THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

WHAT IS THE CAYC?
The Canadian Association for Young Children (CAYC) grew out of the Council for Childhood Education and was officially recognized in 1974 by the granting of a Federal Charter. It is the only national association specifically concerned with the well-being of children, birth through age nine, at home, in preschool settings and at school. Members of the multidisciplinary association include parents, teachers, caregivers, administrators, students and all those wishing to share ideas and participate in activities related to the education and welfare of young children.

MISSION STATEMENT
CAYC exists to provide a Canadian voice on critical issues related to the quality of life of all young children and their families.

THE AIMS OF THE CAYC
1. To influence the direction and quality of policies and programs that affect the development and well-being of young children in Canada.
2. To provide a forum for the members of Canada’s early childhood community to support one another in providing developmentally appropriate programs for young children.
3. To promote and provide opportunities for professional development for those charged with the care and education of young children.
4. To promote opportunities for effective liaison and collaboration with all those responsible for young children.
5. To recognize outstanding contributions to the well-being of young children.

IMPLEMENTING THE AIMS OF THE CAYC
1. The National Conference:
The National Conference is a highlight of the CAYC. The program includes lectures by internationally renowned authorities on children, workshops, discussion groups, displays, demonstrations, school visits and tours.
2. Provincial and Regional Events:
The organization of members at the local and provincial level is encouraged to plan events to deal with the issues and concerns pertaining to young children. These events may take the form of lectures, seminars or a local conference.
3. The Journal:
An outstanding multidisciplinary journal is published twice yearly. Articles by nationally and internationally known experts in early childhood education and child rearing are presented in the Journal of the CAYC. Inside CAYC provides information on Association activities.

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND MEMBERSHIP
Membership fees are payable on application and renewable annually on an evergreen basis. To be considered a voting member, fees must be paid no later than 60 days prior to the Annual General Meeting.

CAYC members receive two issues of Canadian Children as well as favourable rates for national and regional conferences.

Regular $55.00, 2 Year Regular $100.00, association/institution $120.00, student/senior $30.00, international $135.00 (CA).

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ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR LES JEUNES ENFANTS

QUEST CE QUE L’ACJE
L’Association Canadienne pour les Jeunes Enfants, issue du Council for Childhood Education, a reçu sa charte fédérale en 1974. Elle demeure la seule association nationale vouée exclusivement au bien-être des enfants, de la naissance jusqu’à l’âge de neuf ans, dans leur foyer, à la garderie et à l’école primaire. L’ACJE est composée de parents, d’enseignants, de professionnels de la petite enfance, d’administrateurs et d’étudiants, ainsi que de tous ceux et celles qui sont intéressés à partager leurs idées en participant à des activités liées au bien-être et à l’éducation des jeunes enfants.

SA MISSION
L’ACJE s’est donnée comme mandat de faire entendre une voix canadienne sur les questions essentielles ayant trait à la qualité de vie de tous les jeunes enfants et de leur famille.

SES OBJECTIFS
2. Créer un forum pour les membres de la communauté canadienne œuvrant dans le domaine de la petite enfance afin de susciter une collaboration active dans l’élaboration de programmes appropriés au développement des jeunes enfants.
4. Promouvoir des occasions pour une meilleure coordination et collaboration entre tous les responsables des jeunes enfants.
5. Récompenser et souligner les contributions exceptionnelles faites en faveur des jeunes enfants.

EXÉCUTION DES OBJECTIFS DE L’ACJE
1. Le congrès national:
Il constitue le grand événement de l’ACJE. Des sommités de renommée internationale en matière de petite enfance y prononcent des conférences et on y participe à des ateliers, des débats, des expositions, des démonstrations, et à des visites guidées d’écoles.
2. Les événements provinciaux et locaux:
L’ACJE encourage ses membres à organiser des conférences, des séminaires ou des congrès au niveau local et régional afin de débattre des problèmes relatifs aux jeunes enfants.
3. La revue:
Publication bimensuelle et multidisciplinaire de premier ordre, la revue regroupe des articles traitant de questions d’éducation et de formation des jeunes enfants. On y retrouve également des articles écrits par des experts de renommée nationale et internationale. La rubrique Inside CAYC renseigne les lecteurs sur les activités de l’Association.

ABONNEMENT ET COTISATION DES MEMBRES
Les cotisations doivent être réglées au moment de l’adhésion et celle-ci doit être renouvelée chaque année. Pour se prévaloir de son droit de vote, tout membre doit acquitter sa cotisation au moins 60 jours avant l’Assemblée Générale annuelle.

Les membres de l’ACJE reçoivent la revue, et bénéficient de tarifs spéciaux pour participer au congrès national et aux événements régionaux.

Tarif des cotisations annuelles: général: 55 $, général 2 année: 100 $, étudiants/âgé: 30 $, associations : 120 $, international : 135 $ (CA)

ACJE
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Canadian Children is the journal of the Canadian Association for Young Children (CAYC), the only national association specifically concerned with the well-being of children of preschool and elementary age in Canada. The journal is published twice yearly and contains articles, book reviews and announcements of professional conferences.

Canadian Children is a multidisciplinary journal concerned with child development, child studies and early childhood education. Authors from across Canada, and elsewhere, are invited to submit articles and book reviews which reflect the variety and extent of both research and practice in early childhood education and child well-being.

CONTENT:
Submissions should appeal to an audience that includes parents, professionals in the field of childhood education and child services, as well as teachers and researchers. Most issues are multi-theme in nature and the editor will attempt to balance articles that are research related with articles of a practical nature relating to programming, curriculum, classroom practice or child well-being.

FORM, LENGTH, AND STYLE:
• Articles may be of varying length, written in a readable style. Style should be consistent with the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Edition).
• Articles should be sent as an e-mail attachment to the email address below.
• All submissions should be accompanied by a copy of the signed permission form available at the website (cayc.ca)
• Authors are to obtain releases for use of photographs prior to e-mailing the manuscript. Signed permissions must be included in the submission.
• Please include a brief biographical sketch (4-5 sentences) including the author(s) full name, title, professional affiliation, and other relevant information.
• An abstract should be included at the start of the manuscript, and should not exceed 100 words.
• In order to enable blind review, manuscripts must be anonymized. No author information should be included in the manuscript.
• All author information (including full name, mailing address and biographical information) must be included in a separate document.
• It is expected that authors will not submit articles to more than one publisher at a time.

ACCEPTANCE AND PUBLICATION:
The editors will acknowledge receipt and will review all solicited and unsolicited manuscripts received. The final publication decision rests with the editors, and will be communicated within three months.

DEADLINES: Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis.

Please send all publication correspondence for consideration to:
Co-Editors, Laurie Kocher & Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw
CANADIAN CHILDREN JOURNAL
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We begin this editorial with a quote Laurie introduces to the students in her early childhood education classes as they launch into their academic careers. Readers of Canadian Children will know that the early years have long been regarded by society at large as somehow less worthy than other investments, and accordingly, those who work with young children don’t always look beyond the challenges and frustrations inherent in the quotidian activities of their work. And yet, the work we do is surely worthy of reverence:

For many, reverence is too exalted a word to associate with the practical and often mundane activities of teaching. We routinely think teaching is about imparting skills and knowledge that will serve students well in career and life and that there is no need to think of teaching as a venerated activity beyond these goals. However, although teaching students involves imparting knowledge, it is also a calling with other dimensions beyond the cognitive. It is about the formation of minds, the molding of destinies, the creation of an enduring desire in students not only to know, but also to care for others, appreciate beauty, and much more. In some sense of the word, teaching is a spiritual, although not necessarily religious, activity. When done well, it cultivates human intimacy and allows teachers to find creative self-expression in classroom community. (Garrison & Rud, 2009, p. 2626)

In this issue of Canadian Children, we include a wide range of offerings—all of which could be viewed with reverence in mind. Massing, Kirova, and Hennig invite us to consider how parent involvement might be redefined in intercultural preschools by valuing the funds of knowledge that newcomer families bring. Dietze calls us to seriously ponder how accessible neighbourhood playgrounds are for those, both younger and older, with mobility challenges. Doan, in her work with novice early childhood educators, reminds us of how important mentoring is. Munroe and MacLellan-Mansell build on the growing interest in outdoor play experiences, with particular emphasis on children of First Nations communities. And Mann reminds us that, in caring well for children, menu planning is significant.

The Directions and Connections section of the journal includes an interesting collection of poetic pieces from Vojnovic and Kelly that portray awe, as well as Board’s inquiry into “what is hope?” We are republishing Brandon’s poem, This Log, as inadvertently a portion of it was missed in the last issue.

The Professional Resources introduced in this issue, all very different, provoke us to consider the ethical obligations in our work with children and families.

A new review board is introduced in this issue. We are always grateful for the myriad contributors and reviewers, and for our copy editor, Leslie Prpich. Here we wish to acknowledge the hundreds of hours that take place behind the scenes to bring this journal to you.

As the annual rhythm moves us into a new cycle of teaching and learning, we challenge all of us to consider our work and our relationships with children and families worthy of reverence.

References

The Role of First Language Facilitators in Redefining Parent Involvement: Newcomer Families’ Funds of Knowledge in an Intercultural Preschool Program

Christine Massing, Anna Kirova, and Kelly Hennig

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Involving immigrant and refugee families is a desirable goal of ECE programs in Canada; however, families are typically brought into a prescriptive, defined space framed by Euro-North American standards of developmental appropriateness. Within this space, immigrant and refugee families’ funds of cultural knowledge are systematically marginalized. An intercultural preschool program, in which English was the common language alongside three other languages, aimed at enhancing the children’s knowledge and pride in their home languages and cultures; the program challenged the conventional view of parental involvement. First language facilitators and cultural brokers acted as conduits between home and preschool and supported social networking within each of the three cultural communities represented in the program. Drawing on data collected through ethnographic methods during a unit on babies as part of an emergent curriculum, the authors describe how the facilitators and brokers brought newcomer families’ knowledge funds into the classroom and curriculum, resulting in a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Acknowledgments
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Barriers to Involving Immigrant and Refugee Parents

Involving families is a desirable goal of early childhood education (ECE) programs in Canada; however, immigrant and refugee families that are brought into a prescriptive, defined space framed by Euro-North American standards of developmental appropriateness encounter a number of challenges. Within such a space, newcomer families’ funds of linguistic and cultural knowledge are systematically marginalized. Tara, now a young adult who works as a Kurdish first language facilitator (FLF) in the intercultural preschool program this article describes, speaks of her family’s experience of coming to Canada as non-English speaking refugees from Kurdistan:

My brother was in day care when we came here. He went through the whole system. It would have really, really helped him and it would have really helped my parents’ confidence if the teachers were saying to my parents, “Come, be involved, be part of the school” because a lot of time they felt like strangers to the school and they didn’t understand why other parents were involved and they weren’t and they didn’t know how and what steps they should be taking. (focus group discussion, May 20, 2009)

For immigrant and refugee families with young children, ECE programs are often the first point of contact with the formal educational structures of the dominant culture (Adair, 2009). Like Tara’s family, many are unsure of how to navigate the child care system, particularly if such programs do not exist in their home country. Feeling intimidated by the school system is one of many barriers to involvement in ECE programs and schools that immigrant and refugee families report (Turney & Kao, 2009). Others include...
linguistic differences, lack of program or school support (Song & Wang, 2006), teacher bias or other discrimination issues (Ali, 2012; Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007), not understanding program/school expectations for involvement (Bernhard, 2010), holding different views of education and the parental role (Adair, 2009; Ali, 2012), and lack of material resources and/or time (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Dominant Views of Culturally Diverse Families

Majority-culture early learning programs typically consider cultural difference as a deficit instead of an asset. For example, the current position statement of the globally influential American organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), describes “children of color, children growing up in poverty and English language learners” as “at risk,” possessing “deficits,” and “lagging” behind their peers in foundational skills needed for academic achievement (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009, p. 6). By extension, these children’s families are also depicted as deficient and in need of learning the right way to be and behave in their new context (Lightfoot, 2004; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). This attitude undermines newcomer parents’ sense of competence in raising their children and may lead to the loss of parenting self-efficacy among immigrant parents (Ali, 2008).

As a consequence, O’Connor (2011) asserts, “the power base which determines which people are more likely to be successful in life is uneven right from the start as children start school with hugely different amounts of the ‘right’ kind of cultural capital” (p. 117). Families from diverse cultural, racial, or linguistic backgrounds or of low socioeconomic status are perceived to lack this capital (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005) due to the lack of congruence between their familial culture and that of the dominant society (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In addition, newcomer families frequently do not possess the resources, skills, and familiarity with the dominant social arrangements in schools to acquire and activate this “right kind” of capital (Lareau, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 2009). Since preservice teachers are educated into a developmental framework based on research with Western, white middle-class children, the cultural capital of immigrant families is largely invisible or inaccessible to them (Bernhard, 2010). The “right kind” of capital is often reflected in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008); therefore, young children from such backgrounds continue to be viewed as inadequate in relation to preset developmental norms and expectations (Yosso, 2005). The typical societal response is to offset such “disadvantage” through interventions aimed at building up the “right kind” of cultural capital these children are perceived to need to succeed in school.

The Dilemma Faced by Educators

Educators feel challenged to respond to the cultural diversity in their classrooms and to communicate to the parents what their children need for school success while remaining true to cultural competence as one of their professional standards. The NAEYC (2009) standards, for instance, emphasize knowing the characteristics of diverse families and communities, building respectful and reciprocal relationships with families, linking language and culture to the program, and maintaining continuity between home and program practices. However, educators must also meet standards related to knowledge of Western child development theories and use interactional, instructional, and assessment approaches consistent with these theories. The tension between what teachers perceive to be their role and the lack of adequate knowledge of particular cultural practices is expressed in the following statement made by a centre director who participated in Reedy and McGrath’s (2010) study of child care centres’ communications with parents in the USA:

The whole issue of cultural sensitivity/diversity really complicates the situation. A big part of our role is to honour and support the original culture of the family, the original language and all that. So there is the gray area between what we might make recommendations of what we think is best but might be in conflict with their own cultural belief system. And there are a lot of places where I do not have the answer. (p. 353)

Teaching guides such as NAEYC’s (2009) developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) contribute to this dilemma. Preschool teachers’ uncertainty with regard to individual families’ cultural practices is often resolved by their reliance on prescriptive ways of interacting with families, including asking parents to volunteer in the classroom, to read developmentally appropriate children’s books to individual children or the whole group, or to engage in play using developmentally appropriate materials and toys that will help their children reach the development milestones. Although the notion of partnership and equality with parents is emphasized in ECE, the DAP framework positions teachers as experts holding specific professional knowledge, especially that of child development (Alasuutari, 2010). Adair (2009) found that teachers sometimes even “train parents in its principles,” reshaping their culturally formed ways of being with their children (p. 154).

The Dominant Framework of Parent Involvement in ECE Settings

Family involvement in ECE settings is typically conceived in a uniform manner, one that brings families into spaces—which have been defined, and are controlled, by teachers and programs or schools—as volunteers or for meetings and conferences. Within this dynamic, parental involvement inevitably becomes an unquestioned concession to teacher expectations without regard to the families’ sociocultural perspectives. This construction has been problematized for
construing immigrant families as apathetic (Crozier & Davies, 2007), focusing on familial deficits rather than strengths (Carreón et al., 2005; Ippolito & Schecter, 2012), trying to subtly change families (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001), failing to acknowledge parents’ culturally specific ways of being involved (López, 2001; Carreón et al., 2005), excluding visual and oral traditions of some families (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), and neglecting the ways in which involvement is a social practice impacted by myriad external forces (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Early childhood programs, even those that require parent participation (e.g., Head Start programs) are sites presenting unique challenges to family involvement. If parents have enrolled their children in early childhood programs in order to go to work, as is often the case, participation within the traditional on-site involvement paradigm is seriously curtailed by familial time restrictions (Morrison, Storey, & Zhang, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to expand our current conceptualizations of family involvement by diversifying the means, tools, and locations for engagement (Knopf & Swick, 2008), as well as by developing instructional practices that access families’ knowledge funds (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). We contend that new approaches in working with culturally diverse and newcomer families should include cultural brokers whose roles can be defined as “the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons [of differing cultural backgrounds] for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change” (Jezewski, 1990, p. 497).

The Study

The study took place in the context of an intercultural preschool program aimed at enhancing the children’s knowledge and pride in their home languages and cultures. First language facilitators and cultural brokers acted as conduits between home and preschool and supported social networking within each of the three cultural communities represented in the program.

**Purpose and research questions**

The purpose of the study described here was to explore ways in which cultural brokers and FLFs in an intercultural preschool program acted as conduits to newcomer families and their cultures. It is built on the premise of a high correlation between a child’s educational outcome and his or her environment (i.e., family circumstances, parents’ educational level, parent participation, etc.) (Worswick, 2006), thus the role of parents and their communities must be implicated in the whole process of educating children (Harvey & Houle, 2006). The overall aims of this ongoing longitudinal study are twofold: (1) to identify approaches to working with immigrant/refugee communities and families that strengthen the home language for young English as an additional language (EAL) learners, and (2) to identify approaches to curriculum and pedagogy that lead to genuine inclusion of both newcomer children’s home languages and cultural traditions and the English language and Canadian cultural traditions. This paper, however, focuses on the following research question: What is the role of cultural brokers and FLFs in a shared space in an ECE classroom that bridges the boundaries between home and school cultures? We argue that, through these cultural agents, families were drawn into the preschool space even if they were unable to be physically present, thus challenging the normative view of what constitutes parental involvement in the preschool setting.

**Theoretical framework**

The study is framed by a sociocultural-historical theory of learning as informed by the work of Vygotsky (1978), whereby knowledge is actively constructed by learners as a result of their interactions with others in meaningful activities in a particular sociocultural context. These interactions are often structured so that more knowledgeable or skilled adults or peers can scaffold the child’s learning (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) or guide the child’s participation in activities valued by the culture (Rogoff, 1990, 1995). More skilled partners often employ culturally specific mediational means, such as technologies, tools, or signs to assist with learning processes, assisting the child to move toward full participation in the activities of the family and community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Human actions are also mediated by, and inseparable from, the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which they occur (Wertsch, 1991, 1998). It is therefore essential to attend to the various contexts in which children dwell. Understanding families, the skills and knowledges they value, and the ways in which they guide and mediate their children’s learning is crucial when they come from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The notion of space, as explained by Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004), conveys how people’s actions and the roles they enact, events, the rules and expectations for participating in the space, the cultural tools people select and utilize to mediate learning (i.e., objects or artefacts), and signs all operate to define the preschool space. Immigrant children enter into preschool spaces that have already been constructed by actions, events, and tools. Since these are likely to be unfamiliar to them, the relationships between instruction/mediation and development are disrupted. A newcomer child experiences dramatic dissonance between two ways of learning because the language of instruction and patterns of interaction are alien to the child; likewise, the activities taking place in schools do not resemble anything with which the child is familiar (Rogoff, 1990, 2003).

The concept of *funds of knowledge* is an example of an attempt to construct a bridge between home and school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). It is premised on the understanding that children learn culturally valued knowledge and skills in the course of their daily lived experiences in familial and community contexts. A household’s knowledge funds become part of a cultural “tool kit” which helps
members negotiate daily life or, in Bruner’s (1985) view, understand and master their cultural world. Teachers can gain access to families’ knowledges through ethnographic field visits to their homes. If teachers are willing to learn from and genuinely collaborate with families, then these knowledges become resources that can mediate teachers’ understandings of the household and inform pedagogical theory and practice (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005). For immigrant and refugee families, whose cultural knowledges are systematically marginalized in DAP-centred early childhood settings, this concept has particular resonance. When these understandings are formally acknowledged and reenvisioned as a source of strength in the preschool, it disrupts the traditional, asymmetrical power structures among the family, the ECE program, and the child (González, 2005).

In the study presented here, the FLFs and cultural brokers traversed the borders between home and preschool, moving between the two locations and bringing knowledges and cultural practices and objects from one to the other. Not only did the FLFs and brokers mediate between home and preschool, but they assisted with the formation of social networks within each of the three cultural communities involved in the study. These exchanges helped preserve historically and culturally formed, socially transmitted funds of knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005) which may have been eroded during immigration.

Setting and participants
As noted elsewhere (Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011; Kirova, 2010), the intercultural preschool program described in this paper was instigated by several not-for-profit organizations working closely with immigrant and refugee communities, who then partnered with the public school board, the provincial government, community stakeholders, and university researchers. Children from three refugee communities—Sudanese, Somali, and Kurdish—attended the program four mornings a week for two and a half hours a day in a public school classroom. Through the process of establishing a parenting group at a family support centre, these three communities had already formed intergroup relationships, and they approached the public school district with the request to offer an early learning program that would meet their specific needs (see Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011). However, as the program became well established and known among other refugee communities, over 60 families from Iraq, Serbia, China, and El Salvador, to list a few, as well as the Canadian-born families in the neighbourhood, have been served by the program in the last five years of its operation. Nevertheless, the majority of the children are from the three ethnolinguistic communities: Sudanese Arabic, Somali, and Kurdish.

The program staff consists of an English-speaking Canadian certified teacher and three first language facilitators (FLFs), each speaking English and at least one of the languages of the ethnolinguistic groups and having some previous experience working with young children. The role of the FLFs was to speak their home language with the children from their language group, to give cultural input for planning, and to provide a link to the families. Some of these facilitators also worked for the founding agency as cultural brokers who visited families multiple times in the home, at school, and at other locations, such as at an appointment (Ford & Georgis, 2011). During these visits, the cultural brokers provided families with a comprehensive array of linguistic and adaptive supports including community resources and supports for basic needs, advocacy, school, health, education, employment, communication, and parenting (see Ford & Georgis, 2011). In essence, the cultural brokers served as substitutes for the extensive community support network the families would have had “back home” but lacked in the new context; they acted as elders closely involved with raising the children. Several other cultural brokers from the agency (called “community insiders” by other researchers, including Ippolito, 2012, p. 4) also worked closely with the project.

Data collection and analysis
This qualitative study primarily utilized ethnographic research methods (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Data were collected in multiple ways in the course of sensory, first-hand experiences in the natural setting (the classroom) in which the phenomena occurred (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The researchers were positioned both as participant observers ensconced within the daily classroom activities and as facilitators and advisors.

Focus groups (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001) were conducted with three groups of participants: (1) the community members and parents of the children enrolled in the intercultural early learning program at the research site; (2) the classroom teacher, the FLFs, and the school administrators at the research site; and (3) all stakeholders, including community-serving agencies and policy makers. Other sources of data during focus groups included field notes taken during and after the focus group.

Focused observations aimed at describing and recording classroom behaviours and practices as they occurred, as well as giving and receiving feedback, reflecting and setting goals for improvement, and suggesting modifications to behaviours/practices. Detailed field notes were taken during and after these observations.

Research conversations (Herda, 1999) allowed for participants from diverse cultures to work together and assess their actions. These conversations were ongoing and were initiated by both the participants and the researchers. They mostly took place during the regular Monday morning sharing and curriculum planning that involved all FLFs, the teachers, representatives from the not-for-profit organizations, and the university researchers. It was through these conversations of the classroom team that life stories became interconnected in
a shared understanding about the children in the program and the diverse worlds they needed to know and navigate on a daily basis. In the absence of a set curriculum, Grumet (1995) describes conversation as “the process of making sense with a group of people of the systems that shape and organize the world that we can think about together” (p. 19). Taking a constructivist viewpoint, Bruner (1987) defines world-making, or life-making, as “a process in which the life-stories of those involved must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some ‘deep structure’ about the nature of ‘life’” (p. 21).

The FLFs and cultural brokers assisted the researchers in observing appropriate cultural protocols in the discussions with members of their communities (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). As primary contacts with the families, they were also able to bring information from their home visits into these discussions. Finally, cultural artefacts, such as cooking and other kitchen utensils, baskets, and musical instruments (see Hennig & Kirova, 2012) brought into the classroom space by the FLFs and used on a regular basis by the children and the classroom staff were significant data sources, providing insights into cultural values and beliefs. The cultural brokers and FLFs were instrumental in obtaining informed consent for children’s, parents’ and community members’ participation in the research aspect of the program.

Focus group discussions, videotapes, and research conversations were transcribed verbatim and translated by the FLFs as needed to check the accuracy of the participants’ statements. Thematic data analysis of the research conversations, field notes, and interview and focus group data involved indexing, assigning codes to common viewpoints, management, combining similarly coded data into categories and clustering like categories from each of the data sources, and interpretation (Creswell, 2005). The FLFs assisted in deciphering the meanings and cultural intent of observed behaviours in videotapes. Data analysis was a recursive process.

Learning Alongside the Brokers and FLFs

Challenges to involving families

It was originally hoped that families would be directly and consistently involved in programming and classroom activities. However, due to various barriers faced by the families (transportation, child care, multiple low-paying jobs, attending ESL classes during the day, and so on), the program needed to focus on engaging communities and involving families in ways not defined by “middle-class terms” (settlement worker meeting, October 2, 2008). Some parents attended evening meetings but, for the most part, the teacher did not have contact with families because the children took the bus to the preschool. Considering the unique circumstances of the refugee families meant that parental and community involvement in the program’s design was mainly through the ongoing participation of the FLFs and cultural brokers. They offered rich and diverse perspectives on the children’s lived experiences and the funds of knowledge formed in home and community contexts, thus creating conditions for learning (Vonta, 2007). In this paper, we focus on three specific ways in which the FLFs and cultural brokers brought parental knowledges and perspectives into the preschool: (1) knowledge of home realities and traditions; (2) purposeful inclusion of everyday cultural objects; and (3) modelling the use of home languages. For the purposes of continuity, the examples have been drawn from a long-term unit on babies.

Knowledge of home realities and traditions

First of all, the FLFs and brokers possessed firsthand knowledge of the families’ cultural traditions and the realities of their day-to-day lives. Not only did they come from the same cultural groups and geographical locations “back home,” but they belonged to the same communities here in Canada. Their contacts with one another were often both formal—as cultural brokers—and informal—through community events, kin connections, and mutual friends. Knowing the families in these ways helped FLFs share insights with the teacher which could be incorporated into the planning. From her outside connections to the family, for example, Maryam, the Somali FLF/broker, knew there was a new baby in Amina’s family even though Amina “doesn’t talk much” about it. She also noted that three of the other families had recently had babies, too. She observed that the recent births might explain why “they are playing babies a lot in the classroom.” Since the teacher seldom had direct contact with parents, she might not otherwise have had this information.

Although most ECE teachers consistently observe children to better understand their interests and knowledges, unless the teacher and children have a shared cultural background, it is sometimes challenging to accurately interpret immigrant children’s actions. Since the FLFs and brokers were from the same cultural backgrounds as the children, they were especially attuned to their culturally formed practices. As Tara assured us, “If we listen, children will show us what they need to learn.” Typically, the children demonstrated what they already knew, and then the FLFs were able to build on their knowledge in the classroom in culturally specific ways. For instance, as the team discussed the children’s play, Tara noted, “It is interesting how they are very observant and they know how to take care of the baby and hold the baby.” The children were frequently observed enacting cultural scripts around tea ceremonies or parties, both with and without the babies (field notes, September 22, 2009; October 13, 2009). Tea making and tea ceremonies later became a curricular focus with the support of the FLFs (Kirova, 2010). At this point, though, the FLFs were able to serve as interpreters of cultural practices, providing the teacher with information which would not otherwise have been accessible to her.
The facilitators described how the babies’ arrivals might be celebrated in the three cultures. These details deepened the teacher’s understanding of cultural practices and enriched the programming. As the teacher, researcher, and FLFs collaboratively brainstormed a unit on babies, for example, they produced a planning chart which combined typical ECE experiences (interpreted according to the children’s cultures) with more culturally specific experiences. Maryam explained that even though the Kurdish, Somali, and Sudanese communities had some similarities, there were also differences in the “little details.” However, the facilitators concurred that after a birth, there would be many visitors to the homes and that these visitors would prepare food to bring along. In the Somali tradition, Maryam explained, a gathering would be held prior to the baby’s birth, which was kind of like a shower, but it was different because the family cook food and all the ladies—the neighbour and the relative and the friend bring the family…they are not bringing any gift but food, whatever kind of food they prepare in their own home. (focus group discussion, May 20, 2009)

The facilitators also shared naming traditions. Achi explained that Sudanese parents give their babies names after seven days, and often the baby would be named after the grandparents. Tara added that in Kurdish culture, the baby’s name was often related to “meaningful things that’s going on in their life.” She suggested that we ask parents about name songs and meanings of their children’s names and then sing a song for each of the children. These name songs are often sung to the children by adults, such as grandmothers or mothers, and they highlight the child’s characteristics and the adults’ hopes for them. Achi shared several Sudanese name songs with the group. Then we conferred on how to co-construct similar songs with the children or elicit such songs from the families themselves. Some of the FLFs’ suggestions were similar to those commonly used in Canadian ECE settings. For example, Tara emphasized that the parents could be asked to send in baby photos of their children which would “involve parents and show them we appreciate their children” (focus group discussion, May 20, 2009). Maryam wondered about inviting mothers to bring in their babies and offered to help facilitate this contact. The final planning web included such experiences as asking the families to send in baby pictures, bathing and dressing the dolls, asking one of the new mothers to bring in her baby, visiting and bringing food before the baby’s birth, gatherings, making sacrifices, offering prayers, name songs and naming traditions, traditional lullabies, and giving gifts to charity or to the family. The FLFs provided a bridge between the usual “Canadian” practices and those of their own cultures. Many of these proved to be somewhat similar, though they were reinterpreted according to the traditions of the culture, allowing children to enact what they were seeing in home, community, and school.

As the FLFs explained traditions from their home countries, it gave the teacher and researchers a better sense of the specific stresses the families might be experiencing in Canada, particularly because of the lack of extended family and community support. Maryam further described the “shower” in the Somali tradition:

When we have a new baby, it’s a big event in the community…. They pray and eat and pray for her to have healthy baby and, you know, to be ‘four eyes’—the mom has two and the baby has two…. For 6 weeks after the new baby is born the mom is treated like a queen. Her only jobs are to eat, sleep, and breastfeed the baby. New moms don’t have problems with postpartum depression because they are surrounded by people all the time. It’s our way of showing our happiness and of teaching her if she’s a new mom. (focus group discussion, May 20, 2009)

In Somali families, there is similar support because, as Tara explained, babies “don’t leave the house for 40 days…. they want them familiar with the house before they take them somewhere else” (focus group discussion, May 20, 2009). Cultural practices, the brokers recognized, do not remain static, nor are they transplanted from one place to another. Since most of the families did not have extended family in the city, brokers, as community members, provided links to other families and assisted in constructing these kinds of support networks. Immigrant and refugee families often lack these relationships and connections to others (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2000; Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009). Maryam acknowledged this cultural change as she explained that “now we don’t have grandparents and grandfathers so we help each other” (focus group discussion, May 20, 2009). When someone helps the family navigate the new culture, it also might allow them to access the rules of that culture (Delpit, 2006) and share “resources for action” (Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001, p. 486). López et al.’s (2001) research found that meeting the multiple needs of families is essential to involving them, but one must first understand what they might be experiencing. This understanding assisted the facilitators and teacher in working with the families as they helped families cope with change. Together they co-created new cultural processes (Rogoff, 2003).

**Purposeful inclusion of everyday cultural objects**

ECE programs conventionally honour the children’s diversity by bringing in cultural objects, particularly in the dramatic play area. However, without knowing the families, it is often very challenging to ascertain which objects are commonly used in their homes, where to locate and purchase such objects, and how to model their use appropriately. In the absence of such knowledge, cultural objects brought from different parts of the world by parents of children previously enrolled in the program, or accumulated by the
teachers themselves during their travels, serve as “decoration.” In contrast, in the classroom in which the study took place, the facilitators, drawing on their personal relationships with the families, were able to bring in the same cultural artefacts the children would have seen at home—such as traditional slings, rattles, kitchen implements, and cradles—to support the children’s play. These artefacts served as cultural tools, mediating the children’s learning in a manner which resonated with home (Hennig & Kirova, 2012). Figures 1 and 2 show the children preparing to put the baby to sleep in the cradle, and carrying the baby in it.

Figure 1. Time to put the baby in the cradle.

Once these familiar cultural objects were introduced into the preschool room, the children were able to bring their home knowledges into their play. For instance, during one play episode, Yasmin moved from making soup to feeding the baby doll:

Yasmin held the baby in her lap to feed her with the special “baby fork.” I (researcher) asked her if the babies eat soup, but she replied, “No, babies only eat cereal.” As I began to use a large fork to feed a different baby, she corrected me by giving me a baby fork. Then Amina joined the play. The girls fed the babies and gently put them to sleep in the cradles. Yasmin exhorted us to be quiet. Even when we spoke quietly we were told to “stop it” because “the baby is sleeping.” Once her baby woke up, she again picked her up and cradled her as she sat. At that point Amina took the opportunity to place her baby in the cradle. As Amina moved her baby into the cradle, Yasmin perked up from her seat, saying “Don’t pick to baby’s neck” (“don’t pick the baby up by the neck”), demonstrating that she was the one with extensive knowledge about how to care for the babies. Amina conceded and took more care with the baby. When I spoke with Maryam about Yasmin’s proficiency, she commented that “depending on the household,” even the very young children observed their mothers carefully to learn these skills. (field notes, October 27, 2009)

One of the Somali boys, Jamal, played alongside the girls, making food and then feeding his baby (a “Diego” doll). Maryam commented that such actions would not be “his job” in her culture, but that some Somali husbands begin to take on traditional female roles here in Canada. By involving their children in the activities of daily life, parents guide them in learning specific skills and how to use cultural tools valued by the family and community, but these sometimes change in the new context (see Rogoff, 1990). The FLFs integrated these knowledge funds in their teaching, modelling aspects of care and use of materials that resonated with familial and cultural practices.

In Figure 3, Achi demonstrates how to soothe the baby to sleep.

Figure 3. Soothing the baby.

Demonstrations such as these often incorporated artefacts, such as a traditional rattle which was used in conjunction with the song.

Modelling the use of home languages

Perhaps the most important way in which the FLFs integrated home knowledges into practice was through sustained and intentional use of home language in the classroom space. Each of the FLFs communicated with children from their own cultural background in their home language and spoke English with the children belonging to the other two linguistic/cultural groups. Guided by the children’s interests and the focus on babies and naming, the FLFs showed children how to write their names in their home languages. The FLFs, teacher, and researchers also identified key vocabulary words in each of their respective home languages to support the programming. Culturally relevant vocabulary was relayed to the children by the FLFs, in particular through stories and songs, such as lullabies and naming songs. In a series of focus group discussions with parents, cultural brokers, community leaders, and elders, it became clear that, for them, learning happens through observing and participating in life, and that teaching respect for family members and elders in the community is a priority. Therefore, instead of using Western approaches to teaching young children vocabulary, descriptions, labelling of objects, questioning, or extensive “talk,” traditional songs were used to instruct, to
convey important words of wisdom in the contexts in which they would normally be used (see Hennig & Kirova, 2012). As a result, the children used the target vocabulary in the context of their play. For example, during a play episode in which she prepared food, Yasmin proudly informed us that she knew how to say spoon and pot in Somali (field notes, October 13, 2009).

The FLFs demonstrated that they were particularly adept at including the children’s and, by extension, the families’ perspectives. In a circle time activity, each FLF shared lullabies in their first language and ways of soothing babies to sleep, then invited children to sit with them to sing. In one instance, Maryam began to sing a lullaby and one of the boys spoke out, saying “No, it’s not like that.” Rather than correcting the child, Maryam stated, “That’s a song your mom’s doing right now.” She encouraged him to come up and share his family’s version (field notes, December 15, 2009). Some of the other children who had babies at home clamoured to come and sing with Maryam in the manner they had learned from their own mothers. The playful and participatory nature of the circle time was a typical example of the mutual contribution of all participants, not just the adults. Therefore, the familial perspectives were expressed and shared by way of the FLFs, who lived and worked in both worlds as trusted members of the cultural community and as members of the school community.

Figure 4 shows Maryam singing with Amina and her “baby.”

The concept of hospitality, which is sometimes invoked in literature on family involvement (Barone, 2011; Lahman & Park, 2004), might imply that families are guests to be welcomed into the preschool space rather than partners in constructing it (Carreón et al., 2005). Adair’s (2009) research with immigrant and non-immigrant preschool teachers proposed that teachers make “context-based decisions about how to work with children of immigrants and their families” (p. 192). Often this context is that of the dominant culture, reflecting the teacher’s own past experiences and interactions rather than those of the family and community. When the teacher lacks cultural awareness and knowledge, her or his biases inhibit communication with families (Eberly et al., 2007) and planning may be operationalized in the form of a cultural tourism approach (Strickland, Keat, & Marinak, 2010).

In reviewing the body of work that has been done based on conceptualizations of resource pedagogies—including funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2005), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), funds of knowledge and third space (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999)—Paris (2012) argues that such approaches “do not explicitly support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality (Paris, 2009, 2011) necessary for success and access” in schools and communities (p. 95, italics in original). He offers the term culturally sustaining pedagogy as an alternative that builds on these resource pedagogies. This pedagogy maintains both the traditional and the evolving ways in which young people live in contemporary multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural societies. It affirms that pedagogical approaches should “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95).

The study briefly described here, we believe, is an example of such culturally sustaining pedagogy because the FLFs served as mediators of home practices as they entered the classroom. The children in the program were able to bring the collective (cultural) knowledge they first learned by participating in family and community practices into the classroom, where this knowledge was transformed into personal competence. Children’s knowledge of “event structures” (Nelson, 1995) such as feeding a baby, soothing a baby with a lullaby, cuddling a baby, putting the baby in a crib, and so forth is necessary for children to acquire categories and language. According to Nelson (1974), young children’s concept formation is a process of acquiring knowledge through the child’s actions and interactions in specific types of situations. What the child learns in these everyday practices also depends on the objects that adults make available in any given situation (Rogoff, 1990). Consistent with sociocultural approaches to learning, the program recognized that development occurs largely through everyday activities and interactions of individuals and their social partners (Tudge & Odero-Wanga, 2009). These interactions were facilitated by the inclusion of cultural artefacts that were connected to the children’s lives outside of the classroom and had significance to the members of the classroom community (Holzman, 2009). Thus, having cultural artefacts in the children’s dramatic area was not simply an act of recognition and appreciation of diversity. Rather, it was an essential element of the classroom environment that allowed children from diverse backgrounds to enact their cultural knowledges. Providing cultural objects in the classroom play area, alongside objects typically found in ECE settings, enabled children to continue to appropriate cultural knowledge while guided by more knowledgeable members of their cultural group (i.e., FLFs and cultural brokers) in the process of transition to the new school context. Moreover, through the teacher and more “Canadian” artefacts and practices, the children concurrently gained competencies within the dominant culture (Delpit, 2006; Paris, 2012). Vygotsky’s theory of concept formation, according to which everyday concepts associated with home and community life and scientific concepts associated
with school life are preconditions for each other, helps us realize that knowing what is happening in children’s lives and their families’ and communities’ cultural practices goes far beyond what the prevalent early childhood “parent involvement” practices entail. In the case of newcomer children, in particular, the theory implies that if the spontaneous everyday concept formation is interrupted as the child enters school, then the scientific concept development built on everyday concept development is also interrupted. This study affirms that the use of cultural brokers and FLFs supports children’s everyday concept development based on their families’ cultural practices, so these were “present in their parents’ absence” (see Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009). This presence ensures continuity of children’s learning and concept development. Since the facilitators were present in the families’ home lives, they carried parental (and cultural) expectations and ways of being with children into the classroom space. These facilitators deeply enriched the planning process, supporting the funds of knowledge developed in home and community and providing materials and play experiences that not only resonated with the children and allowed them to enact real events in their lives, but also allowed them to acquire the home language vocabulary and cultural practices associated with the events. Although the example provided here cannot necessarily be applied to all immigrant groups, it demonstrates one possible means by which newcomer families can contribute to their children’s education apart from the Western model of parental involvement.

Implications for Practice

Unfortunately, many programs do not have access to full-time, on-site cultural brokers or first language facilitators. There are other means, however, by which programs and teachers can deepen their understanding of immigrant families’ funds of knowledge. Initial home visits are, of course, a very useful tool in getting to know families in the home and community context and eliciting their funds of knowledge, if programs have the resources to support these visits. However, Yin, the director of the immigrant agency partnering in this project, suggested that programs look internally to see if they have staff members from the same cultural backgrounds as the children who can act as resources. She stressed the importance of the initial contacts with parents. A translator—a friend, family member, volunteer, or another parent—can provide “linguistic bridging,” not only so that teachers can let families know what to expect in the program, but so that teachers can “listen deeply” to the families’ stories and their hopes and dreams for their children. Parents, she believes, should have the opportunity to guide programs as to how to get involved instead of programs imposing expectations on families (interview, May 17, 2009). Tara added that teachers can “educate themselves about the children and where they come from” (interview, May 17, 2009).

As Paris (2012) argues, however, fostering children’s home language and “within-group cultural practices” is only one of the goals of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). As in the program briefly described here, another goal is to create intercultural space based on “common, across group cultural practices” (p. 95) in which cultures mix and a new culture emerges. The examples provided here demonstrate pedagogical practices that allow both aspects of culturally sustaining pedagogy to develop simultaneously and to inform one another.

References


How Accessible and Usable Are Our Neighbourhood Playgrounds for Children Who Have Mobility Restrictions or Use Mobility Devices?

Beverlie Dietze

Many municipalities across Canada have created neighbourhood playgrounds that are intended to offer children and families a place to play, meet other families, and participate in activities that support the establishment of a healthy lifestyle. Yet the structural designs of many of these neighbourhood playgrounds restrict or eliminate children or adults who have mobility restrictions from participating at them. Structural barriers include the placements of the sidewalks, pathways, ground surface, and elevated frameworks around the playground equipment. This paper discusses the results of examining the municipal neighbourhood playgrounds in one suburban community in Nova Scotia in relation to accessibility and usability features for children or adults with mobility restrictions. Adjusting the current accessibility and usability designs of neighbourhood playgrounds becomes increasingly important in our quest to increase children’s physical activity levels, promote play, and model inclusive practices for all members of society. Environmental barriers contribute to social barriers and social exclusion. Accessibility to public space is a legal right and must be viewed as a community’s moral and ethical obligation. It is critical that all citizens in a community experience inclusive practices and a sense of dignity in their daily living experiences.

In Nova Scotia, where do the children play? The province prides itself as being “Canada’s Ocean Playground.” For many, these three words bring about images of children and families outdoors, near water, and playing in the sand. Visualizing the beach, we may imagine active, healthy children who are running, jumping, swimming, building, or climbing. When the word “ocean” is removed and we think of playgrounds, different images may emerge. Instead we may think of children using swings and climbers; we may recall squeals of joy or young voices asking for “just one more minute.” We may have visions of neighbourhood playgrounds that attract children and families, or we may picture underutilized spaces where few children gather.

Increasing children’s levels of physical activity is a priority for governments and organizations associated with child development and wellness. Studies suggest that outdoor play is widely considered a key component in increasing children’s physical activity levels, reducing obesity, and developing healthy, active lifestyles (Gubbelts et al., 2011). The reality of hurried lifestyles and changing societal values, however, are contributing to the challenge of families developing active lifestyles. Active lifestyles can be even more challenging for children with mobility restrictions or children who have adults in their lives with mobility issues, especially if they depend on their neighbourhood playground as a space for, and a source of, active play. Most of us assume that we now live in an inclusive society. Inclusion is “the philosophy that all people have the right to be included with their peers in age-appropriate activities throughout life” (Miller & Schleien, 2006). Examining places where children and families may gather to play in their community from an accessibility perspective is important because of the relationship between motor movement abilities, physical activity, and social inclusion. Upon examination of many community places, the environmental barriers that prevent children or adults with mobility restrictions from participating in everyday life situations become evident.

Being excluded from everyday life situations is not a new phenomenon. In spite of the early studies of Goffman (1963) and decades of research and activism that followed, there continue to be social and environmental barriers that preclude accessibility for all. Instead of a model of accessibility, researchers such as Michalko (1998), Titchkosky (2008), and others identified that a social model of disability has been created by society due to the many types of barriers that exclude individuals with disabilities from being able to access public space or participate in common daily living experiences (Oliver, 1996; Prellwitz, Tamm, & Lindqvist, 2001). When barriers prevent children and families from accessing spaces, such as neighbourhood playgrounds, an imbalance in society is created (Lawton, 1980). This imbalance may contribute to individuals with a disability having
feelings of inequality, and it reinforces the types of struggles that individuals with disabilities face and live with on a daily basis.

Children have the right to play. This right is highlighted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, 1989). The Convention contains a number of articles which are “specifically relevant to children’s access to and experiences of their local environment and their access to play” (Cole-Hamilton, Harrop, & Street, 2002). Articles 31 and 23 are most relevant to this study. Article 31 states that:

Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

And Article 23 indicates that:

A mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community.

Canada ratified the UNCRC in 1991. Canada also released the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) play spaces accessibility document in 2007, which establishes minimum accessibility requirements for newly constructed and existing playgrounds that require upgrading. Increasingly more research is available that highlights the disrespect shown to people with disabilities when their social right of having access to places is denied, is publicized by signs, or is different from non-disabled citizens (Michalko, 2009; Titchkosky, 2008). Changes to accessibility practices notwithstanding, there are still many environments in various parts of Canada where children with mobility restrictions are excluded. To have the neighbourhood playground be such a space is paradoxical, especially in light of the public perception of inclusive practice. In one Nova Scotia municipality, for example, the jurisdiction’s website states their mission as providing quality inclusive leisure services, facilities, and programs for their citizens. Unfortunately, many of the neighbourhood playgrounds in that municipality exhibit structural design features that inhibit or exclude individuals with mobility restrictions from being able to access or use the play space.

In this article, I highlight the results of a study that examined the accessibility, usability, and barriers of neighbourhood playgrounds at the entrance points and pathways to the equipment in one suburban Nova Scotia community. Because social inclusion and access to public space is a right of all citizens, this study is viewed as a starting point to facilitate change to the playgrounds by outlining the current conditions that, by design, exclude children or adults with mobility restrictions. Specifically, the study is intended to provide insight into the extent to which the entrances to playgrounds, the pathways within them, the ground surfaces, and the transfer systems from the perimeter of the playground to the play equipment may support or inhibit children or adults with mobility restrictions in using neighbourhood playgrounds. Such environmental barriers may negatively impact children’s social and physical wellness, play options, interaction with others, and sense of belonging in society. Environmental barriers have a direct correlation to the social disability model which, when present, is inequitable and reduces the overall wellness of communities.

**Neighbourhood Playgrounds**

Several studies reveal that outdoor play spaces influence how and where children play (Bjorklid, 2005; Fjortoft, 2001; Moser & Martinsen, 2010). The people and spaces in children’s environments shape their physical activity and depth of play (Dietze & Kashin, 2012; Miles, 2008). The level of comfort that adults have with neighbourhood playgrounds influences the quality and type of play in which children engage (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2010). For example, adults who have positive feelings toward neighbourhood play spaces intentionally create opportunities for children to actively engage in play that supports exploration, experiential play, and risk taking (Dietze & Kashin, 2012). If adults feel ambivalent or negative toward the play space, they either avoid the play space or rush children to complete their play episode so that they may move to a space that offers more comfort to them or their children.

Neighbourhood playgrounds are intended to be play spaces for children and families to gather to socialize and engage in active play with others. Play is the foundation on which children can increase their levels of physical activity, and it contributes to them gaining a sense of freedom, independence, and improved self-concept (Frost, 2006; Rivkin, 1995). Conversely, if children with restricted mobility do not have access to quality group play experiences that include physical play, they may not develop the same level of skills in independence, experimentation, problem solving, communicating with peers, or taking risks that are necessary for their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Bilton, 2002; Ouvry, 2003). Physical play influences children’s social connections in terms of developing playmates and becoming part of social groups (Segal, Mandich, Polatajko, & Cook, 2002). Neighbourhood playgrounds can be a pivotal place for user groups to participate in informal networking, explore community and cultural identity, and model inclusive practices (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2010; Miles, 2008; Woolley, Armitage, Bishop, Curtis, & Ginsborg, 2006).

Children strive to be accepted into their peer group. Research studies suggest that when children with mobility issues do not have access to the same play environments as their peers, they feel different from their peers. When children are not part of a peer group, they may develop feelings of not
and usability as identified by Prellwitz and Skår (2007), this study examined the neighbourhood playgrounds in one suburban community in Nova Scotia. Looking at the accessibility and usability features of these neighbourhood playgrounds brings awareness to how children with mobility restrictions or children who have adults in their lives with mobility issues may be included or excluded from play opportunities within their home community. This study may provide a forum for municipalities and communities to examine their neighbourhood playgrounds for accessibility and usability features and, as importantly, to determine if and how socially inclusive practices are being exhibited. The findings may also facilitate discussions about how neighbourhood playgrounds need to be redesigned to model inclusive practices.

The Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the accessibility and usability features of the municipal playgrounds located in one suburban community to determine how each playground space supports or restricts children or adult caregivers with mobility restrictions in accessing or using the playground. The research was exploratory in nature because only limited data are available about neighbourhood playgrounds in Nova Scotia or about children with mobility restrictions using neighbourhood playgrounds in Nova Scotia.

Based on a literature review conducted on accessible play spaces and the definitions of accessibility and usability identified by Prellwitz and Skår (2007), a set of questions on accessibility and usability was developed that focused on the entrance to the playground, the pathways within the playground, the ground surfaces, and the transfer systems from the perimeter of the playground to the play equipment.

The municipal website was used to locate the neighbourhood playgrounds. The website identified nineteen neighbourhood playgrounds in the community. Upon examination of these playgrounds, it turned out that two playgrounds listed on the municipal site did not exist. In addition, one playground only had tennis courts and another was a naturalized forest play space with a walking trail. This reduced the study sample to fifteen municipal playgrounds, four of which were located adjacent to or on school properties.

Using direct observation at the fifteen municipal playgrounds, six core questions were answered in relation to how entry points, ground surfaces, space for mobility, ramps, and transfer systems impact families using neighbourhood playgrounds. Photos and field notes were taken at each playground. A coding system was developed and used to identify playground accessibility and usability features. Themes were identified and compared with the notes taken in relation to the accessibility and usability definitions outlined by Prellwitz and Skår (2007).

Findings

The presentation of findings is aligned with the research questions formulated to examine the accessibility and usability of the playgrounds.

Accessibility

The accessibility features of neighbourhood playgrounds influence how children approach play, their motivation to play, their play options, and the depth of active play in which they engage. The accessibility factors of the municipal playgrounds were examined in relation to parking space, the sidewalks/pathways to the playground and from the entrance of the playground to the playground equipment, and entrance restrictions.

Is there a parking lot for vehicles that would support children or adults with mobility issues to be able to safely exit the vehicle, acquire their mobility device, and move toward the playground?
One important aspect of children and families using neighbourhood playgrounds is being able to drive to the playground and have adequate space to park. Four of the fifteen playgrounds had designated parking spaces. On-street parking was available at seven playgrounds. One playground had parking space for one car, but the allocated space had a slight incline which could cause difficulty for individuals exiting the vehicle, especially if mobility devices were required to support them entering or exiting the vehicle. Another playground had a flat, gravelled parking space that could accommodate twenty cars. The three remaining playgrounds, adjacent to local schools, had paved, flat parking lots available.

**Are there sidewalks/pathways leading up to the playground, and is there a hard surface that would support a child or adult using a mobility device?**

The presence of sidewalks in neighbourhoods, the pathways leading to playgrounds, and the surface cover used on pathways have a significant impact on whether individuals with mobility devices can manoeuvre their devices to get to the playgrounds. Eight playgrounds did not have designated sidewalks or pathways that led to the playground. There were sidewalks on the opposite side of the street at three of the playgrounds. Two playgrounds had standard cement sidewalks on the same side of the street as the playground. None of the sidewalks had curb cuts that would allow individuals using mobility devices, such as a wheelchair, to manoeuvre from the street level to the sidewalk or from the sidewalk to the playground.

One playground, located on school property, had a solid surface pathway that led to the playground from the parking lot. Another playground, located in a mature part of the community, had two entrances. The first entrance had an off-street parking lot with a gravel surface located approximately 59 metres from where the playground equipment was located.

Users would be required to follow a winding, sloped gravel path down the hill to the playground. The second entrance to this playground was located on a side street approximately 51 metres from the playground equipment. There was no path from the street leading to the playground equipment. There was an approximate 1.5-metre incline from the street entrance to the playground equipment. The ground cover from the street entrance to the playground equipment area was grass.

**Are there sidewalks/pathways from the entrance of the playground to the playground equipment, and is there a ground surface that would support the use of a mobility device?**

Children or adults using mobility devices require pathways and ground surface covers that provide them with a feeling of stability. Examination of the pathways from the entrance of the playground to the playground equipment revealed that only four of the fifteen playgrounds had sidewalks/pathways leading to the playground equipment. Three of these playgrounds were located in school spaces. As indicated previously, the one playground with two entrances had gravel or grass pathways.

The ground surfaces leading to the playground equipment varied from grass to pea gravel to hard surface pavement. Of the fifteen playgrounds examined, 46% had pea gravel as a ground surface leading up to and around the playground equipment. Twenty-six percent of the playgrounds had pavement as their ground surface, and 20% had grass as the ground surface leading to the playground equipment. One playground had a man-made rubberized solid surface material leading to the playground.

**Are there entrance restrictions such as gates or posts that may limit access to children who use mobility devices?**

An important aspect for children or adults with restricted mobility is if the gates or posts erected at the entrance and exit of playgrounds are wide enough to accommodate mobility devices. The playground that had two entrances (one at the top of the hill and the other on the side street at the bottom of the hill) had a padlocked gate and fence at the entrance at the bottom of the hill. The gate opening was approximately 88 centimetres in width. This size of opening would restrict mobility devices such as wheelchairs from entering through the gate. The remaining playgrounds had unrestricted open spaces at their entrances.

**Usability**

The design of the neighbourhood playground as a play space influences if and how children or adults with mobility issues use the playground (Prellwitz & Skär, 2007). The usability factors of the municipal playgrounds were examined in relation to elevated paths and transfer systems, ground pathways within the playground area, surface coverings, and the open space available for manoeuvring mobility devices.

**Are there elevated paths or systems in place that allow children with mobility devices to get to the playground equipment?**

Elevated paths or systems are intended to provide individuals with mobility aids to move about the play space; they connect play spaces and offer access to the equipment in the playground. In this case, all fifteen playgrounds lacked elevated pathways or transfer systems that would support children with restricted mobility in connecting to the playground equipment or open space. Another complication observed was that twelve of the fifteen playgrounds had elevated wooden borders around the perimeter of the playground equipment that were between 10 and 20 centimetres above ground level. There were no transfer systems in place that would support children with mobility devices getting over the borders to access the playground equipment.

**Are there ground paths within the play space that support a child with mobility...**
devices to move around and have access to all aspects of the play space?

The purpose of ground paths within the play space is to support children with mobility devices in having access to the core play space so that they may engage in a variety of play experiences (Prellwitz, Tamm, & Lindqvist, 2001). All fifteen playgrounds examined lacked ground paths within the play space that would support individuals with restricted mobility or devices to access all parts of the play space. Although the playground that had the man-made rubberized ground covering did not have designated ground paths within the play space, the ground surface made it feasible for children to access more aspects of the play space than the other playgrounds examined.

Does the surface covering around the play structure support a child with mobility devices to have the opportunity to move around the play structure?

The surface coverings around a play structure support or inhibit how children with mobility devices explore and engage within the play space. The playground with the man-made rubberized solid surface around the play equipment would support children or adults with mobility devices to get to the playground equipment. All other playgrounds had pea gravel or a combination of grass and pea gravel around the playground equipment. In most instances, the pea gravel completely surrounded the play structures. If children could get to the play structures, the pea gravel would interfere with them easily manoeuvring mobility devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, or canes.

Is there manoeuvring space around the play structure that would allow for children with mobility devices to make 180-degree turns if required?

Children with restricted mobility require space to manoeuvre their mobility devices in a variety of directions. Small spaces around play structures reduce children’s ability to move in and out of a space comfortably or to make the 180-degree turns that may be required. The playground that had the man-made rubberized ground surface covering had sufficient space and a surface covering that would support children being able to make adequate turns. Two other playgrounds had sufficient space for children to manoeuvre their mobility devices, but had pea gravel as the surface covering, which would also inhibit the ease with which a mobility device could be manoeuvred. Twelve playgrounds did not have adequate space for children with mobility devices to make 180-degree turns.

Discussion

According to researchers such as Baker and Donnelly (2002) and Heath, McGuire, and Law (2007), the barriers in children’s environments have a stronger influence than their disability on their participation in play. Michalko (1998) and others who have studied the social model of disability reinforce this perspective by suggesting that the disability is not the main issue for the individual. Participation is influenced more by how society views disabilities and creates barriers, thereby excluding people with disabilities from engaging in daily living experiences (Imre, 1997; Oliver, 1996). To break the social model of disability, neighbourhood playgrounds need to be accessible to all citizens.

The results of this study indicate that in the community where this study occurred, significant environmental design flaws exclude potential users with restricted mobility from accessing their neighbourhood playground. The findings indicate that only one playground had some environmental features that would make it accessible to children with mobility restrictions. The remaining playgrounds lack appropriate ground surfaces on pathways and around equipment, and appropriate transfer systems. These limitations clearly imply, from a societal positioning perspective, that there is not fair or equitable accessibility for all and that social exclusion exists. Social exclusion has many negative implications for community development and for children and their development, and it works against accepting and celebrating diversity and individuals with differences.

When children are faced with environmental or social barriers, such as not having the freedom to access the playground and choose where to play, what to play on, and with whom, they are in essence being segregated from their social network. Yet playing with peers is an important developmental requirement (Dietze & Kashin, 2012; Stanley, 2011). This means that just through presenting these environmental conditions, children with restricted mobility have fewer opportunities to participate in interactions, experiences, or experimentation with their physical and social environments than do their peers without disabilities. It would further appear that the lack of accessibility to neighbourhood playgrounds is in direct violation of Articles 23 and 31 of the UNCRC, as well as a variety of laws, such as the Accessibility for Ontarians Disability Act, that have been legislated to protect individuals from discrimination. This study raises important issues about the physical inaccessibility of the playgrounds in this particular community and how “exclusive practices” rather than “inclusive practices” are being modelled by this community.

Neighbourhood playgrounds can be the hub of activity for children and families that positively influences individual, family, and community wellness. Based on the results of this study, there would appear to be a lack of understanding of the importance of all citizens having access to public space and what environmental barriers implicitly or explicitly communicate about being an inclusive society.

Removing the physical environmental barriers is achievable. Many communities have been guided by universal design principles created by the Center for Universal Design (1997) at North Carolina State University. Playgrounds that adapt these principles model equitable use (so
that the design supports people with diverse abilities), flexibility in use (so that the play space supports a wide range of individual abilities), low physical effort (so that maneuvering around the play space may be done with comfort, ease, and a minimum of fatigue), and reasonable size and space (so that individuals are supported regardless of mobility and body structure).

Inclusive playgrounds may be unique in their presentation, but what they should have in common is that all users can be active and feel included, safe, and able to participate in play, similar to their peers. These types of play spaces are designed to intentionally facilitate bringing together physical play with social connections and social play, which leads to increasing the play options for people of diverse abilities, interests, race, gender, and culture. This model of inclusion breaks down the barriers that have perpetuated the social disability model.

Municipalities could benefit from becoming familiar with and adapting universal design concepts in their decision-making processes around playgrounds. If these concepts were employed, the environments and the materials within the playground would only be present if they were usable by all people, without adaptation or specialized designs being required (Christophersen, 2002; Ringaert, 2002). Municipal staff may be required to examine and change some attitudes, engage in different levels of problem solving and visioning, and seek input from users of neighbourhood play spaces. Research has shown that involving children and adults with mobility restrictions in planning play spaces provides valuable information and a better understanding of how simple design features can change the functionality and accessibility of the play space (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999). Adopting universal design concepts may bring forth positive attitudinal changes that would promote open access to environmental space and equality to all citizens of a neighbourhood, regardless of their ability or disability (Iwarsson & Stahl, 2003), which in turn supports both the physical and psychological needs of all users (Ringaert, 2002).

Bringing together experts, such as early childhood education specialists, early intervention specialists, and occupational therapists, as well as parents and children with mobility restrictions could lead to the creation of a new blueprint for accessible neighbourhood playgrounds, thus support the development of active, healthy communities. Creating educational tool kits that provide key attributes of accessible playgrounds could be helpful for communities, municipalities, and school settings. Expanding municipal websites to include specific sections on accessible playground principles and models of accessible playgrounds may further support communities in redesigning their play spaces so that they are inclusive. The availability of educational programming on accessible playgrounds, in a variety of formats, could support individuals and groups seeking up-to-date information on accessible playgrounds. Such information may help parents, community leaders, municipal planners, and others to determine how to ensure that the UNCRC is adhered to in their community and that all children have access to their neighbourhood playground.

Finally, if it is agreed that it is in the best interest of society to have accessible and usable environmental space such as neighbourhood playgrounds for all citizens, how do we move this agenda forward? Do we need specific legislation to upgrade the playgrounds? How do we provide the public with education to rethink the messages we send when exclusive, rather than inclusive, environmental space is within our community settings? It is time to rethink neighbourhood playgrounds and design them so that they are active, accessible play spaces for children and adults alike. This could be an important strategy in creating healthy communities that celebrate diversity and differences.

Limitations

This study provides a snapshot of neighbourhood playgrounds in one suburban community. The sample was small and focused only on accessibility and usability in relation to gaining access to the playground space from the perspective of children or adults with mobility restrictions. The study did not examine the playground equipment for accessibility or usability features. This is the next phase needed so that playgrounds are adapted to be inclusive. Nevertheless, information obtained from analyzing the playgrounds based on the core questions used in this study suggests that the playground sponsors need to examine public play space relative to inclusive practice, the social disability model, and the UNCRC.

This study did not seek out the opinions of municipal staff responsible for neighbourhood playgrounds or children or adults with mobility restrictions to obtain their perspective on the playgrounds examined. Such information would provide rich data and insight into the current challenges that children with mobility restrictions face in using neighbourhood playgrounds.

Conclusion

To summarize, it is evident that even though active outdoor play and being part of a community are essential to the development of young children, not all neighbourhood playgrounds are accessible or usable for children or their adult caregivers with mobility restrictions. The fact that the neighbourhood playgrounds examined had pathways, ground surfaces, and wooden borders that would pose a challenge and most likely eliminate children with mobility restrictions from playing there should be a concern to all citizens of the community. Excluding citizens from public space is unacceptable. Investing in inclusive neighbourhood playgrounds can’t be seen as an option. Communities have an obligation to advocate for and create social space that
promotes and celebrates diversity and differences rather than maintaining a social exclusion model.

References


Mentoring: A Strategy to Support Novice Early Childhood Educators

Laura K. Doan

The mentoring needs of novice early childhood educators are identified within the British Columbian context, where graduates do not receive formal mentoring. Following a description of the problem, a literature review is provided on the following themes: how mentoring facilitates a culture of learning; characteristics of successful mentors; and the mentoring process. Examples are drawn from mentoring programs in New Zealand and Worcester, England. Leadership implications are discussed with an emphasis on future research on mentoring in early childhood education.

Diploma programs that prepare early childhood educators for their profession can provide an excellent introduction to theory and practice; however, graduates often explain that they need support during their first year of work (Rodd, 2006). Like first-year elementary and secondary school teachers, early childhood educators report that a mentoring model where they connect with an experienced educator would be most effective as they transition into the role of a professional early childhood educator (Brindley, Fleege, & Graves, 2000; Whitebook & Sakai, 1995). When asked what would help to increase their confidence, competence, and professionalism, novice teachers identified mentoring as their first priority (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). Moreover, novice teachers recognized the benefits of mentoring as “collaboration, feedback, observation, and sharing with experienced colleagues” (p. 8);

experiences like these can help educators to avoid feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and uncertain (Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Schwille, & Yusko, 1999; Noble & Macfarlane, 2005). Novice educators involved in a mentoring program through the University of Worcester benefited from “support in the workplace, layers of mentoring support, relationship building, and interactions and communication” (Murray, 2006, p. 73). In contrast, early childhood educators in British Columbia are not involved in a formal mentoring program, and are potentially left on their own during a critical time in their careers when mentoring might be beneficial. The purpose of this article is to determine how mentoring might assist or ameliorate the stresses associated with beginning educators. The mentoring process will be discussed, with examples from programs in New Zealand and Worcester, England. Finally, leadership implications for establishing formal mentoring programs will be shared.

Context

Early childhood education programs rely on relationships between the student, the early childhood education instructor, and the sponsor educator. The early childhood education instructor teaches in a postsecondary institution and the sponsor educator works in the community alongside the student, supporting the student in their practicum by modelling skills, observing the student, and providing feedback. The early childhood education instructor and sponsor educator spend many hours with the early childhood education student, discussing matters of pedagogy and issues of practice, such as how to guide children’s behaviour (Rodd, 2006). With the assistance of the sponsor educator and the instructor, the student takes on increasing levels of responsibility. The student is given feedback on a consistent basis and is supported in making any necessary changes to their practice. When early childhood education students graduate and begin working, these relationships change, and at present in the province of British Columbia, there is no defined structure to support novice early childhood educators.

When attempting to understand the needs of novice early childhood educators, it can be helpful to draw on theories of educator development. Katz (1972) proposed a theoretical model for the stages of early childhood educators (see Figure 1). The first stage, survival, as its name suggests, is where the educator simply tries to get through the day or week, and this can last up to one year. Katz wrote, “During this period the teacher needs support, understanding, encouragement, reassurance, comfort and guidance. She needs instruction in specific skills and insight into the complex causes of behaviour—all of which must be provided on the classroom site” (p. 4). What is key here is the on-site support the novice early childhood educator requires, making it important that the mentor is physically nearby to assist the novice in daily situations, such as how to guide children’s behaviour, form connections with family members, and plan programming based on children’s needs and interests.
Katz (1972) went on to describe stage 2, consolidation, as a phase when educators are “ready to consolidate overall gains made during the first stage and to differentiate specific tasks and skills to be mastered next” (p. 5). This period is one where educators feel more confident and are able to focus less on themselves and more on the individual needs of the children. Katz described the third and fourth stages, renewal and maturity, as times when educators seek further professional development and ask deeper questions about topics such as philosophy and how change occurs.

In 2007 the Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia wrote a report entitled Developing a Strategy for Professional Leadership where they reported that “a mentoring framework is needed to help people take steps to be mentors” (Gay, 2007, p. 18). Additionally, it was suggested that Katz’s (1972) developmental stages of early childhood educators be explored. Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2005) has suggested that teacher development be viewed as a continuum, with teachers receiving support at the beginning of their career in addition to ongoing professional development. It is possible that mentoring could be a useful strategy in helping novice early childhood educators to successfully enter the profession.

Mentoring in Early Childhood Education

In reviewing the literature on mentoring in early childhood education, the following themes have emerged: culture of learning, characteristics of successful mentors, and the mentoring process. These themes are elaborated below.

Culture of learning

Successful mentoring can result in a culture of learning, where knowledge gain occurs for both the mentor and the novice. Rodd (2006) points out that the early childhood profession has “endorsed informal and formal mentoring as a key leadership strategy because it focuses on helping practitioners to realize their professional potential” (p. 173). Rodd (2006) believes that most early childhood educators feel enthusiastic about their work and are eager to help others by sharing “their own knowledge, understanding, practice and expertise” (p. 173). Researchers have found that mentoring supports professional growth (Rodd, 2006), is a strategy for professional development (Bellm & Whitebook, 1996), helps to promote attitudes of lifelong learning (Weaver, 2004), and assists in rising above “some of the shortcomings of current approaches to training early childhood practitioners” (Rodd, 2006, p. 172). Additionally, there are opportunities for shared learning among staff groups as opposed to learning that is occurring between mentoring dyads exclusively (Murray, 2006), making mentoring an opportunity for professional development that could impact the whole workplace, resulting in increased learning and collegiality among staff (Weasmer & Woods, 2003).

Characteristics of successful mentors

Rodd (2006) identifies the following characteristics of successful mentors: “empathy and understanding, an interest in lifelong learning and professional development, sophisticated interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, understanding of the role of mentor, and considerable early childhood expertise” (p. 172). Hurst and Reding (2002) found the following to be important mentoring characteristics: “authenticity, gentleness, patience, consistency, positive attitude, teachability and enthusiasm” (p. 19). Specific skills connected with successful mentoring are “active listening, effective observations, reflective conversations, awareness of different learning styles, and adult/teacher development” (Rodd, 2006, p. 173). Callan (2006) describes the mentor as a “bridge between the academic forum and the day-to-day experience encountered by practitioners in early years settings” (p. 8). Additionally, novice educators benefit from modelling by the mentor (Weasmer & Woods, 2003). Ingersoll and Kralk (2004) found that some types of mentoring actions were more useful than others. These included working with a mentor from the same field, and having common planning time, opportunity to collaborate with other educators about instruction, and supportive communication from administrators.

The mentoring process

Mentoring occurs in a variety of forms, ranging from informal to formal and lasting a diverse amount of time. Mentors may be assigned to a particular novice or may be chosen by the novice themselves. In most cases, mentors are considered to have more experience than the novice, but it is possible for peers to mentor each other (Murray, 2006). In New Zealand, novice teachers are involved in a two- or five-year stage of induction before applying for fully registered teacher status (Aitken, Ferguson, McGrath, Piggot-Irvine, & Ritchie, 2008). These novice educators, referred to as provisionally registered teachers (PRTs), are assigned a mentor who is involved in “the provision of emotional support and encouragement; giving general guidance and suggestions; providing summative feedback; promoting reflective questioning and conversation; supporting goal setting; and generally advocating for the PRT and her progress” (Aitken et al., pp. 25–26). During this time, the PRT is involved in a prearranged program of “mentoring, professional development, observation, targeted feedback on their teaching, and regular assessments based on the standards for full registration” (p. 1). The PRTs portrayed their mentoring experience with the mentor teacher as “vital to their profession and to the eventual completion
of their teacher registration” (p. 25).

The relationship between the mentor and the novice educator is important, and building trust is a crucial first step (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). Some novice educators are reluctant to ask for help, despite the fact that they need it, making it all the more important for the novice to know that the mentor understands their needs and is there to support them (Liberman, Hanson, & Gless, 2012). One program in Worcester, England, uses the term professional critical friend to describe the mentor, one who provides “front-line peer support” (Murray, 2006, p. 64). The Worcester program is based on the premise that mentoring supports adult learning in the workplace by facilitating experiential learning, which helps the novice educator to “draw personal meaning and value” through the context of their work site (p. 64). The professional critical friend is typically a workplace colleague and may be a peer with the same qualifications as the novice educator. Novice educators select their own mentor, giving them the opportunity to choose a mentor they trust and feel comfortable with. One novice educator spoke about the support she received from her mentor:

I have gone through the traumas. My mentors made me realise it was manageable. I might not have got to the end and was tempted to ‘throw in the towel’ at times. My mentor helped those times. There was a sense of family and community with the mentor and the college. (Murray, p. 75)

Mentoring practices differ depending on the interaction style of the mentor and the needs of the novice educator. Novice educators benefit from mentors who are responsive to their needs as a novice educator and the context in which the mentoring is occurring (Murray, 2006). A critical element of the mentoring process and educator development is reflection, and mentors play a pivotal role in facilitating it (McCormick & Brennan, 2001). Mentors and novice educators should meet regularly; during these times, the mentor can invite the novice to reflect on their daily practice with children, families, and educators. This reflection may include recognizing areas of strength and growth, and identifying goals. What is important is that, as the novice educator enters the profession, they are not alone (Murray, 2006).

Leadership Implications

When early childhood educators are involved in mentoring, leadership ability is built within the profession; this is something that needs to happen for early childhood education to achieve the same professional status as other occupations (Rodd, 2006). Additionally, mentoring is one way to help novice early childhood educators “to perceive themselves as leaders in the profession” (p. 34), which some may be reluctant to do. Furthermore, there are opportunities for early childhood faculty in postsecondary institutions to explore and develop leadership capability through mentoring programs. Researchers who can partner with educators to develop and research a mentoring program can provide leadership by helping to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners, which is of particular interest in early childhood education, where many educators do not embrace a research culture (Rodd, 2006). Puig and Recchia (2008) found that novice educators were feeling overwhelmed and desired further connections with their university faculty. They wrote, “Bringing new teachers and professors together through these forums of support creates meaningful connections between research and practice as well as teacher training and teacher work” (p. 342). Maintaining relationships between faculty and graduates can be a benefit to all stakeholders in the early childhood education community.

Conclusion

As novice early childhood educators enter the profession, they experience “survival,” as Katz (1977) described, a time when educators could benefit from hands-on support through a mentor in the workplace. Novice early childhood educators can gain support from mentors who demonstrate gentleness, patience, and a positive attitude, and are able to encourage reflective thinking (Hurst & Reding, 2002; Rodd, 2006). Furthermore, there are advantages for staff who become involved in mentoring, as a culture of learning can develop where early childhood educators learn together (Rodd, 2006). Mentoring is a relevant topic for early childhood educators, and pursuing research on the mentoring needs of novice early childhood educators could lead to increased levels of workplace satisfaction for mentors and novice early childhood educators, including less burnout, greater understanding of leadership in early childhood education, and better quality care (Bella & Bloom, 2003; Rodd, 2006).

References


Information Centre Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education.


Despite the many known benefits of outdoor play, early childhood educators are often reluctant to take children outdoors. We have been examining this issue as part of collaborative school improvement work with early childhood educators in First Nation communities in Nova Scotia. In this article, we first present a review of related literature and then share information gathered from educators related to the barriers to taking children outdoors. Finally, we propose four processes that encourage and support educators as they reconsider the challenges and reexamine the potential of this crucial area of experience for young children.

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Outdoor play is beneficial for young children (Louv, 2005) and young children usually enjoy opportunities to spend time outdoors. Furthermore, most early childhood programs operate under policies and standards of practice that regulate the time children spend outdoors. However, despite these strong reasons to include outdoor play in their programs, early childhood educators are often reluctant to take children outdoors (Davis, Greenfield, Harris, Starbuck, & White, 2011). In our work with early childhood educators in First Nation communities in Nova Scotia, we heard widespread agreement about the importance of outdoor play experiences and recognition of cultural connections to the land, but participants often mentioned barriers to providing enriching outdoor play experiences.

In this paper, we review the benefits of outdoor play in terms of enhancing the multilayered development of individual children and in relation to deeply held Aboriginal cultural relationships with the land. We review challenges to taking children outdoors, as discussed in the published literature, and we relate these to our conversations with early childhood educators in 11 First Nation communities in Nova Scotia. In particular, we examine the data gathered during one workshop regarding educators’ perceptions of barriers to taking children outdoors. Finally, we propose four processes that encourage and support educators as they reconsider the challenges and reexamine the potential of this crucial area of experience for young children.

Of the 70 educators with whom we collaborate, 96 percent are First Nation, and all of the parents and children they work with are First Nation. However, we believe the issues explored in this paper are not particular to First Nation contexts. As the literature demonstrates, barriers to taking young children outside exist in many communities in the world, so we suggest that the processes to encourage and support change in this area of practice would be appropriate and helpful for many directors and educators in a wide variety of settings.

Children Spending Time Outdoors—What Do Others Say About the Benefits?

The early childhood education literature is replete with articles extolling the benefits of being outside. One area of focus is the skills, attitudes, and knowledge individual children gain through experience outdoors. For instance, outdoor spaces that provide a variety of play options, such as imaginative/dramatic play, building, digging, running, jumping, swinging, and climbing, offer children the opportunity to develop both physically and socially and to enhance their reasoning and observation skills (Clements, 2004; Handler & Epstein, 2010; Nature Action Collaborative for Children, n.d.; Stephenson, 2003). Outdoor play also develops children’s independence by giving them the freedom to explore without the interference of adults (Handler & Epstein, 2010; Kernan, 2010; Little & Eager, 2010). For children with symptoms

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of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, frequent outdoor play - especially in green spaces - provides crucial sensory input that enables the children to maintain focus (Handler & Epstein, 2010; Nature Action Collaborative for Children, n.d.). Outdoor play also reduces aggressive behaviour and bullying, as long as the space is of an adequate size (Handler & Epstein, 2010; Lambert, 1999).

Much of the literature we reviewed reveals the developmental advantages of childhood exposure to the challenges posed by the outdoors, particularly in the natural environment (Dowling, 2010; Fjørtoft, 2001; Handler & Epstein, 2010; Miller, 2007; Moore, 1997; Rivkin, 1997; White, 2004). Play in nature offers varying degrees of risk or challenge, thereby giving children the opportunity to determine their physical or social limits and to choose whether to challenge themselves further (Almon, 2009; Copeland, Sherman, Kendeigh, Kalkwarf, & Saelens, 2012; Handler & Epstein, 2010; Miller, 2007; Nature Action Collaborative for Children, n.d.). For Little and Eager (2010), this opportunity was crucial because willingness to take a risk is “fundamental to human learning as we endeavor to develop new skills, try new behaviors, develop new technology, and abandon the familiar to explore what we know less well” (p. 499). In the absence of natural settings, some authors argue that play areas and structures can be designed and built to incorporate nature and provide opportunities for challenge, if they are created with the management of risk in mind rather than its elimination altogether (Little & Eager, 2010; Sandseter, 2009).

In addition to benefiting children’s physical and social development, active outdoor play has been found to promote health in ways that popular indoor screen-based activities cannot. During the crucial period of greatest physical growth between the ages of 3 and 12, children’s muscles, heart, lungs, brains, and other organs are strengthened greatly through energetic activities associated with outdoor play (Clements, 2004). Vigorous play has also been linked to stimulation of the digestive system, improved appetite, and the bodily strength and growth that results (Clements, 2004). Physical activity reduces childhood overweight and obesity, which has lasting benefits for cardiovascular and muscular health and endurance, as well as decreasing depression and anxiety (Tucker, 2008). Perhaps most importantly, active play in these early years has been linked to the formation of positive associations with physical activity and children’s continued engagement in active and healthy lifestyles into adulthood (Clements, 2004; Handler & Epstein, 2010; Tucker, 2008).

Spending time outdoors has implications beyond benefits to individual children. Louv (2005) claims that “the health of the earth is at stake…. How the young respond to nature, and how they raise their own children, will shape the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes - our daily lives” (p. 3). When children spend time outdoors, they are more likely to develop an environmental ethic or a sense of stewardship for the earth (White, 2004), which contributes to ecoliteracy, one of the literacies thought to be essential for the 21st century (21st Century Schools, 2010, para. 3).

Much of the foregoing literature is derived from mainstream research on individual child development. These writings are pertinent to early childhood educators and families in First Nation communities as they strive to enhance each child’s intellectual, social, and physical health, but they overlook the cultural significance of the outdoors and the land to Aboriginal people. The Assembly of First Nations (n.d.) describes the special relationship Aboriginal people have with the earth and all living things in it as a “profound spiritual connection to Mother Earth” (para. 2). Greenwood and Shawana (2003) insist that traditional values and beliefs should be the “fundamental building blocks” of programs for young children (p. 60). They quote one of their study participants who emphasized that including the natural environment in child care settings would promote holistic learning, “a reflection of who we are” (p. 58). Certainly, several parts of the Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq Child Care Facility Guidelines (Nova Scotia Child Care Initiative Program Technical Group, 1998) reflect the cultural value placed on the land and nature. For example, the guidelines state:

- Mi’kmaq language and culture can be reinforced through activities related to the environment: taking special field trips; picking berries; setting up a small teepee, etc.

- Outside play is encouraged as children need a minimum of one (1) hour a day for physical well-being. Mi’kmaq philosophy in regards to child development puts an emphasis on connecting to nature. Fresh air and sunshine are necessary elements for social, spiritual, physical, and emotional development. (p. 9)

What Discourages Educators from Taking Children Outdoors?

Despite the many known benefits of outdoor play, many children do not spend as much time playing outdoors when compared with previous generations (Handler & Epstein, 2010; Kernan, 2010; Rivkin, 1997; Tucker, 2008; White, 2004). Inadequate or impoverished outdoor play spaces attached to child care centres can be one kind of barrier (Staempfli, 2009). When the square footage of play space is less than the recommended guideline, or when the space has few provocations for interaction - either with fixed or moveable structures and props - children may not find it positive to be outside.

Other barriers to outdoor play relate more to educators’ attitudes and fears. Beliefs about weather are often a barrier to outdoor play (Copeland et al., 2012; Cuencas, 2011; Kernan, 2010). In much of North America, rain, snow, or cold can be perceived as reasons to stay indoors, thereby limiting children’s outdoor play opportunities. In some locations, such as Iqaluit, Nunavut, the daily use of outdoor
environments is central to the operations of daycares, demonstrating that some communities experiencing difficult weather continue to make outdoor play a priority (McNaughton, 1995). Elsewhere, in countries such as Sweden and Norway where outdoor kindergartens are increasingly popular, weather is not seen as an impediment (Fjørtoft, 2001; New, Mardell, & Robinson, 2005; Litmus Films, 2008). There, children and adults dress for the weather and continue to play and learn outside in all weather conditions.

Perhaps the most pervasive barrier is concern for children’s safety. Fears of accidents and falls, kidnapping, sun exposure, air pollution, insect bites, contact with garbage, and a plethora of other safety concerns have prevented adults from encouraging children to play outside (Clements, 2004; Copeland et al., 2012; Dwyer, Higgs, Hardy, & Baur, 2008; Handler & Epstein, 2010; Kernan, 2010; Moore, 1997; Stephenson, 2003; White, 2004). Despite the acknowledgement of the benefits of providing challenges for young children, as discussed above, play spaces or equipment often offer little to no risk because of more stringent safety regulations for outdoor play areas. Such low-risk environments can lead children to play in dangerous ways as they seek appropriate challenge (Almon, 2009; Copeland et al., 2012; Dwyer, Higgs, Hardy, & Baur, 2008; Kernan, 2010; Stephenson, 2003). Adults’ worries about injury during outdoor play can lead to restrictions on the amount of children’s free mobility, since injury prevention has come to overshadow injury management (Kernan, 2010; Sandseter, 2009). Some suggest that this situation stems from fears of litigation, so prevalent in North American society; these fears, in turn, pressure educators to dissuade children from taking beneficial and developmentally appropriate risks (Almon, 2009; Little & Eager, 2010; New et al., 2005). In countries such as Italy, where litigation resulting from injury is rare, children have been more likely to have opportunities to challenge themselves (New et al., 2005). Conversations with early childhood educators and directors in Norway also made it evident that litigation related to outdoor play is rarely an issue in Norway (personal communications, March, 2012).

Safety concerns can be exacerbated by the lack of adequate outdoor space offered by many child care facilities. A lack of space can result in a dearth of private spaces to hide alone or with friends, increased stress and aggression among children, and potentially injurious collisions (Lambert, 1999; Mauffette, 1998). As a consequence, adults may come to see the outdoor space as an area of stress and choose to remain indoors instead, where safety can be more comfortably monitored (Kernan, 2010; Lambert, 1999; Mauffette, 1998).

In addition to safety concerns, educators, parents, and community adults may lack conviction that learning and development occur through outdoor play (Dwyer et al., 2008; Lambert, 1999; Mauffette, 1998). This notion has its roots in Spencer’s 19th-century surplus energy theory, which considered children’s outdoor play simply as a means to work off excess energy (White, 2004). As a result of Spencer’s theory, White (2004) explains, “playgrounds are seen as areas for physical play during recess, where children ‘burn off steam,’ and not for the other domains of development or for learning” (p. 1). In reality, outdoor play provides authentic and rich learning experiences not replicated indoors (Dowing, 2010; Miller, 2007), and children who spend time in well-designed, nature-filled outdoor spaces with nurturing adults develop valuable skills across all learning domains (Miller, 2007). Belief in the value of outdoor play for providing learning opportunities is perhaps best evidenced through Norway’s nature kindergartens, where children spend much, if not all, of their time learning outdoors (Aasen, Grindheim, & Waters, 2009; Fjørtoft, 2001; Litmus Films, 2008; Sandseter, 2009).

Educators’ attitudes about being outside can be a significant predictor of children’s experiences and attitudes about learning outside (Stephenson, 2003). Educators’ concerns about weather or safety affect children’s views of outdoor play by suggesting when it is appropriate to go outside or what it is appropriate to do there (Cuencas, 2011). Research indicates that pressure from parents to keep children completely injury free and to focus on academic skills creates the impression among some educators that outdoor play has little place in their program (Copeland et al., 2012). This mindset affects children’s outdoor experiences by situating educators as mere supervisors rather than as learning facilitators and by placing limits on the allotment of time for outdoor activities (Lambert 1999; Moore, 1997). Conversely, educators with positive attitudes about the learning that can occur outdoors have a tendency to overcome barriers and to build time outdoors into the day (Aasen et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2011; Litmus Films, 2008; Fjørtoft, 2001; McNaughton, 1995; Sandseter, 2009).

In communities where the educators, children, and families are First Nation, it might be assumed there would be fewer barriers to children spending time outdoors, and that it would be a high priority because of strong cultural connections to the land. However, as Stairs and Bernhard (2002) explained, there is considerable complexity inherent in education for Aboriginal children because of the need to intertwine the goals of mainstream academic success with “the essential establishment of children’s identity valuing and giving expression to Aboriginal cultures” (p. 309). Comments made by Elders when child care centres and Aboriginal Head Start programs were created on reserves in the late 1990s illustrate this complexity (Greenwood &

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1 While supervising twelve bachelor of education students conducting their field experience in Bergen, Norway, the first author had multiple opportunities to discuss this cultural difference regarding children’s safety and responsibility when outdoors.
Shawana, 2003). Some Elders expressed concern that these programs would be a sort of residential-school experience for the youngest members of their communities. Rowan (2011) agrees that a community’s adherence to mainstream regulations may colonize the programming for young children in Aboriginal communities. Greenwood and Shawana’s work sought to define quality child care for First Nation children in terms of the communities’ priorities. However, Greenwood (2009) notes that “one of the greatest challenges facing early childhood caregivers is to take principles of Indigenous knowledge and actualize them in current practice” (p. 75).

This review of the literature provides strong evidence of the benefits and importance of outdoor play for all children, but it has also revealed educators’ hesitation and the complexities in taking the children outdoors (Almon, 2009; Handler & Epstein, 2010). Considering the strong traditional Aboriginal identification with nature and the land, it might be assumed that the First Nation early childhood educators with whom we have collaborated would readily embrace taking the children outdoors. In reality, these women experienced similar barriers to those described in the mainstream literature, as will be discussed below.

Two Professional Learning Workshops

As part of an ongoing research study in partnership with the Mi’kmaw Kina’matnewey (MK) First Nation Student Success Program (FNSSP) in Nova Scotia, professional learning opportunities have been offered for early childhood educators, with a specific emphasis on programming for children in the year before they enter formal schooling. In addition to visits to the communities and initial collaborative work with specific individuals, two full-day workshops, one year apart, have been held. The primary purpose of these workshops has been to facilitate collaboration and networking among the educators on the topics of language and cultural enrichment. As part of the emphasis on increasing programs’ cultural relevance, the workshops included discussions about the benefits of and barriers to providing enriching outdoor play experiences for the children. Prior to the first workshop, the researchers and the FNSSP coordinator had visited many of the communities. When asked in what area they felt improvement was needed, some of the educators had expressed frustration with their outdoor play spaces, and they had asked questions about designing new outdoor areas. Although none of the educators or directors specifically linked their interest in improving outdoor play with the Aboriginal context in which they worked, the FNSSP coordinator affirmed that, in his view as a First Nation person, children’s connection to nature was very important. A focus on taking children outdoors was seen as an extension of the focus on the programs’ cultural enrichment.

Thirty early childhood educators and directors from eight First Nation communities in Nova Scotia attended the first all-day workshop organized under the auspices of the partnership. As part of the workshop, the first author shared photos and information from a recent trip to Sweden, where she had visited child care centres with extensive and interesting outdoor spaces. As well, participants viewed the video, Leave No Child Inside (Harvest Resources, 2006), which included inspiring photos of naturalistic outdoor play spaces for young children as well as research-based information on the benefits of outdoor play.

During the year after the first workshop, the researchers and the FNSSP coordinator continued to visit communities and collaborate with the early childhood educators. It became obvious that while directors and educators were enthusiastic about increasing the time children spent outdoors and were interested in alternative play spaces, they were meeting considerable barriers to achieving that goal. At some meetings, the topic of “catalogue” style versus natural play spaces arose, and at other meetings, some educators described some tension with regard to increasing outdoor play time. With candour, they admitted to their personal dislike of taking children outdoors and their belief that outdoor experiences were not as crucial as the indoor learning time. These discussions influenced the decision to continue a focus on outdoor play in the second annual workshop.

Seventy-five educators from all 11 First Nation communities associated with MK attended the second full-day workshop. Most early childhood programs closed for the day, and almost all the educators working in First Nation communities received approval to attend the event. Interactive experiences were offered to reach the participants on an emotional as well as an intellectual level (Keeler, 2004). We showed a segment entitled “Exploring the Natural World” from the DVD Our Children, Our Ways: Early Childhood Education in First Nations and Inuit Communities (Red River College, n.d.), which was very well received by the group. The images and the encouraging narrative underscored the role of early childhood educators in assisting Aboriginal children to learn about their cultural connections to nature and to the land.

At another point in the workshop, everyone selected a smooth beach stone to hold while listening to and viewing the illustrations from If You Find a Rock by Christian and Lember (2000). Then, the educators reflected on and discussed their own memories of playing outdoors. The room filled with conversation as the participants reminisced about their positive outdoor play experiences and commented with regret and concern on the few hours children spend outside nowadays. The participants watched a slide presentation that reviewed information about the benefits of children spending time outdoors and examined some of the possible reasons that children are not playing outdoors as much now as in the past (Nature Action Collaborative for Children, n.d.). There was widespread agreement among the educators that...
children should be spending more time outdoors, for individual and cultural reasons.

Examining Barriers and Proposing Solutions

At this point in the second workshop, the participants were randomly assigned to small groups and asked to record on poster paper all the barriers that they believed prevented or limited their taking young children outside in their centres. The barriers listed by the 12 groups are represented in Figure 1. This graph shows the frequency of the responses and offers examples of the participants’ specific concerns in each category. All of the barriers identified by the early childhood educators in these First Nation communities were similarly identified in the literature reviewed above. The workshop participants clearly recognized the problems associated with weather, educators’ and parents’ attitudes and fears, and inadequate or dangerous outdoor play spaces. Interestingly, no group identified children not wanting to go outdoors as a barrier!

Subsequent to identifying barriers to taking children outdoors, each group was asked to look at another group’s list and propose solutions to those listed barriers. In only a couple of minutes, many practical solutions came forth, ranging from personal actions to community initiatives. For example, with regard to the barrier of children who run away, there were suggestions to improve supervision, use a harness, give the children special jobs, employ a special assistant, or install a fence. Considering the ease with which participants offered solutions, one might assume that all the barriers to taking the children outdoors would be removed once the participants returned to their communities. However, such an assumption overlooks several layers of complexity.

In some instances, when one group examined the barriers listed by another group, people maintained that some items on the list were not barriers at all. For example, one group had listed puddles on the playground as a barrier to taking the children outdoors. The next group disagreed and suggested that puddles offer an interesting play opportunity. Others commented that the lack of appropriate clothing for the children was not a barrier; their centre had a supply of outdoor clothing to lend so that children were not prevented from going outdoors.

The educators who perceived certain constraints as barriers were not simply conjuring up excuses. As Bernhardt (2004) writes, “All of us have perceptions of the way the world operates. We act upon those perceptions everyday as if they are reality” (p. 54). Therefore, the views of those educators who saw these issues as real barriers merit respect. As well, ignorance concerning the extent of some barriers, such as puddles on specific playgrounds, must be acknowledged. Perhaps the puddles were deep, extensive, and filled with mud, and as such offered a particular challenge to the educators taking the young children to the space. Perhaps the educators were following the suggestions in the First Nations Head Start Standards Guide regarding eliminating water in the outdoor play space (Health Canada, 2001). Finally, in the case of the educators who had a ready supply of children’s outdoor clothes, the fact that they had already faced a barrier and found a solution should be celebrated.

Considering Next Steps

The workshop participants completed a detailed feedback form at the end of the second workshop. They were asked to comment on the ideas discussed in the workshop and to explain whether or not they hoped to make any changes in their work regarding outside play space and/or taking children outdoors. The majority of participants stated that they had found the conversations and resources to be useful, informative, and inspiring. Some added

Figure 1. Barriers to outdoor play, as described by early childhood educators taking part in a workshop in Nova Scotia, Canada. Numbers in the chart indicate how many of the 12 groups listed this circumstance as a barrier.
that they had not previously thought about the possibilities for learning through outdoor play and that the workshop had opened the door to new practices. Participants acknowledged that outdoor play could incorporate Mi'kmaw culture and suggested that Elders could visit to discuss the importance of nature.

The notion of natural play spaces, as highlighted in some of the resources, captivated many participants’ interest, with some highlighting the welcoming appearance and simplicity of playthings such as tires, wood, or dirt. Participants noted the current lack of comfort outdoors and expressed the desire to create spaces with shade, such as gazebos or outdoor tables, where children and adults alike could relax and chat. Of those who expressed these interests, only a few believed that space and resource concerns would inhibit them from moving forward with new initiatives.

Many participants indicated that they could see themselves making an initial change in their practice by “bringing the outdoors indoors.” They noted that children love going for walks and so it would not be difficult to spend more time picking up items in nature, discussing them, and bringing them back into the classroom. One educator remarked, “I am going to make a science centre with outdoor things—branches, rocks, moss, etc.” Others resolved to have more plants and perhaps a fish tank inside their centre.

A small number of participants indicated that they would not change their practices. Some reported that they felt a lack of agency at their workplace because they were not able to make decisions. However, these individuals also indicated that they intended to make suggestions to their directors or other supervisors in the hopes of effecting change.

Six months later, the authors sent a follow-up email to participants asking if they had thought more about the information and experiences shared during the second workshop and requesting an update with regard to taking the young children outdoors. Although the response rate was low, one message was particularly exciting. The centre director wrote:

“We are in the phase of getting more added to our playground…. We have looked at the books and found great ideas as to what we’d like to implement in terms of play outdoors. We’re waiting on funding for [a] new swing set. Ideally, we’d like a bike trail, little hill for sledding, and a tunnel. We do have an area set out for a medicine/flower garden. We’re excited for our new additions.”

Possible Processes to Encourage and Support Change

The comments on the feedback forms from the second workshop illustrated a very encouraging positive response to the information about outdoor play shared throughout the day together. However, a workshop’s success is found, not in the feedback forms, but rather in actual changes in practice (Guskey, 2000). We know we cannot ignore the long lists of barriers the educators created and we cannot assume that all the tensions regarding taking children outdoors were erased through the workshop experience. For educators to reflect on and perhaps change their practices, ongoing information, encouragement, and support are needed (Fullan, 2007).

We suggest four processes as next steps to encourage and support change in young children’s outdoor play time. It is important to note that these processes rarely depend on external experts. The first suggestion, offering professional learning opportunities, may rely on external resources to some extent, but overall, the discussions and experiences that occur should be primarily an opportunity for educators to network, collaborate, reflect, and make plans for next steps in their communities.

- Offer professional learning opportunities to build awareness

A single professional learning event such as a workshop may not change practice (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010), but a single event does hold the potential for building awareness. Through our two annual workshops described above, we observed that a cycle was started, with awareness leading to action, which led in turn to more widespread awareness and, ultimately, to more action.

During our first workshop, participants viewed slides of innovative natural play spaces. One child care director exclaimed with regret that she had just purchased a play set from a glossy catalogue; she had not known about nature-based materials and equipment for outdoor play spaces. Perhaps White (2004) was thinking about people like this director as he observed that “when most adults were children, playgrounds were asphalt areas with manufactured, fixed playground equipment such as swings, jungle gyms and slides, where they went for recess. Therefore, most adults see this as the appropriate model for a playground” (p. 1).

Inspired by the photos shared during the first workshop, this director applied for and received a grant for a new natural play space at her centre. At our second workshop, we showed photos of that new play space and the educators from that location participated in an interactive conversation about their experience in changing their outdoor play area. All the people in the room seemed to be inspired by the way that the dream for change had become a reality for one of their sister communities; the possibility for change in their own communities seemed more possible. As we found out through our email correspondence six months later, another community was in the midst of changing their outdoor space to include more natural elements. This series of events illustrates the awareness-action-awareness-action cycle that we hoped for.

- Acknowledge and examine the past and current experiences of adults
The second process we suggest to support and encourage change in children’s outdoor play experiences is that directors and educators examine their past and current experiences with outdoor play. One barrier listed during our workshop activity was that “ECEs [early childhood educators] refuse to go outside.” During another conversation, one First Nation educator commented frankly that she did not like going outside and wished she did not have to take the children out. In early childhood settings, the adults make the decisions whether or for how long the children spend time outdoors, despite regulatory policies. Why might an educator decide against going outdoors? What are the past and current experiences of the adults regarding outdoor play? The answers to these questions are pivotal to the decisions the adults make on a daily basis.

Many educators are part of a generation that has not spent hours playing freely outside and that has little nostalgia for being outside. Almon (2009) suggests:

It’s time to move forward…. There are several good ways for adults to get started on this. One is to share play memories from one’s own childhood. We remind ourselves that we are players at heart, and young teachers who may not have played learn from the older ones. When teachers share play memories with each other and with parents they help create a strong play culture in their school or child care center. (p. 44)

In collaborating with Aboriginal early childhood educators in Alaska, Hughes (2007) invited them to paint a representation of their childhood. Their representations led to an examination of core beliefs and values, one of which was a desire to have children spend a lot of time outdoors experiencing nature.

Attention to the adults’ current experience while outside with the children is paramount in supporting outdoor play. Some of the educators we collaborated with mentioned broken benches and no shade as deterrents to their enjoyment of being outdoors with the children. We suggest centre directors and staff could examine outdoor space in terms of how it meets the adults’ needs. Is there a place for adults to sit down, for example? Mauffette (1998) observes that “if the outside space is cramped, uncomfortable or stressful, adults will avoid it and spend minimal time outside…. Making the outdoors more enjoyable for everyone is of utmost importance” (p. 21).

• Explore and share the adults’ values, beliefs, and goals

In discussions during community visits and the two workshops, we learned that educators placed considerable emphasis on the learning that should occur when children are attending organized early childhood programs. Educators commented that they felt the need to spend the time “teaching” the children in order to prepare them for school and they did not want to interrupt this teaching by taking the children outdoors. Such comments were especially common among those who worked in half-day programs. Educators from a wide variety of programs also believed that this was the expectation of parents and other adults in the community. However, during meetings held with parents and others in two communities, we heard strong agreement about the value of children spending time outdoors, learning some of the traditional ways of the (typically rural) communities. The adults of the community seemed to value outdoor play as well as school readiness experiences. Stairs and Bernhard (2002) emphasize the complexity inherent in Aboriginal education, as the students “must be competent in the skills and knowledge that will allow them to be successful in both the community of their birth and broader Canadian society” (p. 8). Early childhood educators have often received their certification through coursework that reflects a mainstream lens (the case until recently with most of the First Nation educators with whom we collaborate), and this state of affairs has introduced additional complexity. The resultant programming may be more “submersion education” (Bear Nicholas, 2011, p. 1) than culturally relevant education.

It might be assumed that children will spend some time outdoors once they are at home, but statistics indicate that this is not always the case (Copeland et al., 2012). If communities examine the extent of their children’s outdoor play opportunities beyond experiences in organized programs, they may acknowledge the need to increase the time spent outdoors while children are in child care, Aboriginal Head Start, or kindergarten. As Gruenewald (2008) explains, “to develop an intense consciousness of places that can lead to ecological understanding … children must regularly spend time out-of-doors building long-term relationships with familiar, everyday places” (p. 316).

Community collaboration and consultation is strongly encouraged in The First Nations Head Start Standards Guide (Health Canada, 2001), and is a central tenet of Aboriginal early childhood policy (Greenwood, 2006). Perhaps increased and targeted communication among all the adults (parents and educators) about time spent outdoors would lead to clarification of the goals of the various early childhood programs and discussion of the ways in which those goals might be achieved. Children may not learn the letters of the alphabet while they are outside, but they do develop social and physical skills, as well as vocabulary and language skills, that are important for school success. They may also develop a deeper understanding of their culture, which is “vital for educational success amongst Aboriginal youth” (Nguyen, 2011, p. 239). Through these community discussions, strong cultural values may become evident and changes to the experiences of the young children in organized programs may result.
• Reframe barriers in terms of problems and conditions

Early childhood education centre directors and educators are constantly bumping up against the barriers to taking children outdoors that are particular to their location and then considering possible solutions. Sometimes this becomes a reactive process. To move into a more proactive approach, we suggest that child care centre staffs work with a model that incorporates Bernhardt’s (2004) notions of ideal state, driving forces, restraining forces, problems, and conditions.

To begin, the staff would have to agree that the goal, or ideal state, is taking children outdoors for longer periods of time in enriched or natural play spaces. Staff members then would consider what forces are driving and restraining progress toward the ideal state. The main driving force toward this ideal state would be the strong belief in the value of children playing outdoors, while the restraining forces would be the various barriers experienced by staff members. To effect change in behaviour, Bernhardt (2004) proposes “gnawing away at the restraining forces, while strengthening the driving forces” (p. 176).

One way to gnaw away at the restraining forces, or barriers, is to think about whether they are problems or conditions. Bernhardt explains: “A problem is something we can do something about … a condition is something that we cannot do anything about—we acknowledge it and go around it, but we do not waste time trying to change it” (p. 177). For example, the weather is a condition; the lack of proper clothing to go outdoors in that weather is a problem. After agreeing which of the barriers are conditions and which ones might be reframed as problems, stakeholders could develop an action plan that would facilitate progress toward the ideal state.

Clarifying the Priorities

Our review of the literature provided substantial confirmation of the benefits children reap from spending time outdoors. Emotional, social, fine and gross motor, creative, and intellectual development may be enhanced through exploration and play in outdoor settings. Mental and physical health benefits are also evident. Beyond benefits to individuals, some suggest that the ongoing health of our planet depends on children developing ecoliteracy. In the case of First Nation children, spending time outdoors and learning about and honouring their connectedness to and responsibility for the land reflects their communities’ traditional beliefs and values.

Even though there is widespread agreement that children should spend significant periods of time outdoors, the literature and our research data suggest that many barriers prevent the realization of this ideal state. Questionable safety for the children, unpleasant experiences for the adults, and unclear goals for the programs may prevent or shorten the time that educators take the children outside, despite policies or regulations being in place and despite cultural values. In this article we have suggested four strategies or processes that may assist early childhood educators to overcome the barriers. These processes describe potential next steps in our collaborative work with the First Nation communities in Nova Scotia. The first three of these strategies are (1) increasing educators’ awareness of the importance of outdoor play and the possibilities for outdoor play spaces through professional learning opportunities; (2) facilitating discussions wherein the adults’ past and current experiences with the outdoors are examined; and (3) exploring staff members’, parents’ and communities’ values, beliefs, and goals with regard to the educative experiences of their young children. Through these processes, we believe staff and community members will clarify where their priorities lie with regard to outdoor play experiences for their young children. Once the priorities are established, we recommend a fourth step whereby educators work through Bernhardt’s (2004) process of reframing barriers in terms of problems and conditions to create an action plan to facilitate children playing outdoors in enriched play spaces.

References


Development of Menu Planning Resources for Child Care Centres: A Collaborative Approach

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Well-designed menus in child care centres include nutritious meals and snacks necessary for the optimum health, growth, and lifelong healthy eating behaviours of young children. With pending government food and nutrition standards, a need was identified for comprehensive, relevant, user-friendly menu planning resources. Therefore, guided by an action research model, this study identified current menu planning practices, determined the needs and expectations for menu planning resources, and developed menu planning resources that incorporate these standards and other relevant factors. Menu planners from regulated child care centres in Nova Scotia (n=330) were invited to participate by responding to an online survey and/or volunteering as a member of a collaboration group. Survey respondents (n=83) indicated that they wanted their menus to be more interesting, practical, and cost effective. Menu templates, sample menus, and costed recipes were the most requested resources. Two-thirds indicated a preference for web-based resources and about one-third expressed interest in an interactive blog. The collaboration group participants (n=21) met twice and provided valuable input for the development of a menu planning model, menu template, sample menus, recipes, and information sheets. The model unified the menu planning considerations and served as a framework for the Child Care Centre Menu Project website (http://www.msvu.ca/menuproject/). The follow-up evaluation indicated that approximately half of respondents (n=39) had consulted the website and that the sample menus were the most useful resource. The website, blog, and online survey enable ongoing development supported by input from the menu planners. The resources should be transferable, with minor adaptations, to other provincial child care centres, elementary schools, or even licensed senior care facilities.

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Approximately 25% of Canadian children and 30% of Nova Scotian children are overweight or obese, conditions that are known to negatively affect quality of life and life expectancy (Ascentum for Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Ministers of Health, 2011; Briley, Jastrow, Vickers, & Roberts-Gray, 1999; Briley, Roberts-Gray, & Rowe, 1993; Drake, 1992; Gubbels et al., 2010; Nicklas et al., 2001; Nova Scotia Alliance for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity & Office of Health Promotion, 2005; Pollard, Lewis, & Miller, 1999; J. D. Skinner, Carruth, Bounds, Zeigler, & Reidy, 2002). On average, Canadian children spend 27 hours weekly in child care centres, and parents of those who attend full time rely on the centres to provide adequate foods to meet most of the daily dietary requirements and to teach the children about healthy eating behaviours (Lynch & Batal, 2011; Dwyer, Needham, Simpson, & Heeney, 2008; Moore et al., 2005). Further, as approximately 70% of Nova Scotian preschool children have mothers or both parents in the workforce (Bushnick, 2006), there is an opportunity for child care centres to play a key role in the development of healthy lifestyles.

Research studies over the past twenty years indicate, however, that nutrition standards of child care centre menus were not being met (Briley et al., 1993; Briley et al., 1999; Fleischhacker, Cason, &
Achterberg, 2006; McConahy, Smiciklas-Wright, Mitchell, & Picciano, 2004; Nicklas et al., 2001; Romaine, Mann, Kienapple, & Conrad, 2007). A pilot study comparing Head Start child care centres’ menus with the actual food served found that, while 77% (n=92) considered dietary guidelines in menu planning, only 14% provided adequate calories (Fleischhacker et al., 2006). Studies of portion sizes of foods provided to preschool-age children indicated that they were often over or under the recommended size, which may result in a diminished ability to regulate energy intake later in life (Fox, Reidy, Karwe, & Ziegler, 2006; McConahy et al., 2004). Specific to child care centres in Nova Scotia, it was determined that the legislative requirement for provision of one-third of daily nutrients was not being met, even though the existing guidelines for menu planning were followed (Romaine et al., 2007).

In 2007, stemming from an environmental scan of recent research (Nova Scotia Departments of Health Promotion & Protection [now Health and Wellness] and Community Services, 2008) and recommendations of the Healthy Eating Nova Scotia report (Nova Scotia Alliance for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity, 2005), a provincial advisory group to “inform the development of a comprehensive food and nutrition policy for licensed child care in Nova Scotia” (Nova Scotia Departments of Health Promotion & Protection and Community Services, 2008, p. 3) was formed. This led to the release of the standards, guidelines, and criteria in the Manual for Food and Nutrition in Regulated Child Care Settings (hereafter referred to as the Manual; Nova Scotia Departments of Community Services and Health Promotion & Protection, 2011), as well as accompanying revisions to the Day Care Act (Province of Nova Scotia, 2011).

Good menu planning for child care centres, however, must consider and incorporate a number of factors that go beyond standards and guidelines that simply interpret nutritional and licensing requirements alone (Fleischhacker et al., 2006; Marotz, 2009; Romaine et al., 2007). To encourage the development of healthy eating behaviours in children, menus must plan for aesthetic appeal and the introduction of new foods (Marotz, 2009). Weekly menus should be consistent, or based on a pattern, and control for the frequency and intervals of occurrence of same, or similar, food items.

The menu is also the primary control for any food service operation, impacting its budget and image (Gregoire, 2010; Marotz, 2009). This is particularly applicable to child care centres that operate within tight budgetary restrictions and limited resources. A simplistic solution for child care centres could be for all to use a costed standard menu. However, this would negate the fact that menus are unique to the mix of ages, cultures, and backgrounds of a centre’s children, as well as the centre’s access to resources (Gregoire, 2010; Marotz, 2009). Costing also varies by region, season, and economic conditions (Romaine et al., 2007).

Despite the availability of menu planning guides and books, menu planners, whether they have completed training or not, struggle with balancing the multiple factors involved (Moore et al., 2005; Oakley, Bomba, Knight, & Byrd, 1995). With the development and subsequent implementation of the Manual, the need for relevant and user-friendly menu planning resources that encompassed these multiple factors was identified (Nova Scotia Departments of Health Promotion & Protection and Community Services, 2008). It was also evident that the child care centre menu planners must be engaged in the development of these resources to ensure the needs and expectations of the centres were incorporated and to allow centres to take ownership of the menu planning process.

Therefore, guided by an action research model to engage the child care centre menu planners, this study set out to identify current menu planning practices, determine the needs and expectations for menu planning resources, and develop relevant, user-friendly, and comprehensive menu planning resources that incorporate food and nutrition standards as well as other relevant factors.

Method

This study received approval from the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board in 2010. It used an action research methodology with participants solicited from Nova Scotia regulated child care centres.

Participants

Regulated child care centres in Nova Scotia were identified from the Directory of Licensed Child Care Facilities (Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, 2010). Contact information was compiled for all 330 full-day centres, an e-mail distribution list was established, and messages were sent to invite centre menu planners to participate in the online questionnaire and/or to be a collaboration group participant. The criteria for participants were that they be involved in menu planning at their child care centre.

Procedure

The spiral technology action research (STAR) model (H. A. Skinner, Maley, & Norman, 2006), illustrated in Figure 1, guided the procedure for this study. The STAR model combines technological design and community involvement in the continuous quality improvement process. The STAR model is based on the principles of action research, health promotion principles, behaviour change theories, and quality improvement and community mobilization practices to create a process that is centred on the user and “grounded in the everyday realities of the target population and organizations that work with the population” (H. A. Skinner et al., 2006, p. 408).
However, because this study required the incorporation of existing standards for food, nutrition, and menu planning, an additional step was added. The customer-driven management model (Leebov & Ersoz, 1992), which is based on the principles of quality management, as first described by W. Edwards Deming (1986), informed the addition of this step as it incorporates community expectations as well as professional standards to create the menu planning resources. The listen-plan-do-study-act cycle, again first described by Deming (1986), provided an appropriate structure to allow for revisions to incorporate feedback throughout the study process.

Action research methodology was an important component of this research project. Menu planners were able to collaborate and state their menu planning needs, contributing to the development of resources which, in turn, was expected to lead to more control and confidence with the menu planning process (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Wandersman & Florin, 2003). By means of online questionnaires and collaboration group sessions, the researchers listened to the needs and expectations of the menu planners; ensured the standards were addressed; developed the appropriate resources; consulted, tested, and revised; and implemented the resources using the desired information technology. The following paragraphs outline the procedure (as suggested by the STAR model with the addition of a step named “standards.”

Standards

Identification of the child care centre menu planning standards and best practices was an important step because it formed the foundation of the resources. At the time of this study, the Manual was still under development. However, the recommendations from the advisory group provided clear direction for the standards. Those that impacted menu planning included requirements for Canada’s Food Guide (CFG; Health Canada, 2007) food group servings, recommendations for fluid milk to ensure a source of vitamin D, and adherence to CFG best practices regarding food selection. To emphasize the latter recommendation and to limit use of processed foods, criteria for acceptable amounts of sodium, fat, refined sugar, and fibre were developed.

The advisory group also addressed the importance of introducing new foods in appealing ways to promote healthy eating behaviours. Sensory properties of food, such as colour, texture, shape, and flavour, enhance appeal and therefore acceptance (Marotz, 2009). For example, the sensory properties of a menu can be enhanced by having a contrast of at least two of the sensory properties and one item close to its natural form (baby carrots, berries, etc.). The recommendation for family style meal service was intended to allow children to make decisions about what and how much to eat in order to satisfy their hunger cues and establish independence (Marotz, 2009). These were all menu planning considerations as they impact the combination and preparation of foods.

Centres must also consider licensing regulations for administration and record keeping, such as advance posting of the menu and menu substitutions, food safety, budgets, and training requirements for menu planners as defined by the Day Care Act (Province of Nova Scotia, 2011).

These standards were summarized and subsequently compared to the results of the questionnaire and collaboration group discussions.

Listen

Information about menu planning current practices and the needs and expectations for resources was collected by an online questionnaire and collaboration group meetings. The online questionnaire sought responses about characterization of menus, menu planning processes and factors, experience and training, resources used, and expectations for new resources. Some questions were adapted from a previous study (Romaine et al., 2007) and others were based on the study objectives. The questionnaire was tested by three faculty members at the university and revised prior to distribution. The link to the questionnaire, which was posted online on SurveyMonkey™ (Palo Alto, CA 94301), was distributed by e-mail to all the regulated full day child care centres in Nova Scotia (n=330). Reminder e-mails and phone calls were carried out to increase response rate.

The e-mail to the centres also included an invitation to participate in the collaboration group. The first collaboration group session (n=21) utilized a World Café format (World Café, n.d.). Participants were randomly assigned to three discussion groups hosted by a researcher or research assistant. Each discussion group, sitting around a table covered with large sheets of paper, focused on specific topics for approximately 30 minutes, recording their ideas on the paper. The groups then each moved to another table to discuss another set of topics, and so on. The topics discussed at each table are outlined in Table 1.

Plan-Do-Study-Act

The plan-do-study cycle (see below for the “act” step) was repeated twice in the development of menu planning.
resources that incorporated the food and nutrition standards, the information from the participants, and how they should be displayed using the chosen technology platform (website).

In the first cycle, the researchers compiled and analyzed the responses from the questionnaire and the World Café discussions. Descriptive statistics were used for the questionnaire and simple groupings of responses were used for the discussions. Based on these analyses and the identified standards, the researchers proceeded through a series of prototypes of the menu planning resources before presenting drafts for review by the collaboration group. The researchers also explored website options for distributing the resources.

A second collaboration group (n=17) meeting was then held to review the prototype resources. Again, using the World Café format and in three groups, participants were asked to critique and test the application of the resources. Next, the researchers revised and developed additional resources and distributed them for feedback. A second questionnaire was developed using SurveyMonkey™ and distributed by e-mail to the same group of Nova Scotia child care centres. The questions elicited feedback from respondents about which resources had been accessed and which were most useful, as well as any suggestions for ongoing improvements.

The “act” step is the ongoing maintenance of the website and its resources, including means used for evaluation and feedback from users.

Results and Discussion

Participants

The response rate for the initial online questionnaire was 83 or 25% (n=330). All efforts were made to ensure the e-mail addresses were accurate; the research assistant phoned those who had e-mails undelivered. An option to respond to the questionnaire by phone was also offered, but no one chose that option. There was representation from centres with varying licensing capacities, ranging from 10–25 to greater than 101 children, with a median of 26–50; half were from the main urban centre and half from all across the province. By comparison, a previous study (Romaine et al., 2007) using a mailed survey to a random sample based on provincial distribution to 101 centres had 35 responses. Therefore, it may be suggested that the technology that now allows for electronic surveys played a role in the larger response. It is also expected that the pending release of the Manual (Nova Scotia Departments of Community Services and Health Promotion & Protection, 2011) increased interest in this study about menu planning.

Fifty-five percent of respondents indicated that they were directors or owners of the centres, 20% were caregivers, 16% had multiple roles, and only 9% were cooks. It had been expected that cooks would have been the menu planners more so than the others; however, 46% of respondents indicated that they consult with their cooks when developing and implementing a menu. In smaller centres there is less likelihood of having dedicated cooks as centre staff likely participate in menu planning and preparation as part of a general, multitasking role.

While 25 child care centre menu planners initially consented to be members of the collaboration group, only 15 attended the first session and 17 the second. While the majority were from the main urban centre, there was representation from rural areas. The information from the first World Café was made available on SurveyMonkey™ and the link was distributed by e-mail to all who had consented to be members of the collaboration groups. This allowed those who couldn’t attend to contribute and, for those who were present, to contribute further; six participants responded.

Current Menu Planning Practices

When questionnaire respondents were asked to characterize their menus, the top four responses were nutritious (94%), meets government policies (71%), kid friendly (43%), and practical (41%). Less frequently selected responses included cost effective (23%), adaptable to special diet needs (27%), creative (7%), and environmentally sensitive (6%). Most (87%) were satisfied with the characterization of their menus but indicated an interest in addressing the less frequently selected areas.

While 60% of respondents reported that they revised their menus at least yearly, 40% had not revised their menus for a year or more. Reasons for this, gathered from the collaboration discussions, included uncertainty with government policies and guidelines as well as lack of time. Regular menu revisions ensure incorporation of the specific needs of the children, current eating trends, seasonal adaptations, and changing centre resources.

Table 1. World Café discussion group topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you think are characteristics of a good menu? Are these realistic to achieve?</td>
<td>How do you adjust your menus for allergies and special diets? Examples?</td>
<td>Show a sample weekly menu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you plan your menus? Discuss similarities and differences.</td>
<td>What resources do you refer to about allergies and special diets?</td>
<td>Do you think it is a good menu?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What menu planning resources or guides do you use?</td>
<td>What else would you like to have available?</td>
<td>Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What format do you prefer for these resources or guides? Prompt by saying checklist, flowchart, framework, and model and available online (website), on hard copy, or on DVD? Other formats?</td>
<td>Show a sample weekly menu. How would you modify it for child with celiac disease (wheat allergy)?</td>
<td>How would you improve this menu?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What else would you need to consider in feeding this child?</td>
<td>What resources would be helpful to improve this menu?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Show a sample recipe.</td>
<td>The new menu standards will be based on Canada’s Food Guide food groups. For a child-sized serving of this recipe, can you identify the number(s) of food group servings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The World Café discussion group topics.</td>
<td>Can you identify how many food guide servings are in this recipe?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Menu planning was reported as a collaborative process for the questionnaire respondents. Centre staff (71%), cooks (46%), children (24%), parents (15%), and, externally, public health nutritionists (69%) and childhood development officers (19%) all provided input into menus. While parents were the least consulted, they have a large influence on the development of healthy eating behaviours and, as such, there are many unexplored opportunities for engagement (American Dietetic Association, 2005; Gibbons, Graham, Marraffa, & Henry, 2000).

When asked to identify factors considered in menu planning, respondents identified CFG (75%), cost effectiveness (71%), specific nutrients in foods (71%), government policies/guidelines (68%), ease of preparation (60%), child preferences (53%), allergies/special diets (53%), and local/seasonal foods (47%) most often. Less often selected factors included food availability (35%), sensory appeal of foods (30%), kitchen equipment (18%), cultural needs (15%), and personal preferences (1%). These numbers illustrate that menu planners have a complex array of factors to address (Fleischhacker et al., 2000; Romaine et al., 2007).

Needs and Expectations for Menu Planning Resources

Resources most often used for menu planning were CFG (89%), menus from other centres (52%), and nutrition or menu planning books (40%). Respondents expressed a need for sample menus, menu templates, and recipes, with associated costs. Almost equal numbers of respondents indicated that they would like to have these menu planning resources provided on a website (66%) and in hard copy (62%), similar to other reports (Burden, Sheeshka, Hedley, Lero, & Marsh, 2000; O’Mara & Chambers, 1992; Romaine et al., 2007). Thirty-six percent indicated that they would like to have an interactive website or blog for consulting with other child care centres’ menu planners and/or experts. Most (92%) reported that they had access to a computer for menu planning.

When asked about other information resources, respondents indicated they wanted to learn more about creative menu planning (79%), recipe and menu costing (65%), allergies/special diets (59%), nutrition (56%), and how to introduce new foods to children (54%). These results are similar to those in other reports (Gibbons et al., 2000; Romaine et al., 2007). The collaboration group participants responded well to the World Café approach. Table 2 summarizes the types of responses gathered from the first collaboration group, including the follow-up questionnaire. See Table 2 (next page)

To initiate discussion among the collaboration group participants, they were asked to share their suggestions for menu items and recipe modifications that would meet the new standards. Some of these creative ideas were to add red lentils to tomato soup to provide both a meat alternate serving and a vegetable serving for a noon meal, serving “deconstructed” casseroles such as chicken cacciatore with the ingredients separated to make the menu item more appealing to children who are reluctant to accept combinations, and replacing the ground beef in spaghetti sauce with tofu to make the menu item suitable for vegetarians. Interestingly, the collaboration group participants were not supportive of “hiding” vegetables in menu items, although they did indicate that they would add extra vegetables to soups and sauces, for example.

Development of Resources

Based on the review of the standards and analyses of the questionnaire and collaboration group discussions, the researchers grouped the menu planning standards and considerations under four main sections to form a menu plan model (see Figure 2). It was felt that the pictorial representation would assist menu planners to organize and prioritize the various disparate factors. An explanation of the model was also prepared.

Figure 2. Child care centre menu plan model.

To unify the resources, the headings and colours of the model were used for the evaluation form and the resource list; they were also later used for the website design. A menu template that incorporated the proposed standards and repetition control was designed, as was a sample menu. The sample menu included a description of how the standards and considerations were applied, thus building capacity for menu planning and evaluation. A guide for calculating food group servings from recipes was identified. The task of costing recipes and calculating their food group servings was initiated.

These draft resources were presented to the participants at the second collaboration group session. Feedback about the resources was recorded as they tested the utility of the template and evaluation for menu planning. Participants were able to design and evaluate menus using the resources, and they appreciated the opportunity to brainstorm with other menu planners. In a general group discussion, participants suggested that video(s), available on the website, would enhance communication and understanding of how to apply the model.

Following the second collaboration group session, the resources were adjusted based on participant feedback and experience. Additional sample menus were developed based on the ones created during the collaboration group session. The costs and food group servings for a selection of recipes were calculated, and a link to allow menu planners to submit recipes for
Fifty percent had accessed the website and the response rate was 48 or 14.5% (n=330). Six weeks after the website went live, an email was sent to the community involvement ownership and the recipe costing feature addressed in Nova Scotia were notified. The blog on the website. Finally, the website went live, a WordPress blog was created and linked to Mount Saint Vincent University server. A project, 2010) was established on the website (Child Care Centre Menu Project, 2010) was a dedicated website for child care centre menu planning. An instructional video to provide commentary to guide site costing was established. An instructional video to provide commentary to guide site users through the menu planning process and use of the resources was produced. The website (Child Care Centre Menu Project, 2010) was established on the Mount Saint Vincent University server. A WordPress blog was created and linked to the website. Finally, the website went live, and regulated full-day child care centres in Nova Scotia were notified. The blog and the recipe costing feature addressed the community involvement ownership component as outlined in the STAR model (H. A. Skinner et al., 2006).

Six weeks after the website went live, an evaluation questionnaire was distributed to the Nova Scotia child care centres. The response rate was 48 or 14.5% (n=330). Fifty percent had accessed the website and of this group, 83% had viewed the sample menus, 67% the menu plan model, 50% the child food group best practices, and 50% the recipes. Eighty-five percent of the respondents indicated that they plan to use the website resources in the future. No one had used the blog even though 40% had requested it be included on the site. It may be that menu planners are interested in the potential of this technology, but without prior experience, are reluctant to be an early user.

Conclusion
Menu planning resources, such as the ones developed by this study, was a need identified by Nova Scotia child care centres in the Food and Nutrition Support Environmental Scan (Nova Scotia Departments of Health Promotion & Protection and Community Services, 2008) and again in the public consultations (Nova Scotia Departments of Community Services and Health Promotion & Protection, 2010) prior to the release of the Manual (Nova Scotia Departments of Community Services and Health Promotion & Protection, 2011).

Minor revisions were made to the website resources, in particular the model, child food group best practices, menu template, and sample menus, so that they coincided with the final content of the Manual. The website resources have proven to be valuable aids for students in the nutrition and child study programs at Mount Saint Vincent University; this was an unanticipated but welcome outcome. As predicted, maintaining and updating the recipes with costs has proven to be difficult. Future revision of the website, including a planned migration to the WordPress blog, will involve removal of the costed recipes and replacement with links to recipe sites.

The STAR model, with the addition of the step to identify standards, was well suited for this study. Utilizing this action research approach resulted in an eHealth promotion outcome (H. A. Skinner et al., 2006): the Child Care Centre Menu Project website. The principles of action research enabled the researchers to build a trusting relationship with the collaboration group and therefore ensured that the needs and expectations of the menu planners were incorporated in the website resources. In turn, it is expected that incorporating the menu planners’ needs will give them confidence in their ability to plan menus that will appeal to young children, that will meet the food and nutrition standards, and that will be unique to the specific character of their centres. As one participant stated, “menus must be specific to the particular centre and its children; there can’t be one menu that fits all.”

The Child Care Centre Menu Project website and its resources should be relevant and adaptable to child care centres in other provinces, elementary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Group Topics</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the characteristics of a good menu? Do you think it is realistic to achieve these and why?</td>
<td>“Menu item variety, challenging, sensory variety, lots of food choices, balancing it with Canada’s Food Guide.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Cost effective, kid friendly, incorporating seasonal foods, appropriate portion sizes, offering choice, de-emphasizing desserts, flexibility.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Yes, it can be realistic to achieve these but it could become too expensive to buy what you want. It is more difficult for the larger centres with so many individual food preferences. It is difficult to control the plate presentation with family-style meal service. Having flexibility can be challenging with the regulations and standards in place. Child care centres need to continue trying new things and offering foods more than once—even if the children do not like it the first time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you plan your menus? Do you use tools or checklists? How do you manage the process?</td>
<td>“I plan based on what is on sale in the store. I mentally plan for one vegetarian, one poultry, one beef, one pork, and one fish per week.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I consider the age of the children, I use the checklists we are given from the nutritionist, and I closely watch what the children like and dislike. I try to incorporate the foods that they dislike into the menu in a variety of ways.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We use things that have worked in the past. We try out new ideas to see how well they work. We look on the internet and ask parents for recipes. It is frustrating to come up with enough variety for snacks.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Consultation with other centres.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Keep a record of old menus to draw ideas.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Consult with public health nutritionist for menu ideas.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Check government regulations to see if a new item meets requirements.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What format do you prefer for resources? Do you prefer a model, a checklist, examples, etc?</td>
<td>“Anything concrete helps!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I learn through hands-on approaches. I like checklists and models.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I would learn the menu planning process best if there was a dedicated website for child care centre menu planning.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I would like a bank of recipes, a way to communicate with other centres, and costed recipes.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. World Café discussion group responses: Collaboration Group 1 (n=21).*

*Includes responses to follow-up questionnaire.
schools, and, potentially, licensed senior care facilities.

References


Student Engagement and Success Using an Inquiry Approach and Integrated Curriculum in Primary Education

Alison Board

Alison Board is a teacher with the Toronto District School Board. Her interest in the Reggio Emilia approach to education has led to opportunities for sharing her practical implementations with teachers in her school board and in other boards in Ontario. She is a contributor to the book and blog *The Heart and Art of Teaching and Learning: Practical Ideas and Resources for Beginning Teachers* (Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, 2011). Email: alison.board@tdsb.on.ca

Intended for educators working within a prescribed curriculum, this article demonstrates how student engagement and success are achieved using an inquiry approach and integrating the curriculum. Alison outlines how she initially planned for this outcome by selecting four questions that were provided for the Toronto District School Board’s Teaching and Learning Critical Pathways for Literacy. She then documents the children’s responses throughout the inquiry to assess their understanding. Subquestions, rich narrative stories, and knowledge building were used to support the children’s learning in a deeper context. Ultimately, the children with the most challenges in reading and writing were able to demonstrate their knowledge using a variety of assessment forms that included oral responses, visual arts, science journals, and technology.

What is hope? This was the inquiry question I presented to the grade 1 and 2 children in my classroom. I wanted a question that was broad enough to incorporate strands of the science and social studies curricula, as well as allow for many interpretations depending on context, as could be considered with art and language. The plan would follow the same timeline as *Teaching and Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP) for Literacy*, which is now standard across the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). My intention was to integrate science, social studies, art, and math within the same big idea as language, to allow time and space for inquiry with the intention to expand and deepen the question, “What is hope?” I also planned to assess the children’s understanding, using photographs, recorded conversations, and observations, and provide opportunity to represent their understanding in a variety of forms. This intention was based on my previous years of experience as a kindergarten teacher who used inquiry to engage learners; I also wanted to follow a Reggio Emilia approach. My enthusiasm for an integrated and inquiry approach was often met with skepticism by primary teachers who felt restricted to cover a more prescribed curriculum than was outlined for kindergarten. I was motivated to teach a primary grade where I could present guiding questions to engage students (and myself) in a curriculum that could be considered in a nonlinear way. After reading Jeffrey Wilhelm’s (2007) work on inquiry, I felt confident that I could surpass merely “covering the curriculum” and aim to design curriculum that would engage learners and support deeper understanding. Hence, my challenge was to combine and integrate a grade 1 and 2 curriculum provided in a flexible long-range plan and presented in the form of questions for inquiry-based learning.

Each school in the TDSB approaches the implementation of TLCPs in a unique way that benefits staff and student needs. At our school, we were to complete four TLCPs for language that span from September to June. We were provided with a list of possible questions that were developed by our literacy coach and influenced by the director of the Toronto District School Board, Dr. Chris Spence, and his vision of hope: “Imagine there is a clear focus on achieving student success and every student is engaged, has a voice, [has] access to a caring adult, and [has] the opportunity to develop to their full potential” (Toronto District School Board, n.d., para. 2).

Once I selected the four questions for the TLCPs for language, I then integrated the curriculum strands from the social studies, science, arts, and math curricula that fit best with each question, using a web graphic organizer. I then created subquestions to create a framework for inquiry-based learning and presented them with the four main questions as long-range plans for the year. The long-range plans were flexible, but provided a list of learning opportunities (curriculum expectations), possible excursion ideas, and a culminating task.

The Integrated Pathway

September was a time to create an inclusive environment as a foundation for inquiry-based learning. Students in grade 2 were surprised to see an art studio and blocks in the classroom, but they were quick to utilize the materials during extended inquiry time where the students could explore ways of representing their learning. We spent the first month building our classroom community and taking the time to share and listen to one another. To start the first integrated pathway, I simply asked the children, “What is hope?”

Ryder: You want something.

Alex: Being excited.
Madeline: You wish something.

Leah: Worrying about other people.

By recording the children’s responses, I could see that the children had similar ideas of hope as wanting or wishing, such as “I hope I get a new toy.” Only Leah’s comment seemed to differ in that it touched on worry or care for others. The children in my classroom needed an opportunity to consider hope in a deeper context. I looked at the subquestions I had developed in connection to the science and social studies curricula, such as, Why is hope important to our community? How is hope different for other communities around the world? How do the sun, air, and water (as energy/life source) give hope to people in our community and other communities around the world?

I looked to narrative as a form that could provide the stories and context needed to promote a deeper understanding of hope. Using various search engines, I located texts to read aloud that would provide opportunities to discuss the idea of hope in relation to our own community and communities elsewhere in the world.

The following four texts, which were chosen in response to the children’s needs for understanding and were not in my original long-range plan, became the foundation for our inquiry:

• *Lila and the Secret of Rain*, by David Conway and Jude Daly
• *Listen to the Wind*, by Greg Mortenson and Susan Roth
• *Poor Fish*, by Heide Helene Beisert
• *The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee’s Story*, by Pegi Shea and Anita Riggio

We read the books two or three times each over a period of a month. The grade 1 students easily compared their own community with the environmental issues in *Poor Fish*, and with teacher direction, the grade 2 students compared the people, houses, transportation, and geography presented in the other books about Pakistan, Africa, and Thailand. To support the learning needed for these comparisons, each student was provided with a field journal. We used these journals on a weekly outing to our school grounds, where we made observations about the sun, the air, or water in relation to our familiar surroundings. We would return to class and share our findings, building on our own understandings in a process Chiarotto (2011) calls *knowledge building*.

In my long-range plans, I had outlined the culminating task as a fabric picture, using a variety of textiles to represent the children’s understanding of hope in the context of their local community (grade 1) or another community in the world (grade 2). Part of our learning included a class trip to the Textile Museum of Canada. This trip provided us with new information about the symbolism and purpose of clothing in African cultures. It also gave the students an opportunity to explore textiles, wool, and weaving in a hands-on area.

Upon returning to school from our class trip, Kieran, a grade 2 student, handed me a piece of fabric that he had just cut out, saying, “Here, Ms. Board, this is for you.” Kieran’s representation was not petitioned or expected. I felt the need to have something written to support his representation of a garment, so I asked him to explain what it represented in words. He said, “Hunter clothes. The red symbol is good luck. They go hunting so they can eat.” His written piece did not convey his understanding of symmetry as demonstrated in how he cut the garment, nor his initiative and interest which, until this time, had not been evident.

After our trip to the textile museum, extended “inquiry time” in the class to pursue topics and interests at various centres, and discussions around our four foundation books, the children started to make their own observations and connections. Integrating the science curriculum for both grades, which included focus on the sun’s energy (grade 1) and the need for air and water (grade 2), contributed to their understanding of the texts. I asked the children again, “What is hope?”

Madeline: To keep the environment clean.

Leah: To build a school.

Alex: For rain to cool down the land, fill the wells so people will not die.

Molly: To live in a new country; to have a home.

Kieran: To go to school.

The children’s responses were now reflecting their understanding of hope in other contexts. They were continuously making connections between the books that we read. They were also showing interest in locating the various countries that are the settings for the texts. When we were in the computer lab, many of the children searched their country of interest on Google Earth. Leah and Madeline were surprised to see the snow-covered mountainous terrain of Korphe, Pakistan.
Figure 2. Leah takes her chair to work by the map where she is working on locating Korphe, Pakistan, and describing its climate.

An Emergent Interest in Weaving

An interest in weaving emerged from the children’s learning regarding the importance and cultural significance of cloth in our community and communities in Pakistan, Thailand, and Africa. This interest was the result of our trip to the textiles museum, the rich texts combining themes of hope, cloth, and community, and the social studies and arts curricula.

A basic loom was set up as a centre in the classroom, on a table with chairs set on either side as an invitation for two. A basket was provided with strips of blue fabric and a limited selection of beige and grey yarn. All the children wanted to try weaving; however, over an extended time I observed three main outcomes that resulted from the weaving centre.

First, I was surprised by the unlikely partnerships that it brought together and the collaboration it encouraged. Ryder said, “We can do this together. First I hold the strings and Kate pushes the fabric through, then she holds the strings and I do it!”

Second, the loom attracted interest from some students who were not usually interested in the arts. For example, Ryan worked alone at the loom and methodically wove the materials, noting the pattern as he worked. For many of the grade 1 boys, weaving provided necessary opportunities for small motor development.

Figure 3. Ryan at the loom.

Third, the loom provided a centre for oral language development. Eve-Marie, an English language learner, was often reticent about participating in any group activities at the beginning of the year. Yet, she felt comfortable participating with others at the loom, and it was here that she engaged in dialogue while sharing in the act of weaving.

Figure 4. Eve-Marie, grade 1 English language learner, at the loom.

The Culminating Project

When it came time for the culminating project, I doubted my decision to rely on the fabric representation for assessment. So, I created a graphic organizer or template for the children to complete first. However, I found the fabric representations captured a depth of understanding that was not evident in the written task.

Leah’s fabric representation shows the altitude of the Korphe community, the challenge of the water that was previously crossed using a wire pulley and a box to sit in, and the wise man who slipped. In Korphe, the people’s need for a bridge is more clear than their need for a school.

Figure 6. Culminating fabric picture, Korphe, Pakistan.
In Figure 7, grade 2 student Molly uses fabric to effectively demonstrate her understanding of the dry African landscape. She has also shown perspective with a home and person in the background on the horizontal line, skills that were explored during instruction of the visual arts curriculum. This work demonstrates how a student can represent his or her knowledge using visual art. As Lorraine Chiarotto (2011) notes, “the fact that a student may not possess particularly strong writing skills does not mean that he or she is devoid of ideas or knowledge” (p. 24).

Conclusion

At the end of the inquiry, I asked the students if their ideas about hope had changed.

Kieran: Hope is more about needing something, like a place to live, food, or water to survive.

Leah: We pretty much have everything we need.

It was evident from these responses that the children had gained a deeper understanding of the question through their own inquiry, which had been supported using an integrated curricular approach. More importantly, the children were successful in demonstrating their knowledge and understanding in science and social studies that would not have been achievable if only paper and pencil tasks were provided. Visual art provides a valuable means of assessment. Through the documentation process, I was able to clarify my own objectives and make the children’s learning visible.

How To Implement an Integrated Inquiry Approach

To implement a similar approach, brainstorm ways to connect the children to the curriculum using real-world problems or questions. Provide many, many ways to approach the inquiry, and allow for extended time periods where the children can explore their topics of interest at the computer, in an art studio, or using building materials. More specifically:

1. Make flexible plans
2. Build classroom community
3. Learn with the children
4. Share ideas as a group
5. Provide the resources and the time
6. Allow students to express understanding in many forms
7. Document and reflect

References


To Be...

To be in the place  
Is to relate to others  
In the external objectivity.  
To be in the place  
Is to embody the experience  
And to establish identity.  
If there is no relation to others  
Then no relation to self exists either  
For to be in the place  
Is to encounter the world.

We Are Places

The place in which we begin  
The place in which we question  
Is the Place in which we stand and discover ourselves.

In finding ourselves  
“in” the world  
We find ourselves  
“in” a place  
Already given over to  
and involved with “the other.”

Place does not gather  
But is gathering itself  

So we don’t merely belong to a place  
But we are places themselves.

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Ana Vojnovic is an early childhood educator who is in the process of completing her BA in early childhood education at Capilano University. With her educational background in philosophy and fine art techniques, she discovered a passion for the concept of being in a place and what it means in the context of these disciplines. She situates her work within existential phenomenology as she critically examines the role of the child care centre as a place of childhood.
If You Give a Bird a Binary

Mary Kelly

Mary Kelly graduated in 1981 with a certificate in early childhood education from Camosun College, Victoria, British Columbia. After many satisfying years working in a variety of childcare settings, Mary returned to Camosun College in the fall of 2008 to obtain a diploma with an infant/toddler specialization in the early learning and care program. After graduating in 2009, Mary was fortunate to join University of Victoria Child Care Services, where she loves working in one of their toddler programs. Email: mcnkelly@shaw.ca

For the past two years a group of early childhood educators who work for the University of Victoria Child Care Services have voluntarily participated in a course facilitated by two pedagogistas. Each month one or two articles are put forward for reading. Course participants then meet to share their thoughts, struggles, and learning from the readings. As one of the participants, I do my best to read and, more importantly, try to understand and make meaning of the articles. I find it necessary to read the articles multiple times because the academic language used is not part of my everyday early childhood educator vocabulary! It was after I read and reread an article titled “Challenging Anthropocentric Analysis of Visual Data: A Relational Materialist Methodological Approach to Educational Research” by Karin Hultman and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi that I was inspired to write the following poem.

If you give a bird a binary
She’ll ask you for two nests.
Once you’ve found the right materials
She’ll decide what suits them best.

It depends on definitions
Knowledge, theories, and beliefs.
Two eggs would be most common,
Most suited, cause less grief.

But what if epistemology
Is foremost on your mind?
A belief lends one suggestion,
Your truths another kind.

To justify one’s decision
Puts to question one’s beliefs.
Are eggs the chosen objects?
No questions, just relief.

You know that birds lay eggs—
It’s infallible, needs no proof.
It’s simple, easy, obvious—
Unless you seek more truths.

Could the nests hold brand new knowledge?
Inviting questions from a few:
What phenomenon is occurring
When you question what to do?
At London Bridge Child Care Services we share in the belief that growing children deserve growing adults. One of our core professional development practices is to do for educators what we want them to do for children. In other words, if we want educators to foster curiosity and support deep thinking in children, we need to foster curiosity and support deep thinking with them.

One of the ways we do this is to support teacher research through our Master Educator Program. After two years, London Bridge educators are eligible to apply for the 18-month program, where they are supported by mentors in a year-long research project on a topic they are curious about.

Shelley Brandon, a recent graduate of the program, chose to do her research around the question “How can I support a toddler curriculum in a patch of grass?” Shelley’s research stemmed from her deep connection to the outdoors and her strong desire to offer young children meaningful experiences in a natural environment. Her idea was to study how toddlers engaged in an outdoor space that housed nothing but grass, stones, logs, leaves and other items that would naturally be found there.

Among other things, Shelley’s research deepened her appreciation for an old log bench that had been a quiet, forgotten part of the playground for years. Over the course of her research, her thinking was transformed as she watched this dried-up piece of wood come alive under the careful study of several two-year-olds.

The following is a poem Shelley wrote in response to the wisdom of those children.

This Log

This log used to be a tree. Perhaps it was one of many trees on a ridge, or perhaps it stood alone against the horizon – one will never know for sure. We know from its rings that its life spanned several years but we will never know the details of its existence. Who did it shelter from the elements? Who did it nourish? Who did it protect? Who did it inspire?

This log used to be a tree. Somehow at some time it was removed from its original home and altered from its original state. Now it takes form as a miniature bench and has assumed the position as part of our playground landscape. It blends well in its new setting, its potential unnoticed and unsolicited. It is just a log, after all.

This log used to be a tree. Through the changes in the seasons, the log remains a constant in our environment. Its weathered exterior is a testimonial to our climate – cracks form along its axis in response to extremes of heat and cold; its rugged bark begins to slip off as the log itself expands and contracts. Its surface becomes polished and slippery with the rain. This log no longer has the defenses against the harsh elements that it once did in its life as a tree.

This log used to be a tree. Its base now presses firmly against the ground, inventing habitats for the tiniest of creatures. Tall grass surrounds its perimeter, shielding it from sight at times. Near record snowfall levels hid this log from our sight. It is easy to forget about this log at times. It is simply a bench, after all – nothing more, nothing less.

This log used to be a tree. Years pass and its unwavering presence in our landscape make it increasingly difficult for us to ignore, so we accept this log as a permanent fixture in our environment. True, it is no longer a tree, but perhaps in time we would see value in its new form.
This log used to be a tree. We watch and we wait as this seemingly uninspiring log ignites a transformation. In an instant, this log becomes a hub for social networking, as toddlers form and strengthen relationships with their peers. This log becomes a place for children to test theories, explore boundaries, and take risks. This log became a place to exercise an active imagination and a refuge for solitary reflection – a place for rest, a place for quiet contemplation.

This log is alive...

This log used to be a tree. Now we see it as so much more. It has established itself as a place where our youngest citizens can challenge themselves – a place where they are free to ask questions and seek answers. It is a base camp for making discoveries about our world and a place we can go to learn about ourselves. This log used to be a tree, but now it is a prop for climbing, balancing, and jumping. It provides a surface to build on; it is a vessel with the ability to contain even the smallest pebble or sprinkle of sand. It begs to be poked at, climbed, balanced on, hammered, peeked under, squatted upon, jumped over. This log is admired, revered, and appreciated.

This log used to be a tree. We no longer live in its past; rather we marvel in its presence. This log has opened our minds to the significance of the seemingly insignificant. It has forced us to reexamine our methods and it has allowed us the freedom to let go of our inhibitions. This log used to be a tree. Perhaps it was one of many trees on a ridge or perhaps it stood alone against the horizon – one will never know for sure. We are certain however, that this log does not need roots or branches or leaves to hold a special place in our hearts. Its power rests in its possibilities.
Stand Together or Fall Apart: Professionals Working With Immigrant Families

Written By: Judith K. Bernard
Reviewed by: Lara di Tomasso

Lara di Tomasso received a BA in political science from McGill University in 2003 and completed her master’s in child and youth care at the University of Victoria in 2012. Her work with immigrants and refugees both in Canada and the Middle East has fuelled her research interests, which include processes of racialization, ongoing colonialisms, migration, and the ways in which these forces impact the lives of children and families in Canada. Lara currently resides in Toronto; she works as a freelance report writer in the nonprofit sector and as a course writer and online instructor for the University of Victoria.

Human service professionals working with immigrant children and families in Canada, the United States, and other immigrant-receiving countries face rapidly evolving practice contexts. An enduring economic recession and rightward shifting immigration policies and discourses are creating increasingly complex realities for migrant families in Western countries. These changes occur in the shadow of the impacts sustained by racialized and/or Muslim migrants, after the events of September 11, 2001. While human service professionals in training are often prompted to explore diversity issues in their college or university programs, they rarely have the opportunity to learn about the many issues surrounding immigration and the migratory process—issues that have a direct bearing on practice.

Stand Together or Fall Apart by Judith Bernhard serves as a timely and important introduction to the realities facing immigrants in countries such as Canada. It offers professionals working with migrant families alternative frameworks and examples of programs that can assist in “shifting the focus” (Bernhard, 2012, p. 72) toward approaches that foreground the strengths, resilience, and knowledge of newcomer families.

The first and longest section of the book discusses the contemporary realities of international immigration. Chapter 1 makes a compelling case for the book’s relevance today, chapter 2 describes how immigration redefines societies in immigrant-receiving countries, chapter 3 discusses some of the social and legal issues faced by immigrants, and chapter 4 provides an overview of the challenges experienced by immigrant families as they settle into their new lives. Chapter 4 ends by reminding readers that despite good intentions, human service professionals are often located within the dominant culture and may not approach their work with newcomers in a way that resonates with or benefits them. This is an extremely important point and one that absolutely needs to be emphasized in human service education and training programs. This first section does a good job of introducing readers to the myriad issues very often encountered during the processes of migration and settlement. However, the section’s main strength is the urgency it conveys for human service professionals in immigrant-receiving countries to learn about these complex and interconnected issues and develop an ability to apply this knowledge in their work with newcomer families.

The book’s second section sets out to provide readers with new paradigms through which to work with immigrant children and families. In chapter 5, Bernhard adeptly summarizes several alternative theoretical frameworks as part of her “call for a broader conceptual understanding of interventions with newcomers” (p. 54). Next, in chapter 6, she challenges notions of “normal” in education settings and describes the ways in which Western theories of development delineate specific standards of success that can serve to marginalize immigrant children and parents. In this vital chapter, Bernhard importantly explores how “normal” is conceptualized and challenges the universal validity of mainstream assessment tools. She uses rich examples from her own research to emphasize how knowledge itself and the approaches that stem from dominant knowledge are rooted in particular values and norms that cannot always be applied universally across cultural lines. In Chapter 7, Bernhard advocates for shifting the focus to one that seeks out and works with potential and present strengths of newcomer families.

The book’s third and final section focuses on research and practice with newcomer families. It introduces readers to typologies of effective interventions and to programs that the author herself was involved in designing and implementing. In chapter 8, Bernhard eloquently explains the difference between programs that involve parental input into design and delivery and those that place parents on the sidelines. In a section with particular relevance for researchers and program designers, Bernhard discusses “problems of evidence” (p. 86) in chapter 8. Here, she explores how efforts to centre the voices of immigrant families can be challenged by the exigencies of funders, who often want to see a list of measurable, predesignated objectives before funds are allocated. The subsequent sections of this chapter offer well-articulated rationales for learning how to recognize
when full parental involvement is needed; examples are presented of programs that successfully do this. Chapter 9 is one of the strongest chapters in the book, both for students in the human service professions and for researchers and readers who are interested in learning about successful approaches to building on newcomer families’ strengths. Bernhard details her own initiatives with newcomer families, summarizes what she has learned from these experiences, and proposes future applications of this knowledge. Chapter 10 is a compelling conclusion to the book that calls for “all helping professionals in immigrant-receiving countries to commit to and build on this foundation of empowering practices” (p. 116).

Stand Together or Fall Apart addresses a large amount of complex subject matter. In addition to the many topics Bernhard addresses, several other considerations could serve to round out readers’ understanding of the issues related to migration. Increasingly, migrant justice movements in Canada and elsewhere (e.g., No One Is Illegal, Solidarity Across Borders) are making important connections among many of the trends that Bernhard discusses and ongoing colonialism. In a growing number of social movements, justice for migrants is seen as necessarily tied to Indigenous self-determination (Walia, 2012). Settler states like Canada, the United States, and other immigrant-receiving countries were formed through colonization and are sustained through immigration. The history of colonization, as well as ongoing colonial processes in Canada, are therefore deeply tied to immigration and to discussions of national identity, integration, racism, and marginalization.

In the Canadian context, a significant amount of scholarship explores the connections among colonization, migration, race, racism, whiteness, and processes of racialization (e.g., Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 1998; Smolash, 2009; Thobani, 2007). This type of scholarship offers a useful theoretical layer for understanding the complexity of issues tied to migration and settlement. Beyond learning about policy, laws, and events or conditions that trigger migration, service professionals could benefit from learning about the ways in which racism informs systems and policies, the impacts of systemic racism on immigrant children and families, and the global systems that produce refugees, mass migrations, poverty, Indigenous dispossession, and various forms of marginalization. These systems are directly implicated in producing the therefore an ability to understand them is a significant asset when working with migrant children and families.

Bernhard’s book encourages greater understanding of issues related to migration and settlement, provides a theoretical framework for alternative and more effective approaches for working with immigrant families, and describes programs that are effective because they have succeeded in building bridges with newcomer parents. Universities, colleges, teachers, and students in the human services can use this book to start conversations about how to work with immigrant children and families.

References


It was with great curiosity that I started to read Roma Chumak-Horbatsch’s *Linguistically Appropriate Practice: A Guide for Working with Young Immigrant Children*, since it covers an area dear to me as a graduate student, that of bilingual children’s education. My curiosity came not only from the researcher in me, but also from my role as parent of two young bilingual children. I was curious to find out how and what classroom practices could support the maintenance and development of bilingual children’s heritage languages, as my wish for my children is to continue to be bilingual even when they attend school in English. So, my double role as parent and graduate student drew my attention to this book immediately.

The purpose of the book is multifold, and it reflects the diversity of its intended audience. The book offers practical solutions to the challenges encountered by educators in childcare centres and primary schools where immigrant children do not speak the classroom language. It also provides answers to parents who value and encourage heritage language maintenance and who might wonder what is best for their children in terms of bilingualism. Last but not least for all the workers, educators, and policy makers involved in early childhood education in Canada, it describes in detail a plan for an inclusive learning environment in which all children’s linguistic, cultural, personal, and intellectual richness is supported and validated.

The book is organized into three main parts. “Laying the Groundwork for Linguistically Appropriate Practice (LAP)” provides background information about immigrant children. Part 1 contains four chapters; in the first three, the author answers questions related to (1) the presence and the linguistic situation of immigrant children globally and in Canada, (2) current classroom practices with young immigrant children, and (3) why we need a new approach in how we help immigrant children. A detailed description and explanation of the new approach, LAP, is provided in Chapter 4.

Part 2, “Setting the Stage for LAP,” offers a detailed description of how ECE practitioners can prepare their classes for LAP and what has to be in place before launching LAP in their classrooms. Part 3, “Implementing LAP Activities,” offers a series of practical classroom activities that can be used as they are or adapted to children’s diverse needs.

By identifying a gap in the current classroom practices with regard to the language and literacy needs of young immigrant children, by providing a rationale for the need for a new approach, by rigorously planning and organizing the book, and by clearly presenting practical suggestions and examples, Chumak-Horbatsch has succeeded in producing a much-needed resource that offers a comprehensive overview of the linguistic and cultural situation of Canada’s immigrant children. She proposes inclusive language and literacy practices that will enrich the academic experiences of all children. Although these are definite signs of success for the book, a few things make me consider the book particularly valuable and outstanding.

First, while reading the book, I could not help but appreciate the author’s clear definition of the construct *linguistically appropriate practice* (LAP). In the introduction, the author relates the birth of LAP while jogging in Toronto’s High Park, telling an audience of sleepy Canada geese that LAP would be “inclusive, research based and practitioner friendly” (p. 4). Chapter 4 is dedicated in its entirety to defining the new approach, describing LAP’s theoretical grounding and the absolute, immediate necessity of a new way to work with immigrant children. The author explains how the proposed classroom practice extends inclusive practices and reflects the principles of dynamic bilingualism in a way that takes into account all language circumstances, contexts, and speakers. Thus, Chumak-Horbatsch writes, “LAP sees immigrant children as emergent bilinguals, acknowledges their unique language and literacy needs, focuses on the social and communicative aspects of languages, encourages translanguaging, promotes bilingualism, and builds partnerships with families” (p. 57).

Another important aspect of the book’s success is the presence of concrete examples in the form of activities and lesson plans on how LAP can be put into practice in the classroom. As willing as practitioners often are to provide the
best instruction for all children, they are just as often at a loss when it comes to putting into practice new theories that promote child growth because of the lack of clear guidance, proper support, and training. Chumak-Horbatsch’s inclusion of this guidance and support gives the book extreme value and sets up the new approach for success. Not only does she promote a new classroom practice of inestimable value to developing and maintaining heritage languages by immigrant children, but she also provides very carefully planned and detailed activities and lesson plans that will help practitioners set the stage for and adopt LAP in their classrooms. After she describes each activity in detail, the author offers tips and suggestions with regard to expanding and extending the activities to make them suitable and appropriate for the children’s needs. The fact that the activities have been through a “tried and tested” process by being rigorously developed and implemented throughout the years by the author herself or by other practitioners and researchers speaks to the efficiency and success these activities bring to a class.

In my opinion, LAP’s overall value stems from its significance for pedagogy. The call for supportive approaches to children’s home languages and cultures in preschool and elementary classrooms is nothing new, but unfortunately, that is what it remained for a long time—just a call waiting to be answered in a proactive way that comprehensively addresses the language and cultural needs of bilingual children. The brilliance of Chumak-Horbatsch’s book stems from the fact that it goes a step further—a huge and important step, I might say—and provides educators with what the field was lacking—concrete examples of how inclusiveness can be achieved. In other words, the book successfully makes the link between theory and practice.

Although I am not currently an early childhood educator, I absolutely enjoyed the group activities section included at the end of each chapter. The section took me on a journey back into the past and helped me to reflect on my past beliefs and practices with the bilingual children I once taught and to remember those years with warm feelings. I took tremendous joy in carrying out some of the activities on my own and appreciated the new tips I learned that will help me with my current home practices with my children.

Last but not least, the book is extremely reader friendly. The book’s attractive format is clearly explained in the introduction and is followed throughout. I particularly liked the easiness of the read and the lack of pretentious terms. A list of definitions for terms used throughout the book is provided in the introduction, with additional explanations inserted throughout the book, making the book accessible for everyone. The inclusion of anecdotes, photos, and stories makes the argument for a new approach more convincing and real. Whether you are a policy maker, an ECE instructor, or a parent, this book draws you into wanting to become part of an inclusive community—the LAP community.

To conclude, Linguistically Appropriate Practice: A Guide for Working with Young Immigrant Children has something to offer everyone involved in the education of bilingual children. The book provides researchers and graduate students like me with a comprehensive overview of the linguistic situation of Canada’s immigrant children. It proposes a new, inclusive, and supportive language approach to the classroom practices in daycare centres with immigrant children and offers practical suggestions and ready-to-use activities and lesson plans. For language policy makers and curriculum planners, the book makes a call for carefully building a curriculum that is inclusive of the language learning acquired at home and that enables immigrant children’s continuous development.

References
Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education

Edited By: Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Larry Prochner
Reviewed by: Sandra Chang-Kredl

Sandra Chang-Kredl is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal. Her research interests are in curriculum studies, teacher identity, childhood studies and children’s popular culture, all of which are framed by qualitative and cultural studies approaches. She also has experience teaching and administering in early childhood settings.

Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education (2013), edited by Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw (professor in the School of Child and Youth Care and coordinator of the Early Years Specialization at the University of Victoria) and Larry Prochner (professor of early childhood education and chair of the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta) is part of a series called Rethinking Childhood (Gaile S. Cannella, general editor). The series challenges modernist approaches to childhood, through reconceptualist and critical scholarship, with the purpose of developing new understandings of the early childhood education field within a framework of postfoundational theories. Re-situating Canadian Early Childhood Education presents scholarship from a uniquely Canadian context, providing examples of reconceptualist work by Canadian early childhood researchers.

The two opening chapters set the tone and purpose for this volume by presenting a forceful overview of the reconceptualist movement in early childhood education. In the book’s foreword, Curry and Cannella describe the scholars of the movement, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, as advocates who challenge dominant, positivist, universalizing, and Euro-Western ideologies that disregard (to the point of erasure) the contributions and experiences of marginalized groups. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by the privileging of developmental psychology in the field of early childhood education. The construction of the child from a developmental standpoint is an idea that has been institutionally legitimized, and its powerful discourse affects the lives of children, families, and teachers around the globe. Reconceptualists argue against discourses of childhood that legitimate a belief in control and predictability, for example, the process of adults observing and measuring children’s development/progress against a standard of normality. Significantly, book editors Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner frame reconceptualist work in early childhood education as a political project. The critical activism implicit in reconceptualist scholarship aims to decolonize the field and open it to more diverse and socially just approaches. Its purpose, then, is to give voice to those whose voices have traditionally been oppressed, in particular, children, their teachers and families, women, and racial and ethnic minorities. The collection of work in this volume demonstrates how Canadian scholars in early childhood education contribute to the reconceptualist project of challenging discourses entrenched in modernist, neoliberal agendas through “deconstructive action” (Curry & Cannella, p. xv) while reconstructing new ways of thinking. These new ways draw on postfoundational theories that encourage dialogue, process, and openness to diversity, multiplicity, and complexity.

The book succeeds in representing a diversity of approaches and topics from a reconceptualist standpoint in Canadian early childhood education scholarship. In their introduction, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner describe how the original focus of reconceptualist studies in early childhood education was to critique assumptions framed by developmental psychology, and this appears to still be a prominent theme, as reflected in many of the chapters in this edited volume. Postfoundational theories are used to challenge dominant views forwarded by developmental psychology and exemplified in NAECY’s guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice. For example, sociocultural theories are applied to challenge the view of literacy development as a solely cognitive activity (Davidson); sociohistorical perspectives of play are used to interrogate the dominant, Eurocentric perspective of play as stage- and age-based (Kirova); and critical disability studies are used to challenge dominant discourses of disability as deficit oriented and literacy as print focused and psychometrically defined (Iannacci & Graham). Many of these chapters are thought provoking. Langford, in writing about the early childhood educator’s professional authority, applies feminist studies and critical theories to help the early childhood educator reclaim her identity and work. The dominant view of early childhood educators as professional technicians who merely carry out standardized procedures dictated by experts (e.g., child psychologists, professors in education), Langford claims, must be challenged. She advocates for an educator who can understand her position in a highly gendered profession, actively pursue a professional authority that is complex, and reconceive of herself as a critical subject and agent. Such new understandings of the project of early childhood education, sorely lacking in current Canadian society and teacher education programs (with their hegemonic devotion to child-centred and developmental discourses), bolster the early childhood professional with the will to contribute to social justice as a caring, intelligent citizen who is historically, socially, and culturally aware.

To be clear, the book is not a collective hunt to overthrow developmental approaches. Kummen, Pacini-Ketchabaw, and Thompson, in what they title “making developmental knowledge stutter and
stumble,” challenge traditional dualisms, such as human versus nonhuman and discourse versus matter, to literally reconceptualize developmental knowledge (i.e., rather than offering alternative theories to developmental psychology, they encourage us to think differently about developmental knowledge). The authors apply postfoundational theories of new materialisms and posthumanism to resituate developmental knowledge from within the educator, as successful or unsuccessful developmental worker, to an event that emerges from interactions between educators, children, and materials. The reconceptualist movement has also expanded beyond the interrogation of developmental psychology to encompass a broader aim of equality, diversity, social justice, and emancipation (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Prochner). Davidson presses for an integrated approach that combines cognitive and sociocultural understandings of literacy development. Queer theory is used to challenge heteronormative approaches to teacher education in early childhood (Janmohamed). And work from Indigenous scholars is used to oppose colonization practices in an Inukjuak centre (Rowan).

Challenging persistent core ideas in the early childhood education field is not an easy goal. Unchallenged assumptions that have been recycled for decades, such as the undisputed belief that human intellect should be measured through predetermined and universal psychological constructs, make it difficult for different ideas to be considered. As Janmohamed notes, challenging dominant discourses requires a “constant need to swim against the tide” (p. 99). A project of reconceptualization is by necessity complex and messy, not straightforward. This book’s chapters—and their somewhat “piecemeal” presentation, which echoes Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner’s description of the movement—serve to disrupt and resituate the conversations away from some of the core ideas too long unchallenged. Many do so in a preliminary and exploratory manner, leaving space and an implicit invitation for further research to be conducted in important areas.

A recurrent experience in reading the various chapters was a sense of surprise, almost a sort of awakening - “I never thought of this issue in this way”- and an appreciation for the vision and mettle required to challenge dominant discourses in everyday early childhood events. For example, Rose and Whitty move the reader to reconsider how neoliberal constructions of time dictate so much of our lives, specifically, the routines that are ritualized in child care settings, the goal of efficiency that is prioritized through time-fixed beliefs, and the quantification and objectification of students’ and teachers’ experiences. In this way, they reveal some of the unquestioned ways of thinking that are so embedded in our lives as educators, parents, and children.

Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner describe the reconceptualist movement in early childhood education as a political project, in that the work is meant to move beyond theorizing and make a real-world difference by addressing social injustices. The collected work in this book certainly supports this vision by interrogating the marginalization of different populations in a variety of actual Canadian early childhood contexts. Kirova studies the experiences of refugee families and their young children in an intercultural early learning program in western Canada. To challenge the dominant stage-based view of play, she brings to light the importance of cultural “brokering” that educators carry into children’s play, showing that play is not a culture-free activity to be parsed into measures of norms and deficiencies. Rowan addresses remnants of recapitulation and evolutionary theories that continue to perpetuate the marginalization of Indigenous students and families. She urges for accessibility to Inuit culture and identities for children in a child care centre in Inukjuak, Nunavik. Swadener, Peters, and Gaches focus on a children’s rights perspective across three nations: Australia, Northern Ireland, and Canada. In challenging the traditional and neoliberal tokenizing of the child as passive, dependent, and inferior, they go farther than many scholars who advocate theoretically for children’s greater participation. By fusing their theoretical interrogation of adults’ assumptions about childhood with actual cross-national examples of children being supported in forming and expressing their views, they present possibilities for including children, especially children under 8, as participants in serious forms of decision making about issues that affect their lives. Bernhard’s focus is on Latin American immigrant mothers’ relationships with their children’s schools. Drawing on critical pedagogy, cultural capital, and identity studies, Bernhard makes a case for the need to help immigrant parents develop their agency through a process of “conscientization” (Freire, 1994), to acquire their own habitus. Through focus group discussions, the mothers developed knowledge and awareness of social positioning, power, social strata, and cultural capital in Western school systems and, through this awareness, began to engage with and maximize their own identity. Bernhard also challenges the lack of awareness that Canadian teachers have about immigrant families as they unknowingly subscribe to assumptions of Western norms as superior.

In addition to Langford’s chapter on authority and the early childhood teacher, other chapters address the need to reconceptualize early childhood teacher education. In examining curriculum documents in Ontario, Janmohamed notes that the focus of diversity in teacher education is on different abilities and different cultures, but has yet to attend adequately to the queer population. Janmohamed challenges heteronormative approaches to teacher education and contends that queer theory can offer important, rupturing ways of understanding children, families, and early childhood education. Iannacci and Graham apply critical disability studies to question dominant discourses of disability in teacher education. The teacher candidates in their study learned to understand children’s assets as opposed to deficits, to move beyond print texts, and to focus on the quality and nature of instruction.
rather than the quantity; however, they were not drawn to consider disability to be a social construction. Iannacci and Graham conclude that the monolithic discourse of disability is difficult to penetrate, but they urge teacher educators to encourage more complex and reconceptualized discussions about disability.

A reader who is unfamiliar with postfoundational theories may have benefited from a more explicit explanation of the theoretical positions being referred to early in the book, but it is perhaps only through reading the various chapters that a keen understanding of these theories, through the different authors’ practical and critical applications to real-world problems, can be appreciated. In terms of the book’s representation of reconceptualist scholarship in Canada, the contributing authors write from a number of provinces, as well as from the United States. Of course, any book is limited in its ability to fully represent its constituents; however, as a Québécoise, I would have liked to have seen Québec - in terms of its linguistic politics or its prominent (and controversial) subsidized child care program - represented in the book. Let this be a call to scholars in different provinces to step forward, as reconceptualist work in early childhood education is needed if the aims of social justice, diversity, and emancipation are to be had for all Canadian children, families, and educators in early childhood settings.

To conclude, this is an important book that I would highly recommend to researchers and graduate students looking for important directions in which to focus their developing research in early childhood education. It would also be valuable for prospective teachers studying in teacher education programs, to help them understand the impact of foundational ideas on their beliefs about childhood and teaching, and to enable them to consider alternative postfoundational approaches reflected in this collection.

References


the early childhood educator to the point of rendering it invisible? This is a big and difficult question to raise. Yet, within the current political landscape, where new policy demands are placed on both the ECE field and early childhood educators, responding to—or at least beginning to address this question—has become pertinent.

The “Good” Early Childhood Educator

Alongside, and in relation to, the issue of invisibility of the early childhood educator’s pedagogical work is the stereotypical image of the “good” ECE teacher. Undoubtedly intensified by societal assumptions about women “naturally” taking on caring roles, the “good” early childhood teacher is typically portrayed as a substitute mother—a feminine, sensitive, nurturing carer of the young (Moss, 2006; Ryan & Ochsner, 1999). Sharon Ryan and Mindy Ochsner explain that these prevailing images of the “good” early childhood educator have often positioned early childhood teachers as apolitical practitioners who view change and activism as a responsibility to be placed somewhere else. In response, Ryan and Ochsner challenge teachers of young children to transform the dominant images of the early childhood educator through repositioning themselves from facilitators to activists or interventionists—as teachers who take a proactive political stance in order to expand definitions of what teaching in ECE means.

In Embracing Identities in Early Childhood Education: Diversity and Possibilities, Sue Grieshaber and Gaile Cannella (2001) address some of the issues emanating from a tradition that portrayed the “good” early childhood educator within the dominant discourse of nurturance and caring, or within what Louise Hard (2006) later termed the “discourse of niceness.” Grieshaber and Cannella argue that contemporary understanding of identities as multiple and dynamic has opened space for early childhood educators to embrace a wider (and seemingly contradictory) range of identities. Early childhood educators can embrace the notion of nurturance and care while questioning and critiquing knowledge and practices, challenging authority, and upholding the idea that there is room for uncertainty and spontaneity because there are (always) multiple ways of being a teacher of young children.

In our Canadian context, Rachel Langford’s (2006) research into the construction of the “good” early childhood educator within an ECE training program in Canada revealed similar issues to those discussed above. Early childhood educators in the training program imagined their identities by identifying personal traits that enabled them to be an alert and responsive teacher. The educators in the program tended to minimize their role as social agents, and were inclined to hide their world views when those were different from the mainstream. Langford called for a reenvisioning of ECE training programs in such a way that early childhood teachers may see themselves as significant agents of change in contemporary social and political struggles.

Changing Times…

The early childhood educator as change agent.

The identity of the ECE field is changing on a global scale. We have seen over the last decade unprecedented attention from policy makers on early education. We have witnessed an increase in the standardization of the field as numerous countries have created curriculum documents for the early years. Another international trend is the transfer of responsibility for early education and care from ministries of welfare, health, or children and families, to education ministries. While these changes pose new challenges to the field, including the possibility of new accountability measures, they also create an opportunity to surface some important questions about the identity of the ECE field and its protagonist—the early childhood educator.
**Action or reaction?**

The ECE scholar Sharon Ryan (2008) asks: How might early childhood educators act rather than react to the changes we are witnessing? In other words, she encourages early childhood teachers to become active participants who effect changes in the field, rather than being observers who react to these changes. Moss (2006) urges early childhood educators to take responsibility not only for their work but also for how pedagogical practice in ECE contexts is understood in public. Whether we choose to act and how we enter into these political discussions will be determined by the identities we dare to embrace.

In BC, a number of initiatives have already made it possible for early childhood educators to enter into dialogues with the greater community and to share, or make visible, the complexities involved in their pedagogical work with young children. For example, the BC Early Learning Framework (Government of British Columbia, 2007) portrays the early childhood educator as a researcher who continuously seeks to deepen her understandings of the practice with others by using the tool of pedagogical narration. A number of early childhood educators from BC have been engaged in thinking about their identity through the ECEBC Leadership Initiative (Early Childhood Educators of BC, 2007). One of the leadership projects, initiated by Kim Atkinson and Danielle Davis and called the Images of Learning Project, has evolved into a travelling exhibit and a blog (see http://imagesoflearningproject.com/info/) which aim to expand the images of children and early childhood educators by sharing multiple stories from ECE settings. Through sharing these stories, the early childhood teacher’s identity becomes less predictable and more surprising. The stories keep the question of who is an early childhood educator dynamic and provocative—as it should be!

In fact, it may be time to ask this question: In what ways have the Canadian Association for Young Children (CAYC) and its journal, Canadian Children, been a platform for sustaining and enriching the conversation about the politics of the identities of the early childhood educator?

**Friends of Children Award Guidelines**

The CAYC “Friends of Children Award” was established to give CAYC a way of recognizing outstanding contributions, by individuals or groups to the well-being of young children. If you wish to nominate an individual or group for this award, please use the criteria and procedure below.

**CRITERIA**

The Friends of Children Award may be presented to an individual or group, regardless of age, who:

- Has a history of commitment to the CAYC mission statement and/or aims.
- Has shown an outstanding scholarly, advocacy, innovative or practical contribution to the well-being of young children.
- May or may not be of Canadian citizenship.
- May or may not hold CAYC membership although it is encouraged.

**PROCEDURE**

- A nomination must be made by a member of the Board of Directors and be seconded by a member of the Board of Directors. Board members can, however, receive recommendations for nominations from individual CAYC members or from other organizations.
- Nominations will be brought forward at a Board of Directors or National Executive meeting by the board or executive member assigned responsibility for the award. This board or executive member will present and speak to the nomination.
- The nomination will be voted upon and passed by the Board of Directors with a consensus decision.
- The award will be presented promptly and in person when possible.
- Publicity of the award and the recipient(s) will appear in the journal, Canadian Children, and other publications where possible.
- The number of awards per year will vary.

**References**


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