaged outside the classroom.

Thinking of these two schools, I wanted to know more about the relationship between space and healthy learning and growing environments. I wanted to know more about why these schools seemed to be so different and yet were in the same city.

**BACKGROUND READING**
I began this project by investigating the relationship between space and healthy learning and growing environments. I looked at studies about green space in the healthy development of pre-school children, elementary-aged children, and teenagers, and at work done related to the role of playground design in the
healthy development of children. Susa and Benedict (1994) have shown that cognitive development and social development can be influenced by playground design. Studies have also shown that divergent play and creativity can also be influenced by playground design and green space. As well, Taylor and Wiley (1998) report that a number of studies have been done that suggest that barren, inner-city neighborhood spaces compromise the everyday activities and experiences necessary for healthy development. Deasey and Lasswell (1985) report on research that suggests that children become more engaged in imaginative play when they are active in places that have a variety of vegetation, slopes and elevations, playing surfaces, and green spaces. I also tried to find studies done regarding the relationship between space and resources available to children and conflict and aggression among them. While there has been a great deal of research done on this topic as it relates to adults, especially those in prison populations, I couldn’t find anything on the issue as it relates to children.

As well, there has been a substantial amount of research conducted into the relationship between space and livestock. Take, for example, the following very detailed findings on the relationship between space and the behaviour of chickens:

Studies of chicken behavior have determined that the absolute minimum area required for a hen to stand comfortably is 72 square inches. Battery cages do not allow hens to express any normal behaviors such as dust bathing, nesting, or foraging (60% of an unconfined hen’s day consists of foraging). Without the outlets for these instinctive behaviors hens become stressed, lose their feathers, and begin to peck each other excessively.

In short, while lots of research has been done to suggest that space can play a role in the healthy development of livestock and in the reduction of violence amongst prisoners, when it comes to children, there is still much work to be done.
THE PROJECT
Wanting to begin to address this unfortunate gap in the research, I finally came up with a project that I thought might work. I wanted to learn about how the children in my school would respond to a comparison of spaces and resources between their school and other schools in Vancouver.

The project took place in the classroom, in the hallways, and on the playground and was done by the students in my class over a four-week period. Basically, students completed all the steps that would be required in an architectural design project for the creation or renovation of a public building. They did a careful assessment of both the interior and exterior of their school and thought about what they liked and disliked. They surveyed staff and students to determine what these stakeholders felt were positive and negative features of the school and what they would like to see in an “ideal” school. Then students compared their present school with other schools in the district and thought about things such as acceptable ratios of space and adequate resources. Comparing their school with other schools gave them the opportunity to reflect on issues of inequity and healthy learning environments.

After these steps, students were asked to write a design brief in which they presented their conceptual views of an ideal school for the community. And finally, students created a scale model of their “ideal” school.

What follows is an explanation of each step of the project, responses that students made along the way, and some analysis of what was learned in the process of conducting this project.

PROCEDURE
Students first learned about interior design concepts such as natural lighting, vibrant and tranquil colours, artistic features, and ergonomic spaces. They were then given a small group assignment to consider these concepts and to have a really good look at their school in light of them. Our school completed a renovation five years ago which
added natural lighting and open hallway spaces to the building. Many students noticed the natural lighting and enjoyed the open spaces created by this renovation.

When asked, the children had a great deal to say about which spaces were and were not their favorites in the school. (Note: In the comment excerpts below and elsewhere in this study, all student names have been replaced with pseudonyms.)

My favourite places in the school are the computer lab because I can play games. My second favorite place in the school is the gym because I can let off some steam... I do not like the Principal’s Office... I would have more paintings around the school and add more gyms so the kids can have P.E. once a day.

—Freddie

At lunch time it’s very hard to walk up and down the ramp...I don’t like the ramp because after lunch and recess, it’s hard to get back to class. It is also hard to get to the lunch room at lunch time.

—William

My favourite place in the school is the library because it is warm and quiet. In there, you can just relax and read a book on a rainy day...To make the school a better place, I would add lots of colours, decorations, furniture.

—Laura

The cafeteria is one of the places that I don’t like because it is stinky and dirty.

—Tony

Many students said that their favorite place in the school was the library and they explained that their reason for this was because it was quiet and peaceful. It is the only place in the school where students are expected to be silent during non-instructional time. As well, many students commented that the lunch room or the activity room was their least favorite place in the school. It is this room that is always the most crowded. At lunch hour,
students are expected to line up for as long as fifteen minutes to eat their hot lunch. It is a noisy and messy place. As such, many students associate this room with overcrowding.

After we dealt with interior design concepts, the students learned about exterior design concepts such as green spaces, vegetation, playground designs, view corridors, slopes, and elevation changes. They then completed a small written evaluation of the exterior of their school:

There isn’t enough room on the soccer field because when we kick the ball it can nearly reach the other goal.

—Marla

I think we should use something else besides rocks on the soccer field. We could switch it to something safer so if we fall we won’t get hurt as much.

—Chris

I don’t think there’s enough space for all the things that need to happen because sometimes the basketball courts are all full and there’s not enough equipment for all the things that need to happen.

—Minh

There is enough spaces for everyone on the field but on the basketball court we have to sometimes fight for the courts.

—Neil

A majority of students mentioned the gravel field and its problems. Many students felt it was dangerous and too crowded. As well, many students felt it would work better as green space because it would reduce the number of injuries and because it would feel better to play on it.

Our next step as a class was to measure the outdoor areas of the school. These areas included the total amount of space on school property that was available for student use, the amount of green space, the amount of space available for gardens and plantings, the amount of green space available for children’s activities without crossing
roads, the amount of designated play areas for primary-aged children, and the amount of covered space for playing under on rainy days. I chose these outdoor areas because all of them are relatively easy to measure and because I believe that they are all important in the design of healthy learning environments.

Students also counted the number of ladders, slides, seating areas, soccer goalposts, painted sidewalk games, baseball diamonds, and free-standing playground apparatuses on the school property. These outdoor playground resources all play an important role in the over-all design of a school and play a role in the creation of an active and fruitful landscape for play and recreation. Students then took their measurements and divided them by the number of pupils in the school (650) and came up with a variety of space and resource ratios. For example, students found that each student has 16.06 square meters of total outdoor activity space, 0.27 square meters of covered outdoor play area each and 1.85 square meters of green space each. Further, for every painted sidewalk game there are 72 students and for every seating area with benches, there are 108 children and for every goalpost there are 325 children.

Afterwards, students compared this data with two other schools in Vancouver. One was the school that I taught at before coming to work at my present school. It has 470 students and is located in a wealthy and stable neighborhood in Vancouver. Two sides of the school property border a twelve acre city park with playing fields, picnic areas, and a public art walkway. In short, it is not an inner-city school. The other school I chose is located in Point Grey, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Vancouver. It seems to have generous amounts of outdoor play spaces and plenty of outdoor play and learning resources. There are about 440 students at this school. There are dozens of varieties of trees, remarkable gardens, excellent primary playground spaces and structures, a significant amount of natural “bush,” lots of clean, well-lighted play areas. In addition, the school’s property borders a large park with many grass soccer fields, baseball diamonds, and picnic areas.
My school is very different from both of these schools. Our community has a significant amount of low-income housing, a higher crime rate, and a much higher level of social density than is found at either of the other two schools. My school does not border any parkland and the nearest open area to us is a large parking lot behind Hastings Street.

In the calculation of space and equipment to child ratios, only school property and facilities were included (i.e., any land or facilities associated with adjacent city park spaces were not). After comparing these ratios numerically, students completed two activities to better show their understanding of these ratios and to get them thinking more about what these comparisons meant. For the first, they were asked to represent each school’s space-to-child ratio for particular space categories. Using chalk, they constructed rectangles on the pavement at our school with each rectangle providing a full-scale representation
of the average amount of space each child had at each of the three schools. For example, a group of students measured out the category of Total Outdoor Play Area per Child and constructed a rectangle that was 16.06 square meters for their school, and 34.34 and 34.68 square meters per child for the other two schools. Each category was completed by a different group of students and when everyone was finished, students did a walking tour of the rectangles. When represented in full scale, next to each other, the ratios became startling for the students. Many students were shocked by how different they were. One group mentioned that a child at their school does not have enough space to sit in an outdoor covered area while both other schools there is enough room for a child to lie down.

The class then went on to represent the ratio of children to various outdoor design features and resources. In groups, students were asked to draw stick people that
represented the number of students per playground resource. For example, 108 stick people were drawn gathered around a seating area with a bench at their school, while 15.7 stick people were drawn around a seating area with a bench at the school from the Point Grey Community. The most startling of these sketches was for soccer goalposts: 325 stick people for their school, and 55 and 58 for the other two schools.
After these activities, children had a very good sense of the differences in spaces and outdoor resources at these three schools. Students then responded to a series of open-ended questions related to these comparisons. They were first asked what the comparisons showed:
I think the space ratios there are so different because the adults there are really rich and they donate cash to the schools. Our neighborhood is also really poor. A few years ago, I heard that our school had so much students they had to make Tillicum School.

—Minh

I think the space ratios are so different because they are probably more wealthy.

—Olivia
They have more of everything than us, but there is one thing we have more than them: students.

—Katherine

They must have a lot more space if they have so many soccer goalposts and basketball hoops. Those two things do take up a lot of space.

—Lina

Compared with others, it shows that we need more space to play other games instead of just [a] whole bunch of kids playing only one soccer game and it ruins it.

—Jacky

Students were also asked why they thought the space and resource ratios of these three schools were so different:

Because our school is located in the city and the other two are probably close to the woods. In the city there are lots of people so it is crowded. The woods are open and they can have as much space as they want.

—Teresa

It is interesting to note that 13 out of 20 written responses to this question mentioned that the inequity was related to wealth. While they seem unclear about how schools are funded, many felt that poverty played a role in their school not having as much space or as many resources.

Students were then asked whether they thought these space ratios were important. As well, they were asked to think more about what resources and spaces are most important to them and to their success and well-being at school:

Yes, I think these space ratios are important because if students feel more relaxed at recess and lunch they will do better in class.

—Wade

If everybody has more space they wouldn’t feel so squished up. If it was less crowded there won’t be as
much fights and if there isn't a lot of fights more kids would want to go to school and if they come to school they would learn more.

—Cam

Afterwards, students were asked if they thought there was any relationship between space and learning. While little research has been done related to this, these inner-city children were able to make some interesting and valid comments about this issue:

We don't have as much as they do and it's not fair!!!

—Crystal

I think there is because if we had lots of space to run around and play, we would have lots of energy to do work.

—Mandy

I think the space had something to do with the learning because there is more space and the students could find a quiet spot to relax at during recess or lunch before going back to class. The nice rest probably helps them to be more awake and alive in class so they could absorb more information from their teacher.

—Teresa

I don't think there is any relationship between spaces and learning because the people there probably hired tutors to help their children get smarter.

—Dennis

At this point, it became clear that the issue of inequity had been raised, that students had been intrigued by it and that it was now time to respond to it in a positive way. It also became clear that the children needed to respond to the inequities they had found with imagination and hope. By having children design their “ideal school” I believed we would be able to move beyond what we had learned about the inequities that exist; to think constructively about space, not to be left feeling powerless in the face of the unequal ways in which it is currently distributed. As well, students would be able to show an under-
standing of healthy learning environments in their “ideal” school designs. And finally, students would be able to create a school that was better than the three schools they researched.

At this point, students were finally given their major model-making assignment. They were asked to write a design brief explaining their views about what an ideal school should be. They were asked to think about designing a school that every child in Vancouver would want to attend, that every parent would want their child to go to and that every teacher would want to teach at. They were asked to think about inside and outside features, public art, green spaces, ergonomic design, and space ratios:

My school is going to look like a normal school but it’s going to have a pond with a big playground and swings with lots of trees and grass it won’t have parking for the kids safety and fish in the pond and a boat and the kids could have boat rides at recess and lunch and it will have two gyms and water fountains with freezing cold spring water...we will have school bus, a big one, so the hole school could go on a field trip...and a horse to ride around on and a huge trampoline to bounce on and 200 basketball hoops.

—Linda

It would have a big grass field about 14400m so kids can play all sort of sports like football, soccer, or baseball...There will be a Staples store or Office Depot so teachers can easily buy supplies for their classrooms.

—Koji

I’m going to make a man-made lake with live Koy in it so kids can study the lake’s ecosystem without going to the P.N.E. There will also be a nice sandy beach beside it so people can have picnics. When winter comes, the kids can skate on the lake. In the summer, you can even swim in it if you don’t mind hungry Koys... I’ll plant some edible berry bushes to grow all year round so if the kids forget to bring their lunch, they can just pick berries to eat.

—Minh
There will be no hallways. You have to swim from class to class.

—Cass

After sharing their design brief thinking, students were asked to form groups and to share their ideas and then come up with a paper draft of their “ideal school.” Discussions were intense and all students became engaged in lobbying for their particular design. Students lobbied their group members for swimming pools and libraries and tinted glass and roller skating rinks and statues of great teachers and beaches and boats and rocket launchers and observatories and fish ponds and horses and stables and laptop computer rooms and skylights and waterslides and go-kart tracks and many other things. In the end, all groups had created excellent drafts on large architectural draft paper of their “ideal school” design.

Students were given large plywood bases and paint and wooden blocks and glue and sand and a large and varied supply of other model making materials and were given two weeks, for two periods each day, to complete scale models of their “ideal school.” Their models were remarkable. There were islands connected by footbridges. There were hockey arenas and swimming pools on every floor. There were beaches and trout ponds and koi ponds and water slides and wave pools. There were classrooms with invisible walls so parents could watch without going inside and so kids who couldn’t go to school could listen in anyway. There were greenhouses and gardens and orchards and zoos and horse barns and video games rooms and libraries on every floor. There were wheelchair ramps and anger management centers and detention lounges and telescopes and climbing walls and skateboard parks and lots and lots of green spaces and gardens and playground equipment. There were Astroturf playing fields and scuba dive centres and boats and rafts. For the teachers, there were Starbucks coffee shops and banks to get money for field trips and buses that were free. There were large classrooms with less than twenty students and lots of gymnasiums and rides from the P.N.E. and statues in honor of the great teachers. There were skylights
and retractable roofs. There were tiles and stained glass windows and yellow and green and black and red and blue and orange walls.

When complete, students presented their models to the rest of the class and other grade seven classes. They were asked to explain their school design features, including those that could not be seen with the model and to explain why they felt all students, teachers, and parents would be interested in attending their school. Students were very proud of their models and gave wonderful presentations about why they designed their schools the way they did. They talked about green space and playground space and ergonomics and elevations and natural lighting and trees and water and positive learning environments. They talked about school needing to be fun and needing to be filled with resources. In the end, they were proud of their models, they were able to respond to inequity in a positive and creative way, they were engaged in clear and complex thinking about learning and space, and they were solving problems in group settings in ways that they had not been able to before the project began. In short, they were engaged in the act of learning.

**SUMMARY**

It is difficult for me to summarize what I learned from this activity. I think I learned that children are capable of recognizing the importance of good school design in creating a healthy learning environment. I think I learned that children are able to recognize the role that space and resources play in making a healthy learning environment. Further, despite being over-crowded and poorly served by space and resources, children are able to construct meaning and to create and to celebrate learning in dynamic ways. That is to say, despite the landscape they find themselves in, children are capable of learning. For me as a teacher, this was the best and most important finding of my project. I sometimes think that I would like to teach at a school like the ones we compared my school to because there are so many more resources and so much
more space and so many less-troubled children. But then my students get engaged in a project like this and the classroom turns into a beautiful and fruitful space. And for me there is one specific student comment that highlights this very clearly.

It was made at the point where students were asked why they thought the space ratios were so different. It was an important point in the project as they were just coming to recognize the inequity of spaces. And it was a difficult point because I was trying to get honest responses, but I didn’t want to leave the students demoralized.

Most of the students were thinking carefully about why the ratios were different and commenting on things like neighborhoods being in the country instead of the city and neighborhoods being richer or there being fewer children in other parts of the city.

One of the students in my class is a gentle and well-liked boy named Kenny. He once wrote in his journal that he was excited about meeting his Dad for the first time. His father lives in another country and is having difficulty getting to Canada. His mother, who is working very hard to raise a caring and thoughtful child, is alone, unable to speak English and living in poverty. When asked why he thought the space ratios were so different, he made the following comment: “Well, as long as I have friends around I don’t care where we are because my friends make me feel safe everywhere.” In other words, Kenny has been able to find good in the world, and to construct important meaning for himself despite the landscape he finds himself in. This project reminded me of the resiliency that children like Kenny have and of the learning that can take place even in impoverished spaces, when imagination and hope and the encouragement to use them are present.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Teaching for Social Justice

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