"I Needed to Rediscover who I Really Was": An Inquiry into the Impacts of one Graduate Teacher Education Program for Early Elementary Teachers

Anne Murray-Orr, Elizabeth Munroe

St. Francis Xavier University

This paper reports on the impacts on teachers of a new Masters in Education program developed for early elementary teachers at one small Canadian university. Central to the program are concepts of the child as competent and capable, and a view of professional learning as democratic, critically reflective and a way to enhance teacher agency. Our findings are based on interviews and focus group conversations with several members of one of the cohorts who completed the program. In our thematic analysis we determined that teachers reported changes in their practices including slowing down and listening to children as well as increased flexibility and ability to relinquish control. Additionally, teachers spoke of increased confidence in themselves and the children in their classrooms as a result of participating in this program.

Cet article fait état des impacts sur les enseignants d'un nouveau programme de maitrise en éducation développé par une petite université canadienne pour les enseignants du primaire. Le programme est centré sur le concept selon lequel l'enfant est compétent et capable, et sur une perspective de l'apprentissage professionnel comme étant un processus de réflexion critique qui est démocratique et susceptible d'augmenter chez les enseignants le sentiment de pouvoir agir. Nos résultats découlent d'entrevues et de conversations avec des groupes de discussion impliquant plusieurs membres d'une cohorte ayant complété le programme. Notre analyse thématique révèle que les enseignants ont signalé des changements dans leurs pratiques; entre autres, ils ont indiqué qu'ils ralentissaient et écoutaient les élèves, étaient plus souples et se sentaient en mesure de céder le contrôle. De plus, les enseignants ont reconnu que leur participation au programme avait entrainé une augmentation de leur confiance en soi et en les élèves.

It's really like a grace, a blessing almost, that you can be an early elementary teacher. That you have that opportunity to influence and to try and make a difference. And to not take it lightly. (Kathleen, individual interview)

The words of Kathleen, one of the teachers in our graduate program in early elementary pedagogy and a participant in our research, remind us of the profound influence teachers in the early grades have on children's lives and learning. Our research into the impact of our new

Masters in Education (M. Ed.) program with a focus on early elementary, Grades K-2, pedagogy responds to the widely-documented body of work indicating that "the quality of teachers is a major factor in determining the quality of schools" (Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000, p. viii) and that changes in classroom practices "ultimately rely on teachers" (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Spillane, 1999, as cited in Borko, 2004, p. 3). Fleet, De Gioia and Patterson (2016) call for more research that gives voice to teachers who are living an inquiry stance in their classroom. Effective approaches to facilitate rich, relevant, and ongoing professional learning for teachers are a focus of numerous studies which are pertinent to our inquiry. However, while the graduate program our research investigates is not the only one to address educational change through an emphasis on deepening teachers' critical reflection and facilitating the development of teacher inquiry, we found few examples of published research in which teachers' voices on this topic were emphasized. It is our aim to contribute to the field by valuing and bringing forward teachers' voices in this paper. We begin by describing how this program arose and the context of the program, followed by our understanding of teacher learning.

Context of the Study

The M. Ed. in early elementary pedagogy began in 2014 at our small Canadian university. Similar to the M. Ed. program described by Lease and Garrison (2012), this degree program arose in response to specific local concerns. The first concern emerged from our observations of pre-service teachers during their practicum where we noticed that teachers were hesitant to incorporate strategies that the provincial department of education promoted, such as play-based learning, integrated curriculum, and a project or inquiry approach to learning. These are approaches we, like the province, believe are valuable in early elementary. In our experience, the teachers working with the younger children in schools across our province hold a strength-based view of children, even though some mandatory processes, such as frequent evaluations of progress toward achievement of curriculum outcomes, work against this view. Teachers speak of their students with respect and empathy and they work hard to implement instructional strategies prescribed by the province and introduced through professional development processes. However, most of the early elementary teachers we know have no specialized preparation for working with young children. They are unfamiliar with current ideas about young children that are commonly discussed among early childhood educators (those people who work with children before they enter formal schooling).

Our second concern originated from a conversation Elizabeth had with a literacy coordinator from a local school board, who asked if we could develop a relevant professional learning opportunity for early elementary teachers. Elizabeth, working with our M. Ed. Program Chair, Joanne, drew up a plan and the initial cohort of our M. Ed. in Early Elementary Pedagogy (MEEP) which began in Summer 2014. We have had successive cohorts each year since, and the uptake continues to be strong.

Our university already had a cohort model in place for the M. Ed. programs for approximately six years, with cohorts in literacy, inclusion, physical education, and other fields of education. Ovington, Diamantes and Roby (2002) strongly support the effectiveness of the cohort model, and we observed its popularity in the previous M. Ed. cohorts. This approach has allowed our Faculty to maintain the core requirements of the two-year part-time degree but to adapt each of the 12 courses to the particular needs of each cohort. The 12 courses that make up the 36-credit MEEP include Educational Foundations, Inclusion, Program Development,

Assessment, Literacy for Early Elementary Learners, Mathematics for Early Elementary Learners, Principles of Learning, Play, Curriculum Theory, two research courses, and a capping experience. In the capping experience at the end of the program, each individual conducts a teacher inquiry to develop a deepened understanding of an area of professional interest that is also relevant to the advancement of early elementary pedagogy in their classrooms. Additionally, they develop a teacher inquiry report and a presentation to share their findings with the others in the cohort. We will refer to the teacher inquiry reports as part of our data set later in this paper. The first two courses of the degree are face-to-face either at our university or at a school or college campus in the capital city of our province. However, due to the rural nature of our province, the remaining 10 courses are synchronous online courses or online with some face-to-face components, such as two Saturdays at the beginning and end of the course and online classes in-between.

Similar to the M. Ed. program that is the focus of Lease and Garrison's (2012) work, "these courses are presented as discrete units, for registration and credit-awarding purposes" (p. 16). Like Lease and Garrison, we have worked with all instructors to ensure the courses are integrated with one another, share a common approach to early elementary education and are linked to classroom practice. Ovington, Diamantes and Roby (2002) note the importance of "course work [that] has been carefully planned to be delivered as a cohesive, coherent program. The courses are evolved from a unified philosophical and knowledge base intended to provide continuity and not a smorgasbord of selections" (p. 387). We agree that this continuity has been key to the potential success of the MEEP, and this has been confirmed by our research participants.

A Review of the Literature Alongside the Goals of the MEEP

Opfer and Peder (2011) emphasize that teacher learning it is not an event, but rather an "overwhelmingly multicausal, multidimensional, and multicorrelational" complex system (p. 394) requiring focused, sustained, and supported learning opportunities (Guskey, 2002; Joyce & Calhoun, 2010; King, 2013; Knight, 2009). Our 12-course MEEP offers the focused, sustained, and supported learning opportunities recommended in the research and reflects a partnership approach between universities and school boards, as well as providing teacher networking opportunities. This approach is affirmed by Day and Sachs (2004) and by reviews of effective professional learning strategies such as that by Avalos (2011).

All of the M. Ed. programs at our small university have five goals that are relevant across the various cohorts. These are to: a) challenge assumptions and introduce new thinking; b) cultivate educational inquirers and researchers; c) engage in critical reflection; d) develop future leaders to improve education; and e) prepare leaders for educational change. These goals informed the structure and content of the courses in the MEEP and underpin our research. Before providing details of the methodology and findings of our study, we present specific examples of ways in which the goals of our M. Ed. program, the focus of our research, and the current literature are interconnected. In the following literature review we have grouped these five goals into three topics, as illustrated in Table 1.

Challenging Assumptions and Introducing New Thinking

One notion we purposefully asked our graduate students to consider throughout the M. Ed.

Table 1

M. Ed. Program Goals and Three Areas of the Literature Review

M. Ed. program goals	Three areas of literature review
Challenge assumptions and introduce new thinking	1. Challenging assumptions and introduce new thinking
Cultivate educational inquirers and researchers	
Engage in critical reflection	2. Cultivating educational inquirers and researchers and critically reflective educators
Develop future leaders to improve education	3. Developing future leaders and preparing leaders for educational change
Prepare leaders for educational change	

courses was their image of the child. A teacher's image of any particular child has implicit and explicit implications on the decisions the teacher makes (Malaguzzi, 1994). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) wrote, "we have choices to make about who we think the child is, and these choices have enormous significance since our construction of the child and early childhood are *productive*, by which we mean that they … determine the pedagogical work that adults and children undertake" (p. 43, emphasis in original). We invited our students to consider an image of the child as "competent, active and critical" (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 51). We also asked our graduate students to think of children as powerful in the present, rather than seeing them through a deficit lens, only in the state of developing towards pre-specified learning outcomes (Rose & Whitty, 2010).

The image of the child as competent and capable arose in the approach to early education in Reggio Emelia, Italy (Rinaldi, 2001) and has had an extensive influence on the field of early childhood education around the world. These views have been evident in the development of curricular frameworks for early years programs internationally (e.g. Australian Government Department of Education, 2009; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017) and locally (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette & Thomas, 2014; New Brunswick Department of Social Development, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). They are reflected in literature about children's rights (Clark, Kjorholt & Moss, 2005; Kanyal, 2014), and they also underpin the post-modern or reconceptualist literature about young children (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Iannacci & Whitty, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010). Suggesting that our graduate students consider their image of the child more holistically was intended as a spark to challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions that underpin many of the early elementary instructional practices in our province. Day and Sachs (2004) emphasized, "if [continuous professional development] is to challenge participants to critically review their beliefs and ideas it must be relevant to their agendas." (p. 24). Throughout the 12-course degree, our students were invited to consider their own contexts and experiences alongside new ideas.

Cultivating Educational Inquirers, Researchers, and Critically Reflective Educators

Our image of the child as competent, capable, powerful in the present, and not in a deficit state, are mirrored in our view of the teachers. As Rinaldi (2001) wrote, "A strong image of the child is

also a strong image of the teacher" (p. 52). Two of the goals of the M. Ed. Degree that we maintain through MEEP are to *cultivate educational inquirers and researchers and to engage in critical reflection*, which are also foundational in Rinaldi's view of children and their teachers.

Our image of the teacher as competent and capable is related to current discourse on notions of professionalism and changes in teachers' identities. Several researchers have problematized the marketization, performativity, and managerialism that underpin educational reform (Ball, 2003; Costello, 2014; Fox, 2016; Hargreaves, 2000). Deriving from instrumentalist or managerial views that emphasize efficiency, compliance and externally imposed accountability, Sachs (2001) describes the emergence of an entrepreneurial teacher identity characterized by individualism, competition, control, regulation, and external definition of the teacher's role by administration. Similarly, Oberhuemer (2005) notes that "numerous countries have decided on policy measures to regulate the early childhood field more closely" (p. 12). She traces a shift from a degree of professional autonomy of early childhood educators to an "undermining of their professional independence" (p. 12). Sachs (2001) contrasts the entrepreneurial teacher identity with a view of professionalism as democratic, and describes a democratic teacher identity characterized by agency, collaboration, and critical reflection, with a respect for the importance of professional self-narratives. She proposes communities of practice as an avenue to "provide the context and conditions for teachers to develop an activist identity" (Sachs, 2001, p. 158). Communities of practice, according to Sachs (2001), "facilitate values of respect, reciprocity and collaboration... The purpose is to revitalize teachers' sense of themselves professionally and personally" (p. 159). Oberhuemer (2005) concurs, suggesting "early childhood pedagogues...need to be encouraged to see themselves as interpreters and not as mere implementers of curricular frameworks" (p. 12). Important features of such professional learning opportunities include recognizing teachers' expertise (Knight, 2009), building upon teachers' prior knowledge (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009), and purposeful invitations to teachers to make connections between new content and their professional practice (Hargraves, 2000).

Building on Guskey's (2002) emphasis on change in teacher beliefs as an essential aspect of professional learning, we prefer to broaden the purpose and outcome of teacher learning beyond the "global hyper-narrative" that equates teacher quality to student achievement (Kennedy, 2014, p. 691). Kennedy (2014) pointed out that,

> the more common policy approach to the development of 'sophisticated' CPD [continuing professional development] systems and programmes has been to tie [teachers] up in bureaucratic, managerial knots that squeeze out autonomy and instead seek and reward compliance and uniformity, [whereas] in order to make real progress, teachers do need to have autonomy and the ability and space to exert agency. (p. 691)

Rather than focusing solely on student learning as a goal, MEEP focuses on the teachers' development of an "inquiry stance—a professional positioning that is owned by the teacher ... a habit of mind, not a series of steps and a time- and place-bound project" (Ross, Adams, Bondy, Dana, Dodman & Swain, 2011, p. 1217). Teacher inquiry has many proponents who celebrate the potential for inquiry to improve teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). In their book on practitioner inquiry as an avenue for educational change Fleet, De Gioia and Patterson (2016) provide examples of teacher inquiries which they suggest may "deepen our understanding of how the puzzle of teacher research may come together to create effective and lasting change" (p. 42). Patterson, McAuley and Fleet

(2013) note the benefit of multiple engagements with the inquiry process in the following quote, "as the school staff engaged with the practitioner enquiry cycle for a second or third time, having a greater understanding of the process, we … began to realize the full potential of the practitioner enquiry model for sustainable professional growth" (p. 66).

Researchers are increasingly calling for professional learning outcomes of conceptual knowledge and deep learning (Hargreaves, 2000; King, 2013; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009), or a transformative learning experience. Ross et. al (2011), in describing a graduate program in teacher leadership, found that rather than being informed, the teachers were transformed, and were becoming autonomous professionals. In addition, Kennedy (2014) "acknowledge[ed] that in many cases master's-level award-bearing CPD can be liberating, empowering and a significant contributory factor to enhancing teacher agency" (p. 693). We aim to engender transformative learning as we encourage teachers' stories of practice and teacher research/classroom inquiries, with the goal of cultivating educational inquirers and researchers who engage in critical thinking.

Developing Future Leaders to Improve Education and Preparing Leaders for Educational Change

The final two goals of our M. Ed. program are focussed on developing leaders. We adopt a broad definition of leader that includes educators in formally assigned roles (such as administrators, coaches, consultants) and classroom teachers who lead informally, "drawing from their expertise and passion for teaching, … having casual conversations, sharing materials, facilitating professional development, or simply extending an invitation for other teachers to visit their classrooms" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 7).

The potential contribution of classroom teachers to school improvement is widely recognized (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010; Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008), although informal teacher leadership is a complex process (Angelle & Schmid, 2007; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). "The norms of autonomy, egalitarianism, and seniority continue to exert great influence among teachers" (Donaldson, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, Marinell, Steele & Szczesiul, 2008, p. 1089) and may discourage teachers learning from each other. Teachers may de-emphasize their expert status in order to comply with the norms of egalitarianism (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011). Although sensitivity and finesse are needed for teachers to have influence on other teachers (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011), it has been noted that teachers do seek advice from colleagues whom they perceive as having expertise in specific domains (Supovitz, 2008). Although the call for teacher leadership is evident, there is limited research on the development of teacher leaders through graduate programs (Ross et al., 2011). Ross et al. provide one such research study, and it is a goal of our inquiry to offer another example.

Research Design: Methods and Participants

As our first MEEP cohort drew to a finish in the spring of 2016, teachers were telling us, through their inquiry reports and in conversations, intriguing information about their experiences in their classrooms and schools, and we noted that the M. Ed. seemed to have direct effects on their practice. For example, a number were enthusiastic about student responses to their incorporation of play in their classrooms. We decided to learn more about what the effects of the

program were on these 18 teachers, and developed a research proposal to talk with teachers in interviews and a focus group after they finished their program. Since we wanted to explore teachers' changes in practices and beliefs, and teacher leadership in the early elementary grades, this qualitative study focuses on how these teachers "interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6).

This study received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board of our university in April 2016, and had a focus group and interviews with participants from the first cohort of MEEP graduates, in the summer and fall of 2016. In addition to a focus group and interviews, our ethics approval allowed us to ask teachers if we could use excerpts from their teacher inquiry reports. We, the authors, have taught the teachers three out of the total of 12 courses in their M. Ed. degree. Data gathering therefore did not begin until we had entered the final mark for the students' final course with us. We assured the teachers that their participation in this research project would have no implications, positive or negative, if they take any courses with us in the future, and emphasized that participation was completely voluntary.

To initiate our project, we sent an Invitation to Participate to each teacher in the first cohort and conducted a focus group on July 19, 2016. Focus group questions were about what stood out as significant for teachers in taking the degree, what they noted about each cluster of courses (for example, the research courses and capping experience), what changes they noticed in their practice and beliefs, and how students responded to changes in their practice. We audio-recorded the focus group, which lasted approximately 45 minutes and included 6 teacher participants.

After completing the focus group, we interviewed eight teachers individually by phone or Skype between November 2016 and January 2017. Three of the eight interviewees were also members of the focus group. The interview questions were similar to those asked in the focus group, but included a question about whether the teacher felt she had acted as a leader in her grade level team, school, or school board. Table 2 provides basic information about our 12 participants.

In our thematic analysis of the data, we each separately read through the eight individual transcripts, the focus group transcript, and the inquiry reports of each participant multiple times while making notes of patterns that arose. We read the data with a lens on changes in teachers' practices and beliefs; we used open coding to note patterns or themes as they occurred in our analysis. Following this individual coding process, we each clustered these codes into related ideas or concepts to create analytic codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The second stage of data analysis included several meetings where we noted the similarities amongst the analytic codes each of us had created, beginning to generate themes together. After discussing these codes, we returned to the transcripts and reports to confirm our findings.

Findings: Changes in Practice and Beliefs, and Growing Confidence

Two topics we were interested in were changes in practice and changes in beliefs. Within those topics we noticed several sub-themes including the overarching idea of confidence development. To ease the presentation of our findings, we have separated the following section into findings about changes in practice, and findings about changes in beliefs.

Table 2

Teacher Participant Information

Teacher pseudonym	Years of teaching experience	Individual interview	Focus group	Grade taught/position
Cathy	1-10	Yes	No	Reading Recovery
Janet	1-10	Yes	No	Kindergarten/1 FI*
Carol	1-10	No	Yes	Kindergarten
Nancy	1-10	Yes	Yes	3
Lori	1-10	No	No	3
Kelly	11-20	No	Yes	Kindergarten
Marie	11-20	Yes	No	Literacy coordinator for French school board
Kerri	11-20	Yes	No	Kindergarten
Karen	11-20	Yes	Yes	3/4
Margaret	20-30	No	Yes	5
Linda	20-30	Yes	No	1/2
Kathleen	20-30	Yes	Yes	1

* Kindergarten is the first year of school in this province. Children who are four years old by Dec. 31 of that year may be enrolled in this grade. FI is an abbreviation for French Immersion.

Changes in Practices—Flexibility and Listening to the Children

The first theme we noticed in our findings was our participants' descriptions of changes in their practices. Many examples related to a realization of the need to slow down, to take time to observe and listen to children. Perhaps as a result of teachers' observation and listening, and in combination with their growing beliefs in the capabilities of the young children, we detected examples of changes in practice related to the need to be flexible and to let go of some directive instructional and organizational strategies. Here we offer details of these two aspects of changes in participants' practices.

Slowing down and listening to children. When asked, "What are the changes in your practice as a result of taking this master's cohort?" most of the participants responded with examples of how they now felt more confident to provide time for activities they were previously hesitant to include in the routines of their early elementary classrooms. Of the eight participants who were interviewed, seven spoke about slowing down, taking more time to listen to children, and making more time for children to play and talk. In the focus group, five of the six participants noted similar changes in their practice. Kathleen said, "one of the best things that I heard over and over and over again in the Master's was to slow down…it's okay to take time with the kids, to take time and to listen" (focus group).

Kerri's teacher inquiry report focused on including more play in her Kindergarten classroom, something she had not felt comfortable to do before beginning the M. Ed. This experienced teacher was a keen observer and noted the important learning happening during play. A feature of her inquiry was taking pictures and short videos of children at play, and then looking at and discussing these photos with the children after play. Kerri noted the children "loved being given the opportunity to explain" (individual interview) what was going on in the

photos. For her, this time was valuable, because "there's a lot of learning going on with that, too. For myself, and the students" (individual interview). Kerri's example of valuing and making time for talk in the classroom was echoed by others in this cohort.

Linda, a Grade 1-2 teacher, noted "It [the MEEP] has really broadened my understanding… on the importance and value of play…on children's early development and how we can still reach our curriculum outcomes through play" (individual interview). Linda, like many of the teachers, was concerned about whether a more play-based approach would allow her to adequately fulfill her responsibility to the provincial curriculum requirements. She reported feeling more confident about this after her teacher inquiry, which was focused on starting the school day with play. She was surprised at the response from children when she invited them to share stories of what they had done during play time at the end of each play session. Linda felt she could justify the changes in her practice to include more time for play when she observed the language development opportunities play time and talk about play provided.

Janet, a Kindergarten-Grade 1 French immersion teacher, talked about the significance of language acquisition in the immersion setting, highlighting the importance of play and time to talk in her interview. In her teacher inquiry, Janet decided to add a center in her classroom where several children at a time could make items with playdough as they sat at a small table and talked with her. There were no restrictions on what they could do or make with the playdough, and students could talk about whatever they wished with her at this center. Janet found these moments of time with children individually or in small groups to be very valuable.

> And for me, getting to know them better as students, but also just getting to have that time to talk with them … I noticed, definitely, that there were language improvements, and I feel like it was a more authentic learning experience for them … to be able to speak. And I just found that it was more personal, and it was … really, I was able to tailor it to each one of their learning styles, or what they needed to work on. (Janet, individual interview)

Janet described how she provided opportunities to practice vocabulary and language structures while rolling and shaping playdough with the children, creating a more natural context for language development.

Overall, the value of making time for students to play and to interact with one another and with the teacher in informal ways was highlighted by most teacher participants. This change was also connected to teachers seeing their role in a different light, as described in the next section.

Flexibility and letting go. Many of our participants mentioned that flexibility is important when teaching children in the early elementary years. It appeared some of their changes in practices were related to ideas about flexibility that had been deepened through their graduate studies, as their teacher inquiry reports illustrated. In response to their close observation of children, teachers described changing their expectations and letting go of some of their directive approaches. Margaret noted, "I think that giving up responsibility as a teacher… giving them more responsibility has been a huge thing, too, that I have taken from [the MEEP]" (focus group). Two teachers, Kelly and Lori, who completed their capping experience together, observed their students in the school's Makerspace for instances of creativity and communication. Kelly described their flexibility in the following way:

> We had a picture in our mind of what it was going to be like to have students working on projects in the Makerspace. When we got in there it was nothing like what we expected! In our minds we thought

the children would break off into groups and work on one project that would continue for most of the visits to the Makerspace, ending up with a finished product. This was not the case ... Students were really excited and wanted to dabble in a little bit of everything! However, the students were able to explain lots of creative ideas ... without actually having a completed product. (Kelly, focus group)

Kelly and Lori discovered their time in the Makerspace was not what they envisioned, but they were able to adjust their expectations and see the value of the kinds of learning in which students were engaged.

Cathy stated that "flexibility is probably the most important thing" (individual interview) in terms of what is fundamental to teaching young children. After completing MEEP she understood how she could be flexible in terms of assessing students, as is illustrated through the following quote:

I'm much more open, now, to students representing things in different ways ... and showing me their understanding in a variety of ways. And ... [I understand] that play and talk is just as important as being able to write it down. (individual interview)

Participants also described thinking carefully about their teaching practices and making changes that represented a process of letting go of control. Carol, for example, explained a change in organizational structure in her classroom and her insights into this process. She previously had the manipulative materials for mathematics learning on a high shelf, and she controlled passing the tubs out, deciding what materials the children might use on specific days. At some point during the program, she moved the manipulatives into easy reach for the children.

I mean, that was huge for me. Because that was passing the control ... There was a lot of letting go and giving more responsibility to the students. And that was a big thing. Just something simple, but it was big. Having it more readily available, and that they could go get it, and it was okay. (Carol, focus group)

Nancy mentioned that she "tried to make my [Grade 3] classroom a little bit more hands-on learning, and the children kind of exploring the way, instead of me just being up there teaching" (individual interview). So, when her children built bridges or structures for science, instead of Nancy directing them, the children "kind of plan[ned] and problem solve[d] with what would work best" (individual interview). In Nancy's own words she spoke of letting go, "let[ting] the children decide; not telling as much, but letting children discover." In sum, the examples from our data provide a window into the changes teachers reported in their practices, as well as a sense of their appreciation for the benefits of taking time to observe and listen to what children said, and for their students' capabilities when they were given more control of their learning.

Changes in Beliefs—Teachers' Confidence in Themselves and in Children

The themes explored in the above section about changes in practices—taking time, slowing down, being flexible, and letting go—reflect the participants' increased confidence in themselves as professional decision-makers and their concurrent increased confidence in and respect for their young students. In this section, we describe changes teachers reported in their beliefs as a result of their participation in MEEP.

Teachers' confidence in themselves. A common response from teacher participants was that they felt a growing confidence as professionals. Cathy expressed that she experienced a change in how she perceived herself, noting, "I feel more experienced...comfortable pushing boundaries and doing more what I know is right, even if it's not what I'm told" (individual interview). The hesitation she felt in previous years to "give students more choice" was due to worries about "getting into trouble" with administration (Cathy, individual interview). Cathy was no longer hesitant to invite children to make choices about their activities and how to represent their learning. Teachers like Cathy moved from looking for permission where the authority seems to reside with others to strength where they seem to be relying on their own authority or confidence.

Kathleen said she was more confident to include more time for play in her classroom. She began using an inquiry-based learning (IBL) approach again for the first time in many years, as she believed in the importance of the "autonomy and freedom" of inviting "students to choose what they want to learn about" (focus group). Kathleen noted she "now realize[s] the research, the theory behind [benefits of IBL and play]" and "can defend it" (focus group), which reflects the strength of her conviction. Linda also initiated IBL and morning play in her classroom and worked with another grade level teacher to develop an inquiry unit because of her increasing confidence. She was busy planning for another inquiry with her students when she was interviewed.

Marie, like Kathleen, found that MEEP helped her return to beliefs she had held much earlier in her teaching career. In the intervening years, she had moved away from a practice that included play,

> It [the M Ed] brought me back to my initial beliefs and my values ... it just clarified for me, who [I am as a teacher] ... and that's one big thing that the [MEEP] did ... at a time that I needed to rediscover who I really was. A change in lifetime, and a change as a professional, as a teacher ... it made me more confident. (Marie, individual interview)

This inward look at oneself and changes experienced was discussed by Karen as well, when she noted that,

> Not going through he said, she said for researchers [to write academic papers], but more, from my own experience and relating what my reality is, and the experiences I've had, and how I want to change them, different things, and ... giving myself the ability and... permission, and... strength to give things a go ... Just a huge professional development thing, for me as a person. (focus group)

Karen suggested that the focus on teacher inquiry in classrooms that was part of MEEP enabled her to "give things a go" with increased confidence (focus group). Some teachers were a bit more tentative, but nonetheless positive about their growth in confidence. Nancy noted, "even if you're not exactly confident, you're ... you have a more ... you're more secure in what you know, and you look at things through a critical lens" (focus group). Margaret stated, "I don't have to like everything that everybody does anymore. Because I have my own [beliefs]. I guess, maybe, I trust myself more than I used to. [I feel] more credible" (focus group).

Teacher confidence demonstrated through leadership. As we worked with teachers throughout their courses and listened during the focus group and interviews, we heard examples of ways in which they, in our view, were developing as leaders to improve education. Not all

were equally confident, and some teachers were hesitant to label their actions as "leadership." Being able to advocate for changes they believed in with their school administration was one way some participants described increased confidence and began to take on informal leadership. For example, Kathleen noted that her administrator consulted her about ideas for working with the youngest children in the school. By the end of the MEEP, all participants reported ways in which they were demonstrating their development as leaders to improve education. Many were acting as informal leaders, such as Kerri, who took on the responsibility of removing the desks from her classroom to create a more play-based program with the 4- and 5- year olds who were her students. The changes she made were observed by others, including her administrators, as she led the way in terms of needed changes in early elementary classroom environments. Two of the teachers within the cohort were invited to take on more formal leadership positions. One moved into an Early Literacy position at her school, and another moved into a part-time role supporting the development of outdoor play in her school board.

Marie spoke about how ideas from the MEEP influenced the direction her school board was taking. For example, a basic template for planning an inquiry-based integrated curriculum unit was used as the basis of an activity in the Program Development course. Marie indicated that she was using that template with several teachers in her board. Her passion about the way that play might be increasingly incorporated into early elementary classrooms was evident, and she noted she felt more confident to talk with teachers about the value of the teacher as observer during play in her leadership role with her school board.

Cathy, in her role as Reading Recovery teacher, explained that teachers in her school approached her and she made suggestions about ways to include more play and choice, how to respond to children's interests, and ideas for varying assessment. She said, "I hope that I'm helping shift things at school" (individual interview). Several teachers told of sharing websites, articles, videos, and ideas with other teachers in their schools. Karen was inspired by a visit to a school as part of the first course in the program to establish a dedicated room for play in her own school. She approached her school administration and worked with teacher colleagues to help them understand the positive benefits of play in a school setting, to furnish and equip the room, and to facilitate the scheduling and use of the room. Overall, the ways these teachers diplomatically engaged others in rethinking school and classroom practices provides evidence of their increased confidence and how it was expressed through these examples of leadership.

Increased confidence in children. As teachers described the ways in which they felt they had changed due to their involvement in MEEP, we heard many declarations that represented an increased confidence in children, an increased belief in the young school-aged child as competent and capable, worthy of being listened to, and worthy of respect. Several participants noted their new, or renewed, understanding of the importance of considering each child individually and holistically. Kathleen noted, "Little people have such enthusiasm … [and] empathy … And it's so sincere, and it's so genuine" (individual interview). Carol said,

> I think, too, that initially, I maybe underestimated the ability of the Kindergarten students to take responsibility. [The courses] really opened my eyes up… they can do a lot more than a lot of people give them credit for… So just, learning that. That they can do a lot more than maybe I initially thought. (focus group)

Not surprisingly, this heightened respect for their young students was linked to teachers' descriptions of ways in which this notion of the child as capable has an impact on their planning

and preparation, instruction, and assessment. Cathy explained,

> … having a little more theoretical, or research background, it helped me to kind of shift, and see things a little differently … I think that I would set the bar a lot higher, now. Like … especially students with a … with a learning difficulty of any kind, or a student with, you know, maybe some extra baggage. That I might have just set the bar low, and accepted what I thought was what they could do. And now I realize that they are much more able, and just because they can't show me in the way I was previously expecting, doesn't mean that they can't do everything their peers can do. (individual interview)

Cathy emphasized that now she is "expecting more from everyone" (individual interview). Kathleen summed this up, noting, "They have a lot of capabilities. We just need to give them the opportunities to use them" (individual interview).

Discussion: Reconsidering Teachers' Evolving Stances as Critically Reflective Inquirers and Leaders

In this section, we reconsider the changes noted by the teacher participants as they completed the two-year MEEP and how these reflect key ideas from our literature review. Returning to the five goals of the M.Ed. program, we outline the ways these findings align with each of those goals, and how they provide further support for concepts introduced in the literature review.

Challenging Assumptions and Introducing New Thinking

It is evident that changes in teachers' beliefs were an essential aspect of their professional learning in this MEEP. As stated earlier, we purposefully challenged assumptions and asked teachers to consider their image of the particular children in their classrooms throughout the program. Aligned with the reconceptualist view of the child as competent and capable (Iannacci & Whitty, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010), at the end of the program teachers spoke of a revised understanding of the abilities of young children, a new perspective that gave them confidence to release to children some responsibilities they had previously kept for themselves. Teachers incorporated more play and inquiry-based learning, and invested in spending time listening to and observing children in their classrooms as a result of this altered perception of children.

Cultivating Educational Inquirers and Researchers and Critically Reflective Educators

This MEEP is rooted in our belief in the teacher as democratic professional (Kennedy, 2014; Sachs, 2001). Teachers provided examples of the ways they felt more confident and empowered to critically assess aspects of their classroom practice such as how play centres were run or whether to keep desks in the classroom. Some noted they were thinking critically about features of school-wide practices such as the need for a play space in the school, assessment plans and expectations of students. Each of these examples show how teachers felt "able to reflect openly on their personal and professional beliefs…. [demonstrating] an individual and collection repositioning…as a counterbalance to … managerial forms of professionalism" (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 12-13). Kennedy (2014), Oberhuemer (2005), and Sachs (2001) each note the importance of "participatory relationship and alliances, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders" (Oberhuemer, 2005, p. 13). It is our stance that the MEEP

provided spaces for these relationships to flourish and for democratic professionalism to grow, in the end suggesting that more spaces such as this are needed for early elementary teachers.

Avalos (2011) identified the nurturing of an inquiry stance and an activist teacher identity as central for deep professional learning. Teacher inquiry reports indicated many found it both challenging and rewarding to carry out inquiries in their classrooms. They noted changes that would live on after the completion of the inquiries. While they did not use the word "transformative" (Ross et al, 2011), we suggest that the descriptions participants provided of their learning and changes in their beliefs and practices reflect increased teacher agency (Kennedy, 2014) and a transformed stance on learning and teaching.

Further, in recalling the request for a professional learning opportunity that was the impetus for the development of this M. Ed., we note that the two-year span of the MEEP may have been important in allowing time for sustained changes in practices and beliefs related to teachers' own experiences. As Kathleen said, "Shifts take time, right?" (focus group), to which Karen added, "We have a two-year shift … I think reflection was probably key for me" (individual interview). Having time to reconsider their practice repeatedly from various angles throughout courses over two years, and the teacher inquiry report, appeared to be "a significant contributory factor enhancing teacher agency" (Kennedy, 2014, p. 693).

Developing Future Leaders to Improve Education and Preparing Leaders for Educational Change

The examples of informal leadership described in the findings suggest that these teachers were able to overcome some of the complexities that prevent teachers from learning from one another (Donaldson et al., 2008; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011). We heard many stories about our participants confidently sharing ideas with teaching partners, but with respect for the existing knowledge and skills of their colleagues. Janet reported that during the two years of the MEEP she had collaborated with her peers, "just really encouraging them, and giving different ideas" (individual interview). Although Kathleen was enthusiastic to share what she was learning and implementing in her own classroom, she acknowledged,

> you have to be careful, too. You know, you don't want to push it upon people. You have to present it in a way that people are going to not feel overwhelmed or that you're judging them … [not] hey, I do it this way now and you should try that. You know, you really have to be very cautious in that, because they're not … where I'm at, perhaps. (individual interview)

Participants appeared to be able to skillfully navigate the challenging terrain of sharing their new ideas with others in non-threatening ways.

Conclusion

Although teachers told us about ways they were changed by their participation in the M. Ed. program in early elementary pedagogy, we recognize they will continue to face struggles to maintain and grow their beliefs and practices as they move away from the community of practice the program provided for them (Sachs, 2001). The sense of agency they gained is precarious, as the school system tends to lean toward a managerial professionalism (Sachs, 2001), and expectations of teacher compliance. There are multiple challenges to this precarious

sense of agency in this era of regulation and increasing accountability, as Sachs (2001), Oberhuemer (2005) and Patterson, McAuley and Fleet (2013) detail. We suggest that the sustained and supported learning opportunities provided over the 26 months of the MEEP and the teacher networking opportunities inherent in the program may provide a foundation that will not erode. We remain hopeful that the impacts of the program will be lasting, and that as more teachers complete this MEEP and work with one another in schools in our province and beyond, the balance may gradually shift and a more holistic pedagogy in early elementary grades will be a reality. We plan to continue this research to learn more about how teachers experience the impacts of graduate studies in early elementary pedagogy.

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Anne Murray-Orr is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University. Her current research areas include disciplinary literacy, indigenous language immersion programs, early elementary pedagogy, and teacher education.

Elizabeth Munroe is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University. Her current research areas include early elementary pedagogy and professional learning.