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Q&A: From Kindergarten to Project-based Learning

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Joanne Marie Babalis is a Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Lead Teacher and Teacher Librarian for the York Region District School Board.

Joanne is passionate about designing spaces that inspire inquiry-based learning and creative innovation for

twenty-first century literate learners. She has been teaching for nine years and believes that all children are born ready to learn, inquire, and play.

In addition to her teaching, Joanne is a part-time PhD student at York University. She is also an instructor for York University's Kindergarten Additional Qualification course. Joanne regularly presents at academic conferences as well as a variety of other professional learning events across Ontario and beyond.

You are a Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Lead Teacher working in Ontario. Over the last few years, the kindergarten program in Ontario has undergone a significant transformation. Can you summarize your background and the philosophical influences on how you approach your kindergarten teaching?

I am going into my tenth year working for the York Region District School Board. I had always hoped to become a Kindergarten teacher. However, at the beginning of my career,



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I was hired for the higher primary grades. I eventually had the opportunity to teach an alternate day Kindergarten program and an alternate Senior Kindergarten/Grade 1 class. The following year, the province began implementing the Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK), and as a result of this and my continued interest in the early years, I transferred to a school that would be one of the first to move to the new approach.

In the last year of the FDK implementation, I transferred for the second time to a new school as their Kindergarten Lead Teacher and Teacher Librarian. Within this leadership role, I had the chance to work with six sections of FDK, with a total of 15 staff members.

Teaching in the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program has transformed my teaching practice. Specifically, some of the areas of transformation were influenced by the Ontario Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program document (e.g., self-regulation; play-based learning; literacy and mathematics embedded in play; inquiry-based learning; and the personalization of learning over generic whole group tasks, worksheets, and/or art activities, etc.). I have also been inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education from a small town in northern Italy (e.g., the image of the child; the environment as third teacher; the emergent curriculum, and pedagogical documentation, etc.). With these new understandings, I could never again teach traditionally, no matter the grade or circumstance.

Similar to project-based learning, the Early Learning-Kindergarten program in Ontario is rooted in an inquiry learning approach. What does this mean in practice for three to six-year-olds?

I am a complete supporter of the inquiry-based learning approach, as it means that learning for students can be more



authentic and that they can help steer the projects they actively pursue in directions that are not pre-determined by adults. When young children are able to pursue a topic that

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matters to them they naturally become more engaged. Educators can capitalize on this by integrating multiple curricular areas of study that together compliment the students' chosen project. In addition to this, educators can attentively document what students say, do, and

represent, addressing the curriculum expectations through this process. Though it may sound straightforward, facilitating the learning of young children in this way is quite a complex experience. Students can and will play and inquire within a stimulating learning environment. However, they also require a very competent and responsive educator to help push their ideas forward.

Although Ontario's Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten classroom has many proponents, there are also some detractors. How would you respond to criticisms that Ontario's kindergarten students should receive more direct instruction from their teachers?

I would have to defend the program and state that students are indeed receiving instruction. However, it is at their level and it is developmentally appropriate. For instance, instead of conducting a whole group lesson on how to hold a pencil, learn a new letter sound, or write a word, students are invited to participate in small group instruction that is differentiated. Not all students need to learn in the same way. If a child arrives in Junior Kindergarten and already knows all of their letters and sounds, then they might participate in something that is more tailored to their needs. If we don't meet our students where they are at, and challenge them appropriately, then they will either lose their sense of engagement or feel a



high degree of frustration towards learning. Instruction can occur via play, inquiry meetings, mini lessons in small groups, or one-on-one guided support. If the school day schedule is run in an open-ended way, often known as “flow of the day” in FDK, then there are many opportunities to meet with students and facilitate learning.

Project-based learning emphasizes skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and real-world research and problem solving. How are these skills scaffolded in Ontario’s Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program?

In my Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten classroom experience, I have found that educators help scaffold these skills in important ways. This need is presented quite clearly and accessibly within Ontario’s kindergarten program document.

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course; rather, by beginning with each student’s identity, interests, and social interactions we can begin to create a foundation for inquiry learning. One cannot jump into critical thinking and real-world research or problem-solving if students are unable to self-regulate for

example. As with the gradual release of responsibility strategies that are useful for teaching reading and writing, so too, I have found it helpful to adopt similar strategies in scaffolding inquiry. When students are ready to ask deeper questions and think more critically, I model questioning and theory building, both in group discussions and one-on-one. Over time, this builds each student’s confidence and readiness to try out these inquiry behaviours independently.



Your Masters research focused on what you describe as “layers of inquiry.” What do you mean by this phrase and what might be its significance to project-based learning in the elementary years?

The “layers of inquiry” concept is inspired by my deep admiration for and research into the Reggio Emilia approach. It is my belief that the layers of inquiry should work together in order to allow project-based learning to emerge naturally in its most organic state.

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For example, if an educator has in place a schedule that is supportive of inquiry and an environment that acts as the third educator with open-ended materials, but they nevertheless plan their instruction without listening to the students, then the project is no longer an authentic

experience. Instead, it is an adult-directed series of tasks with the agenda of the teacher in mind. Students are likely to lose interest and the project will feel unnatural or forced.

Alternatively, if you have all layers in place, except for ‘time,’ and you continue to work in twenty minute intervals with literacy rotations and frequent interruptions, students are unlikely to achieve an optimal flow. We cannot hope to pursue an inquiry topic or engage in deep and meaningful learning in any grade if the time commitment is limited to short periods that are sporadically placed throughout the school week.



What should Grade 1 teachers ideally be doing to extend the rich learning that happens in the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten classroom?

In Grade 1, I would continue right where FDK leaves off. I would consider the inquiry layers noted above as seriously as was done in the early years. Students in all grades will thrive if they are immersed in an engaging learning environment, with an educator who listens to their interests and questions. Though the curriculum requirements may well be the starting point for many teachers, I prefer to begin each year by building relationships, treating students as individuals, and empowering them as knowledgeable co-learners. Once I know them better, we pursue a topic that is of interest to the students, addressing the curriculum expectations as we go along. If some of the big ideas or overall expectations are not addressed, then I bring in materials or read-alouds to complement the learning, while continuing to take direction from the students, following their ideas.

Are the students in your elementary school collaborating on projects in the elementary grades? If so, is it your sense that the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten program has helped prepare them for their project work?

Some grades and classes are incorporating inquiry into their program. It can feel like an overwhelming challenge in the upper grades to cover all of the required curricular expectations, whilst still preserving an open flow and flexible schedule to allow for project work.

In my teaching, I have tried to connect FDK students with Grade 5 students in a shared project in which the two grades of students document their thoughts and questions about specific topics. To be sure, the skills that are first developed in FDK (e.g., collaboration, risk-taking, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving, etc.) should continue to be



further developed in the higher grades. I believe that this is especially important in the 21st century, given the impact of rapid technological change. Students can quickly find the answer to almost any question online. By developing skills such as problem-solving, collaboration and creativity etc. we address a new set of learning skills that complement what can be achieved using readily available instructional technologies.

Your blog (myclassroomtransformation.blogspot.ca) chronicles your study of a number of innovative and holistic approaches to education, including most recently the Reggio Emilia approach. What can teachers who are pursuing project-based learning learn from the instructional approaches you have studied?

I have learned so much in my studies, travels, and reflections about the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Some of the most practical lessons encourage us to slow down and embrace the beauty of everyday moments. In North America, we are often too quick to jump to the next task, experience, or product. The Reggio Emilia approach encourages uninterrupted time which

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is conducive to project-based learning and the building of strong, trusting relationships with students.

Another lesson I have learned from the Reggio Emilia educators is their ongoing commitment to pedagogical

documentation. We do not need to create these perfect display panels after every lesson or project. Instead, documenting learning in its raw form and preserving traces of student learning can be equally beautiful and meaningful. A few scratch notes on a clipboard, paired with a work sample or photograph, can be interpreted and used to “re-launch” (as they say in Reggio Emilia) the next steps of an inquiry.



Blogging has presented me with a wonderful opportunity to reflect on my professional practice and continually re-examine my teaching and learning philosophy. I make a point of going back to see what I believed four years ago. Often, I discover that I have evolved immensely, year after year. What I have learned from blogging is that we are all on an individual journey. We must honour where we began and be good to ourselves along our travels. It takes time to explore complex ideas in education, and if we seek inspiration rather than trying to copy someone else's journey, we will be pleasantly surprised with our own growth.

At your blog, you refer to the "environment as Third Educator." What do you mean by this and what might be the significance of this phrase to the ways in which project-based learning classrooms are designed in the upper elementary grades?

To me, "the environment as third educator" means that the physical space of the classroom, the materials, and the schedule are supportive of student learning. Our students learn from the adults in their lives (the first educator). They learn from their peer group (the second educator). And, finally, they learn from what is present in the environments they learn and reside in (the third educator). What we, as educators, place in our classrooms has the potential to interest, intrigue and/or provoke student curiosity, encourage deeper thinking and questioning, and ideally challenge students to problem-solve. In my view, the planning of all learning environments should take these ideas into account. The environment as 'third educator' is not limited to FDK, elementary, or even school aged students. Paying attention to environmental design is also of relevance to higher education and work settings in business.

Kindergarten classrooms are typically complex spaces with differentiated activity areas that invite young children to interact with a diverse array of curricular materials in



meaningful, hands on ways. What does the design of the kindergarten classroom as an inquiry space tell us about how classrooms in the upper elementary grades should ideally be designed?

Human beings are innately curious. We learn by doing, so I am not quite sure why the design of classrooms is so different in the upper grades. If we want learning to be meaningful, we

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need to be thoughtful in the ways in which we instruct and design our classrooms. Students do not wake up suddenly one morning and prefer to work at their own desk on the same task as everyone else in the class. Even as adults, we thrive when we are given free

choice, time, and a voice in decisions. The way I see it, if we are deeply engaged in or passionate about a topic, then shouldn't learning feel like play at all educational levels?