



# Educational Change in International Early Childhood Contexts

*Crossing Borders of Reflection*

Edited by Linda R. Kroll and Daniel R. Meier

FOREWORD BY JOSEPH TOBIN



INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

## **EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN INTERNATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD CONTEXTS**

Co-published with the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), *Educational Change in International Early Childhood Contexts: Crossing Borders of Reflection* examines the role of teacher reflection in a variety of educational contexts worldwide. Using a case study approach that integrates research, theory, policy, and practice, international contributors show how, in some settings, local traditions and values are honored while, in others, foreign educational ideas and programs become modified to suit local needs. Cases from Japan, China, Palestine, South Africa, Kenya, Finland, Italy, and New Zealand are discussed, as well as models from the United States.

Through its thorough investigation into teacher reflection practices throughout the world, *Educational Change in International Early Childhood Contexts: Crossing Borders of Reflection* focuses on the transformative value of these practices to promote change in early childhood education. Framing commentary from Linda R. Kroll and Daniel R. Meier provides context and places the case studies in conversation with one another, allowing for productive international comparisons in this dynamic collection.

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# **Educational Change in International Early Childhood Contexts**

Crossing Borders of Reflection

Edited by

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Ko Tararua ngā maunga

Ko Waikawa te awa

Ko Tainui te waka

Ko Wehiwehi te marae

Ko Ngati Wehiwehi, ko Ngati Tukorehe, ko Ngati Rangitawhia oku iwi

Ko Karen Liley ahau

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Reflections on Global and Cultural Difference, Human Kinetics, and ‘Dance with Connections to Moving and Playing in the Early Years’ in B. Clark, A. Grey and L. Terreni (Eds.), *Kia Tipu te Wairua Toi - Fostering the Creative Spirit: Arts in Early Childhood Education*.

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# INTRODUCTION

Linda R. Kroll and Daniel R. Meier

Teaching well is a life-long learning endeavor. While this perspective is not necessarily universally acknowledged, all teachers know that one can never know enough about how to teach the children in her/his charge well. Good teaching for the youngest members of our global societies is essential for their success both in the moment and in their future educational lives.

These young children need the best teachers to help them realize this success and to be lifelong learners. Teachers, too, need to be lifelong learners. Reflective practice, reflection, inquiry, investigating one's own practice are all terms for ways to continue learning about one's teaching practice.

In thinking about reflective practice and inquiry, we focus on the learning of the students, the teachers, and to some extent the families and communities of those students and teachers.

Teacher reflection and inquiry as a vehicle for teacher development and educational reform has been identified as one essential aspect of improving the lives of children and their families internationally. However, there are multiple ways for these practices to occur, depending on the teaching context, the teacher's level of preparation and the opportunities for continued professional development. In addition, the actualization of these practices depends on social and cultural values and beliefs, traditions around socialization, and concepts of what counts as knowledge.

How reflective practice can be enacted and how it works to support life-long learning to teach in different global contexts is the topic of this book. We examine the forms and functions of reflection and inquiry on early childhood education in a variety of global contexts. Taking a case study approach, we specifically look at the role of teacher reflection in educational change, and how local traditions and values are honored and continued in a particular country or region, as well as how educational ideas and programs from other countries and regions are adapted and modified. Early childhood teacher educators, early childhood teachers and early childhood researchers have written the chapters, representing a multitude of ways to think about the process.

As we wrote alongside the authors of the nine chapters, we discovered that reflection and inquiry on the part of teachers is often accompanied by reflection and inquiry on the part of their young

students. We also discovered that reflection and inquiry take on multiple guises and definitions, depending on the context in which they are applied. However, no matter how reflection is enacted, the focus it provides on improving and changing practice, on learning from others, and on empowering those practicing it is evident. We intend teachers, policymakers, researchers and others to take note of the power of reflection and inquiry to spur educational change at the global, as well as the local, level.

Multiple definitions and meanings for words that we share in this discussion emerged as we read and reread the chapters. Each chapter has its own interpretation of what it means to be a reflective practitioner, and what inquiry into one's own practice looks like. In an illuminating treatise on cultural differences in the definition of the learner, of learning, of what it means to know and the value of learning, Jin Li (2012) describes different cultural definitions of what it means to be a learner, and (for us) this discussion reverberated in our thinking about what it means to be a reflective and inquiring teacher. Inquiry itself is a Western traditional concept (Li,2012), deriving from the notion of the importance of curiosity about the world as essential to learning. Curiosity about one's practice is at the heart of reflection and inquiry into teaching.

On the other hand, Eastern tradition values learning for oneself, to perfect oneself, to better serve the world (Li, 2012). Thus, while the purpose of learning in each context may seem to contain philosophical differences, inquiry and understanding are essential aspects of the learning process, East and West. In the chapters that follow we will see how these processes are used and applied across early childhood classrooms, teacher education contexts and communities of practice.

The book is organized into four sections. Section 1 contains two chapters, one by Linda R. Kroll and the other by Daniel Meier, the editors of this volume. These chapters set the stage for thinking about the big ideas in this text—that of reflection and inquiry as means for teacher development and learning, and the global context of early childhood education, identifying both strengths and challenges of addressing and learning from an international body of early childhood educators.

Section 2 reflects the perspectives of cross-national teacher education and teaching. In Chapter 3, *Developing Teacher Collaboration along a Global Perspective: Using Inquiry in a Kenyan Preschool*, Trevor Valentino writes about his experience working with teachers in Kenya, what happened during his summer there and what he learned about collaboration, in particular, that he

was able to bring back to his own practice in the US. In Chapter 4, Fengyuan Sun discusses her experiences growing up and attending schools in China and then teaching early childhood in the US, contrasting her own cultural beliefs and experiences with those of the children and families with whom she works. This contrast provides us with insight into the reciprocal opportunities that such a cross-national experience provides for both the teacher and the families with whom she works. In Chapter 5, Molly van Houten describes her experiences as a US educated early childhood practitioner teaching in Guatemala, learning to acknowledge and appreciate the Guatemalan and indigenous views of the teacher and reconciling it with her own understandings of what can lead to powerful teacher learning.

Section 3 presents international views on the practice of reflection and inquiry among teachers and their students, and between teachers, students and the communities they serve. In Chapter 6, Amasa Ndoferopi discusses the implementation of philosophical discussions for young children that take place in South Africa. In Chapter 7, Lesley Pohio, Adrienne Sansom and Karen Liley describe how teachers and children together engage in reflection and spiritual inquiry through engagement with place in New Zealand. Brenda Fyfe and Carlina Rinaldi describe the process of documentation that engages children and teachers in the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy and in St. Louis, MO in the US.

Finally, Section 4 addresses the question of professional learning, professional growth and professional development among teachers. In Chapter 9, Kaisa Kopisto, Laura Salo, Lasse Lipponen, and Leena Krokfors describe the policies and changes occurring in early childhood teacher preparation in Finland, and the role of reflective practice in the Finnish model. In Chapter 10, Kyoko Iwatate and Mikiko Tabu describe the system of early care and education in Japan and the preparation of teachers for different contexts. Finally, Buad Khaled describes preservice and inservice teacher preparation through reflection and story in the West Bank, Palestine.

Each chapter gives a particular view of how reflection and inquiry can support teachers' and children's learning in multiple ways. In different global contexts we are asking similar questions about how to best serve young children and the teachers who work with them. The glimpses we have into these different contexts open up new possibilities for cross national and international learning and development for all of us.

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## Chapter 11

# REFLECTION THROUGH STORY: STRENGTHENING PALESTINIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

BUAD Mohamed KHALES

In this chapter, I examine the role of reflective thinking and teaching for early childhood preservice and inservice teachers' professional development and growth in the West Bank, Palestine. I discuss how Palestinian kindergarten teachers, who work with children aged 3-5, reflect on their beliefs and practices through interpreting and writing stories. The stories focus on the recent effort at my Palestinian university to adapt and integrate more child-centered and inquiry-based teaching in Palestinian education.

In presenting these teacher stories, I address key questions about the role of reflection in strengthening Palestinian education and creating a new image of Palestinian teachers and students as reflective, inquisitive, lifelong adult learners. What does reflective thinking look like for our teachers? What is the importance of reflective thinking in teaching practicum courses? What are particular features of teacher stories that promote new teacher voices and new practices? In addressing these questions, I present the work and voices of teachers with whom I have worked at Al-Quds University, at the Abu Dis campus, in the West Bank, Palestine. The preservice teachers were enrolled in the early childhood education (ECE) program at Al-Quds University, and completed their practicum teaching in local kindergartens and primary grades under my direction and guidance.

### **Palestinian Education, Inquiry, and Reflection**

Palestinian education continues to face significant structural and pedagogical challenges for improving children's education from kindergarten to grade 12 (Ministry of Education and Higher Education/MoEHE, 2007; Nicolai, 2007). Strengthening K-12 professional development is a critical goal at the Ministry, teacher education, and K-12 school levels (Al-Ramahi & Davies, 2002; Wahbeh, 2003, 2011). Palestinian policymakers and others are also advocating for educational ideas and practices that promote constructivist teaching, increased student and teacher agency, and student-centered curriculum (Wahbeh, 2003, 2011). Of particular interest is for teachers to develop their own teaching materials and effective teaching methods (Wahbeh, 2011) that are less didactic and rote-based (Al-Ramahi & Davies, 2002). The inclusion

of inquiry and reflection in preservice and inservice professional growth has shown potential formoving beyond traditional rote and teacher-directed learning that characterizes the majority of Palestinian classrooms (Wahbeh, 2003, 2011).

### **Teacher Stories and Reflection**

Stories — oral, written, dramatized, and in music and song — have a long and time-honored tradition in Palestinian society. Stories are central to the social and educational fabric of Palestinian life, and are linked to a number of cultural and educational traditions. Family storytelling is one rich tradition, and many stories and folktales are adapted from other sources (Nurwelhad, 2002), and are used as an important medium for socialization and teaching. Stories in Palestinian society also have connections to Arab children's literature, and to traditional literature, contemporary realistic fiction, and historical fiction (Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2007). Palestinian society is seeking to preserve and promote traditional stories and children's literature, as stories are seen as "cultural products" that help ensure the "viability and continuity" of Palestinian culture and society (Fasheh, 1995, p. 71). For example, the Tamer Institute for Community Education (<http://www.tamerinst.org/resource-center>), based in Ramallah, publishes children's literature specifically for Palestinian schools and libraries.

The use of narrative has been shown as a powerful influence for promoting teacher observation, reflection, identity, and educational change (Connolly, & Clandinin,1990; Eagen, 1986; Paley, 1981; Pushor & Clandinin, 2009; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). Stories help teachers recognize and understand the often nonlinear narrative flow of young children's learning as they socialize, play, and discover. There are several critical elements to teachers' stories the inform their teaching and reflection (Black, 2001; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1993, 1995; Renck & Joar, 1993):

1. a mental element for processing information and taking decisions
2. a critical element for ascertaining the impact of experience, objectives, orientations, and values
3. a narrative element for uncovering teachers' objectives

The most "effective" teacher stories focus on exploration and reflection, and lead to new professional growth and personal insights. Stories help teachers uncover the complex realities of what it means to teach well as teachers take on active roles as listener and teller. Teacher stories also enable teachers to communicate with one another and “compare notes” about their

individual practices and beliefs (Jalango & Isenberg, 1995), and to see the "truthfulness" of their relationships with students and their inner feelings and thoughts.

### **The Al-Quds University Teacher Education Program**

The majority of Palestinian kindergartens follow traditional ways of teacher directed and rote-learning in a whole-class setting. The kindergartens primarily adhere to a specific curriculum that focuses on skill development in literacy and numeracy, rather than an emphasis on how children can understand and use varied kinds of knowledge in multiple contexts. My colleagues and I are interested in new kinds of learning based on children's real world experiences, a new way of learning based on inquiry-based teaching and learning. Our traditional forms of teaching can be transformed by guiding our teachers to reflect and analyze how and why their teaching can become more child centered.

We wish to promote reflection and inquiry as a mirror for teachers to gain new insights about who they are as teachers, and to empower teachers to adapt and implement new educational ideas and practices.

Our work so far has raised several questions discussed in the literature on reflection and educational change. To what extent can reflection actually improve practice? Is there enough time for teachers to reflect as they are learning to teach? What types of discussions are needed to evoke reflection? What type of arguments or proof can reflecting teachers present to support their teaching? To what extent does reflective thinking motivate teachers to review their practices?

My colleagues and I believe that Palestinian teachers are capable of thinking and reflecting systematically about their practices, and we are adapting ideas and practices on systematic inquiry from primarily Western-based educational research (see e.g. McNiff, 2007; Rodgers, 2002; Rust, 2010; Stremmel, 2002). The integration of reflective practice in teaching and the professional growth of teachers has the potential to change teachers' personal and professional lives. It requires a great deal of courage to criticize one's practices, and to listen to the advice of fellow teachers or supervisors and to make use of findings from the latest research on reflective thinking. To overcome some of the challenges that teachers might experience implementing reflective practice, it is important to look for mentors who can help teachers express their individual fears, feelings, preferences, and interests freely. Preservice and inservice teacher

professional programs can play a critical role in this process, helping teachers learn to teach with a disposition for reflective and inquiry-based teaching (Loughran & Russell, 1997).

The Al-Quds University early childhood program has recently emphasized an innovative linking of teacher reflection, inquiry-based teaching and learning, and curriculum and instruction based on children's interests (Khaless & Meier, 2013). The preservice teachers engage with readings and assignments intended to adapt and implement more child-centered approaches to young children's learning. The program also introduces and guides teachers in learning practical ways to involve children in an emergent curriculum based on children's interests (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). Given the lack of existing child-centered materials and resources in the local Palestinian kindergartens, the pre-service teachers prepare their own activities and materials as part of their coursework, and use these materials during their practicum teaching.

The teaching practicum course at Al-Quds University is a central component of our teacher education program, and allows student teachers to experiment with their new knowledge about child-centered teaching in local classrooms. To deepen the students' learning and teaching, I ask pre-service teachers to write reflective stories about their teaching in kindergarten to address the challenges faced in their teaching and to improve their practice. The teachers' stories also assist the university in developing other educational programs related to early childhood education.

In their fourth year of their B.A. program, the early childhood student teachers enroll in a practicum course and teach in Jerusalem, Alexaria, and local Abu Dis kindergartens three days a week for a full semester. They first observe, then participate partially, and then fully engage in teaching in local kindergartens. The preservice teachers featured in this chapter enrolled in a practicum course and taught in Alexaria and Abu Dis kindergartens. All of these students prepare, teach and reflect on their child centered activities in a practicum course that focuses on kindergarten and also curriculum in grades 1-4. This is a new kind of teaching for Palestine, and it requires a new kind of thinking and risk-taking on my part and as well as by the students.

The practicum course guides preservice teachers in the process of asking young children about their needs, experiences, and what they would like to learn. All of our course readings and discussions are in Arabic, and the student teachers teach in Arabic in the local kindergartens. I also introduce a number of research and practical sources and materials such as children's

literature books written in English, which I translate into Arabic for the student teachers. A few teachers have oral and written language fluency in English, and can directly consult additional educational materials online. English is taught in Palestinian schools beginning in the first grade, and for those Palestinian teachers who wish to teach English, they receive separate specialized training in English medium instruction.

In their initial work with the children in local kindergartens, the student teachers draw a brainstorm “sun map” and title the project that the children have chosen. For example, Sabti and the children created a sun map about their interest in butterflies. (Figure 11.1).



Sabti then carried out a series of hands-on and interactive activities with the children based on their butterfly interests. Student teachers are encouraged to talk with children about their family and community experiences and prior knowledge to the project. Sabti also varied the physical environment and groupings for the children, encouraging them to meet and talk in small groups on the floor or around one large table about the butterfly project (Figure 11.2)



In another example, another student teacher's project focused on birds, and the project's initial sun map recorded the children's early interests: bird sounds, songs, food, colors, flight, and varieties. Teachers and children then co-create and engage in several activities within each project. In the bird project, the teacher and children shared stories and discussions about birds, observed birds in flight, drew birds, and played games such as puzzles, matching pictures, and dominoes with images of birds.

The student teachers create their own beautiful and intricate hand-made educational materials and games to promote active student engagement with each other and the teachers. For instance, one student teacher created a puzzle game where children match sentences from a story with the corresponding picture in a puzzle format (Figure 11.3)



The student teachers learn to make developmentally appropriate and high-interest materials that not only encourage interaction and discussion with the children, but also promote fine- and gross-motor coordination (Figure 11.4).



To deepen their understanding and implementation of project-based and inquiry based teaching, the teachers read more about the project topics on their own and maintain a reflective journal of their teaching and inquiry journey with the children. They also use the journals to plan out possible activities for the project and share and discuss this plan with the children. The student teachers write in their reflective journals throughout the practicum course and reflect on their implementation of child-centered activities, the children's reactions, and how their teaching can be improved. The reflective journals are a beginning road map for the student teachers to guide their teaching, and they use these journals for sharing their reflections in our practicum course discussions.

### **Preservice Teacher Stories — Encounters with Reflection**

In a recent practicum course, I asked my eight students to write stories about their successes and challenges in their pre-service teaching. It was not easy for the students to write stories about what they learned in their university program and in working with children in the classroom. But

our earlier work writing reflective entries helped the student teachers to feel that they had enough raw material to draw from for reflection.

Their journals helped the student teachers look more deeply at what their children truly wanted to do and learn in the classroom, and to reflect on materials and practices to promote more child-centered teaching based on children's interests. Over the course of their first three years in our B.A. level program, I provided the students with a core set of questions to guide their written reflections —

Why do I want to teach?

What does teaching children mean to me?

What goals do I want to achieve?

How I can I start teaching?

How I can engage children to think, judge, ask questions, and learn?

How can I create a meaningful learning environment?

How can I build good relationships with the children and their families?

In class, we discussed how to look back over their journal entries for key challenges and successes, and to think about some of the small moments and critical feelings in their journals. General comments from the student teachers indicated the value of our emphasis on reflective practice and critical thinking:

“I learned about learning strategies that work for me in my own learning.”

“I have discovered my talent for critical thinking.”

“I improved my teaching and I started to have the passion to teach.”

“I now read articles about children's interests.”

“We did not memorize, we understood, we learned how to be reflective and effective teachers through real experience.

I now present three students who wrote a series of reflections at the end of their practicum. Dua is especially interested in the arts, and enjoys using art and music with children in her teaching. Haneen has a particular interest in reading and children's literature. May enjoys and has a special talent for creating her own educational games and materials.



### **Duaa — Internal Conflict**

The first time I taught in the classroom, I wasn't afraid to teach the children. I heard from many of my colleagues at the school that teaching children was difficult, and when the head teacher left me alone with the children, I got their attention by singing, reading a story, and doing drama with them. They all listened to me. But after that, the teacher didn't give me a chance to work with the children alone. She always said that she was the teacher in the class and that she wanted me to do what she wanted. I didn't like what she did because her relationship with the children was not good. I felt conflicted — teaching in this kindergarten is not as free as I hoped it would be. I want to be a teacher who is inviting to the children, and not continue in a traditional, boring style and manner.

I care more about the child in front of me than the vast amount of information we are supposed to teach. I hope to be a teacher who reflects on how to work with children, and to use new teaching aids and educational games that have long been neglected in our schools. If I can engage children in meaningful ways, then they will not notice the passage of time. My goal in becoming a teacher is to discover and develop children's thinking and creativity. I want to use all my energy for the development of the children and my community because they are the future.

### **Haneen — An Open Mind**

The first day I entered the kindergarten I felt afraid because it was my first time teaching. But day after day I started to love the children and to teach them in the ways I learned in my university classes. We started a project together on the four seasons, and I asked the children what they wanted to learn. This experience was strange and new for me as it also was for the children. We created a sun map together, and then we worked together through conversation, drawing, playing games, eating fruits, reading books, and matching words for the seasons. As I learned at the university, I tried to keep an open mind about this kind of child centered teaching, and writing in my reflective journal helped me discover what I could improve in this kind of teaching.

### **May — Teaching in a New Way**

The first time I started in my practicum kindergarten class, I was afraid because I had not taught children before, and when I saw how the teachers were teaching, I cried. It was traditional teaching, and they wanted me to teach this way; they do not believe that children need to learn through play and discovery. Preservice teachers like myself who are trying new ways of teaching

need to be patient and to find support — the kindergarten was not what I hoped it would be like and what I learned at the university. But with support from the instructor of my practicum course, the children and I created sun maps about what interested them, and I discovered that they are creative and active learners. As I worked with them according to this approach, I began to learn and grow because I want to be a good teacher. The challenges in this first experience helped me see myself as a teacher in the future. I learned that it is not easy to work with children, but if we decide to change ourselves, we discover that we can be good teachers. Dialogue with children is very important. At first, the children were ashamed of speaking, but I learned that when I set up a dialogue through a story, for example, the children's responses were creative and we started to remove the barrier of shame and fear. Writing in my reflective teaching journal also helped me — I became more curious about where I stood regarding a certain teaching idea or practice, and to understand why a certain child said or did a particular thing.

Taken together, these brief reflective stories give a "developmental snapshot" of the first generation of Palestinian early childhood educators to embark on expanding reflective practice in our schools. The stories focus on certain universal, global challenges that all new teachers face, but they are also about particular challenges pertaining to Palestinian education. The student teachers themselves grew up and experienced classrooms featuring mostly whole-class, rote-based learning and they are the first group to experiment with understanding and implementing more child-centered teaching approaches. At the preservice level, Palestinian universities and other institutions have the responsibility and challenge of providing our future teachers with a foundation and orientation toward new ways of teaching and learning.

### **Inservice Teacher Stories — Finding a Voice**

A year later, at the end of their first year of full-time teaching in local kindergartens, I asked the same teachers to write new stories about the value of reflection in learning to teach. A few teachers, such as Duaa, were working alongside other recent graduates of our Al-Quds University Early Childhood Program. They are beginning to form a group of reflective teachers, sharing their teaching ideas and helping each other plan their activities. I continue to provide guidance for the teachers on building their reflective practice skills and knowledge through Facebook and meetings at the university.

### **Duaa — Engaging Young Children**

Now that I'm a teacher, reflective practice means more to me. Reflection has helped me revise what I experienced and learned from my university work and practicum teaching last year in kindergarten. I have learned many new lessons through reflective practice about how to base my teaching on children's interests and to help them be creative and active in their learning. I continued to write in my reflective journal, writing entries before and after my lessons to reflect on my objectives and if the activities I designed met children's needs. This year I worked with my children in a new way. I implemented many activities similar to what I did in the practicum course. We told stories, had discussions, played educational games, and I used technology in my teaching. I had 38 children in my class, and engaging all the students was a real challenge. It was not easy to work in such conditions but I believe that teaching children involves sacrifice, patience and cooperation. I started to think of activities that suit large classes. Today, I am more confident to use reflective teaching and teaching based on children's interests. Now I find myself different. I feel free and I can do many new things with my children.

### **Haneen — Challenging Traditional Beliefs**

Looking back on my first year teaching children, I relied on the professional development through reflection that I gained in my practicum course at the university. It was very important to see the map of my own development, and how we develop our practices through writing diaries. Reflection is new in Palestine. For this reason, reflection is very important. It's like a road map. Reflecting on my teaching helped me learn more about effective objectives and outcomes, and what I really wanted my children to learn. It also helped me understand how children think and how to engage them through play, music, puzzles, and stories. This was all new for the children and for me. I also faced a big challenge in changing parents' beliefs toward the application of new methods in education. Parents need to realize that children are different than adults, and need different techniques and strategies. They have different intelligences and learning styles. I was intrinsically motivated to use new and modern methods of education that I learned about in my university studies. I'm now very confident in using reflective teaching because I know what the children want and what they need in the kindergarten. I now see how the new ways of teaching give children the chance to play, think, discover and work together. I now want to learn more about how to use learning centers, and to continue to change my teaching in good ways.

## **May — A New Adventure**

If anyone asked me about my first year of teaching, I would tell them that I learned how to create a good learning environment in my class that allowed my children to play, think, ask questions, and work as a group. I reflected on my teaching over the course of the year, and continued to write in my reflective journal. At the beginning of the year, I still was not sure that the children could learn according to their interests because they are not aware of what they want to learn. But I discovered a different issue — children do know what they want to learn, but they need opportunities to discover and examine their interests. It was not easy sometimes when my administrator asked us to teach in traditional ways, but because we believe in new ways of teaching, we take responsibility for a new adventure to change our teaching. I hope to be an expert teacher through more inquiry and reflection on my teaching. It has opened my mind to understand children in a deeper way, and now I see new ways to become a better teacher.

Duaa, Haneen, and May reflect on their teaching successes and challenges and reveal the beginning states of conceptualizing and implementing a new way of teaching and learning in Palestinian kindergartens. Their reflections indicate how much they relied on their preservice training for thinking, discussing, and writing about their teaching goals, materials, strategies, and ways of interacting with children and parents. This reflective foundation helped the teachers to persevere and overcome a number of personal and professional challenges in implementing a new form of child-centered curriculum in their classrooms.

The first-year teachers' stories also allowed them to release their feelings and emotions about the challenges and joys of their first year of teaching — emotions which they might hide even from themselves. The opportunity to write and express their feelings also helped them appreciate the personal meaning of their teaching practices and experiences.

I believe that preservice and inservice teachers benefit from a strong and confident voice and sense of agency through reflective practice. The teachers' stories indicate the degree to which they are motivated to critique their own teaching, and to bravely confront their thoughts and emotions. This kind of self-reflection and selfcritique builds a strong sense of a teaching self and professional voice. As one first-year teacher at an inquiry group meeting remarked, "Through reflection I am now able to identify my weaknesses and strengths and to change my thinking."

In a related way, this interest in reflecting on practice strengthened the voices of the children themselves. The teachers reflected on new ways to raise children's voices in the kindergartens, to

encourage children to express their needs, concerns, to work in groups, to play, think, and to discover the world around them. One first-year teacher noted, “I learned how to put myself in the children's place to see if they can learn in many ways according to our new way of child-centered learning.”

### **Closing — A New Way Forward**

Palestinian teacher educators, policymakers, and teachers are in the early stages of strengthening the quality of Palestinian early childhood education. I strongly believe that the promotion of reflective practice, taking an inquiry stance toward one's teaching and learning, is effective for improving the motivation and teaching of Palestinian early childhood educators. I realize, too, that the inclusion of reflective practice on a larger scale will take time and dialogue, as well as changes in our infrastructure and school organization. As one kindergarten teacher said, "It would be much more effective to implement a reflective approach if we had fewer students in our classes."

As the first generation of teachers to learn a new way of teaching and learning, they were reluctant at first to engage in reflective practice, but became more confident later as they saw that becoming reflective teachers is part of the entire teacher development process. Palestinian kindergarten teachers are reflective and creative when provided with supportive opportunities at the preservice and inservice levels. I look forward to creating larger learning communities of Palestinian kindergarten teachers at the university and in local schools to increase our teaching excellence and improve children's learning.

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