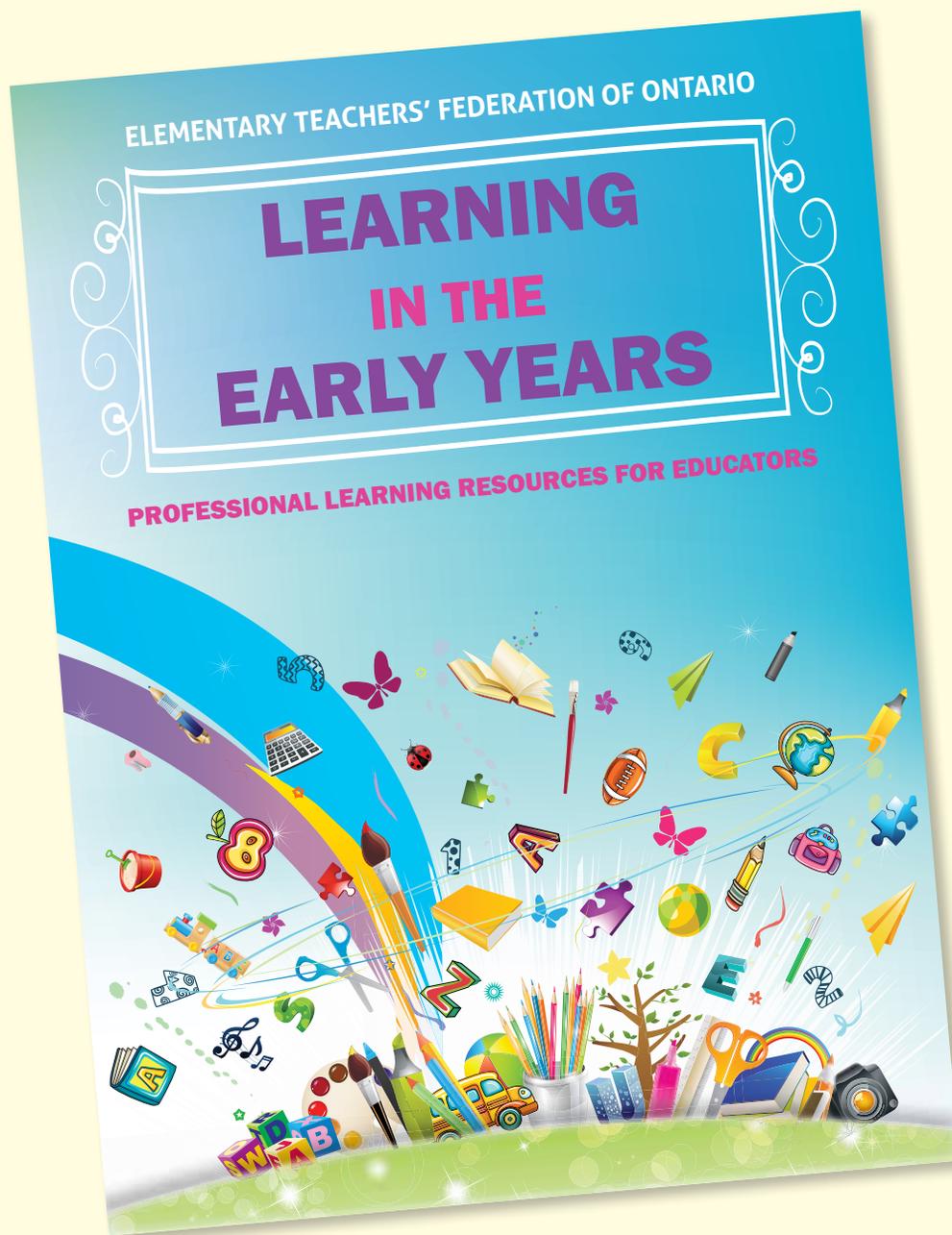


# CREATING CONVERSATIONS TO BUILD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS



The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario has released its *Learning in the Early Years* resource package. This package of resources has been designed to provide educator teams, teachers, occasional teachers, designated early childhood educators and teacher leaders with a variety of relevant resources to support their professional learning. As an organization, ETFO's position about professional learning is that its primary focus is to enhance teaching and learning. It is also central to the professionalism of teachers and designated early childhood educators, is based on research, best practices and adult learning principles, and should be self-directed, collaborative, collegial and reflective.

Professional learning together as a team is an excellent way to build your relationships. As you have conversations and reflect on what you are discussing, you are able to learn and grow together. Use these resources to support your professional learning as an individual or as part of a team.

The *Learning in the Early Years* resource package is made up of the following:

## LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS: EXPLORING OUR THINKING

This resource document, written for ETFO by Dr. Kimberly Bezaire (George Brown College), has four sections focusing on the child as learner, the educator in the classroom, the learning environment and powerful classroom play. It explores effective practices in the early years, and provides reflective questions for educators to think about and next steps to take.

## DVDS AND FACILITATOR'S GUIDES

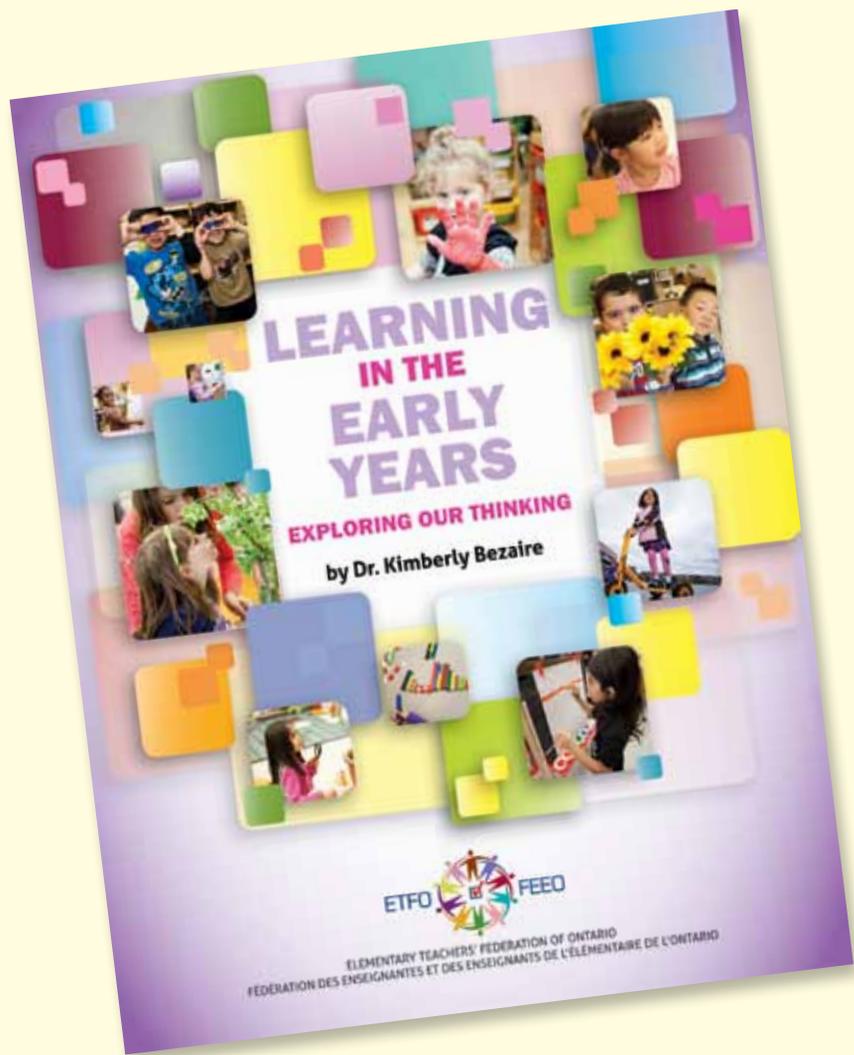
Three DVDs with accompanying facilitator's guides are included in the resource package: *Math Happens in Kindergarten*; *Conversations with Dr. Kimberly Bezaire about Learning in the Early Years*; and *Observation: A Window Into Children's Thinking*. The facilitator's guides correspond to the video segments for those wishing to use them to facilitate professional learning sessions.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS WEBSITE

ETFO is excited to share our new *Professional Learning in the Early Years* website. This new website at [etfopley.ca](http://etfopley.ca) will support educators interested in learning more about teaching in the early years. Videos focus on effective practices in the early years, mathematics in Kindergarten and observation. Accompanying sample facilitator's guides are included on the website. Also included are a photo gallery that provides images of various instructional and organizational components, and tours of early years classrooms.

The "Classroom Tours" section of the website was created for members to experience what early years classrooms look like and sound like. The educators included on the website discuss their classroom environments and the thinking behind how they have structured their classrooms and instruction. These tours provide educators with a glimpse into other classrooms, and act as starting points for professional conversations and reflection. The website will continue to expand and grow to support our members' learning needs.

The resource package, individual DVDs and accompanying facilitator's guides are available for purchase through [shopetfo.ca](http://shopetfo.ca).



## USING THE VIDEO SEGMENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

To use the video segments on your own, with a partner or with a team, you can access them on the website or you may purchase the DVDs through [shopetfo.ca](http://shopetfo.ca). Each facilitator's guide is structured in a similar way. Each section of a facilitator's guide corresponds to a brief video segment in the video series, which is identified in the table of contents. In order to use the video segments and reflective questions in the facilitator's guides, the following guidelines can help you.

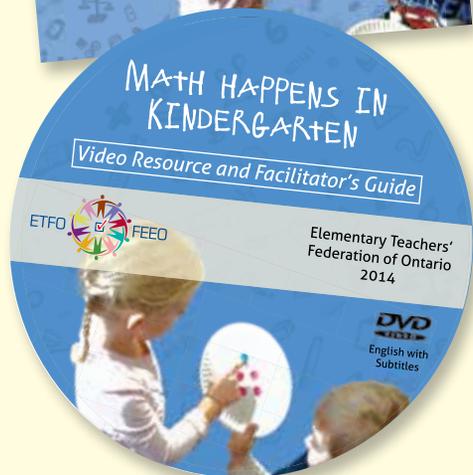
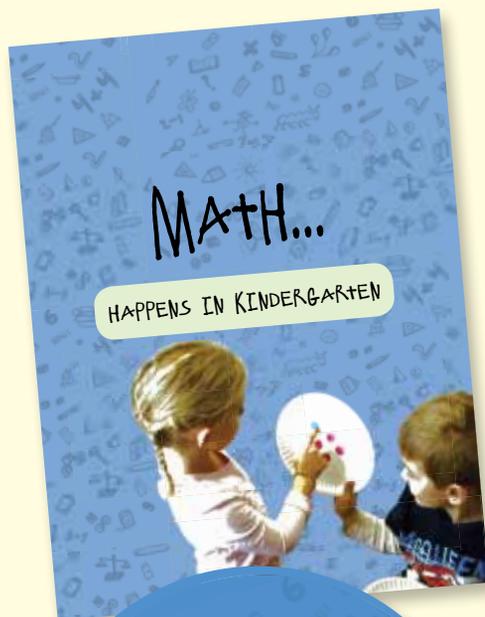
- Once you have chosen a video segment you are interested in watching, visit the "What to Look For" section in the facilitator's guide. This section is structured with questions and prompts to activate your thinking as you watch the video and will give you a lens or frame of reference to consider. (Please note: The *Conversations* facilitator's guide does not include this section as you are "having a conversation" with Dr. Bezaire and not watching children in action.)

- After watching the video segment, the questions and ideas in the "Think About and Discuss" section of the guide will provide focal points for your reflections and discussions.
- You can then look to the "Actions and Next Steps to Try" section in the guide for ideas and inspiration to inform your future programming decisions and professional learning.

Excerpts follow from each facilitator's guide to help you explore four video segments: one from *Math Happens In Kindergarten*; one from *Conversations with Dr. Kimberly Bezaire about Learning in the Early Years*; and two from *Observation: A Window into Children's Thinking*.

RESOURCE EXCERPTS →

# MATH HAPPENS IN KINDERGARTEN



This DVD and accompanying facilitator's guide provide educators with opportunities to frame and extend their thinking and information about what they can do to create a mathematically rich environment for Kindergarten children. Dr. Douglas Clements (University of Denver) is featured in this resource.

## VIDEO SEGMENT:

### CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE YOU BUMP INTO MATH

In this video segment, Dr. Douglas Clements invites us to think about what mathematics looks like in the Kindergarten classroom, and the importance of designing an environment where “kids bump into mathematics at every turn” so that they frequently encounter mathematical spaces and ideas through play, manipulatives, literature and small group activities.

### What to Look For?

- What mathematics can you see happening in the play?
- What is the role of the materials available to the children in promoting mathematical experiences?
- Why is it easy for students to bump into mathematics in these classrooms?

### Think About and Discuss ...

- Think about some situations where you have encouraged students to “bump into mathematics,” or times when you have co-created the environment with the children in order for mathematics to naturally occur.
- What do the educators intentionally place in the classroom so they can observe children interacting with mathematical ideas, and see the ways in which they “bump” into the mathematics in the environment?

- Children can use manipulatives for a variety of reasons. Talk about the selection of manipulatives you see and the kinds of mathematical concepts they are eliciting.
- What is the role of the educators in highlighting the potential of the mathematics in the materials?
- How might an educator's view of the child and the goals of the program influence the creation of the learning environment?

### Actions and Next Steps to Try:

- In your classroom consider how your children can see themselves as mathematicians. What can you put in place for that to happen? What have you already put in place for that to happen?
- Consciously set aside time to observe, take notice and think about your learning environment. Consider changes or tweaks you could make to your learning environment to act on the idea that “all spaces can be mathematical spaces.”
- How can you make mathematics visible to your children and their families?
- Consider if there are any “perceived” barriers that are preventing depth of learning for the children, or that are limiting the children's opportunities to “bump into mathematics.” (For example, do children perceive that they can only use manipulatives in the math centre?)



# CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS

This DVD and accompanying facilitator's guide feature Dr. Kimberly Bezaire (George Brown College). Dr. Bezaire shares her thoughts and current research about a variety of topics that are encompassed within ETFO's *Learning in the Early Years: Exploring Our Thinking* resource, which looks at the child as learner, the educator in the classroom, the learning environment and powerful classroom play.

## VIDEO SEGMENT:

### THE CHILD AS LEARNER

#### Think About and Discuss ...

- Talk about the following: "Their world has changed a lot, but children stay the same."
- How is our practice influenced by our broadened understanding of poverty, diversity, English Language Learners, as well as the cultural and linguistic contexts of the communities in which we are privileged to teach? How does awareness of these factors focus our responsiveness to the diversity of learners in our care?
- What aspects of growth and development are unique to the young child? Why is this important to think about?
- What is the result when we talk about and value children as scientists, artists, experts and capable learners?

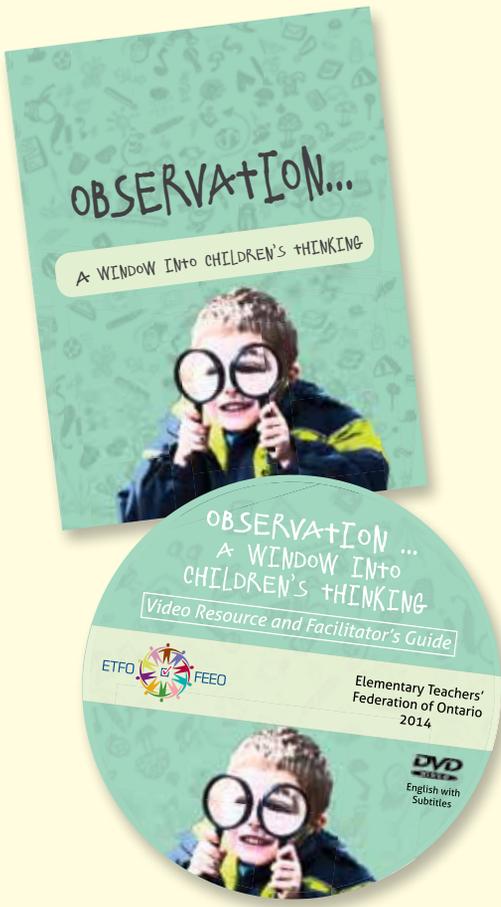
- What is current brain research teaching us about emergent literacies and numeracies, roots of empathy, and how "responsive caregiving grows brains"?
- Think back to your own experiences as a young child and your perceptions of play then and now. As you recollect, which memories are most vivid? Where and when did they take place? Who was with you? Why are these memories most rich or real for you? How can we access our memories and experience to better relate to the playful nature of the children in our learning spaces? How can we bring our own playful imagination into the learning environment to further enhance children's play opportunities?
- Children are innately curious as they develop theories about their world. How do we, as educators, intentionally offer materials that invite exploration and the opportunity to "play" with concepts and test theories? How does this affect our understandings of the potential of the environment as third teacher?
- Why are children particularly engaged in the outdoors?
- How might revisiting our childhood play experiences support our natural interactions with children at play in our programs?

- How are we, as a province, aiming to optimize the potential of this generation of child learners and of our future?
- Play-based learning is unique to Ontario; it is not happening in the same way anywhere else in the world, and the world is watching to see how it will unfold. What is the implication for us as educators?
- What knowledge and understandings do you bring from your own childhood experiences, as well as academic studies, to your interactions with your learners?
- How does the change from "teaching" to "engaging learners" influence your role?
- How do we maintain a positive, calm demeanour in a busy environment of play and inquiry? What influences should be considered? List positive strategies to add to your teaching toolkit.
- How can the social environment foster empathy, language and healthy emotions, and how do we nurture opportunities for these to naturally emerge?

#### Actions and Next Steps to Try:

- Consciously set aside time to observe, take notice and think about your learning environment. Consider changes that would better reflect a space to grow what Lilian Katz (1993) refers to as "learning dispositions" or "habits of mind." What materials and experiences invite reflection, inquiry, innovation, invention, resourcefulness, wonder and puzzlement?
- Remove materials that don't invite the depth of thinking of which we know children are capable. Observe changes to student learning behaviours.
- Observe and document interactions between the children and their environment. Then, invite conversation about materials and their potential uses. What other materials and experiences are your students interested in that would further their learning?
- Consider if there are any "perceived" barriers that are preventing depth of learning for the children? (For example, "I can only write when I'm at the writing centre as the writing materials are only in that spot.")

# OBSERVATION: A WINDOW INTO CHILDREN'S THINKING



This DVD and accompanying facilitator's guide discuss questions asked by educators about the observation of children in the Kindergarten context and provide further information to consider as they explore observation and its impact on educators and their students. Dr. Pat Dickinson is featured in this video.

VIDEO SEGMENT:  
**IMPORTANCE OF OBSERVATION**

**What to Look For?**

"We have recently deepened our understanding of observation to incorporate a more interactive role between adult and child. In order to truly understand how children are making sense of the world around them, we have to engage them in conversation as well as observe them." - Dr. Pat Dickinson

- How might this idea impact your role as an observer?
- How does your view of the child and the program influence the way you plan your program and your observations?

**Think About and Discuss ...**

- Consider the components of observation: for example, careful listening and responding, which may be enhanced with various forms of documentation including pictures, videos, collections of children's drawings and creations.
- What is the potential of revisiting documentation with children to deepen the understanding of both the child and the educator.
- How does working from children's interests in a play-based environment provide an authentic window into children's learning?
- Discuss the different purposes for observation; i.e., Assessment AS, Assessment FOR, and Assessment OF Learning. Where should the emphasis be in a play-based-learning Kindergarten?

**Actions and Next Steps to Try:**

- Reflect on your program and consider how the viewpoints expressed about the nature and purpose of observation might begin to influence your practice.

VIDEO SEGMENT:  
**CO-CREATING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

**What to Look For?**

- How might an educator's view of the child and the goals of the program influence the creation of the learning environment?
- How does this more open environment change the role of observation? The role of the educator? The role of the learner?

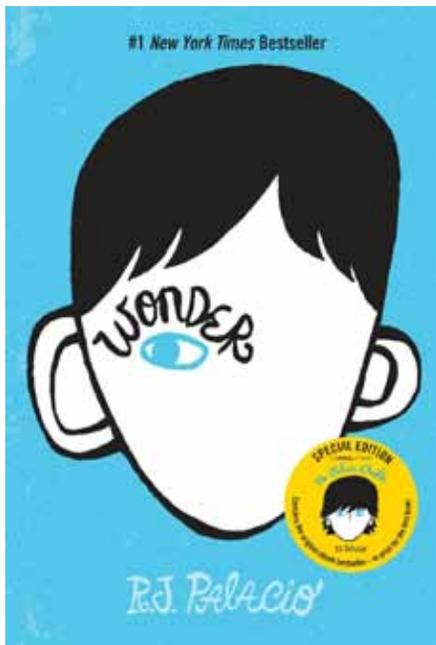
**Think About and Discuss ...**

- What is the difference between observing in the context of pre-planned learning experiences (e.g., containers in the water centre) and observing child-centred discoveries?
- How does co-creating the learning environment change the traditional role of the educator as the classroom 'engineer' who structures the classroom according to curriculum expectations in order to observe specific skills?
- What educator qualities are necessary when co-creating the learning environment: for example, being a sensitive listener, being reflective, allowing the children's intentions to unfold, etc.?

**Actions and Next Steps to Try:**

- If this is a new idea for you, try co-constructing one centre with the children in your classroom. See if, and how, this changes children's engagement with the learning. Think about how it changes your interactions with, and observations of, the children.

## REVIEWS



### WONDER

R. J. Palacio

Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2012

313 pages, \$16.99



Reviewed by Laura McCoy

*Wonder* is the story of a ten-year-old boy named August, who was born with severe facial malformations and has had to undergo numerous surgeries. It takes place in a private school, and tells of August's first experience of going to school in his Grade 5 year.

As teachers, we strive to support our students in negotiating the challenges of the junior and intermediate years. We help them learn skills in order to thrive in new situations and to be positive members of the community. Through literature, students can explore social issues and can learn about and practise empathy.

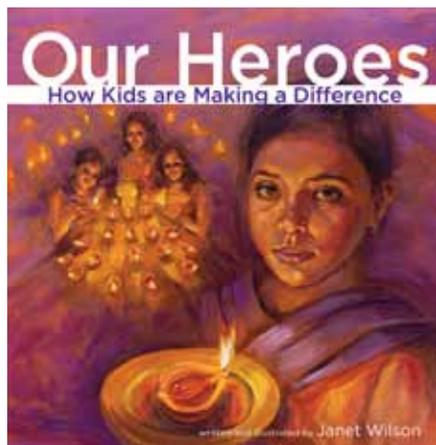
This novel is written from a number of different perspectives. Most of the book is given over to August telling his own story, but this narrative is interspersed with accounts by his sister Via and by several classmates and friends. Through the eyes of these narrators, the reader gets different perspectives into August's story. This intriguing and successful structure allows readers to find characters they can relate to, and conversely, to be in the space of people quite different from themselves.

Narrative voice is central: who is telling the story and how is it told? As a sibling to

someone with a disability, I felt drawn to Via's story. I found her voice compelling and it resonated strongly with my experience. Other readers may identify with August, or with one of his classmates. Each section begins with a few lines of a song lyric or a quotation from a play or novel. August's first chapter starts with "Fate smiled and destiny laughed as she came to my cradle" from Natalie Merchant's "Wonder," a song about (dis)ability. By linking sections of the novel to outside texts, students can expand their understanding and practise making connections among texts.

This is a very readable and highly engaging novel that will capture the imagination of students. It would be suitable for students in grades 4 to 8, as either a read-aloud or student-read novel.

Laura McCoy is a member of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto Local.



### OUR HEROES: HOW KIDS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Janet Wilson

Second Story Press, 2014

32 pages, \$18.95



Reviewed by Rosemary Renton

*Our Heroes: How Kids Are Making a Difference* by Janet Wilson is a collection of short biographies of child activists. Each biography features a child who saw an injustice and worked to make a difference. Included are children like Alaina from Canada, who raised money to support girls' education in Afghanistan, and Kesz from the Philippines, who, instead of a birthday present for himself, asked for donations of flip-flops for kids who worked as garbage-pickers in the local dump.

*Our Heroes* is part of a growing number of books about child activism, but what makes it stand out for Ontario teachers is the Canadian content (many of the children are Canadian or have Canadian connections) and the accessible format. Ten young activists are featured, each on a double-page spread, with a beautiful portrait by Wilson, supplemented by photographs, a short biography, and a sidebar with additional information and quotes. At the back there are shorter, one-paragraph summaries of more children who have worked for change, followed by a list of websites for the featured children and their organizations.

The text is manageable and engaging for young readers and would make a powerful read-aloud. Many of the biographies would be appropriate to read to students as young as Grade 1, but the book would be inspiring for all K-8 students as part of a social justice unit or in response to difficult questions about unfairness in the world. The book contains a good balance between male and female activists, and includes stories about how kids have handled bullying, donated food to animal shelters, responded to homelessness and raised money for sports facilities. There is something to inspire every reader.

As a teacher, I have been at a loss, at times, to know what to say when students want me to explain the injustice they see in the world. *Our Heroes* is an optimistic and empowering book for children who want to make a change. As Hannah Taylor, age eight, points out, "When you feel sad about things, if you do something to change the problem, your heart won't feel so sad."

Rosemary Renton is a member of the Simcoe County Teacher Local.