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Let Me Learn in-service training: A teacher's experience

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Ms Montebello has consistently strived to transform her training into concrete classroom practice, and has integrated LML approaches into writing process methodology. She is presently one of the key resource persons within the St. Benedict's College, responsible for supporting teachers in implementing writing process methodology.
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Abstract:

This paper zooms in on the story of a classroom teacher who participated in the Let Me Learn professional staff development programme. It aims to illustrate how the LML process served as a "liberating experience" for the young teacher and, in particular, for one of her pupils.   Through the voice of the teacher, as expressed in her professional journal, this paper portrays the growth experienced by this teacher in terms of her intentionality in the choice of appropriate strategies of success. The paper will show how through the adoption of LML, this teacher has sharpened her skill in analyzing tasks and students' needs and demands through a metacognitive reflective process and through applying personalized responsive strategies.   The student improved conception of the learning environment, and motivation to behave better and perform in academic tasks was also noted.

Introduction

The National Minimum Curriculum has set the direction for understanding the teaching profession in terms of competences and effectiveness. Principle 12 of the aforementioned document defines an effective and competent teacher as a person who is professionally and academically prepared to safeguard democratic and social principles, attend to learning needs and develop the potential of every individual. As recognised by the NMC, such competences can only develop within a culture of continuous professional development "through reading, reflection, exchange of ideas with colleagues, courses and ongoing experimentation" (p.41).

This paper appropriates the voice of one classroom teacher and, in particular, a child whose behaviour is challenging in nature,   to show that a considerable difference in the teacher's and students' approach to learning has taken place as a result of the Let Me Learn professional staff development programme. We hope to illustrate how the LML process served as a "liberating experience" both for the teacher and also for the child in her class.

The in-service professional development programme in question is built on reflection and exchange of ideas between teachers, and on collaborative work between teachers and learners in their classrooms. This programme aims at involving teachers in an intensive and reflective process which assists them in transforming themselves into facilitators of learning by empowering young learners to take control over their own learning.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) uphold that the natural consequence of intentional teaching is intentional learning, which is
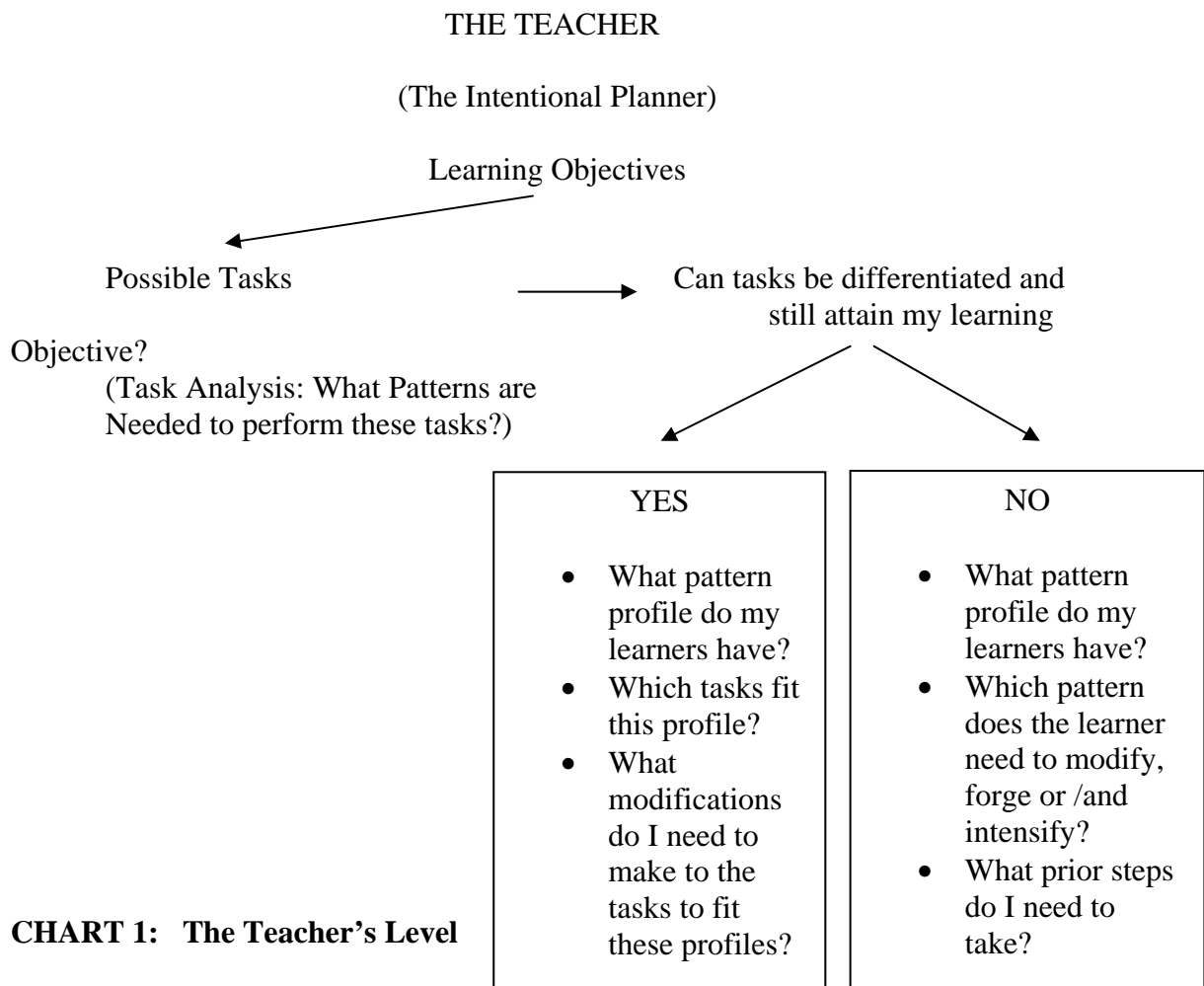
> Characterised by the desire to grow in understanding and responsible ownership of the learning experience… Intentional learners make the learning process work for them by recognizing how they use their own learning processes to explore, understand, and grow in their ability to learn effectively. (p.163)

Facilitating intentional learning requires a new way of professional development strategies that build on acknowledgement of self as learners, and move to a deeper understanding of the learning process as a paradigm of creative understanding and knowledge processing which is particular to each learner, but at the same time managed within a community of learners. The Let Me Learn training programme aims at equipping teachers with the skill of transformative planning (which has the learner as the focus) and builds on skills to help learners accomplish intentional learning through "developing workable, personal learning strategies, negotiating with the learning environment (most important, the teacher), and developing respect for various learning modes" (Osterman and Kottkamp, 2004).

This training programme, which has as its conceptual framework the Interactive Learning Model (Johnston, 1994,1996.), provides teachers with the knowledge of how the three mental processes, namely Cognition, Conation and Affectation (Philip, 1936) synchronically interact within the four patterned operations, namely *sequence* (the learner who wants clear directions and organises and plans carefully), *precision*

(the learner who seeks details, researches answers, and questions accuracy), *technical* reasoning (the learner who solves problems on his/her own using a hands-on approach) and *confluence* (the learner who takes risks and embraces unusual approaches). These mental operations function as part of the interface between the brain-mind connection, at the juncture where stimulus which has entered the brain is translated into symbols which the mind can process and store in order to retain, retrieve when needed. The act of translating these stimuli into symbols of language, numeracy, etc, involves the interactive mesh of our mental processes, namely the four identified learning patterns (Johnston 2005). This training programme also provides teachers with a forum to transform knowledge into practical metacognitive strategies that they use as a tool in the planning of learning episodes that put the learner at the centre.

The Let Me Learn Process thus works on multiple platforms (for more information on the LML process consult www.letmelearnmalta.com or www.letmelearn.org). For the purpose of this paper we will consider two levels, namely, the facilitator-teacher and the learner levels. The model below depicts the shift in the way we understand knowledge acquisition and the learning process - from a teacher focus in which the student is a passive recipient of content and passive performer of pre-packaged skills/strategies to an intentional performer, an active learner who is involved in meta-analysis of the compatibility between the task and his/her own (the learner's) approach to learning . Here, learning is highlighted and moved to the frontal consciousness level so as to affectively and intentionally be dealt with.

THE TEACHER

(The Intentional Planner)

Learning Objectives

Possible Tasks   ⟶   Can tasks be differentiated and
                                      still attain my learning

Objective?
        (Task Analysis: What Patterns are
        Needed to perform these tasks?)

YES	NO
• What pattern profile do my learners have? • Which tasks fit this profile? • What modifications do I need to make to the tasks to fit these profiles?	• What pattern profile do my learners have? • Which pattern does the learner need to modify, forge or /and intensify? • What prior steps do I need to take?

CHART 1:   The Teacher's Level

The model above also shows how the teacher's perceptions and assumptions about learning, and specifically about how a specific learning episode can be taught, are brought to the awareness level and analysed in the light of the learner's profile. This paradigm of learning emphasizes the role of the learner as an active participant - an intentional performer.

The second model illustrates how the learner is equipped with metacognitive tools to analyse the patterns demanded by the task at hand, when the teacher's intentional consciousness allows space for the intentional learning process.
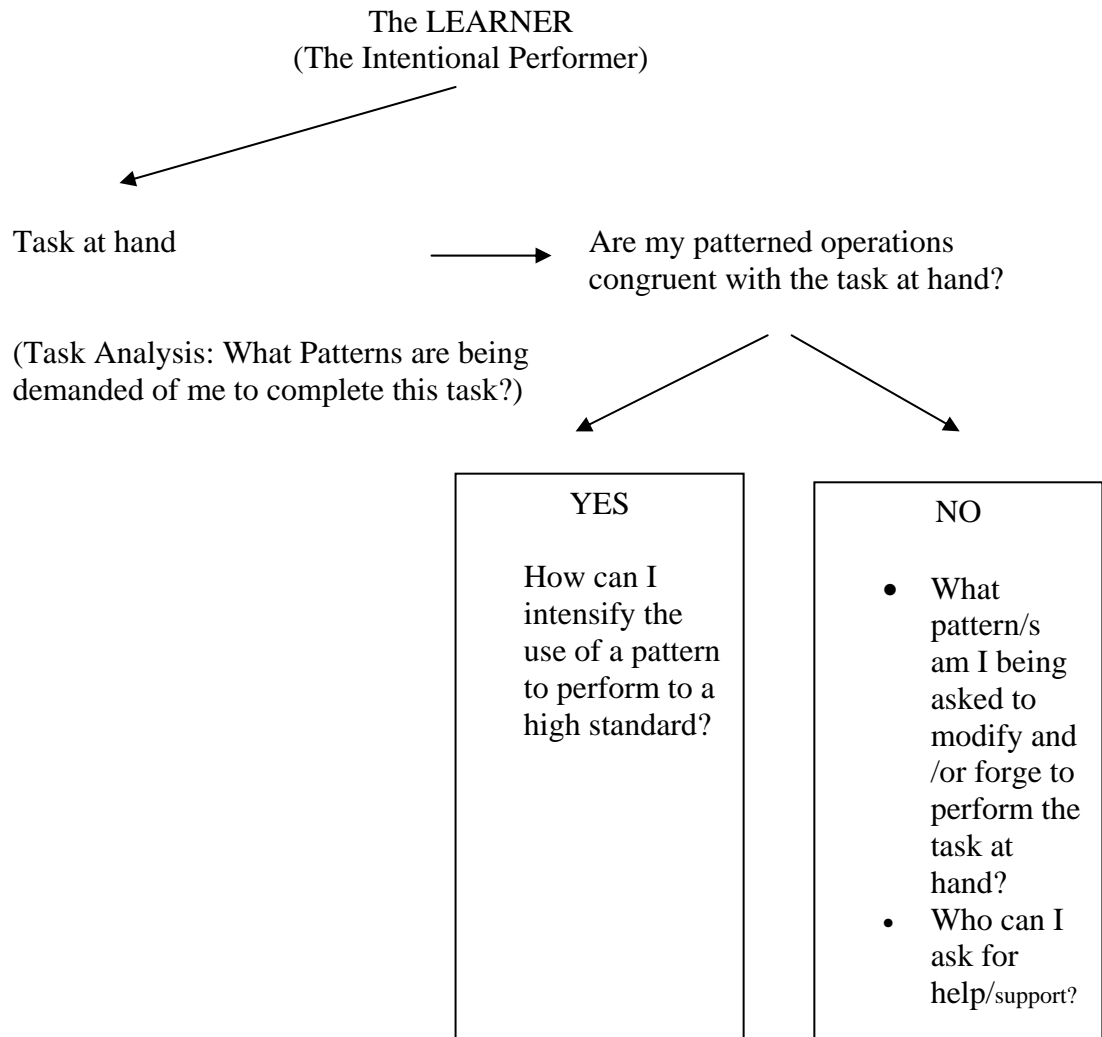
CHART 2: The Learner's Level

A Teacher's Experience

Maria started teaching in 1990, at a small rural village in the south of Malta. This school caters for 500 students and has 19 mixed-ability classes, 12 primary and 7 kindergarten classes. This is how Maria expressed her experience of her first day of work:

> *"Teach in a school in the south of Malta! You're completely crazy," a friend warned me. "You'll ruin your career."*
>
> *I was taken back. "What do you mean "ruin my career?"*
>
> *"When you've decided you've had enough, and apply for a job in a better school, you'll be labelled as a "state south" teacher. Be smart – get out before you get in."*
>
> *But I wanted to work with primary school children and teaching jobs were available here.*
>
> *I graduated in the early 1990s. I walked to my first day of work at school with theory, slogans, cliché words, ideal practice in my mind. My new Head Teacher told me she thought I'd made the right choice. She welcomed me to the ranks of primary teachers, leading me to her office saying, "Just call me Joan." I relaxed immediately.*
>
> *In her mid-fifties, she had a disarming grin and a thick lock of grey hair that looked strangely out of character. A china mug on her desk read "I'm the Boss." It was clear that the mug was a joke. "The excellent grade I see in your Degree Certificate won't matter much here," she began. "This is the real world." She leaned over the desk. "I only have one criterion for appraising new teachers. Every child in this school, and I mean each one, has the right to be loved. No matter, how difficult the child is, no matter how he or she drives you crazy from the very first day…….. give them all the love and affection you can. When it feels too impossible, come and see me and we'll talk. All right Maria? Now good luck, and we'll see you in the morning."*
>
> *Later I ventured into the kitchen, the only space available as a staff room. Several teachers were crammed into the tiny room, dutifully cleaning up the coffee mugs. I introduced myself*
>
> *"We heard you were coming" answered a voice near the sink. A big, strong looking man came over and introduced himself as the school assistant head, Joe. I shook his hand, which was still dripping with dish water. "I suppose you'll manage just fine," he said, as he looked me over. "You've got youth on your side at least….doesn't she Jane?" An elderly woman with a friendly smile came over and gave me a pat on the shoulder.*
>
> *"Just keep yourself in shape and you'll survive, young lady. Look how long I've lasted. I've been at this game for over forty years."*

My classroom is a "squarish" building on the first floor of the school. The inside was hot and lifeless. An old fashioned roller blind filtered the summer sun, shining a dead green light over the empty desks. There was only one picture on the wall: a washed out, glue-streaked poster advocating bird life. A wounded bird was covered with blood whilst miserably asking "Why?" The desks and chairs of my class were scattered all over the classroom, some of them looked like they had been collected from the old school storehouse. The blackboard was in such poor condition that you almost had to chisel letters on it.

I can't recall many details from my first days of actually working with my pupils. I tried to ignore their individual differences and treat them as one giant, uniform mass. I felt that if I lumped them into a single personality, I would be less overwhelmed." (Abstract from her teaching journal)

This is indeed how many novice teachers experience their first encounter with the reality of teaching. Often, as Bezzina and Portelli's (2005) study shows, '(B)eginning teachers commonly state that they are unprepared for both the workload, and the social problems'. The 'reality shock' described in Veenman (1984) leads teachers to "the concept of homogeneity,…(in which) the idea that one can create homogenous groups of learners by using performance and ability to stream students into different classrooms or schools" (Borg and Calleja, 2006, p.147) often leads teachers to viewing the class as a '*single personality*'.

We believe that it is only through reflective practice, in which teachers critically reflect on the strategies and methods they use, that a transformation can come about. But encountering reality without having alternative means will only lead to frustration. Maria conceived of the Let Me Learn in-service training as a place where '*I could ask how and why our learning gets constructed the way it does*'. In her words, the programme

'*changed me both as a teacher and as a person*'. It gave her the possibility to start '*looking at my pupils as learners functioning as active persons committed to self and social empowerment. Equally important, it gave me strength and showed me new directions that could allow me to make serious inroads in school reform efforts…*'

The teacher here experienced the LML process as a process of creative changes brought about in her methodology, from one that simply sees herself as a transmitter of knowledge to one in which '*pupils construct their own versions of knowledge and through an array of interactive strategies pupils make meaning from their educational experience to embody a constructivist approach.*'

This is how Maria experienced the LML process:

'*The LML process begins almost immediately with data gathering. Through the use of the Learning Connections Inventory (LCI), I gather information about myself as learner and about my pupils. In a collaborative and supportive setting, I learn more about my pupils through activities and*

discussions. As I analyse this information, I develop an understanding of the class learning patterns.

As a teacher, I believe that the LCI plays a particularly valuable role in the LML process because it facilitates the identification of those important underlying theories-in-use about learning. It is a powerful tool to tap and measure the strength of the patterns directly.

I also gather information about pupils through observation and through LCI. Pupils gather information about their own behaviour as learners through systematic data (the LCI), direct observation (experiential activities) and reflective assessment (journaling). Observational opportunities are broad and deep, and they take place continuously throughout the process, supplementing and enriching the ongoing analysis.

Using tools like the Word Wall, I also gather information about the requirements of various learning tasks and again assess the pupils' own combination of learning patterns. This knowledge is an important prelude to developing more successful teaching strategies (Osterman and Kotthamp 2004:79). As partners in the education process, pupils, teachers and parents grow in understanding of how to align strategies with the requirements needed for successful accomplishment of various tasks. In short, everything and anything related to learning that is observed becomes a potential opportunity for analysis, and every analysis generates the potential for additional behaviour and data collection.' (Abstract from her teaching journal)

Through this new self-awareness, Maria could inform her planning with substantial information about the class profile. She could see that:

'The majority of pupils in my class use Sequence frequently so they require a substantive content, clear and complete directions and few to no changes once tasks are given. It helps when I do modelling of activities whilst providing samples of the work product that I am seeking, as this alleviates some of the pupils' anxiousness or frustration they may feel when faced with tasks.

Having a high number of students who use Sequence frequently, I do a regular thoughtful check of how clear and consistent I am with my directions when I give class work. These children, overall, want a plan and want to be as organised as possible.

My high Precision and high Sequence may lead me to give out a lot of detailed information and a lot of importance to organisation. I usually fail to address the technical students. This is an area of self improvement in my teaching methods. I am very cautious that due to my pupils' moderate low use of Confluence, they may feel uncomfortable with a necessary but too sudden change class activity or assignment.'

She could also problematize her teaching strategies in the light of this profile. Thus, while giving the children the opportunity to reflect on different patterns, she could help them strategize by taking on '*a guiding and questioning role, often necessitating*

the use of the learners' mother tongue, to encourage them to reflect on their basic assumptions about learning. By doing this, I model the types of questions about the learning patterns that pupils will gradually learn to ask themselves.'

The teacher could now appreciate the importance of combining metacognitive information with a cognitive approach (Clarke 2001:12):

> ' *For example, in order to get children to learn a group of new words the teacher might ask them to sort them into groups (the sequence pattern used in the cognitive strategy of sorting). However, there is little point in children doing this if they do not realise why they are doing it. In other words, the reflective dimension (the metacognitive strategy of decoding how to tackle the task and evaluating it afterwards) is missing. In addition, some children may find other learning patterns more effective such as copying words, associating words with pictorial images, repeating words and so on.*'

Working with Karol

This in-service training also helped Maria to understand Karol, a pupil in her class who she describes as:

> '*One of the more colourful characters in my class was a seven-year old named Karol . Hated and feared – sometimes loved – Karol literally ran the school, a role he played with the talent of an artist. He was a master technician when it came to creating his own image. At a moment's notice he can become Leader, Fighter, Revenger, Champion, King of the Corridor. Everything and everyone was a point of reference for his act.*

> *The teachers and the school administration treated Karol with a subtle defence. Any attempt at confrontation made them nervous. He was only seven, but he could immobilize you with a glance, quickening the breath, causing the heart to pound.*

> *He was a foreign boy, adopted by a Maltese family. Unfortunately, this boy was encountering hard family problems. Feelings of rejected ness were transforming this boy in a rebel within his environment. In class, he could not sit down for one single moment. One day in November, just after a school lottery activity, the boy felt very bad because his number was not drawn. He turned suddenly and punched a girl on her forehead. The girl went unconscious and the school had to call for the hospital assistance. In a few words, the boy was the "uncontrollable" of the school.*

> *After a few weeks of trying to teach Karol according to the school syllabus and the approaches I had been using in my class teaching, I knew that I would either have to change my entire approach or sacrifice my stomach. My health had been suffering…"* (Abstract from her teaching journal*)*

Maria introduced journal writing to her class (an idea which she picked up from the Malta Writing workshop) and Karol bought a small diary, '*I can still remember the black and white prints of this diary. He never bothered to bring anything to school*

with him.   One can say that this "diary" was the exception.' The teacher understanding the child's combination of learning patterns could strategize and give the child the possibility to express himself, his feelings on something which he owned and considered his:

> *'The writing process in a diary, based on precision and confluence, provided the child (with a combination of learning patterns lead by confluence and precision) and the teacher with a "tool" for communication – something which was lacking and which was causing a lot of rebellion and aggression. For the first time, Karol was using his pencil to write in his diary. His sentences were poorly structured, grammatically incorrect and difficult to read and to understand. However, the very "act" of writing, based on his prominent learning patterns, was quieting down the child. His face could be seen relieved. He fixed his eyes on his writings for quite a long time. Often I could see him smiling at his diary.'*

The writing process helped this particular student to define himself and to name his experiences. A student's voice as defined by McLaren (1989: 227) is not a reflection of the world as much as it is a constitutive force that both mediates and shapes reality within historically constructed practices and relationships of power. Each individual voice is shaped by its owner's particular cultural history and prior experience. Writing, for young Karol, suggested the means that he had at his disposal to make himself 'heard' and to define himself as an active participant in the world.

The Let Me Learn process, in turn, helped the teacher to understand how classroom meaning is produced, legitimated or de-legitimated. This is not merely a technical concern but, more important, a moral and political consideration that 'must provide the basis for any critical pedagogy, especially a pedagogy that is attentive to the dialectic of power and meaning.' (McLaren,1989, p.227). In many cases, schools do not allow students who do not conform to the other pupils' learning patterns to affirm their own individual and collective voices. The teacher in this case-study could understand how this happens. The Let Me Learn process made this teacher reflect on the often use of the voice of "common sense" to frame the classroom instruction and the daily pedagogical activities. The teacher's voice can partake of an authoritative discourse that frequently silences the voices of the students. In the case study, diligence, uniformity and achievement were given prominence by the teacher's learning patterns.   Students like Karol who were 'outcasts', rebels and non-conformists were not given space in this classroom when a common 'voice' was used to address them.

On the one hand, the 'oppressive power' of a teacher's authoritative voice can be seen in instances of what Bourdieu (1973:227) refers to as symbolic violence. Symbolic violence was in fact exercised when, the teacher drew on her learning patterns too narrowly in order to challenge and disconfirm the experiences and beliefs of students having different learning patterns. On the other hand, the emancipatory power of a teacher's authoritative voice was exercised when a student voice was allowed to assert itself so as to be both confirmed and analyzed, in terms of the particular patterns and ideologies that it represents.

> *"Knowledge of your learning patterns forwards a liberating education that hopes to develop a new kind of discourse, one that will inspire us to play a more active role in school and classroom life. In my view, such a discourse is vital in order for educators and others to understand the specifics of oppression and the possibilities for democratic struggle and renewal in our schools. Guiding this transformation, must be a commitment to authentic democracy and social justice, a commitment that is undertaken in the Let Me Learn process in solidarity with the subordinated and the disenfranchised. In this, I feel satisfied that I have contributed enthusiastically to the implementation of the mission statement of my school which aims to include each and every pupil while developing their full potential. This practice implements one of the main principles of the National Minimum Curriculum which forwards an inclusive education, based on commitment, on the part of the learning community, to fully acknowledge individual differences and to professing as well as implementing inclusionary principles."* (Abstract from the teacher's journal)

In the latter instance, the teacher voice provided a context within which students could understand the various learning forces and configurations of power that have helped give shape to their own voice. Students, like Karol in this case study, who exhibit everyday practices in writing can learn to free themselves form the authoritative hold of certain discourse as a means of self-empowerment, without rejecting their own discourse.

The writing process provided the teacher and the student with "openness" – openness to different experiences and perspectives. The Let Me Learn Process in turn held the teacher to entail such dimensions as receptivity, listening, tolerance and suspension of judgement. Receptivity is required for openness in writing as one must "open oneself up" to something new and different. Listening assumes a stance of sympathy for the different view. Next is tolerance, that is acknowledging difference and even disagreement. Finally, there is the temporary suspension of judgement that helps the teacher to consider and respect ideas and experiences that are different from her own.

The journal entries presented in this paper illustrate thus the power of writing twinned with knowledge of learning patterns in forwarding emancipatory interests. This is inextricably related not only to a high degree of self-understanding, but also to the possibility for teachers and students to join together in a collective voice as part of a 'social movement' dedicated to restructuring learning conditions both within and outside of schooling. Thus, we must understand the concept of the Let Me Learn process in terms of its own values, as well as in relation to the ways it functions to shape and mediate school and voices. This represents an attack on the unjust practices that are actively at work in wider society. But most importantly, it forwards a pedagogy based on the Let Me Learn process that begins with the assumption that the stories that students, schools, teachers construct can form the basis for a variety of approaches to teaching and learning in which hope and power play integral role.

> *"I recognised an approach based less on specifying at national level the detailed content of teaching and more on specifying and emphasising outcomes – results required by the learner. The Let Me Learn, in this concept,*

is an approach that requires new thinking and new skills form all of us involved in school-based and class-based curriculum development. I felt urged to use the Let Me Learn process as a flexible springboard with which I could reach great height with my school, with my class and with my children."

The child himself expresses this new freedom in one of his entries where he writes:

"I'm feeling a lot better these days. Writing gives me an unusual feeling inside me. It's like somebody else comes inside my body. I can talk, joke and cry with my diary."

In a note he wrote in his diary, he expresses a feeling of gratitude for his teacher:

"Dear Miss. I have something to tell you. I want to tell you that I love you. I not only love you because you are my teacher. I love you and I respect you. I love you like a mother not just because you teacher. But I wish that I had the heart to tell you that I love you other than this letter."

Yours truly,

Karol

The above written words, coming from a child who was at great risk of being rejected by the same system that was trying to educate him, is truly a relief. This teacher, with her awareness of yet another possibility of reaching out, has succeeded to bring to this child a new hope. In her words

'The Let Me Learn process helped me as a teacher to find better ways of making my classroom a vital place for all my pupils – a place where pupils can be empowered to gain a sense of control over their destinies rather than they feel trapped by their lack of knowledge or social status.'

Conclusion

The growth experienced by this teacher is evident. Other teachers have reported similar experiences of improved intentionality in the choice of appropriate strategies of success. In using LML this teacher has gained more skill in analyzing tasks and students' needs and demands through a metacognitive reflective process and applying personalized responsive strategies.

The child improved conception of the learning environment and motivation to behave better and perform in academic tasks is also noted. This new understanding of his learning processes and the ability to express his inner feelings in writing has resulted in better behaviour and as a result better academic performance.

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