



Pedagogical Leadership

Written by Anne Marie Coughlin & Lorrie Baird

London Bridge Child Care Services & Kawartha Child Care Services

Over the past decade, there has been considerable interest in the importance of leadership in the area of early learning. We have come to understand that the most important work a leader in this field can do is to support and promote quality early learning environments for children. Beyond administrative leadership, this requires pedagogical leadership.

Pedagogy can be defined as the understanding of how learning takes place and the philosophy and practice that supports that understanding of learning. Essentially it is the study of the teaching and learning process. Leadership is often defined as the act of leading or guiding individuals or groups. If we are to combine these two we are offered the notion of pedagogical leadership as leading or guiding the study of the teaching and learning process.

The field of early childhood education and care has had a growing interest in pedagogical leadership rising from the need to increase quality and influence organizational change (Andrews, 2009). Any person who has a deep understanding of early learning and development may take on the role of the pedagogical leader. These individuals see themselves as partners, facilitators, observers and co-learners along side educators, children and families. Most importantly, pedagogical leaders challenge others to see themselves as researchers in the teaching and learning process. In turn, this practice builds a culture of reflective teaching that helps us to sort through the complexities of our work.

Pedagogical leadership requires us to rethink the way we work and learn together with other adults. We know that growth and development takes time. Like children, adults learn best when they are interested and engaged. The pedagogical leader nurtures dispositions that are useful for educators in their day-to-day practice. Dispositions such as curiosity, openness, resiliency and purposefulness help to create a culture where there

is less focus on teaching and more on how learning takes place for both the child and the adult.

In order to do this, pedagogical leaders ensure that educators have time and methods to reflect on their own practice, study children and explore multiple perspectives. They ask questions that engage educators both intellectually and emotionally and require the consideration of how theory informs practice and practice informs theory.

A pedagogical leader can use the idea of asking questions to inspire themselves and others to develop intentional practices that bring to life the six guiding principles of the Early Learning Framework. Questions like:

1. How do we give visibility to the competencies and contributions of young children in a way that challenges us to move beyond traditional checklists?
2. How do we deepen engagement with families as partners in their children's learning?
3. How do we value, promote and celebrate respect for diversity, equity and inclusion?
4. How do we engage educators in thinking about environments, experiences and the daily life of the classroom in ways that will challenge and meet up with children's lively minds?
5. How do we study and articulate play and inquiry as learning?
6. How do we develop a culture of reflective practice so that professional development happens day after day in the classroom as we work with children and each other?

These types of questions can help both leaders and educators to make connections between their own practice and the kind of learning community that they want to nurture.

Part of the role of the pedagogical leader is to create systems and structures that support the values and vision they have for growing a quality learning environment. Decisions that are made around how to spend money, organize time, set up environments and support the success of others come from the greater vision that they have for children, families and themselves.



The following four principles help pedagogical leaders build an intentional culture where reflection and inquiry form the foundation for transforming practice:

1. Use a Protocol to Support Reflective Thinking and Inquiry

Educators regularly use protocols to guide them through day to day practices. Whether it is for hand washing, diaper changing, reporting accidents or keeping us safe, protocols offer a systematic way to perform a task. While protocols are useful in guiding us through custodial routines, they are also an extremely valuable tool in supporting a disciplined approach to reflection and inquiry. It encompasses a set of key questions that encourage us to consider multiple perspectives and helps to deepen understanding and influence our daily practice.

Individuals can construct their own set of reflective questions to focus dialogue by using the principles of the Early Learning Framework or other reflective tools.

Practical Application: Use a Reflective Protocol to Study Environments

Environments set the foundation for learning and have a strong influence on how we think and behave. Studying environments together in a thoughtful way can help educators and pedagogical leaders to be more intentional about how they construct and design spaces for young children.

Provide an opportunity for educators to visit and study each other's learning environments. Use a series of questions as a way to focus observations and support in-depth follow up discussions.

The principles of Ontario's Early Learning Framework can provide inspiration for framing questions such as:

- Where do you see examples of children's strengths and competencies?
- Where do you notice evidence of family engagement?
- How does this space help you to know more about the thinking, interests and personalities of the individuals who spend their day here?
- Are the children's voices present even when they are not in the room?
- How are relationships supported in this space?
- What do you notice about how materials are organized and offered here?
- Where is the educator's thinking visible?

2. Set Up Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities are groups of individuals that come together over time with shared interests and passions to engage in the process of collective and collaborative learning. Learning communities are grounded in a social constructivist approach to learning, recognizing that individuals build knowledge through their interactions with others (Wenger, 1998). To be most effective, learning communities require a facilitator. Facilitators help to guide dialogue, ensure that equal voices are heard, reflect back or summarize ideas and make connections to values and perspectives. Once a learning community has been established, trust builds, and the facilitator can then evolve the role into both facilitator and "critical or essential friend". The critical friend often provokes new ideas, challenges people's thinking and brings forward new perspectives that may not have been considered (Curtis, Cividanes, Lebo & Carter, 2012). While pedagogical leaders often take on the role of facilitator or critical friend within these communities, the groups are made up of people from all levels of an organization and its community. The establishment of professional learning communities is one of the most powerful staff development strategies we have to build capacity in others and shift our focus from teaching to learning. They offer us a way to grow relationships and study together the complexities of both child and adult learning.



Practical Application: Set up Book or Article Studies

Select a book or series of articles of interest to your community. Invite a group of individuals (this can include both educators and families) to meet over the course of several months, taking time to review and reflect on each chapter or article. Establish your own set of questions as a protocol to guide your discussions.

3. Allow Time

Time is a precious commodity that we must use wisely if we are to build and sustain quality early learning environments for both children and adults.

Too often we try to find quick fixes or use one-off training sessions in the hope that it will inspire change. However, we know in order to make sustainable change and authentically grow practice, educators need time to come together to reflect on the complexities of their daily work. Offering this time moves us beyond the notion of using templates or checklists that often remove thinking and collaboration.

Practical Application: Study Photographs to Discover Children's Strengths and Competencies

Bring a small group together to study a photo of a child or small group of children engaged in a focused activity. This group can consist of educators but can also include families. Facilitate a conversation using the following questions to consider the child's perspective: What do you notice in the child's face or in their reactions? What seems to be capturing the child's attention? What details in the photo show the child's strength and competencies? What might the child be trying to figure out or accomplish? How does considering the child's point of view influence our thinking about this child?

Questions like these serve as a guide for a more focused dialogue and prevent the temptation for conversations to drift off in many different directions.

4. Paralleling Practice

As pedagogical leaders we must create learning experiences for educators that parallel what we want them to offer children. We want educators to foster creativity, create rich learning environments, respect individual learning styles, encourage curiosity, support reasonable risk taking, and provide opportunities for children to think and work together. In order to do this, educators deserve the time and opportunity to engage in rich learning experiences themselves. It is only when they know what that feels like that they can inspire it in others.



Practical Application: Block Party

Set up an opportunity for educators (or educators and families) to explore blocks for themselves in order to develop a deeper understanding of the possibilities and complexities that block building offers. You may choose to offer blocks that connect or standard unit blocks. Present the participants with a group challenge such as building a structure as high as they can or using the blocks to tell a story. As adults begin their encounter, they discover many of the same thrills and challenges that children do. Allow plenty of time for both the play and debrief of the play. De-brief the activity by asking questions such as, what did you discover about blocks that you didn't know before? How did other people influence your play? What problems did you encounter and how did you work through them? How might you compare your experience with the experiences that children have with blocks?

This idea of “playing with materials” can be repeated with any number of other things that are or might be offered to children, such as paint, clay or loose parts.

Just as the principles in the Early Learning Framework act as a guide to orient our practices, pedagogical leaders create a sturdy infrastructure that supports the teaching and learning process. Working together with their learning communities, pedagogical leaders define the vision and values that are central to their program. They challenge and empower educators to see themselves as researchers where they become interpreters rather than mere implementers of a curriculum framework. Pedagogical leaders commit to using practices and allocating resources that build an intentional culture where learning and growing happens in relationship with others. Just as the province continues to invest in their long term vision for children and families, so must we commit to pedagogical leadership. This approach to leadership is not always easy. It takes time and continuous investment. However, when leaders invest in themselves and others around them it can transform practice and build sustainable, high quality programs.

References

- Andrew, M. (2009). Managing change and pedagogical leadership. In A. Robins & S. Callan (Eds.), *Managing Early Years Settings: Supporting and Leading Teams* (pp. 45-64). London: SAGE.
- Curtis, D., Lebo, D., Cividanes, W., & Carter, M. (2012). *Reflecting with a Thinking Lens: A workbook for early childhood educators*. Harvest Resources Associates.
- Spillane, J. P. (2005). Distributive Leadership. *The Educational Forum*, 69(2), Winter.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.