

Honoring the Struggle

By Desre Kaye

Many years ago I read a parable that has resurfaced many times in different shapes and forms, both in my personal life as well as in my professional life.

'A man walked past a branch and saw a cocoon that was expanding and contracting. It seemed as if it was struggling to get out. The man decided to 'help' the butterfly inside along and cut the cocoon thus freeing it from its struggle. The butterfly was free, but alas, it was unable to fly. The man, in trying to help the 'trapped' butterfly inadvertently prevented the natural process of development where oxygen would have been pumped into its wings, with the struggle creating a strength that was needed for survival....'

This is how I view myself as a teacher and as a facilitator. I equate the 'struggle' to the complexities of teaching and often I wonder what opportunities I am creating to form a learning environment. I feel that I need to free myself from the confines of my usual thinking and in so doing, free my students.

I feel that I have always tried to be creative in my teaching , often in the past searching for 'gimmicks' to enhance my lessons and to capture the children's interest. I remember once putting one of the Biblical characters that we were learning about on trial and actually visiting a court in session to see how a court case was conducted. In another classroom, I remember asking the children to advertise a particular Jewish Festival, using current advertisements on T.V. The above and other 'gimmicks' were my thinking only. At that time, I saw no need for the children to be co-learners with me, I was the teacher who gave the instructions and they were the pupils who carried them out. However, I was, open to whatever ideas the children had within the confines of my lesson plan. Teaching for deeper meaning did not really come into the equation.

I began my work with the 'Cultures of Thinking' project in July 2006 as part of a focus group. I did not know what to expect, nor was I sure that I was ready to take this on. I am a Hebrew and Jewish Studies teacher in a Prep and a Grade One classroom. In Grade One, my lessons are conducted solely in Hebrew in accordance with the curriculum. That leaves only my Prep class

(five year olds) as a place where Jewish Studies can be taught in English.

And so I began using the routines from the Cultures of Thinking project . I was excited at the time to try something new and this provided a framework for me for a different kind of teaching and learning experience. Using the 'See, Think, Wonder' routine in our weekly celebration of Shabbat (The Sabbath) provided a rich opportunity to glimpse student's thinking. I began this process by leaving a few colourful picture books of Shabbat on the mat and the children perused the books and looked at the pictures – some did this alone , and some in groups and then one child said aloud: "This one is so weird!"

The children's interest was aroused. When I asked the children why the picture was weird, they answered just as I had expected them to , ' It just is'. I knew then that I had to model a deeper kind of thinking in order to illicit a richer and more thoughtful response. I scanned and photocopied this picture and gave it to a few groups of children and began a 'See, Think, Wonder' routine. Some very interesting observations came from this:

I think that I see God.

Really? Where do you see God?

"Here, I see God and he has spots; Maybe God has chicken pox.' (scan pic.)

God can't have chicken pox. He can only give people chicken pox.

I see girls with their hands on their faces.

Maybe they are saying a 'berachah' (prayer)

I see four candles on the table. We only have two candles.

I see a menu.

It's not a menu, it's a book.

It's a Siddur. (Shabbat Prayer book)

I see a ghost – maybe it's a Shabbat angel.

There are no such things as ghosts and angels.

Yes there is – If there wasn't why would Bev (kinder teacher) have taught us that song – ' the Shabbat angels are coming through the window....'

From the children's comments, I realized that the children were listening to each other and making connections. Sometimes, the discussion could go on for five minutes (which is a fair amount of time for Prep students) without any input from me. The use of the routines were beginning to open up possibilities for me. I continued to observe, listen, reflect and model.

Nonetheless, I still found the routines and the Cultures of Thinking confusing at the beginning of my journey. I wanted to make use of them, but was unsure how and in what context to use them – It took me time, but I came to realize that the routines were merely tools that could be used to create a Culture of Thinking. They gave me the confidence to tap into the children's wealth of ideas and made learning more relevant. I could sense that the routines were freeing up my usual teacher directed learning and getting the children to direct their own explorations.

At this stage, I was still experimenting with the Culture of Thinking routines. At times, I felt that there was no continuity between my topics and there probably wasn't, I was trying out a different kind of language and was discovering that this led to the children offering a different kind of thinking. I felt excited as I knew that I was changing and so were the children. I was phrasing questions differently in a more open-ended manner and was opening up discussion from the children that displayed a deeper kind of thinking.

I felt encouraged to begin to try out some other routines. As the Jewish festival of 'Sukkoth' was approaching, I decided to try a 'Creative Question Starts' in the hope that this would lead to deeper discussion to introduce this topic.

We were now nearing October and Sukkot ,the festival of booths, when the Children of Israel built huts according to certain customs in the desert on their way to The Promised Land, Israel.

To begin the process, I introduced three pictures to the class - a Sukkah in the desert, an African hut, and a brick house. I asked the children if they had any questions they they might like to ask about these pictures. I encouraged students to use the 'Creative Question Starts' to help them

frame their questions. My hope was that this would open up the topic of 'Sukkot' and allow the class to ponder different dwellings in different cultures. Creative Question Starts provided students with the opportunity to practise developing good questions that provoked thinking and inquiry into a topic. I encouraged them to use questions starts like "Why, ... ? ;How different would it be if...?; What are the reasons...?; What if...?" and so on. Some of the questions students produced were:

How come we don't have animal skins around our Sukkah – we have hessian.

If I lived there , where would I keep my toys?

How can people live without a fridge? I think that all the food would go bad.

What would they do for a toilet?

How do you know that this house is in Africa?

- The sand in Africa is that colour.

Why do all people in Africa have brown skins?

Teacher: I come from Africa and my skin isn't brown.

- Did your skin change colour when you came to Australia?

- Did you live in a hut like that one?

Maybe they have brown skins from too much sun.

Maybe they are Aborigines.

- No, they're from Africa, it says so. It says Kenya and that's in Africa.

I felt that my classroom had come alive and that the children were exploring possibilities and asking questions that perhaps they would not have if I had had a more teacher directed approach.

I was rediscovering my original educational pedagogy and at the same time my way of teaching was changing. I noticed this by the children's responses to certain topics. At the time, I still wasn't sure where all this was taking me. At times I felt frustrated and at times I felt fearful – I felt that I was losing my confidence and I began questioning myself. Am I doing the right thing? I

was here to teach these children and to shape their learning... or were they here to shape my teaching? Perhaps this was a reciprocal effort. Perhaps I had to consider that we were co-learners and that I was not the primary educator. My teaching was changing.

Everything was not smooth sailing, of course. There were times when I had set out to use a particular routine to elicit certain ideas and reactions that were fitting to a topic being studied only to find that the children would lead me on a different path. Help! The routines weren't working!

And then it dawned on me ... I am promoting a 'culture of thinking' in my classroom and not a 'structure of thinking'. Whilst I wanted the children to follow the routine 'See, Think, Wonder' they were going someplace else. I realized that they were still thinking, challenging and questioning myself and each other. Initially my 'excuse' was 'Oh well, I am dealing with five year olds.' Later I understood that their responses were acceptable and I had to facilitate my own different perspectives inspired by their responses...as you will see. My students were becoming free to think for themselves and to direct their own questions. It is a beautiful age to work with. Students' responses can be so literal and funny and at times, they can 'blow you away'. A story that comes to mind.... Years ago I told a Prep class the story of Moses in the bible and how he had to flee Egypt after he had killed an Egyptian in order to avoid Pharaoh's wrath. I asked the children to draw any part of the story that came alive for them. One child drew a man and a big black dot in the middle of the page. When I asked what the black dot was, he explained: "That's the flee , of course!"

Inspired by what was already taking place in my classroom , at a later stage I decided to concentrate on 'Heroes in the Bible'. I now felt more confident in listening to how the children were thinking. This was a topic that I decided to concentrate on at the beginning of a Prep year after the children were continuously asking "Is this true?" about the Bible stories. I wanted them to understand, that each story had a message and a lesson to teach us and so I decided to focus on the qualities of the Biblical characters – the leaders and the people who merely taught us lessons in human nature.

More and more the effect that the thinking routines were having on the children's thought processes and conversations were becoming evident. They were beginning to develop a deeper understanding of their Jewish Identity and were becoming comfortable in being free to express their

thinking in a new way. They were questioning, analysing and making connections that I would not have thought possible.

After reading the story of 'David and Goliath' to the children, a discussion ensued:

' Now that is a real hero. Imagine killing a giant! And David was just a child and he wasn't afraid at all'

' Maybe God is the hero here, because he helped David'.

Teacher: 'Do you think that in order to be a hero, you have to save someone? '

No', 'you just have to have courage.' 'My mum said that I am a hero'

Teacher: 'Why would she say that'

Maybe because she loves me very much.

I asked the children to go home and to think about who their own heroes were. I received many responses but one that stood out was 'My Mum is a hero because I respect her.' I sensed that the children were beginning to reason with evidence. Once again they were making connections and forming opinions. What's more is that their thinking was becoming more philosophical. I had given them the opportunity to explore our discussions further. In fact, I was showing them that I expected them to continue their thinking away from our class discussions. I began to realize that I was becoming comfortable with the children taking risks – the release of responsibility; the fact that I was not controlling their learning – this was a sense of independence for me as well as for them.

In May 2007, we discussed a more recent festival that is not mentioned in the Bible, Israel's Independence in 1948. (Heb: Yom Ha'atzmuth) I took this opportunity to create another 'springboard' to continue with the topic of 'Heroes.'

The provocation was the story of the Birth of a nation, which I told the children. I asked the children if they thought that it was obvious who the heroes were from this story.

The Heroes are the soldiers that fought for their country.

Why didn't God just tell the Jewish people to go and take this country – He used to speak to people in the Bible – He doesn't speak to people any more. I don't know why.

Maybe God lost his voice from talking too much, just like Devorah (teacher) lost her voice.

Sometimes God talks to me.

Teacher: Really? How?

Yes, in my head sometimes.

Why do we always have to talk about Heroes?

Because in every story there are goodies and baddies and the goodies are always the heroes.

Teacher: Don't Perhaps heroes aren't that important –you want to talk about them anymore?

There's nothing else to talk about – There are goodies and baddies – nothing else.

Well I think that the soldiers who fought are real brave and so we should talk about them.

These conversations demonstrated that the children were in fact becoming independent learners in their own right. Once more I saw myself as a facilitator in the true sense of the word. The children were leading the discussion and were not merely waiting for me to intervene. They were continuing this conversation on their own accord. At times I felt like an observer.

I have since continued on this exciting journey of discovery which leads me to my most recent project which fell under the umbrella 'Identity'. I wanted to explore the concept of identity. It seemed important for me and my colleagues to find the link that the children made to their own identity as well as to their Jewish identities. We also felt that it would give the children the opportunity to freely explore who they were, without the confines of an already told story.

Our school's name, Bialik College was the provocation. Bialik is the name of

the founder of our school and we were focusing on that. We posed the following questions to guide our inquiry. Who was the man , 'Bialik' and what connections do we share? Who he was is paramount to our identity.

Without sharing his identity with the children, we began by using a series of different photos and poses of Chaim Nachman Bialik. Using protocols from The Cultures of Thinking, we did a 'See, Think, Wonder'. (pic of Bialik)

The children came up with comments like :

Perhaps he is someone's grandfather.

I think that he is writing a book.

I'm wondering if he lived long ago.

I'm wondering if he is the boss of the school.

I wonder who he is.

The children did not know much about this person and we asked them how we could explore this further. During their research we discovered that Chaim Nachman Bialik came from a strict religious orthodox background. He was one of the most renowned modern poets of his time and was part of 'The Enlightenment ' period, where he veered away from his strict religious orthodox culture. He loved children and many of his poems were about children playing.

We studied some of his poetry , some of which have become famous songs.

We visited two respected members of our community (age 90 and 92) who had an association with Bialik in the early nineteen hundreds, as well as being founding members of our school . The children interviewed them and were fascinated by the history that these two men brought to life about the man, Bialik and the beginnings of our school.

One child made an interesting connection: "My Hebrew name is the same as Bialik's first name. (Chaim) – I don't think that my mum knew him, but 'Chaim' means life."

Even though the children were becoming independent learners, I have noticed on many occasions that the children have a way of becoming 'fixed' on exploring one single aspect and I was trying to focus on the

topic of 'identity.' They go off on a tangent... and I keep bringing them back. Was I shaping their thinking to my own expectation of what I wanted to explore . I needed to remember that ' the child is made up of one hundred: one hundred languages...and a hundred hundred more.... (Loris Malaguzzi)' With these, they explore the world around them and are free to experiment and learn from their challenges. Do we have the right to reshape their thinking? They see things differently and I need to give time for the children to ponder and to scaffold their learning. I was unsure where this was leading, but young children are able to surprise you with the connections that they make. They go off on a tangent, yet all the while they are making connections and making their thinking visible.

Theodore Geisel, creator of the Dr Seuss series said. "Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind."

And so I didn't mind. I was embarking on a journey of 'identity' . We, the children and I, were reciprocal learners and thinkers in the process.

I also saw an opportunity to involve the parents in this as they had a huge role to play in the children's identity as after all, they played an integral part in the children having an understanding of their own names. I asked the parents to send a paragraph to school about how they chose their children's names and who they were named after. I received some very detailed information about this.

After sharing this information with the children I asked them what they were thinking.

I never realized that our mums and dads thought so hard about our names.

I thought that I was born and my mum just liked my name. But everyone was named after someone in their family or after someone in the Bible.

The children all agreed that our names are important. They had many theories. (as I said above) All of them were important and significant, however one profound comment took this discussion to another level.

Our names are important because you're like your name. I am my name, that's who I am.

Some of the connections that the children made, emphasized the humour in their associations: "If you put my name (Beau) and Tye's name together, you get a bow-tie. You know, but you spell it differently."

I did not know where this was leading, but young children are able to surprise you with the connections that they make. They go off on a tangent, yet all the while they are making connections and making their thinking visible.

I felt that the children were truly exploring themselves and their identity. Some of the children had been named after characters from the Bible and my colleagues and I decided to concentrate on the characters in the Bible and explore what kind of people they were and were they in actual fact role models for the children.

I have now reached the point of 'where do I go from here?' My objective is uncovering 'identity' ie. Personal identity and identity within our community. – Who am I? What are my origins? How does identity shape my character?.. or vice-versa, how does my character shape my identity?

Referring back to the parable at the beginning of my story, I am constantly asking myself, 'Am I the man who 'helped' the butterfly? Am I giving my students too much guidance, thus preventing them from becoming free thinkers? Somehow, I don't think so... Am I creating enough of the 'struggle' within my classroom in order for my students to become independent thinkers? I am teaching a subject that has certain confinements. Perhaps the fact that these thoughts are forever present in my teaching is helping both myself and my students to have the 'courage' that is needed to deepen their thinking and to make our thinking visible and meaningful. I feel that this is a process (just like the butterfly) and patience, consistence, and risk taking is all necessary to make a difference.

My journey continues....

I am Desre Kaye and this is my story so far...