

«That is what our job is. We light the flame»: An interview with Valerie Fisher, a Canadian elementary teacher at R. Gordon Sinclair Memorial School, Kingston, Ontario

«Nuestro trabajo trata de esto. Encendemos la llama»: Una entrevista con Valerie Fisher, una maestra canadiense de educación primaria en la R. Gordon Sinclair Memorial School, Kingston, Ontario

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Valerie Fisher is an experienced elementary school teacher with specialized training in music. She has been teaching in elementary education in Canada for more than 30 years. In learning about her professional background, we will travel across the country, from Nova Scotia to Alberta and finally to Ontario. In the country of Canada, education is under provincial jurisdiction. Teaching in three provinces has given Mrs. Fisher a colourful taste of this diverse and broad country. Last 25th March I had the opportunity to spend one day in a Canadian school with Valerie Fisher, in her classroom at R. Gordon Sinclair Memorial School, located in Kingston (Ontario). She has a «split grade» class, which means that she teaches grade 1 (6-7 years old) and 2 (7-8 years old) together.

¹ First of all, I would like to acknowledge professor Rosa Bruno-Jofré who suggested the idea of this interview. She introduced me to Valerie Fisher, who kindly welcomed me at R. Gordon Sinclair Memorial School and allowed me to participate in her classroom. Mrs. Fisher also responded very patiently to all my questions and provided me materials to support this work. Finally, I would like to thank the school staff for their hospitality during my visit.

The school is located in a residential suburb of the city of Kingston. Most of its students reside in the Reddendale neighbourhood, and walk to school. Others are bussed to the school from the Sutton Mills area, a few miles away. R. Gordon Sinclair Memorial School opened in 1950, and since then it has maintained the communitarian nature under which it was created. The school was named after a chemistry professor, R. G. Sinclair, who was very involved in the community. He was the chair of the Kingston Township School Board, president of the Kingston Horticultural Society, and a leader in his church. After his tragic death in a drowning accident in 1949, the community wanted to remember him by naming the new school after him².



Main entrance of the Gordon Sinclair Memorial School

During my visit to the school, I had the opportunity to talk with Mrs. Fisher –the name that her students call her– and discuss various topics related to education in Canada, and more specifically in Ontario. Her broad background led me to ask Mrs. Fisher about some of the major changes she has observed in education in Canada over the last few decades. Mrs. Fisher also discussed some organizational issues related to education in Ontario, such as the advantages and disadvantages of the «split grades». An essential issue in this interview had to do with bilingualism in Canadian schools, because as a country with English and French as official languages, children have the opportunity to attend either English Schools or schools that offer programs called «French Immersion». Since Mrs. Fisher is also a music teacher, we discussed the place of music in education in Ontario nowadays. Finally, we addressed questions related to the cultural pluralism that characterises Canada and therefore its schools, and the way public

² Information available at: http://sinclair.limestone.on.ca/Our_School/

education addresses diversity. Hopefully this interview with a Canadian teacher will be of interest to the readers of *Foro de Educación*.

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Patricia Quiroga Uceda: *Mrs. Fisher, knowing that you have been living and working in different provinces in Canada, could you tell us more specifically about your professional background?*

Valerie Fisher: I completed my undergraduate degree at University of Western Ontario in London (Ontario) in 1972. I earned a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Music. Most of my subjects were related to music (conducting, harmony, and the theory and history of music) but I also studied a variety of other subjects including English, French, and Psychology. After that, I completed my Bachelor of Education at Acadia University in Nova Scotia in 1977. Upon receiving my B. Ed, I taught music for two years in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. I directed choirs, taught a variety of instruments, and music history and theory. At that time Nova Scotia had a well-established music education system. Children from grades 1 to 6 had music classes 3 times a week for 30 minutes³ as well as the opportunity to sing in a school choir.

My husband and I moved to Edmonton, Alberta in 1979, where I taught music from grades 1 to 6, in a situation similar to Nova Scotia. During those years, Alberta was experiencing tremendous economic growth, which meant that I had an ideal teaching situation with many instruments and a very large classroom. The school I taught in had both an English and French Immersion program, which enabled me to teach musical repertoire both in English and French. I also became affiliated with the University of Alberta's Music Education Department where I assisted with the training of music teachers. In order to further enrich my music pedagogy, I attended the University of Calgary's Summer School for three summers and completed a Diploma in Fine Arts in Music. I studied with master teachers from Hungary. In Hungary there is a very well known and highly respected pedagogy program called the «Kodály Method». Zoltán Kodály was a Hungarian composer who gathered and transcribed Hungarian folk melodies and created a comprehensive pedagogy based on these folk melodies. This method has been adapted and utilized in many countries throughout the world in developing music education for young children⁴.

³ In Canada the time allocated to each subject is organized in minutes.

⁴ Zoltán Kodály (Hungary, 1882-1967). Kodály's most significant contribution was the development of a philosophy of music education. His educational principles were drawn from the educational theories of Pestalozzi, Vygotsky and Bruner. One of the most pervading learning concepts is the use of the child centred

In 1992 my family moved to Kingston, Ontario. At that time the teaching of French was deemed very important and was taught daily in the English elementary school program for about forty minutes beginning in grade 4. It is my understanding that prior to my arrival in Kingston, many schools had employed music teachers (specialists) to teach music. Because of the emerging importance of teaching French, monetary resources were re-allocated in order to bring French into the classroom on a daily basis. As a result, the arts suffered, particularly music. I arrived at this transitional time. For the first few years I taught music to children twice a week for 30 minutes, but with the implementation of more French into the curriculum, many music teachers' jobs were phased out and their jobs changed. As a result, many music teachers became classroom teachers. This change applied to me as well.

P.Q.U.: *Since you have a long background working in education I would like to ask you more generally about the changes that have taken place in education in Canada during these last decades. Which changes would you identify?*

V.F.: I think one of the main changes I have seen is a greater focus on test results, marks, and being competitive with other high-achieving countries in the world. There has been an emphasis on improving test scores in Language and Mathematics through the use of a variety of forms of assessment. For the last 20 years we have had provincial testing in Language and Mathematics at the end of grade 3 and grade 6. Some teachers, myself included, have felt that their teaching has become more prescriptive and focussed on learning expectations because of the necessity to prepare for the provincial testing.

Another major change is that a great deal of money has been taken out of the arts and put into technology, to purchase iPads, smartboards, and other technological innovations. In addition, funds have been allocated to pay technology specialists to teach teachers how to use these new technologies. As a consequence, we no longer have as many music teachers, art teachers, or gym teachers who specialize in these fields.

At the grade 1/2 level I don't use much technology in my classroom. I want the children to hold and read real books and not computers, to print on real paper, and to draw their own pictures. I want them to create with their own hands, and to know that they possess this ability without necessarily having to turn to technology. It is important for me to share my excitement about discovering new

approach of «sound before sight» also known as «concrete before abstract», an approach that was reflected in the education philosophy of Pestalozzi (Caroline Newmann, 2006, Music Makers: Elementary – The Kodály Method and Learning Theories, Canadian Music Educator, 47 (4), 48-49). His music program was widely taken up by pedagogues after World War II.

ideas through reading and discussing ideas face to face, rather than a video on a screen doing it for me. That is what our job is. We light the flame.



This is the class of Mrs. Fisher before children start to arrive. In winter time children remove their boots outside of their class and put on their indoor shoes

P.Q.U.: *Your analysis of the changes that have taken place in education in Canada leads me to ask you about the emphasis that has been put on bilingualism and French education over the last few decades in Canada. Here in Ontario there are English Schools and French Immersion programs⁵. But from what I have seen today at the school, the French Immersion doesn't work for some children, like Tom. What is your opinion of this issue and how do you deal with the children that are transferred from French immersion to your school and arrive to your class, which is in English?*

V.F.: Tom is a new student in my class who just arrived three days ago. His parents put him in French Immersion in kindergarten. He completed two years of kindergarten and then Grade 1 in French Immersion. He wasn't excelling in Grade 2. His mother worried that his self-esteem was suffering because Tom saw that other children were doing better than he was. So his parents had him tested to see if there was any learning disability. The testing showed he was an average student. Because he has never learned to read in English, I have given him extra instruction each day, beginning with the material that the other children had learned in Grade 1. I listened to him read and assessed his reading level. The first

⁵ French Immersion programs and French popularity vary across Canada. In the case of the Limestone School Board in Kingston, they offer four French Immersion Programs: Early Immersion Program (From Kindergarten to Grade 2 the day is 100% in French, starting English instruction in Grade 3); Core French Program (200 minutes of French instruction per week for students in Grades 4-8); Primary Core French (200 minutes of French instruction per week beginning in Grade 1); and Extended French/Late Immersion Program (70% French instruction and 30% English instruction for grades 7 and 8). Information available at: <http://www.limestone.on.ca/Programs/French/Home%20Page>

day he read 15 words, the second day he read 23 words, and the third day he read 35 words confidently. Many children thrive in a French Immersion program, but others, like Tom, may become discouraged and are better placed in an English program. It is exciting to see him discover the joy of reading, as he develops the skills that are necessary to be a successful student.

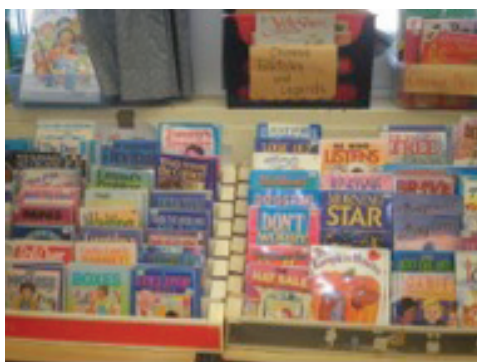
P.Q.U.: *I would like to ask you now about the organization of your class, especially about the «split classes». What are the reasons for joining two grades in one class? In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of split classes?*

V.F.: When I began teaching for the Limestone School Board twenty years ago, my classes ranged in size from 24 to 32 children, all in the same grade. The exact number would change year by year. That is a large number of students to have in a primary classroom (grades 1, 2, 3). A few years ago, the Ontario Ministry of Education decided that it was better to have no more than 20 students in one primary classroom. But in order to organize a class with 20 students, it is sometimes necessary to combine grades. Most classes in my school now are «split classes». An advantage is that when you have a split 1/2 there is flexibility as to where you place students based on their abilities and friendships. Sometimes, children who have personality clashes and don't get along with one another can make the learning environment difficult, so a split class allows us create an ideal mix of students, taking into consideration their different abilities and needs. I believe this arrangement can foster a good learning environment for everyone.

For example, my grade 1's are very strong students, but many of my grade 2's are below grade level in math and reading. A split class helps the grade 2's by enabling them to review the grade 1 curriculum, which they need because they are behind. When the school year began, many of my grade 2 students were at the very beginning stages of reading. The reading program I have presented to the grade 1's has been beneficial in strengthening the skills of the grade 2 students as well. In a split class, the stronger students have the opportunity to exhibit leadership, and be excellent models for the weaker students. If you put all the weaker students together in one class they don't have peers to emulate and grow towards. I also think it is important that children share their work and learn from one another: «Oh! I see how beautifully my friend has done that. I am going to try that approach in my work». Or they recognise: «Oh! My work is stronger than this student. I see my classmate is struggling, so maybe I can help him understand this better». The children never express these thoughts out loud, they are polite, but they are well aware of their abilities. The grade 2's, who may have been very quiet and lacking confidence last year when they were in grade 1 are now a year older. They can offer leadership to the younger children who look

up to them because they are older. So even though some of the grade 2's may be weaker students, the split class gives them the opportunity to be leaders and feel more confident.

However, there are some disadvantages to a split class. The biggest challenge is that you have two different curricula for grades 1 and 2 in all subjects. In order to teach both grades successfully at one time, it is necessary to integrate the subject matter. For example, in the grade 2 social studies program the students learn about the lives and culture of people in different parts of the world. In order to integrate the social studies into the language lesson today, I chose a beautiful folk tale from Africa, from a Rwandan tribe called the «Bantu tribe». We discussed the Bantu people, the nation of Rwanda; we looked at a map and discussed the effect that the climate had on their lives, and so on. We also talked about the different elements and characteristics of a folk tale. The children learned that these folk tales were usually passed on from generation to generation by the grandmother telling the story. This approach combined social studies with language arts. It would be impossible to cover the entire curriculum for grades 1 and 2 if the subject matter was not integrated.



In the pictures, some of the bookshelves that are all over the classroom

P.Q.U.: *I would now like to focus on another big topic that has already been mentioned: music education. Your training is as a music teacher and as you said, during your time in Alberta you had the chance to teach a lot of music. Could you please explain how music was organized in the curriculum in Alberta, and nowadays in Ontario? How many hours of music do students get per week?*

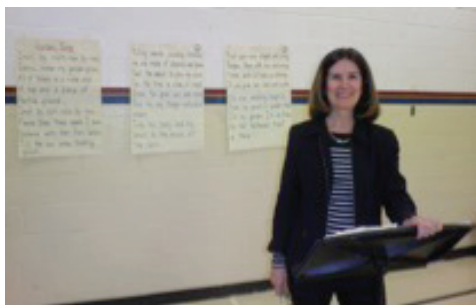
V.F.: In elementary schools in Ontario, music is usually taught by the classroom teacher. The arts subjects (music, art, dance and drama) receive 90 minutes of instruction per week. The way we have organized it in our school is that I teach music to all the children in grades 1, 2 and 3 at the same time for 45

minutes each week. I also teach music to all the children in grades 4, 5 and 6 for 45 minutes once a week. During the time that I am teaching music to grades 4, 5 and 6, another teacher comes into my 1/2 class to teach art.

When I was in Alberta I taught music full-time. The children had music class three times a week for 30 minutes. They sang in choirs and played a number of instruments in a large and well-equipped music room. Now, I teach 80 or 90 children from three different grade levels at the same time so my program does not have an instrumental component. Moreover, I don't have a large budget for buying instruments and other music materials. This is why a choral-based music program works best in our school at the present time.

P.Q.U.: *With this limitation of resources and time, how do you organize your music lessons? What do you teach?*

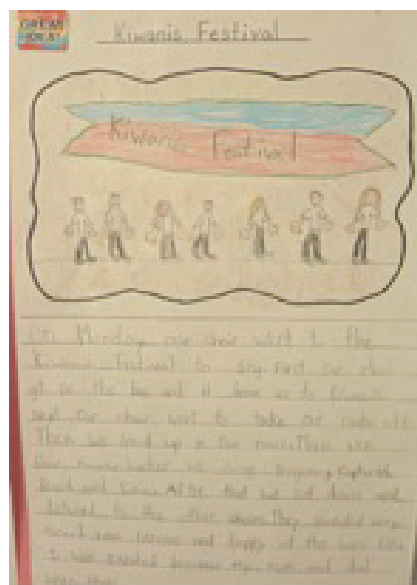
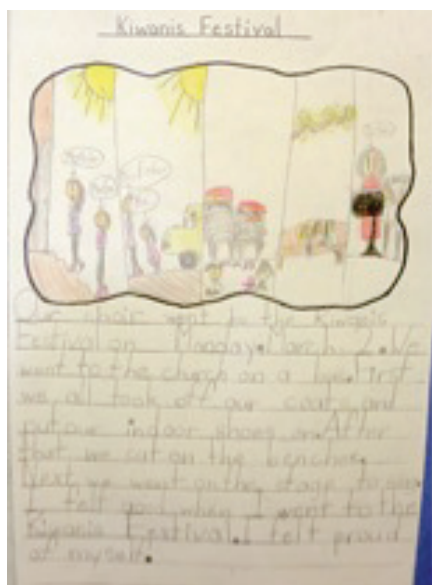
V.F.: I am able to teach the most important musical concepts through singing such as phrasing, dynamics, melody, and harmony. The children do not play instruments, but through singing, they do develop an excellent ear and have a strong sense of rhythm. I also teach them music from different cultures and languages such as French, Gaelic, Hebrew, Arabic, and Hindi. All the music I choose must be quality music. I don't teach what I call «bubble-gum» music but what I consider to be «nutritious music». This is music that has stood the test of time and may be several hundred years old. I believe that one can learn a great deal about people's culture through their music. I try to find music that represents the various cultural backgrounds of the children who are in the school.



In the picture on the left, Mrs. Fisher before her music lesson. In the right, Mrs. Fisher and Mrs. Airth, who is a former teacher. Currently, Mrs. Airth is retired and volunteers as the accompanist of the choirs

P.Q.U.: *I saw on the website of the school that your students won a gold seal (medal) at the Kiwanis Music Festival. What is this festival and how did you get to participate in it?*

V.F.: The Kiwanis Festival is a music festival organized for young performers. The performers include a variety of soloists, instrumentalists, bands, orchestras, and choirs throughout Kingston and surrounding towns. The Kiwanis Committee hires professional adjudicators (judges) to listen to musical performances and offer feedback and awards. When I first came to Kingston, I got involved with the Kiwanis Music Festival. At that time there were at least 10 children's choirs participating. Now, twenty years later, there are only a few children's choirs who perform because there are fewer teachers with the time or training to direct choirs. R. G. Sinclair choirs perform every year because we believe that a public performance is a wonderful experience for children. I can remember myself as a child becoming very excited about performing in a public event like a festival. It is somewhat like a competition, and children love the feeling of working toward a goal and achieving success. They are excited because their parents and teachers come, they are on a stage, and there is a judge who tells them what they do well and how to improve their singing. We have been honoured with many gold seals over the years, which is a source of great pride in our school.



Some writing and drawings made by the children relating their experience in the Kiwanis Music Festival

P.Q.U.: *What about music concerts at the school? Do you organize any during the school year?*

V.F.: It is less common for schools to perform concerts these days. We continue to hold concerts at Gordon Sinclair Memorial School because we enjoy them and have established a tradition of doing so. In the past, schools would perform «Christmas Concerts», but now our concerts are more multicultural and secular to reflect the diverse society we live in and the families in our community. Every December, we have a «multicultural concert» that includes songs celebrating a variety of holidays, such as the Hindu holiday called Diwali, the celebration of Eid al-Fitr (Muslim celebration at the end of Ramadan), and the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, as well as Christmas. It is an important educational experience for the children to learn other languages, beliefs, and celebrations through beautiful music. Each year on November 11th we organize a Remembrance Day service that also features our choirs. On this day we honour the members of our armed forces and remember those who died during wars including the First and Second World Wars.

P.Q.U.: *As a music teacher, what are the reasons you would argue music is important in education?*

V.F.: I think that music is a wonderful way for children to come together and to connect with their culture, and with the culture of others. The human voice is the most immediate and powerful musical instrument, and perhaps also the most beautiful. After singing together in choir practice, children feel tremendous energy and exuberance. Making music is a communal activity that everyone can share and participate in. Every child in our school sings in the choir, unlike a play for which the student auditions or a hockey team that only accepts the best athletes. Making music is something we can all learn to do. We can all sing. Parents tell me that when their children are at home, they amuse themselves by singing all the time because it makes them feel happy.

Learning a wide repertoire of songs, and being exposed to the beauty of rhyme and rhythm, is a way of enriching our understanding of language. Singing helps students develop correct speech and the flow of language. Through singing they can experience the beauty of words. Song repertoire provides a kind of rarefied, poetic language that communicates a message. I feel that singing is a spiritual, emotional, intellectual, as well as a powerful physical experience.

P.Q.U.: *One of the songs you have sung with the children is a very popular Canadian song by Raffi, «Like Me and You». I would like to know why you chose this song, and what issues you wanted to address through it?*

*Janet lives in England,
Pierre lives in France,
Bonnie lives in Canada.
Ahmed lives in Egypt,
Moshe lives in Israel,
Bruce lives in Australia.*

CHORUS:

*And each one is much like another.
A child of a mother and a father.
A very special son or daughter,
A lot like you and me.*

*Ching lives in China,
Olga lives in Russia,
Ingrid lives in Germany.
Gita lives in India,
Pablo lives in Spain,
José lives in Columbia.*

CHORUS.

*Koji lives in Japan,
Nina lives in Chile,
Farida lives in Pakistan.*

*Zosia lives in Poland,
Manuel lives in Brazil, Maria lives in Italy.
Kofi lives in Ghana,
Rahim lives Iran,
Rosa lives in Paraguay.*

CHORUS.

*Meja lives in Kenya,
Demetri lives in Greece,
Sue lives in America.*

V.F.: This song ties in with my «Children Around the World» social studies unit. I think it is important for children to understand that Canada is comprised of people from all over the world. This is a song written by Raffi, a well-known Canadian composer of music for children. I have many students in my choir whose families come from the countries mentioned in this song. I like that this song emphasizes the diversity of our community, while also celebrating what we share in common. These ideas are a major part of my classroom culture, and the

culture of our school. So what I want to address with this song, as in much of the repertoire that I choose, is the rich multicultural dimension of Canada.

P.Q.U.: *There is an important issue in the history of Canada that has been addressed over the last few decades: the history and culture of First Nations peoples. In your language lesson you studied the story «Salmon for Simon,» Simon being an aboriginal boy. This story leads me to ask you how do you integrate First Nations cultures into your school and your class?*

V.F.: The province of Ontario has created an important document, «Ontario First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework». The aim of this document is twofold: improving Aboriginal students outcomes, and outlining policies for integrating and representing First Nations cultures in the curriculum. Ontario offers enrichment programs for First Nations children to learn more about their language and culture. One of my students has attended one of these programs for one day per week.

As a child I grew up in Northern Ontario with aboriginal children in my class. There was a great deal of segregation between aboriginal students living on a nearby reserve, and non-aboriginal students living in the town. Racism was common and normalized. Today, aboriginal children are integrated, accepted, and valued within the school culture. I choose music and literature that reflects aboriginal cultures. The story we read today, «Salmon for Simon,» tells the story of a young aboriginal boy from the west coast of Canada who learns to love and respect the salmon.

The activities that we do in the school are directed towards developing a greater sensitivity, knowledge and respect for aboriginal cultures. Last year I took my class to a large community garden close to our school. We invited a young aboriginal woman to teach us how to plant seeds in the traditional way. She told us a famous story called «Three Sisters». According to custom, three types of seeds (sisters) are planted in a mound of earth: corn, beans, and squash. As she planted the seeds, she told the story of the three sisters. Before she planted the seeds she recited the traditional native prayer. Each student planted the three seeds and repeated the prayer. Months later we returned to the garden to pick the vegetables. This hands-on experience is an example of the way in which the children learn to appreciate and value aboriginal cultures.



Painting by Jackie Traverse entitled «The Three Sisters». Located at Neechi Commons, Winnipeg (Manitoba). Retrieved from: <http://neechi.ca/category/uncategorized/>

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