

## **Introduction**

This is a general introduction to the overall professional project and to the underlying pedagogy.

As Louise Rosenblatt (1978) said, any text is just print on paper until readers pick it up and make sense of it. Then, a text comes alive, not only when readers interpret and savour it but, even more so, when the text influences the thinking and the actions of its readers. The Québec Educational Program is a text, and although it carries the weight of governmental authority and is surrounded with an aura of professional obligation, it too is just ink on paper until teachers decide to read it and make it a part of their lives. This volume contains classroom stories of how ten teachers have made many of the ideas in the Québec Educational Program part of their professional lives but, interestingly, not all of these teachers have read the new curriculum. At the time of printing, the elementary program had not been implemented in Cycle 3, and the curriculum had not yet been written for high school. However, the projects in this volume demonstrate the theoretical and pedagogical principles underlying the program and help to explain what it means what it means to “do” the reform.

## **Teacher Study Groups as Professional Development**

Although writing a new curriculum is certainly one way to influence change in teaching, other ways must be found to help teachers turn the “ink on paper” into practice. Teacher study groups are a form of professional development that provides opportunities for support, sharing, dialogue, and reflection that go far beyond the “shot in the arm” of an in-service workshop. Implementation of the new curriculum for English Language Arts in elementary and middle school is an ideal subject for teacher study groups. For a year and a half, the group of teachers in this volume met regularly to discuss the new curriculum, their classroom projects, their own writing processes, and just to have a good natter with like-minded professionals. They were also able to take time out from their busy schedules to read, write, and reflect on their own practices with other members of the group. This kind of professional nurturing is essential but, all too unusual in the lives of most teachers; however, without opportunities for collaboration, this volume of articles would not have been possible.

The teachers in this project, who teach in all cycles from kindergarten to grade eight, have produced this book which they hope will be a useful resource not only for implementing the Curriculum Reform, but also for creating more student-centred classrooms. Each teacher has written one chapter which is a narrative account of a classroom project or some aspect of the English Language Arts program.

## **Embedding the Curriculum in Classroom Narratives**

Narrative is now recognised as a qualitative-research method. Since teaching is primarily social interaction and composed of an interconnected sequence of events, narrative accounts are particularly appropriate ways to

capture the essential elements of pedagogy. Teachers can better understand what they are experiencing in their classrooms by retelling it. In fact, story-telling is fundamental to an individual's search for meaning. Narration makes abstract ideas concrete by embedding them in experience. Events become more complex when connected implicitly and explicitly to specific points of view and contexts, and paradoxically, become less subjective when compared with the experiences of others.

By connecting their best practices to the Québec Education Program, they hope to situate, in concrete contexts, many key concepts of the program such as, success for all, the role of talk in learning, cross-curricular competencies, self-evaluation and reflection, visual and media literacy, and a focus on learning for life. These key ideas refocus the new curriculum on *how children learn* rather than on *what to teach*. While "student-centred" may have a familiar ring to it, implementation of the new curriculum will require a paradigm shift in teacher thinking in the following areas: 1) making literacy processes the content of the curriculum; 2) creating varied contexts for learning; 3) designing activities that include both special needs and mainstream students; 4) replacing grade-level evaluation criteria with longer-term developmental assessments; and 5) promoting self-awareness and reflection in children through self-evaluation of their learning.

Individually, none of the above ideas is radically new. So, why write a new curriculum based on these elements? There are two possible answers to this question. First, the sum of the above approaches is greater than the parts; this combination of principles provides a flexible and inclusive context for teaching and learning. Secondly, ideas that have been around for a long time have not necessarily been adopted by teachers and, therefore, there is no widespread understanding of how these ideas should influence teaching. There are many reasons for this lack of impact. Persistent notions about the nature of teaching continue to undermine these kinds of change; for example, 1) knowledge consists of external truths that teachers must transmit to students; 2) knowledge is a set of sequential skills; 3) students are empty vessels that must be filled by the teacher; 4) students learn what teachers teach; and 5) all children learn in the same way. The current enthusiasm for standardized testing and reading programs that eliminate the professional judgment of teachers is based on the above beliefs about learning. Unless teachers examine their teaching through the lens of the requirements of the new curriculum, they may be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by these hidden, but generally accepted, precepts and will have difficulty in making the shift to a meaning-based curriculum.

### **Writing to Learn**

The teachers who wrote these articles had a great deal of difficulty in believing that their projects were special and interesting to other teachers. Most of them considered their work ordinary and unremarkable. "But, it's just what I do," was a constant disclaimer. This lack of confidence stems in part from the

group's natural modesty, but also, perhaps, from the widespread undervaluing of teachers in contemporary society which, in turn, prevents teachers from thinking of themselves as professionals and intellectuals. Through completing this project, this group of teachers came to know what they know and what they wanted to share with other teachers and, as a result, have an increased sense of their professional selves. In addition to sharing their work, the writers of this volume hope that they will inspire other teachers to form similar, on-going, professional collaborations.

Most of the teachers who worked on this project did not consider themselves writers, and yet, they all were able to find forms in which to express the individuality of their ideas. Several teachers have used a "multi-genre" approach to best capture the varied elements of their projects, especially the decision-making processes that form an integral part of running a classroom. Elizabeth Ford Makarow, for example, wrote her project on the "van Gogh journals" her grade-three students kept as a series of letters to Vincent van Gogh. She was able to include the artist's voice in his "replies" by quoting from van Gogh's journals and letters to his brother. Several other teacher-writers used a series of journal entries, dialogues, letters, time lines, and poems to tell their stories, and all of the articles contain samples of their students' work and conversations. The result is not only a lively read, but also a demonstration of the expanded notion of "text" that the new English Language Arts program contains.