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**On the cover:** A word cloud based on International Innovations in ECE: A Canadian Forum on Early Childhood Frameworks (held July 13–15, 2012, in Victoria, BC).

# A Personal Reflection on International Innovations in ECE: A Canadian Forum on Early Childhood Frameworks

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I am taking this opportunity to share some thoughts on International Innovations in ECE: A Canadian Forum on Early Childhood Frameworks, a conference organized by the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care and held July 13–15. As the name of the conference indicates, the focus was on childhood frameworks currently used in the field to advance policies and programs, as well as theory and practice. The organizers, UVic professors Alan Pence and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, stated the forum's aim as follows: "to explore innovations in ECE and to consider the role that frameworks can play in opening new possibilities for the early years field in Canada."[1]

"But what exactly is a framework?" one may ask. "Why are we talking about frameworks? How many frameworks are there, and how do I know which one to choose? What if I like some aspects of one framework and other aspects of another? Can I combine them? What if I am not *right?*"

As I often do when I am wondering about the meaning of an English word, I consulted Cambridge Dictionaries Online (http://dictionary.cambridge.org) and found the following synonyms and definitions for *framework*:

- Theoretical account
- Model
- A hypothetical description of a complex entity or process
- Fabric
- A structure supporting or containing something
- The underlying structure
- Brace
- Mount

With these meanings of *framework* in mind, I am intrigued by the possibility of reflecting on the presentations I attended (and I went to as many as one possibly could!) and on the descriptions in the conference program (which contains 124 sessions, including individual presentations, workshops, panels and keynotes). My intent is not to summarize or review the content of the sessions but, rather, to identify (if I can) trends in the underlying structures of the richly textured fabric that weaves together ideas common to two distinct yet inseparable fields: early childhood education and child care.

It is important for me to think of frameworks in the fields of early childhood education and child care as fabric woven from different threads as I reflect on the opening keynote speaker, Margaret Carr. In addition to being the well-known author of *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories* (2001), Carr was codirector of the project that developed New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996).

*Te Whāriki*, a bicultural curriculum developed and adopted in Aotearoa (New Zealand), incorporates Maori perspectives and is an example of practice grounded in the hopes, perspectives and rights of families and communities. In 1991, New Zealand's ministry of education instigated the development of an early childhood curriculum that would connect with a new national curriculum for schools, articulate a philosophy of good early childhood practice, and incorporate a wide range of services and cultural perspectives (Carr and May 2000).

The resulting curriculum is based on four broad principles (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996, 14):

- *Empowerment.* Children will be empowered to learn and grow.

- *Holistic development.* Children learn and grow in a holistic way. Their intellectual, social, cultural, physical, emotional and spiritual learning is interwoven across all their experiences.
- *Family and community.* A child's family and community are recognized as part of the learning experience.
- *Relationships.* Children learn through positive relationships with people, places and things.

These principles are interwoven with five learning strands (pp 15–16):

- Well-being (*mana atua*)
- Belonging (*mana whenua*)
- Contribution (*mana tangata*)
- Communication (*mana reo*)
- Exploration (*mana aotūroa*)

The *Te Whāriki* document contains a visual representation of the fabric created by weaving together these four principles and five strands (p 13).

This brings to mind my own childhood weaving experience. I have tried weaving only once, on my great-aunt's loom, after hours of watching her skilfully interlacing threads vertically and horizontally on a loom almost as large as the room. I watched her choose threads according to colour, thickness, texture and, most of all, her image of the final piece. Sometimes she drew the image on a piece of paper; sometimes she worked from her imagination to create what I thought were beautiful pieces, mostly because of the colours she used. As most five-year-olds would be, I was eager to try weaving myself. However, when I was allowed to "play" with the loom, I found that I had to frequently ask how-to questions. Everything looked so easy when my great-aunt did it and not so easy (or beautiful) when I did it.

My limited childhood experience with weaving, brought to mind by the word *fabric* as one possible meaning of *framework*, made me realize that those who participate (literally or figuratively) in the weaving of fabric need to have not only a loom and an image or vision of the final product but also experience—an embodied knowledge of how to weave so that the result is what they intended.

The conference's keynote speakers came from New Zealand, Australia, Italy and Canada. If we think of the education and the child-care systems in those countries as looms, we can immediately see how those systems facilitated or hindered what these skilful, experienced and knowledgeable educators wanted to create, especially if the creation deviated from the well-established model. The very structure, position and capacity of each loom/system determined to a large extent what could and could not be accomplished by those involved in the development of the framework. Or, as stated in the summary of Carr's keynote,

> [We] have developed curriculum frameworks and/or theoretical positions that are very different from the developmental and tidy early childhood programmes that we used to know. They are innovative, and they have their own cultural and historical bases. But they don't always fit with government expectations and priorities, and the winds of political change can blow them away.[2]

These "expectations and priorities" are, in fact, the underlying structures that allow us as early childhood educators to implement big ideas on a big scale, or to try them in our own classrooms first while waiting for the right wind to blow our way so that the seeds we have planted in our classrooms and that have grown into healthy plants can spread their own seeds.

While curriculum frameworks reflect the specific cultural and historical circumstances of the countries in which they were developed, there are some similarities between them. Keynote speaker Jennifer Sumsion played a leadership role in the 2007 initiative undertaken by Australia's Labor government to improve the quality of early childhood education and care, which resulted in *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Australia 2009). She drew some helpful comparisons between the Canadian and Australian contexts, based on shared patterns of historical development—the countries are both former British colonies, established on lands first inhabited by First Nations peoples. Many presenters stressed the importance of addressing the needs of First Nations children aged birth to five, a common task in the field of early childhood in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

In Canada, Alan Pence's work in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and in other First Nations communities exemplifies a contextualized approach as curriculum is constructed out of dialogue between Western early childhood teaching and the understandings of elders and other community members (Moss and Pence 1994). At the conference, both Pence and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw spoke about the seven-year-old and still ongoing Investigating Quality (IQ) Project, supported by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development. Based on previous cross-cultural work, this project has explored innovative practices, programs and policies in First Nations communities, as well as in Scandinavia, Italy, New Zealand and Australia.

New Zealand's leadership in the field, with the development of *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry

of Education 1996) as a curriculum document that genuinely incorporates Aboriginal perspectives, was acknowledged not only by Jennifer Sumsion but also by Pam Whitty. Whitty led the University of New Brunswick team that developed the *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care* (University of New Brunswick Early Childhood Centre 2008). In her work with the team in general and Sherry Rose in particular, Whitty emphasized the "relational spaces—sacred spaces" created by a variety of curriculum innovations, and asked if those spaces can, in fact, "transform our existing social relations."[3]

In her keynote address, Caroline Rowan, who is completing doctoral work at the University of New Brunswick, provided a powerful example of how these new curriculum frameworks can serve as "a catalyst to work with community stakeholders on crafting childcare programs grounded in Inuit ways of knowing and being."[4] She pointed out how, through troubling hegemonic educational practices, such frameworks have generated practices that honour the cultural roots and native languages of the Inuit and First Nations communities in Nunavik. She talked about projects inspired by using learning stories (Podmore and Carr 1999) as a vehicle for building relationships between people and ideas in a genuine, meaningful way.

Another example of early childhood practice based on rationality is, of course, Reggio Emilia. Although the practice of pedagogical documentation is well defined, described and established in Reggio Emilia schools, I appreciated keynote speaker Carla Rinaldi's emphasis on the philosophical journey that led to the development of such practice. Weaving various theoretical approaches to understanding and stimulating child development and learning resulted, over time, in this unique pedagogical practice, which changed the meaning of early childhood education and inspired educators around the world. Listening once again to Rinaldi made me hear more clearly the message regarding the "uniqueness" of the philosophical journey Loris Malaguzzi and the staff undertook in order to first explore and then try out, articulate and constantly enhance their approach through an elaborate dance between theory and practice in which one cannot clearly define the line between one and the other.[5]

Returning to *fabric* as a particular meaning of *framework*, I am not sure if *fabric* captures Reggio Emilia's unique approach as well as it does *Te Whāriki*. The more I think about it, the more aware I become that it is the image of a completed, beautiful, colourful, unique piece of fabric that I find troublesome. This image implies wholeness and completeness, something that is finished in order to

be used (or admired). That is the opposite of the lively, ever-changing, unpredictable and exciting nature of the process of involving children, parents, communities and colleagues in an ongoing dialogue that leads to further changes and negotiation of possible (new) meanings and knowledges. In Ball and Pence's (2006, 35–36) words, knowledge is "a process that necessarily is incomplete, indeterminate, and contingent on both the place and time of the knowing and on the quality of people's participation in it."

But is that not also the case with New Zealand's *Te Whāriki*, Australia's early years learning framework, the IQ Project and New Brunswick's curriculum framework for early learning and child care? Of course it is! As with pedagogical documentation, it is the process, rather than the product, that creates open spaces for exploration; new wonders; and the discovery of unexpected meanings in familiar topics, relations and things in the world around us.

With this new realization, I am now wondering about the implications of understanding a framework as a final product, or as the fabric one has finished making. The following questions arise: Where in the process do the individual educator's creativity, passion, dedication and professionalism come in? Do we each weave our own fabric? Is this how we "do the work of cultivating a curious, open, and empathetic attentiveness to our encounters," as the description of Pam Whitty's keynote presentation states?[6] I can almost hear someone from the regulatory body in any country asking, "How about quality standards?" And I can almost hear myself explaining how a framework document guides our work; how it provides the underlying structure for what we do; and how it is based on well-established theoretical models of the complex processes of teaching, learning and development.

I reread what I just wrote and cannot help but smile as I realize that in my hypothetical answer to a hypothetical question asked by a hypothetical representative of a regulatory body, I managed to use almost all the synonyms for *framework* given by the dictionary. Except for *fabric*, that is. And yet I am not ready to give *fabric* up. In fact, when I look at the session titles and descriptions in the conference program, I am even more drawn to *fabric* as I recognize some recurring threads. One session title even uses the metaphor of weaving (and the loom): "Mindfully Weaving a Framework of Early Childhood Education: Interleaving Conversations," by Randa Khattar, Karyn Callaghan and Pat Dickinson. The description states,

> We are experiencing innovative times in international policy, research, and practice related to the development of ECE frameworks.

These developments often emerge as tensions weaved along the historical warp and weft of change. Like fabric woven neither too tightly (losing flexibility) nor too loosely (losing coherence), we strive for porosity (openness) and balance in our dialogues among tensions in existing frameworks, both provincial and academic.[7]

I wish I had said it so eloquently. I also wish I had read this session description before I started thinking about *framework* in terms of fabric and weaving on a loom. I am relieved, though, that my colleagues have also thought about the skills required in weaving—skills I lacked in my childhood, which prevented me from creating the beautiful tapestry I saw in my mind.

As I continue to search the conference program for common threads, I find the following session topics:

- Play—play as pedagogy; school is a place for play; the storied lives children play; rough-and-tumble play; musical play; dramatic play; play as a framework for identity-making; outdoor play; YMCA Playing to Learn—a pan-Canadian ECE framework
- Diversity—accommodating diverse beliefs and practices; honouring diversity; integrating diversity in early childhood frameworks; promoting diversity through shifting practices; supporting young refugee and immigrant children; young children with disabilities presenting their own stories; rethinking inclusive classrooms for optimal learning; students at risk in the context of Ontario's full-day kindergarten classroom
- Engaging parents—Ontario's ELECT (Early Learning for Every Child Today) framework in a family resource program; the complex needs of children and families; parent efficacy and engagement in early literacy; interactive parent-and-child language, culture and play programs; queer parents' perspectives on early childhood curriculum; collaborating with preschool children, families and local community members in telling "stories from the garden"; the role families play in frameworks and other emerging approaches to ECE; the experiences of families with children with special needs
- Indigenous children—resiliency; innovations in First Nations ECE; Inuit early childhood frameworks; going back to Aboriginal ways; expanding knowledge through Aboriginal and international partnerships; early childhood Indigenous languages immersion programs in BC; embracing culture in a First Nations Mohawk community; culture as a framework for looking

into ECE spaces; cultural approaches to Aboriginal ECE evaluation; Aboriginal English speakers in Canadian classrooms; urban Aboriginal children's meaning-making; the ECE improvement framework for Nova Scotia First Nations communities; connecting frameworks with Mi'kmaq and Maliseet knowledges in New Brunswick
- Professionalism—teachers as lifelong learners; ECE training; postsecondary early childhood development (ECD) training; career paths for internationally trained early childhood educators; innovations in ECE credentialing; ECE professionalism as an innovation in advocacy; early childhood teacher education; engaging early childhood educators and K–12 educators across transition spaces; ECE professionalism and the contribution of university degrees; professional self-regulation in ECE; constructing professionalism in ECE in four Canadian provinces; ECE professionals' narratives
- Full-day early learning—provincial initiatives in Ontario; the child's-eye view of the full-day early learning kindergarten program; four- and five-year-olds in schools and child care in Ontario; policy, practice and full-day kindergarten in Ontario
- Technology—young children and digital photography; an ecological approach to narrative, drama and technology with young learners; introducing communication technology into the letter-writing process

I then created word clouds based on the conference program.

Although these images do not include all the words in the conference program, they do provide a sense of the most clearly represented threads. In addition, they resemble a piece of the collage the presenters made in the two short days we had together, rather than fabric. They look as if they have no beginning and no end; there is no apparent logic in the way the words are coloured or arranged; there are no visible strands or principles—only emphasis through type size based on word repetition.

And yet words are more than just words—they are concepts, representations, ideas, meanings, thoughts, rules, principles, beliefs (to list a few). Another group of early childhood educators in another time and place would make their own word cloud, with differences but also many similarities.

As I explore these images more closely, I wonder where the underlying/supporting structures are. Where is the loom? Why do I feel so liberated if I no longer see a brace? What I see is a frame—a picture frame that is not a supporting structure for what is inside it. The text within would be the same without the frame. Does that mean that we can live without frameworks? Or that what we do is the same, regardless of the framework? Of course not!

A word not captured in the images, a word that Jennifer Sumsion used, put everything into perspective. That word is *rhisomatic*. At the end of her presentation, Sumsion mentioned that she has been inspired by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), for whom the process of "becoming" is not one of imitation or analogy but, rather, generative of a new way of being that is a function of influences rather than resemblances. This becoming, she said, is not a linear process of achieving learning outcomes; rather, it is a rhisomatic process. The Wikipedia entry for *rhizome* quotes Deleuze and Guattari:

> As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organizational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the original source of "things" and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those "things." A rhizome, on the other hand, is characterized by "ceaselessly establishe[d] connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles." The rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, for a "rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*."[8]

I finally understand why I was not entirely comfortable with the meanings of *framework* in the dictionary. I now wonder if we should be talking about maps that guide our journey with children and families instead of frameworks. But that is a task for the next ECE forum. This forum allowed those in the fields of early childhood education and child care to begin to share ideas and see them as fluid rather than fixed, emerging rather than preset, and becoming rather than not-yet or not-quite-yet. I am grateful to have been part of the discussions and to have this opportunity to reflect on my experiences.

# Notes

1. From the conference program (www.confmanager.com/communities/c2529/files/hidden/ECE_Conference_Program_FINAL_web.pdf), page 1 (accessed August 21, 2012).

2. From the conference program, page 7.

3. From the conference program, page 9.

4. From the conference program, page 10.

5. From the conference program, page 7.

6. From the conference program, page 9.

7. From the conference program, pages 37–38.

8. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhizome_(philosophy) (accessed August 21, 2012).

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*—Anna Kirova*

# Family Literacy Through Story Reading

## Olivia N Saracho

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## Abstract

This study examined whether a five-month story-reading intervention with families would support children's literacy development. The informants were children from five kindergarten classrooms and their families. Twice a week, the families practised story-reading techniques. Data were collected using observations, interviews and documentary analysis to construct a detailed account of the family literacy program. The learning process was described through observations; samples of children's work; photographs; and in-depth periodic interviews with the children, families and teachers. The families used children's interests and abilities in selecting story-reading strategies, materials and experiences to develop children's literacy acquisition. They motivated children to read and write by reading stories to them, engaging them in conversations, writing stories with them and extending their reading experiences. These experiences are consistent with those in the literature on literacy development. Directions for practice and research are also discussed.

Family literacy studies have shown that family story reading has an impact on children's success in school-based literacy instruction (Dearing et al 2004; Hindman and Morrison 2011). Family story reading involves any adult family members (such as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles) reading appropriate texts to children at home.

The effect of story reading on children's early acquisition of language and literacy has been thoroughly documented (Bus, de Jong and Van IJzendoorn 2007). Studies indicate that the early readers are those children who are frequently read to at home (Durkin 1974/75).[1]

Several studies have examined the relationship between families' reading stories to children and children's reading achievement. In the most effective story reading, family members do more than read the text; they also support children's ability to understand the story. They describe pictures, label objects, explain events, ask questions and relate the story to children's life experiences. They discuss the content of the story and direct children's attention to the pictures and the print (Price, van Kleeck and Huberty 2009). These strategies promote children's comprehension and linguistic expression (Hammett, van Kleeck and Huberty 2003; Price, van Kleeck and Huberty 2009) and nurture their reading ability.

These findings suggest that a family literacy intervention can help families learn to read stories to children and relate the stories to children's daily lives in a way that promotes literacy development.

## Family Literacy Interventions

Researchers have recommended intervention approaches as a means to provide families with strategies that promote children's literacy acquisition (Saracho 2001, 2008). For example, in a longitudinal study, the National Early Literacy Panel used five types of intervention to promote early literacy development, one of which was parent and home programs (National Center for Family Literacy and National Institute for Literacy 2008). However, as Sénéchal and Young (2008) show, there is a lack of intervention research on families reading stories to their children in kindergarten to Grade 3.

Interventions that integrate high-quality story reading in the home and in the classroom can develop children's literacy. Investigators use interventions to determine which elements in a story-reading event promote literacy skills. In intervention studies, children listen to stories and engage in a response activity, such as role-playing a story, retelling a story and retracing a story through pictures. Activities in which children respond to literature improve their comprehension skills and sense of story structure, which helps them relate the parts of a story to each other and to integrate information.

Families can learn strategies for reading stories to children that will improve children's reading achievement. This raises the question of what types of story-reading experience can best help families promote their children's literacy development (NCFL and NIFL 2008; Saracho 2001, 2008).

# Purpose of the Study

Studies show that family story reading has an impact on children's success in school-based literacy instruction; therefore, it is important to provide families with a literacy intervention program in which they can acquire knowledge of story-reading strategies and experiences and learn ways to use them in their family environment.

The purpose of this study was

- to develop an intervention program that would help families support their children's literacy development through story reading, and then examine its success;
- to identify the story-reading approaches, strategies and materials that families used to promote their children's literacy development;
- to examine the story-reading behaviour of children and their families; and
- to describe story reading and the task-related characteristics of the story-reading experiences.

This study should contribute to an understanding of the literacy practices families can engage in with children in the home.

# Method

The case study method was selected to describe the results and implications of the family literacy intervention in this study.

Stevenson (2004, 41–42) writes, "The case itself may be descriptive of what has already taken place or is currently taking place, or it may be interventionist in enacting changes to be studied and documented." In case study methodology, data are collected through observations, interviews and document analysis to build a detailed account of a single case or multiple cases (Stake 2005; Stevenson 2004; Yin 2009).

This case study documented what families did with their children in nurturing language and literacy in the home during and after a five-month intervention on instructional story reading.

## Informants

Qualitative researchers use sampling procedures that differ from those of quantitative investigators, who use their results to generalize to large populations.

The sample in this study matched the larger population as closely as possible. It also offered data

sources that are representative of the larger population. The researcher used a methodological and sequential selection to ensure that the sample provided data that appropriately represented the various characteristics and behaviours of the group being studied. The researcher chose her sample based on the characteristics and behaviours of the family members, rather than focusing on the effects of a specific treatment. Thus, the informants were those who had a specific interest in their children's literacy development.

To identify the informants, the researcher used the mapping procedure, which consisted of thorough documentation of significant characteristics and behaviours within the study group, including the researcher's role, and a thorough description of how the data would be gathered throughout the mapping process to consider its effects on the general results of the study.

This process was provided to the informants—children from five kindergarten classrooms and their families (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, other adults). The families volunteered to join other families twice a week for five months to learn and practise story-reading techniques.

The kindergarten teachers who worked with these families all had state certificates qualifying them to teach at this grade level, and they all emphasized literacy in their classrooms.

## Materials

The materials used in this study were children's books and items available in the home.

The children's books were selected based on the kindergarten children's interests, concerns and age. The books were developmentally appropriate for five-year-olds and were of interest to both the children and the families. In addition, the books contained elements that would motivate adults to engage in story reading with young children: powerful illustrations, engaging narratives, humorous situations and characters of a familiar type. The selected books were child-centred and had aesthetically pleasing illustrations. The children were able to interact with the books through humour, adventure and problem solving (Harris 2008).

The items from the home (such as toys or plants) were used in activities meant to extend the content of the selected stories. The objects were developmentally appropriate (easily used and safe for young children), authentic (representative of the home environment) and functional.

Materials for writing (paper, pencils, markers) and art (paintbrushes, tempera paints) were also used.

## The Story-Reading Intervention

With the recognition that the family's more active role in story reading may be beneficial to a child's

literacy development, an intervention was developed to teach family members how to provide literacy instruction through story reading.

The family story-reading intervention consisted of 30 sessions: 10 sessions to provide instruction to families and 20 sessions to allow families to demonstrate what they had learned.

During the first 10 sessions, teachers provided families with instruction in how to select appropriate stories to read to children, how to use appropriate strategies in reading stories, and how to extend stories through the use of appropriate materials and experiences.

In selecting developmentally appropriate stories, the families learned that good picture books and storybooks

- transmit the mores, attitudes and values of the culture;
- help children experience the emotions of others;
- are factual, realistic and imaginative in order to foster children's curiosity and nurture their interests;
- provide children with opportunities to learn the language, such as allowing them to explore the meaning of language and stimulating them to use their higher mental processes through language; and
- help children think about meanings in language by encouraging them to see relationships, recall similar feelings and incidents, and develop concepts, while generalizing and abstracting ideas (Saracho 2012).

The families also learned to select stories with fresh and well-paced plots, originality, credibility, specific conversations, well-defined characters, authentic and predictable results, a main plot, and an arousing climax (Saracho 2012).

Next, the families learned a variety of strategies for reading these stories to their children, participating in active discussions, recording children's dictation of the stories and motivating children to interact with books.

The teachers also showed the families how to extend the stories through related objects. Then, they demonstrated how to use story events to help children make accurate predictions about the plot and anticipate language, plot and sequence patterns. The teachers also provided strategies to extend the family–child interactions.

At each session, the teachers greeted the informants individually upon their arrival. After everybody had arrived, techniques were taught and modelled. The families adapted these techniques to match their individual styles and situations. New children's books, materials and activities that related to the children's environment and the family members' interests were introduced at each session.

## Data Collection

Data were collected using observations, interviews and documentary analysis to construct a detailed account of the family literacy program (Stake 2005; Stevenson 2004; Yin 2009). This case study used these procedures to focus on a literacy program that was examined under natural conditions.

In the sessions, the teachers provided the families with a literacy program they could use at home. The informants were videotaped while participating in the sessions that involved developing materials, lesson plans and activities. When the children attended sessions, dyad interactions between family members and children were videotaped. In addition, in one session, family members were asked to select and demonstrate a story-reading experience with related literacy activities. The informants were also interviewed at the beginning and at the end of the literacy program, each workshop and the demonstration activities.

The study provided a description of the learning process through observations; samples of the children's work; photographs; and in-depth periodic interviews with children, families and teachers. Throughout the study, samples of the children's stories were collected, field notes were recorded in a notebook, photographs were taken, and sketches were drawn to complement the field notes.

# Analysis

The videotaped observations and interviews were transcribed, typed and summarized. A summary account was completed for each dyad (family member and child). Each dyad profile was qualitatively examined for interaction patterns that might indicate the cultural context of the home, story-reading techniques, literacy abilities, knowledge of resources and beliefs about literacy.

Dyad interactions related to the families' preferences with regard to children's stories, story-reading strategies and activities were the primary units of analysis. The workshops and the informants' descriptions of their story-reading experiences in the home were extracted from the profiles to examine if the families had acquired new skills in story reading to promote their children's literacy development. The program included conventional and unconventional story-reading strategies for families to use both at home and at school.

The data presented a distinctive picture of the family literacy program, including its worth, innovations and trends in specific contexts. These data were bound to their explicit contexts and responded to the intervention program's general questions. Hence, a line of reasoning surfaced based on those components of the case that contributed to

analyzing and describing the family literacy program that integrated the perceptions of the families, children and teachers.

## Data Reduction

The data collection focused on the informants' unique characteristics for a more appropriate understanding of the study's objectives, as well as on identifying probable trends. It explored the promising effects of change and innovation. The classification and processing of data offered a foundation to differentiate between the various sets of data that included the full amount of data gathered for each informant. Simultaneously, broader patterns were detected that were considered to be the result of putting into practice an innovative family literacy program (conventional elements). Similarly, components that suggested modification to the family literacy program were identified.

## Verification

In a case study, research evidence is collected in such a way that it can be later used for critical assessment, internal and external criticism, and triangulation. Inferences were validated with the informants, who clarified the researcher's queries. An examination of the data identified a variation of patterns, and the informants verified the significance of those patterns. For example, it became evident that the informants read stories to their children, discussed the stories, and then encouraged their children to develop and illustrate each story. The informants verified these interpretations.

The informants had an exit interview at the end of the family literacy program. They reviewed the evidence found during the collection of the data and clarified any misinterpretations. For example, the informants justified their specific behaviours and addressed the researcher's inquiries.

# Results

The results of this study show that family members can make important contributions when they learn how to use story reading to promote their children's literacy development.

The natural context of each family's home offered children many opportunities to explore literacy-related objects through social interaction. The family members considered the children's interests and abilities in selecting stories, story-reading strategies and activities. Family members also interacted with the children to support and extend their literacy development. They used materials that stimulated family–child interactions as they engaged in story-reading experiences, including objects from the home. In addition, they used

story-reading strategies with activities that prompted the children to write invented symbols and messages.

## Story-Reading Strategies

One of the most interesting factors in this case study was the unique approach each informant took to reading stories.

The family members selected children's stories and practised their story-reading strategies at home. In the sessions, they shared the strategies with which they felt the most comfortable.

Most informants selected a book, read it to a child and interacted with the child. This was followed by an activity and the writing of a story, which the child dictated and illustrated. Family members used their own style and interests to carry out the story-reading strategies they had learned in the family literacy program. Each informant used a different style in selecting home materials and experiences, even in the initial stages.

In the story-reading demonstrations, informants

- concentrated on the family's and the community's state of affairs and surroundings;
- concentrated on family and community circumstances in choosing children's books, pictures and activities and in writing stories;
- selected the strategies and activities with which they felt the most comfortable;
- selected informal story-reading experiences; and
- exchanged ideas with the children and responded to questions.

The informants varied in how they applied the story-reading strategies they had learned. They gave the following reasons for their preferences:

- *Telling the story.* The informants considered whether they could maintain the children's attention and whether a book was too difficult to be read aloud.
- *Encouraging the children to read the story.* The informants believed that it was better for the children to read the story, so that they could gain confidence in their reading ability.
- *Encouraging picture reading.* The informants thought that it was better to have children read their own story, imitate reading behaviour and develop their own interpretation to extend their reading experience.
- *Reading the story.* Informants read the story to make sure the story was correct and to avoid being worried about their presentation.

## Story-Reading Experiences

The families considered their children's interests and circumstances in selecting children's books, story-reading strategies, materials and activities. They interacted with the children to support and

extend their literacy development through stories. They encouraged the children to read and write stories by reading stories to them, engaging them in conversations, writing stories with them and extending their reading experiences.

### Reading Stories to the Children

After the intervention on instructional story reading, family members practised reading stories to their children to communicate meaning. Most selected a book, read it to the child, interacted with the child, did a follow-up activity using materials from home and recorded the child's dictated story. The child then illustrated the story.

For example, one mother chose to read the storybook *Little Red Cowboy Hat* (Lowell 1997), which is a rancher's version of the Grimm story "Little Red Riding Hood." For a follow-up activity, she used soil, cacti (without thorns), flowers, rocks and various plants from her yard. During her demonstration, she

- read the story to her son;
- discussed the story with him;
- used dialogue to interact with him about the book;
- created a diorama based on the story, using items from their home (she spread soil in a shoebox and planted cacti, flowers, rocks and various plants in the soil);
- made puppets out of socks; and
- dramatized the story using the sock puppets and the diorama.

She then

- encouraged her son to retell the story,
- interacted with him about the story,
- invited him to dictate a story of his own,
- recorded his dictated story on paper,
- asked him to illustrate his story and
- reread the dictated story with him several times.

Another mother, a seamstress, read *Little Red Riding Hood* (Grimm and Grimm 1983) to her daughter. After reading the story, she and her daughter discussed the story, examined the sequence of events, made sock puppets for the various characters and dramatized the story using the puppets. They also role-played the story, using a red cap, a large piece of red cloth and a basket filled with oatmeal cookies. The daughter (playing the role of Little Red Riding Hood) wore the red cap, wrapped the cloth around her like a cape and carried the basket of cookies. The mother wore a Halloween mask and garden gloves to assume the role of the Big Bad Wolf.

After their dramatization, they discussed and recorded the sequence of events on three sheets of drawing paper, as follows:

- First sheet of paper—Little Red Riding Hood is taking cookies to Grandmother's house.
- Second sheet of paper—Little Red Riding Hood talks to the Big Bad Wolf.
- Third sheet of paper—Little Red Riding Hood runs away from the Big Bad Wolf.

They then created their own storybook. Using crayons, the daughter drew an illustration on each sheet of paper and a cover page that read "Little Red Riding Hood, retold and illustrated by Clara Smith."[2] Mother and daughter read each page several times, pointing to the words on each page. Then they sang the words to the tune of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean."

### Engaging the Children in Conversations

The families and their children engaged in natural and spontaneous conversations about the books they read. The family members accepted, appreciated, respected and praised the children's ideas. The conversations were extended when the family members responded to the children's predictions in a sensitive way.

The family members engaged the children in conversations to help them understand the meaning of the stories. They used open-ended questions to stimulate conversation.

For example, for the book *What's Up the Coconut Tree?* (Benjamin 1992), a jungle version of "Chicken Little," family members used the following questions to generate conversation:

- What do you think is up the coconut tree?
- Is it dangerous? How? Why not?
- Is it soft?
- How can the animals find out what is up the coconut tree?
- What are the animals going to do next?
- Why are the animals doing the actions the note tells them not to do?

These questions encouraged the children to predict the outcomes of the situation and to use the book to monitor the appropriateness of their responses, which ultimately monitored their comprehension, extended their conversations and enriched their discussions.

The conversations also motivated the children to find solutions to the problems in the stories; increased their vocabulary as they used words from the books to discuss and solve the problems; and promoted abstract thinking, allowing the children to resolve problematic situations.

### Writing Stories with the Children

After the families had read and discussed a story with their children, they engaged in story writing. Usually, the children dictated the story and the family members recorded the dictation. Then, the children illustrated the story. The story related to the book they had just read or to some aspect of their life.

For example, after reading *What's Up the Coconut Tree?* (Benjamin 1992), one child illustrated and then dictated the following text:

> The tiger lived in the jungle.
> The hippopotamus lived in the water.
> The hippopotamus wanted the coconut.

The parent and the child interacted throughout this experience, and together they read the child's story several times.

### Extending the Children's Reading Experiences

The families extended the meaning of stories for the children through the following activities:

- *Listening to the children's stories.* The children retold stories or pretended to read a story that had been read to them.
- *Motivating children to predict events in the stories.* The families used predictable books—such as *What's Up the Coconut Tree?* (Benjamin 1992)—to encourage their children to predict events and to check their predictions during the reading of the stories.
- *Using the language in the stories to develop the children's vocabulary.* The families chose books with repetitive phrases, such as *Millions of Cats* (Gág 1928) and *The Gingerbread Boy* (Galdone 1975). The children enjoyed repeating the phrases in the appropriate contexts.
- *Dramatizing the stories.* The families and their children acted out the stories they had shared or created. Their dramatizations were based on events in the story and on their own family situation. Oftentimes, they modified the stories to match the props that were available. For example, for the story *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkina 1947), one family used hats as props. They called their dramatization "Hats for Sale," and they acted out their story by stacking hats on their heads.

# Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the families used a variety of literacy strategies and experiences in their story reading. They motivated their children to read and write stories by reading children's books to them, engaging them in conversations, writing stories with them and extending their reading experiences. These findings are consistent with the literature on literacy development.

## Reading Stories to Children

The families provided literacy-oriented experiences to accompany their reading of stories to their children. In doing so, they were responsive to the children's interests and situations.

Families can read stories that encourage family–child interaction during the reading itself and also in follow-up experiences. Studies indicate that reading to children cultivates their literacy development in numerous ways (Kuhn et al 2006; Saracho 1984/85, 2001, 2008; Yaden 2003). Reading a story several times helps children gain an understanding of the purposes of print, how print is used and people's reading behaviours (Kuhn et al 2006; Saracho and Spodek 2010; Yaden 2003). Reading stories to children improves their attitudes toward reading (Saracho 1984/85). When children listen to stories, they become conscious of the functions, forms and conventions of print (Saracho 1990).

## Engaging Children in Conversations

Conversations require children to process incoming information, connect various segments of information and integrate new information with their prior knowledge (McKeown and Beck 2005). Conversations promote children's language development and give them the opportunity to obtain knowledge about narratives. Lever and Sénéchal (2011) show the relationship between story reading and narrative knowledge. They conclude that children's oral narrative skills develop in the context of parent–child conversations.

Conversations also help children increase their vocabulary and construct meaning in their language learning. During conversations, children interact with their peers, carefully listen to others and respond to others. This process parallels the language-learning process (Saracho and Spodek 2007).

## Writing Stories with Children

Family–child interactions during story reading can culminate in the development of a new story. This process motivates children to learn the reasons for writing and how to communicate through writing. Three- to five-year-old children can become aware that people write for a reason, and such knowledge motivates them to write to communicate their own thoughts (Clay 1991). When children first learn the fundamental writing skills, they start to discriminate between print and nonprint; to learn the precise characteristics of the written language; to learn and comprehend the letters of the alphabet; and to understand the formalities of writing (such as left-to-right progression on a line, top-to-bottom progression on a page, uppercase and lowercase letters, and punctuation) (Fox and Saracho 1990).

# Educational and Research Implications

Studies on family literacy support the findings of this study and indicate a strong relationship between the family environment and children's acquisition of school-based literacy.

Morrow (2011) indicates that practices such as providing story-reading experiences, making print materials available and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy in the home increase children's literacy development. Families assist in this literacy development when they engage in story-reading experiences and provide the following (Saracho 2008):

- Literacy materials in the home environment
- Literacy experiences that encourage family members to interact with their children
- A family environment that encourages children's literacy learning
- Reading models with high-quality reading materials in the family environment

The results of this study provide directions for both practice and future research.

## Directions for Practice

Family members need to learn story-reading strategies that will help their children in their literacy learning. Story-reading experiences both in and out of the home have been found to contribute to young children's literacy development. These experiences include reading stories, telling stories, discussing stories, engaging in interaction related to stories, teaching vocabulary, dramatizing stories and writing stories.

When family members read stories often and respond to children's questions about the stories, children learn that print communicates meaning (Saracho 2000, 2001). Productive literacy interactions are generated as families and children engage in verbal interaction (Silva, Correa-Chávez and Rogoff 2010). The quality of the interactions between family members and children influences children's acquisition of literacy (Saracho 2000).

Educators can provide families with opportunities to engage in story-reading experiences in the home. They can encourage families to read stories through the following actions:

- Making storybooks accessible to families, and showing them how to check out books from the school library and the public library
- Conducting meetings in locations convenient for families (such as the library or the community centre), with the purpose of sharing with families the story-reading resources and services available in the community
- Encouraging families to use resources and services such as access to children's books, language experience stories and adult literacy instructional materials
- Sharing storytelling ideas, word games and other literacy-related activities that families can use and enjoy with their children
- Continuing to share with families the criteria for selecting developmentally appropriate children's

books and strategies for story reading in the home

Story reading gives families an opportunity to support their young children. Family support is a foundation on which children build their personal and academic success (Prelow and Loukas 2003). Family involvement can increase children's academic and language achievement (Quezada, Díaz and Sánchez 2003).

Families can use story-reading strategies and experiences to become an important influence and resource in their children's literacy development. Providing children with materials and literacy experiences in the home can help them understand the functions of written language. The quantity and quality of the family's involvement can reinforce a child's acquisition of literacy.

## Directions for Future Research

The outcomes of this study have given researchers new directions for examining how families can engage in story reading to contribute to their children's literacy learning.

Future research should include studies on story reading that can

- be extended to examine the family members' and the children's responses to story reading over a longer period of time;
- determine whether the family members' and the children's responses stay consistent or change over time;
- examine the quantity, quality and complexity of the questions the family members ask the children, as well as the children's responses;
- determine the degree of comprehension that results from one-to-one interactive story-reading experiences, as tested through story retellings and cued recall; and
- examine the implications of different family–child interactions when sharing various genres of books.

The style of inquiry in this study provides a basic understanding of how families can use their own family situations to engage in story reading in the home to promote children's literacy learning. Future research in this area can use different forms of inquiry and a variety of data-gathering and data-recording techniques, including a family's personal history, interviews regarding cultural beliefs and an understanding of each family member's contributions to specific literacy events.

## Notes

1. Also see www.nea.org/grants/13662.htm (accessed July 9, 2012).
2. Not the child's real name.

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# Images of Childhood: Reggio-Inspired, Plains Cree–Derived

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## Abstract

This article, which is based on the author's master's thesis research, articulates the Plains Cree image of the child from the perspectives of two Plains Cree elders in Saskatchewan. These understandings were gathered in the spirit of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education—an approach dependent on establishing a locally created image of the child within a cultural context.

Children from Aboriginal communities may be taught at school in ways that do not necessarily correspond to the values of their family and community (Battiste 2002; Kağitçibaşi 2007).[1] For example, Kağitçibaşi observes that many educators hold a Westernized image of the child as independent, whereas Aboriginal children are often raised in an interdependent community. This means that teachers' sincere efforts in structuring learning may unintentionally detract from the educational experiences of Aboriginal children. Furthermore, despite the abolishment of residential schools (which were in existence in Canada from the 1860s to the 1990s), their legacy remains, and Western values prevail in current curricula (Chansonneuve 2005). Positivistic and Westernized discourses disregard idiographic epistemologies, such as the generational knowledge of Aboriginal peoples (Hall 2006; Kağitçibaşi 2007; Smith 2006).

To counter the dominance of the Western image of the child, it is necessary to articulate additional understandings of childhood, as conceptions of childhood vary across cultures. Employing the Reggio Emilia approach of developing an image of the child as a basis for pedagogy, this article explores the image of the child from the perspectives of two Plains Cree elders.

## Conceptual Framework

The Reggio Emilia approach to education is dependent on a particular understanding of the image of the child within a cultural context (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1998). Generated from the views of a community in a particular region of Italy, the image of the child in the Reggio Emilia approach is a competent, capable and powerful learner and citizen (Fraser 2006).

In school systems around the globe, there have been attempts to transplant the Reggio Emilia approach (which was developed for the children of Reggio, Italy) into other cultural contexts—contexts for which it was never intended. Understanding the image of the child from a Plains Cree perspective is vital because images "determine the institutions we provide for children and the pedagogical work that adults and children undertake in these institutions" (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999, 43). It is anticipated that early childhood educators will use the Plains Cree knowledge system for the benefit of their students whose ways of knowing are non-Westernized (Merriam 2007).

## Methodology

My master's thesis research on Plains Cree images of the child (Akerman 2010) made use of qualitative research methodologies, with a particular focus on Indigenous practices and protocol (such as offering tobacco and accessing elders through gatekeepers)

(Kovach 2005; Smith 2006). Ethics approval was granted by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. My research unfolded as follows:

- During an Aboriginal talking circle, I received guidance from five Plains Cree elders on how to carry out my research on the image of the child.
- I conducted one-to-one open-ended interviews (referred to as *learning sessions*) with two Plains Cree elders.
- Employing constructivist grounded theory, I compiled and coded the data and delineated it into categories.

# The Plains Cree

The Plains Cree—who live in central Saskatchewan and central Alberta—are culturally, spiritually and linguistically distinct from the other Cree groups.

Yet, despite their distinctiveness, the Plains Cree are not a monolithic group. As McLeod (2000, 439) writes, because "Cree culture is ever-changing and has multiple paths of genealogy, there is no catch-all definition that can be used to accurately describe the Plains Cree people."

Despite the variance in practices, commonalities exist among the Plains Cree. For instance, in the spiritual realm, the Plains Cree (like most Aboriginal people) share a respect for Mother Earth and a belief in the interconnectedness of all things.

# The Elders

An elder is an Aboriginal person who, in the eyes of the community, carries knowledge of traditional ways. Known for humility and wisdom, an elder is given power by the Creator to fulfill his or her role (Saskatchewan Education 2001). The Cree word for *elder* is *Kehtaya*.

The two Plains Cree elders I interviewed are referred to as and revered as elders by the wider Aboriginal community in Saskatchewan, and they hold a traditional knowledge of Plains Cree childhood. It was not required that I interview female elders, but given that knowledge of child rearing in Plains Cree communities is often held by women, it is appropriate that the two main elder participants, Helen and Margaret, are both female.[2]

Helen is a Plains Cree woman from Chitek Lake, Saskatchewan. Having grown up speaking Cree at home, Helen credits much of her learning of traditional Cree ways to her mother. Her mother spoke only Cree, had no formal education and worked as a midwife. Helen grew up practising Cree spirituality and maintains that spirituality today. Like her mother, Helen did not attend residential school,

simply because a muskeg blocked her access to residential school transportation. Helen is currently an elder and a cultural advisor at a high school.

Margaret is from Thunderchild First Nation in Saskatchewan. Her parents were Plains Cree. Margaret's mother was a midwife and herbalist who spoke only Cree, and her father spoke both Cree and English. Margaret attended St Anthony's Residential School, in Onion Lake, for Grades 1–8. Despite her eight years of attendance at residential school, where the image of the child was "evil," Margaret is firmly grounded in her Cree spirituality. She recalls going home every summer to receive traditional teachings from her mother and other elders in the community. It was her summer experiences that fostered Margaret's Cree spirituality, as well as her traditional knowledge and skills. Margaret is now an elder at an educational institution.

# The Elders' Image of the Child

Elders are experts in their own right. Since I do not possess the traditional knowledge and experiences the elders carry, I did not know enough about the traditional image of the Plains Cree child to ask Helen and Margaret relevant questions. With no predetermined set of questions beyond "What is your image of the child?" or "How do you see the child?" the learning sessions were essentially explanatory (Merriam 1998). Respecting the elders' wisdom, I simply listened to them and asked for clarification only when necessary.

The elders who participated in my research are Plains Cree speakers, yet they spoke to me in their second language (English). It is important to note that since the Cree language carries with it spiritual and cultural meaning, some meanings may have been lost in translation.

The elders' image of the child is presented in six categories:

- The child's awareness in the womb
- The child as powerful and pure at birth
- The child journeying through infancy
- The child's spirit as connected to Mother Earth
- Listening to the child's voice
- The child as a butterfly

## The Child's Awareness in the Womb

Margaret and Helen both believe that children remember their experiences in the womb for a lifetime, and they shared with me many teachings about caring for a child in the womb.

Margaret said, "It's not only when they're born that they remember things. A child has the power to

remember when they're in the womb." She shared the teachings she received from her grandmother-in-law:

> She was a grand old lady, my late husband's grandma. . . . She was the one that continued the teaching about how to look after myself when I was pregnant. She would say, "Before you go to bed, sing to your baby. Put your hands on your tummy and sing to your baby. Or even in the morning when the sun comes, sing to your baby. And you ask your baby, 'Do you hear the birds singing?'" They listen. You are talking to your baby. And you nurture your baby through the umbilical cord. You nurture all four components: mental, spiritual, physical and emotional. And whatever you're singing, whatever you're talking, whatever you're feeling, goes into that baby and they'll remember that.

Helen, who insisted that I begin my research on the image of the child at the moment of conception, refused to use the word *fetus* and instead talked of "a child when in the womb." She believes the child to be "a child at the moment of conception" and explained that "the child's spirit is asked to come down from above at the moment of conception." She pointed out that "*conception* is the English word that is used." Helen spoke of pregnancy as a nine-month ceremony where the mother is "with child" or "carrying a child," which in Cree is called *kikiskahawasot*. When a mother is carrying a child, everything she says, does and thinks will affect the child. For example, if she belittles her husband or others, or if she swears, the child will hear that. Helen also talked about the importance of abstaining from alcohol while with child. She said that all the care required while carrying a child "has been known by the elders for a long time," but their knowledge has not been acknowledged because of their lack of formal education. Helen believes that a child's experience in the womb should be "pleasant and beautiful," rather than "threatening," because this experience has direct implications for the child's journey to adulthood.

## The Child as Powerful and Pure at Birth

Both Margaret and Helen referred to the child as being powerful and pure at birth.

Margaret pointed out that at the moment children are born, they are crying while holding their fist in the air:

> You know what my grandma told me a long time ago when I was a young lady about 14?
> "Someday you'll have babies, and when they are born you'll notice that they have their little fists like this all the time, hanging on to something."

And they are hanging on to something, and they tell you what they're hanging on to. On their first cry, they tell you that. In Cree, they say, "*Esônikeyimiyan* (the future is in my hands), and I have to protect it. I have to protect this future, but you have to help me. Mom and Dad, you have to help me." That is what every child is saying: "The future is in my hands, and I need you to help me protect it."

Margaret said that her "mother and all the older women" used to teach her to use herbal oil to wash a child's hands right after birth to protect the future that rests in the child's hands. Also, she talked about children blessing those around them:

> When they have their hands open, they are blessing you 'cause they're powerful, they're really pure. With their hands, they're blessing the people around them in the house and their surroundings. (That's what she used to tell us, that old lady.) They're born pure, they're very powerful, so they're blessing you, talking to you and telling you you're receiving their blessings.

Helen believes that, in addition to blessing those around them, children have their fist in the air, saying, "I come with a gift." This gift is a talent to be shared with others and is unique to each child. Helen spoke of the spiritual power the *oskawâsis* (newborn baby) has. When we hear the cry of an *oskawâsis,* we are instantly drawn to the spiritual purity and power of that child.

## The Child Journeying Through Infancy

Both Margaret and Helen emphasized the importance of caring for children when they are infants, as infancy is a time when they learn many new skills. Helen referred to infancy as "a sacred journey" where the child learns to talk and walk.

Margaret spoke of the infant engaging in learning:

> Children, from the time they are born, start studying. They start learning about their mother—that's the closest person that they have. He or she is being nourished by their mother . . . for food and also, you know, being warm and fed and clothed and all this and loved and cared for. But at the same time they're already learning. They're watching, you know, and feeling their mother and they want to do that. Even as little and young as they are, their eyes will wander. They'll test what they've seen. They do that and they even talk in their own little language and they think in their little minds.

Margaret views an infant's interactions with the mother as a significant learning phase.

According to Helen, the infant has an important place in Aboriginal gatherings and ceremonies. Referring to ceremonies in which people sit in a circle, Helen said that "the circle is not complete without the very young." Helen encourages all mothers to bring the very young into the circle. She is not concerned when infants crawl around and touch ceremonial objects; infants are pure and "they purify the circle." Helen explained that "once children begin walking on Mother Earth, they can begin learning about how to act in a ceremony."

## The Child's Spirit as Connected to Mother Earth

Margaret and Helen both talked of the importance of "teaching to the child's spirit"—a spirit that must be acknowledged as being connected to Mother Earth. Children, like adults, have a special connection to Mother Earth, as she provides many necessities for them, such as food and water. Margaret believes that even when children sit on the floor of a classroom, rather than on the ground outdoors, they are still connected to Mother Earth and can feel her energy. She recommends that teachers sit on the ground with children when teaching, to acknowledge their connection to Mother Earth.

Sitting on the ground with children not only allows them to connect to Mother Earth but also acknowledges them as equal. When sitting at eye level with children, Margaret said, "you're more relaxed and you're more open to welcome, to receive and give that relationship." According to Margaret, children can

> feel the energy of the care that you have for them because you're getting to their level. You're not standing up, like teachers do. . . . Teachers mostly stand and they walk around and you have to follow them; you're moving your eyes. But the closeness and the caring that we were taught about teaching is sitting down with the children, being on the same level with them.

Margaret said that of all the teachings she received from her grandmother, one of the best "is to be on the level with the children":

> My grandmother said, "Do not scare their spirits away by being so high, as if you know more and you silence their spirit, they're not willing to learn. They feel so small. And they're scared to speak up. But when you get to their level they will share."

Helen defined the spirit of the child as "the whole child"—which includes the "emotional, mental, physical and spiritual" dimensions of the child.

## Listening to the Child's Voice

Margaret and Helen both spoke of the importance of "listening to the child's voice" since a child has much knowledge to share with others.

Margaret's preference of sitting with children is a way of acknowledging the child's ability to teach the adult. Margaret explained that when sitting at the same level with children,

> You're welcoming them. . . . You're being open to them and you're welcoming their sense of level—that you're not above them, that you do not know more than they do, but you're willing to share and willing to teach and willing to learn from them. That's what you're giving them. They can teach as well.

According to Helen, from the moment a child is conceived, he or she has a voice that must be listened to. Pregnant mothers often ask, "What about me?" when overwhelmed by pregnancy. Helen reminds those mothers that there are now two lives, and the mother must do what is best for the child. After all, the child is also asking "What about me?" and mothers must hear that voice and respond to it by caring for the child they are carrying. Helen acknowledged that pregnancy is a difficult time for some mothers, but they must sit with elders and grandmothers and receive knowledge, encouragement and strength from them.

Listening to the child's voice involves responding to children when they express that they want to receive teachings in certain areas. For example, Margaret spoke of children who touch ceremonial objects that are not meant to be touched:

> In ceremonies, I hear mothers say, "Get away from that" before their children experience it and fulfill their curiosity. Let the children do that, touch the ceremonial object. And they'll ask, "What is this for?" And that's when your teaching comes in. They're asking for your teaching. They're asking for you to exercise your teachings. "What is this for?" OK, you'll tell them that. "And why can't we touch them or play with them?" That's when you need to explain, "They're for ceremonies and that's the only time we use them. We'll do it together. I'll teach you how."

For Margaret, a child's curiosity is welcome in a ceremony. Holding the belief that children and adults can learn from one another, she recognizes the importance of responding to a child's curiosity.

## The Child as a Butterfly

Margaret likens the child to a butterfly who is free in spirit. As she explained,

> You look at a butterfly. They are so delicate. They're so soft and there's such beauty in them.

You can see the purity in them and the beauty. And that's the way a child is; a child is free in spirit. . . . A child has the power to leave spiritually and still have life in their body, but they're flying around observing. That's how they know where they're gonna be, and then they'll even think . . . "Hey, I was here before 'cause my mother was talking to me while I was in her womb." . . . They have the ability to think and they'll store that. They're not forgetting it . . . but they're storing it, in their little minds and in their hearts and in their senses.

Like a butterfly, a child's spirit will flutter from one learning opportunity or thought to another:

Just watch a butterfly. It'll go to one leaf or maybe go to another flower. They'll have the taste of it and they'll have the experience of touching that plant and then flying away and learning again, and then they'll come back to where they were before.

Margaret advises teachers that children will pay attention only for the amount of time they choose to pay attention:

Well, I always tell teachers when I go and talk to them that I'm not gonna force the children to stay two hours with me or an hour with me. 'Cause they have their own space, like we do. Sometimes we're sitting there and we're listening and then, finally, you know, we're not listening at all 'cause already your spirit had enough and needed to go elsewhere to digest what we learn. And that's the same thing with children. But theirs is a shorter span because the spirit they're given is to learn and to pick up in different parts and different areas. And that spirit will go; it will wander off. You'll be talking there and the child will be there, but they're not really listening. So we have to respect and honour that.

Margaret warns against reprimanding a child for not listening during class. Instead, she suggests that the teacher ask the child,

What is it that you had to experience? I'd like to learn about that. Are you willing to share or can you talk about it sometime? It must be very interesting. I'd like to learn and I'd like to know about it.

After the teacher asks the child such questions, Margaret explained, "sometimes they'll come back and tell you more about it, sometimes they won't."

# Reflection

The Reggio Emilia image of the child and the Plains Cree elders' image of the child are similar. For instance, both view the child as powerful and as an important and contributing member of society.

The elders' child-as-butterfly analogy has direct implications for early childhood education, because it illustrates children's need for flexible and free use of learning time in the classroom, as well as their need to allow their spirits to wander from one learning opportunity to another.

The elders' image of the child as being connected to Mother Earth encourages educators to allow children to sit on the ground to learn, so that they may feel the energy of Mother Earth, as well as the respect their teachers have for them.

Educators must be cautioned that, unlike the Reggio approach, the Plains Cree image of the child has a spiritual orientation, which can be fully actualized only when accompanied by Plains Cree culture and language. In a traditional Plains Cree paradigm, one's spirituality is entrenched in and inextricable from relationships with others and relationships with the land.

By using Reggio Emilia as a theoretical basis to determine and discern the image of the child from a local and cultural perspective, educators can begin to work against the adverse influence of Western discourses and residential schooling, and reunite Aboriginal children with the cultural strengths of their families and communities. Reggio Emilia education is not a program to blindly copy but, rather, a starting point for tapping into the existing cultural knowledge of any community in need of cultural and educational revitalization and, moreover, an impetus for planning educational environments and learning activities for children.

# Notes

1. The term *Aboriginal* is used here to refer to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada.

2. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this study.

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# How Do Pakistani Parents Perceive Their Children's Placement in Special Education Classes?: Over-Referral in the Toronto District School Board

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## Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents whose children (ages six to twelve) had been referred for special education programs in Toronto. The study was qualitative and was based on the grounded theory method. The interviews with five parent participants provided insight into their perceptions. The study found three main factors contributing to the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education: (1) parents' denial, (2) cultural and linguistic differences and (3) experiences of immigration. The results indicate that Pakistani parents perceive a problem of over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education programs. Recommendations are made for implementing change in the special education system of the Toronto District School Board, and areas for future research are identified.

Canada's immigrant population is rising. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2010), one in six people in Canada were born outside of the country. Statistics Canada indicates that these numbers are increasing every year.[1]

This has resulted in an increase in the number of immigrant students in Canadian schools. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) website reports that approximately 26 per cent of the district's students were born outside Canada and that 53 per cent have a language other than English as their mother tongue or as the primary language spoken at home.[2]

Terms used in the literature to refer to students for whom English is not the primary language include *English language learner (ELL), second language learner (SLL), English as a second language (ESL), limited English proficient (LEP)* and *culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD).* This article uses *CLD* to refer to immigrant children from homes and communities where English is not the primary language of communication.

## The Problem Statement

Immigrant families bring with them a rich cultural and linguistic heritage. However, as children start school, their linguistic and cultural differences are often seen as a problem. Over-referral of these children for special education programs is well documented and disturbing (Sullivan 2011).

Disproportional representation of children from particular linguistic, ethnic and racial groups could be partially attributed to the difficulty teachers and other professionals have in determining whether the learning and behaviour problems of these children are due to cultural and linguistic differences or actual disabilities (Barrera 1995; Beier 2006; Brown 2004; Connor and Boskin 2001; Kester and Peña 2002; Sullivan 2010, 2011; Tomlinson 1989; Tyler et al 2004). In addition, cultural and linguistic biases often influence teachers' and examiners' perceptions of students' abilities (Zine 2001, 2006). What teachers see as a problem for

these children is greatly affected by such views (Baca 1990).

Thus, the referral of CLD students for special education programs may have more to do with differences in language and perceptions of culture than with actual disability (Barrera 1995). It is hard to distinguish learning disabilities from linguistic differences in the assessment of a child's cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins 1984; Schon, Shaftel and Markham 2008). Often a student's difficulty in learning two languages at the same time is misinterpreted as a learning disability (Spinelli 2008).

# Objective of the Study and Research Questions

In this study, I examined the experiences of Pakistani families whose children were referred for special education programs in elementary public schools in the Toronto District School Board. My aim was to gain insight into the factors influencing the referral process. I conducted interviews with five parents and hoped to create a space for them to share their perspectives. To my knowledge, this study was the first to examine this topic with Pakistani newcomer parents.

The main research question was, What is the Pakistani immigrant parents' perspective regarding their children's referral for special needs classes? The following subquestions framed the exploration:

- What do Pakistani immigrant parents perceive as the factors contributing to the referral of their children for special education?
- Do Pakistani immigrant parents perceive these referrals as being based on actual learning or language disabilities?
- Do these parents perceive their children as being over-referred for special education in Toronto?
- If yes, what do Pakistani immigrant parents perceive to be the causes of over-referral?

# Reasons Behind the Over-Referral of CLD Children for Special Education

There is no single factor behind the problem of CLD children being over-referred for special education programs. In North America, the factors vary from district to district (Sullivan 2011; Utley, Obiakor and Kozleski 2005). However, a large body of research outlines reasons for the over-representation of CLD children in special education.

## Difficulty Distinguishing Between Language-Acquisition Problems and Learning Disabilities

It is difficult for general educators to evaluate for special education placement the students in their classrooms who do not speak English. It is impossible to be sure when identifying a limited English proficient (LEP) student as a student in need of special services. Even with a pre-referral process, which helps teachers identify students' special needs, it is difficult for a teacher to identify whether an LEP student simply has a second language problem or suffers from an actual disability (Beier 2006; Chamberlain 2005).

## Second Language Acquisition–Associated Phenomena (SLAAP)

The lack of a clear distinction between language disorder and the process of second language acquisition is a major factor in the over-referral of CLD children for special education programs. Some language problems found in CLD children are not necessarily due to a language disorder but, rather, are part of acquiring a new language.

Brown (2004), in an attempt to make a clear distinction between language disorder and language difficulties, proposed a new term: *second language acquisition–associated phenomena (SLAAP)*. SLAAP includes those performances of CLD students who are in the process of acquiring English as a second language and who could be misidentified as having a language disorder.

According to Brown, the factors leading to SLAAP emerge from the process of moving to a new country. These factors include cultural differences, feeling uprooted and isolated, a change in socioeconomic status, and language problems while adjusting to the new country (Barrera 1995; Berhanu 2008).

## Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Cultural and linguistic diversity is problematic only when the knowledge and skills of CLD children are undervalued. This depends on the degree of similarity or difference between the culture and language of the child's home environment and those of the educational setting. It also depends on whether these similarities or differences are accepted in the new culture.

Instead of helping to increase immigrant children's learning abilities, cultural and linguistic differences can affect their school performance (Agbenyega and Jiggetts 1999; Zine 2001, 2006). Teachers sometimes judge CLD students' competence on the basis of their race, sex, socioeconomic status, and linguistic and cultural

differences, rather than on their actual abilities (Barrera 1995; Sullivan 2010). This problem is more dependent on external circumstances than on internal conditions and, again, it can vary according to the degree of similarity or difference between the cultural and linguistic context of the home environment and that of the school.

The literature on the education of CLD learners acknowledges the over-representation of specific cultural groups in special education categories (Berhanu 2008; Blanchett 2006; Sullivan 2011). There are differences within groups in terms of gender and age, which could also be a reason for referring CLD children for special education. For example, according to Ferri and Connor (2005), black girls are less likely to be over-represented in special education than black boys. (However, black girls are more likely to be labelled in need of special education than either white girls or white boys.) Moreover, taking language into consideration, Spanish-speaking students who are learning English are much more likely to experience over-referral than those who are not (Artiles and Harry 2006; Baca 1990).

### Low Socioeconomic Status

Brown (2004) notes a strong correlation between being referred for special education services and poverty status. Other researchers have suggested that socioeconomic status is a factor in the over-referral of CLD children for special education classes.

The appearance of extremely low literacy skills may be the result of unfavourable environmental factors rather than a "natural" condition (Barrera 1995; Brown 2004). Most CLD parents have little time to help their children with schoolwork and do not have the financial means to provide additional materials that could improve their children's school performance. These parents often have demanding, low-level menial or labour jobs. Moreover, they often have to take on several jobs at a time.

General education teachers might misinterpret as deficiencies those learning problems that are, in reality, due to socioeconomic status, and thus refer CLD students for special education (Berhanu 2008; Brown 2004).

# The Effect of Over-Referral on the Scholastic Achievement of CLD Children

Whatever the reasons behind the over-referral of CLD children for special education, the phenomenon affects their scholastic achievement.

Over-referral has a negative effect on the academic performance of CLD students who are labelled as having a disability. It also lowers the expectations teachers have for these children, who tend to have higher rates of suspension, face more severe disciplinary actions, and experience a higher dropout rate than their peers (Ferri and Connor 2005). Teachers interact differently with these students: they wait less time for them to respond, offer fewer opportunities for them to learn, focus on student behaviour and discipline rather than on academic work, seat low-expectation students further away from the teacher and the front of the classroom, and pay less attention to them (Zine 2006).

In special education classes, students from racial, ethnic and linguistic minority groups are more likely to be placed in separate classrooms or in more restrictive classrooms than their peers of European descent (Sullivan 2011). Notably, students from minority groups who attend special education schools in large urban districts are given the most segregated and restrictive placements (Fierros and Conroy 2002). These classes are overly restrictive and may limit students' ability to access the general education curriculum or to keep up with their grade-level peers.

Students who are English language learners (ELLs), who are labelled as having limited English proficiency (LEP), or who are placed in ESL or bilingual classes at the elementary level are usually over-referred for special education in the upper grades. When these children fail to obtain a high school diploma, their occupational opportunities are restricted, increasing the likelihood of poverty (Artiles et al 2002).

The consequences of misperceptions about the language abilities of CLD children can affect their overall performance and their opportunities to learn. They may not be given adequate opportunities to be on a par with their peers, as they may be placed wrongly in special education classes. They will, as a result, be unable to access a curriculum that is challenging and that will help them reach their full potential (Brown 2004). Special education classrooms do not meet their true needs. Instead, they receive services for deficiencies and disabilities that they do not have. Compared with other children, many CLD children are denied the opportunity for academic development (Klingner et al 2005). They are separated from students in regular education programs, and this separation can affect them for their entire life. There is no chance for them to learn positive things in a positive environment.

The over-referral of CLD students for special education programs is problematic not only for individual students but also for cultural groups, as it

can create stereotypes about the educational abilities of specific groups (Chamberlain 2005).

# Theoretical Framework

Despite a large body of research, this area lacks conceptual and theoretical frameworks. In this study, a grounded theory approach was used in an effort to generate a conceptual framework that could lead to the development of testable hypotheses about the over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education programs.

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that is widely used to generate theories rooted within the data and that allows a researcher to find themes and links within data (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Creswell 2008; Neuman 2006). The grounded theory approach used in this study was modified, because no prior research on Pakistani immigrant children was available to guide this research. The grounded theory approach has proved to be helpful in generating hypotheses where there are no pre-existing ideas about what will emerge from the data (Creswell 2008).

Following the tenets of grounded theory, I collected field data through semistructured face-to-face interviews of Pakistani immigrant parents. Once the data were collected, they were broken down into units, coded, analyzed and interpreted according to the research question. For the data analysis, critical social science (CSS) was used to develop a conceptual framework for the over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education in Toronto.

# Research Sample

Parents of Pakistani immigrant children referred for special education in Toronto were the focus of this study. Five parents (three mothers and two fathers) of children aged six to twelve were selected. The children themselves, their teachers, other school staff and classmates were not included in the research because it was intended as a small-scale study.

Convenience and snowball sampling were used in selecting the participants because of the investigative nature and the small sample size of the Pakistani population participating in the study. Convenience sampling was chosen because of feasibility and the relatively easy access that I, as a member of the community, had to the parents of Pakistani immigrant children.

# Findings

The parents who participated in this study clearly believed that their children were over-referred for special education classes. None of the participants completely accepted the referral of their children.

According to them, the two main reasons for over-referral were (1) cultural and linguistic differences and (2) immigration and lack of familiarity with the education system in Canada. They all said that they were not properly informed by the school about their children's referral. According to them, referral resulted from their lack of awareness about the Canadian education system, low socioeconomic status and limited proficiency in English. They presented arguments and evidence to support their claims, such as their children's behaviour at home and their normal interactions with family members (particularly grandparents and siblings). Most of the parents provided examples of home language use or religious studies as proof that their children were doing well. They also discussed their other children who were performing well at school.

One couple I interviewed, Mr and Mrs Ahmed, had moved to Canada one year earlier and had a son in Grade 6. Mr Ahmed did not agree with the school's decision about special needs placement for his son. According to him,

> The referral decision is not fair. My son is absolutely fine. He has no disability at all. When he first brought the letter from his school, I was shocked.

Mr Ahmed further said,

> My son is absolutely normal like the other kids in the class. He is absolutely normal at home. He remembers many Urdu poems and is very active in play. He has no problem in solving math questions. In his religious classes, his performance is absolutely fine, and he is learning the Quran by heart, which is not easy at all.

Perhaps one reason for Pakistani parents' disagreement with a referral for special education is their cultural background: the Pakistani culture does not support children being labelled as special needs unless they have physical or mental disabilities. All five parents talked about this cultural norm. They were concerned that once their children were labelled as having any kind of disability, they would never overcome the stigma. The label could affect their whole life.

As Mrs Ahmed said,

> When we first came to Canada one year back, my son did not get good marks in the first term. The teacher complained about his learning deficiencies and recommended him for extra need classes. I was totally shocked.

She elaborated,

> I can't say he is absolutely fine. He has some attention deficiency. He easily loses his interest

from his studies. But it is not at that extreme that I can say that he has some type of deficiency.

According to Mrs Ahmed, *deficiency* means handicapped or having some kind of mental illness or weakness. In her view, being slow in learning is not a deficiency. She commented,

> In Pakistan, back home, we never label a child with a learning disability, because it is a very serious issue and people don't accept this kind of labelling. In fact, once a child is labelled, it can never be removed, and people don't want to marry these kids when they grow up. So for me it is a very big challenge, and I always try to hide this from my family and friends. There is no need to put my son in special education classes when he has no deficiency.

The second Pakistani couple I interviewed was Mr and Mrs Akram, who had been in Canada for six years. Their son was nine years old and in Grade 4. He had been referred for special needs classes because his teachers believed he had a learning disability. According to Mr Akram,

> My son is not weak or slow in learning. He just has a speech problem and because of that he performs a little slow in the class. He is shy because of his speech problem, but he does not have any learning problems at all.

In Pakistani culture, the word *deficiency* does not mean the same thing as it does in Canada. Among Pakistani people, *deficiency* usually refers to a physical or mental deficiency, or a deficiency that can be observed. Having a learning disability or being a slow learner is not considered a deficiency.

In addition, in Pakistani culture, parental expectations are gender-specific. When boys are careless and mischievous, these behaviours are considered normal. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to be shy, quiet and responsible.

Another cultural difference is how respect of elders is shown in Pakistani culture. Behaviour considered respectful in Pakistan is sometimes seen in Canada as shyness, disengagement or lack of interest, because Canadian children are expected to be more independent and to interact with adults as partners in play and learning. In other words, not talking in front of teachers is a positive quality in Pakistan but not in Canada. Thus, it is possible that Pakistani immigrant children in Toronto, who are behaving according to their cultural expectations and who are in the initial stages of learning English as a second language, are being wrongly referred for special needs classes.

According to Mrs Akram, her son did not have any disability at all, although he was a little shy. When Mrs Akram first came to Canada, she was so busy finding and working at jobs that she did not have the time to spend with him. She felt that is why he became shy.

In addition to cultural differences, children's linguistic differences can create misunderstanding about their competence. Sometimes children have difficulty understanding their teachers' and peers' accents and misinterpret the meaning of the questions being asked.

According to Mr Ahmed, the main reason behind his son's referral was his difficulty in understanding what was being said:

> When we first came to Canada, my son was confused and shy due to the cultural and linguistic differences. The teacher's behaviour, his peers' attitude towards his differences, and even the language and syllabus—everything was different. His first attitude towards other peers and the class teacher was not impressive. The teacher's and classmates' accents were totally different from his own, and he felt difficulty in understanding what they were saying with those accents.

Almost all the parents mentioned their immigration as a possible reason for their children's referral for special education. They discussed how everything changed after immigration, including their social relations, their socioeconomic conditions and even their language. They had to spend more time on their jobs and on learning how to survive in their new environment. Most parents of CLD children have demanding, low-paying, menial jobs. These jobs restrict them from giving time to their children and home life. In addition, the parents in this study acknowledged that they did not know or understand the school system in Canada.

At the time of the interview, it was very important for Mrs Akram to become familiar with the Canadian education system. She was still struggling with English, although she had attended Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes for three years. She was working hard to become economically stable and provide a good life for her children. In Pakistani culture, it is the mother's responsibility to look after the children and the home. Mrs Akram considered herself responsible for her child's slow learning and shyness. When the Akram family first came to Canada, her son was very young and, in her view, had no problems. She explained,

> Due to immigration, everything changed as I am a totally different person now. My son was attached with his family in Pakistan, especially with his grandmother. These things affected him a lot. Last summer, when his grandmother visited us, he was very happy and he improved a lot in everything.

# Parent Suggestions for Improving the Special Education Referral Process

The parents involved in this study offered suggestions for improving the referral process for special education.

They all felt that it is crucial for school personnel to make sure that all important and related information is considered in the assessment process. According to Mr Ahmed, schools should consider the language and cultural differences of Pakistani immigrant children and give them more time to adjust to their new environment.

Almost all the parents demonstrated a lack of awareness about the whole referral process. For example, they tended to think that the teacher was solely responsible for decision making about their children's referral. Mr Ahmed said that schools should be more supportive of new immigrant parents who are trying to understand the Canadian education system. Mrs Ahmed agreed:

> Parent involvement is very important. Most of the new immigrant parents don't know much about the Canadian system, and these things create misunderstandings and it is hard for them to defend or explain their feelings. The schools should provide translators so the parents can understand everything more clearly.

If possible, schools should provide translators or cultural education brokers to help immigrant parents more clearly understand the education system in general and the special education referral process in particular. Hiring multilingual teachers from various cultures can smooth the transition process for both families and educators, as well as facilitate more appropriate consideration of the linguistic and cultural differences of immigrant children and families. Going beyond involving parents in festivals and celebrations will facilitate proper assessment of children's needs and strengths and help clear up cultural misunderstandings.

## Notes

1. See the Statistics Canada table "Population and Private Dwellings Occupied by Usual Residents and Intercensal Growth for Canada, 1971 to 2011" at www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/hlt-fst/pd-pl/index-eng.cfm (accessed August 15, 2012).

2. See the TDSB Fact Sheet at www.tdsb.on.ca (under About Us) (accessed August 15, 2012).

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# Voices of Immigrant Children in Canadian Picture Books

## E Linda Reichenauer

E Linda Reichenauer has a PhD in elementary education. Since retiring from teaching, she has become actively involved in community volunteering. Like the characters in the picture books discussed in this article, she immigrated to Canada as a child.

## Abstract

In this article, the author first refers to 2006 Canadian census data on immigrants to Canada and considers questions raised by Anna Kirova (2006) about the experiences of immigrant children. She then reviews research on the adaptive challenges of relocation, particularly immigration, relating these challenges to general themes in children's literature. She also provides criteria for selecting and evaluating multicultural texts, possible links to learning outcomes from the Alberta program of studies and suggestions for classroom use. Last, she provides an annotated list of Canadian picture books that may provide insight into the experiences of immigrant children.

In the 2006 Canadian census, as Bainbridge (2010) notes, approximately 5 million people, or 16.2 per cent of the total population, were enumerated as visible minorities, compared with 13.4 per cent in 2001.[1] Moreover, between 2001 and 2006, 75.0 per cent of immigrants belonged to visible minority groups.[2] Bainbridge comments that if current immigration trends continue, the growth of Canada's visible minority population will be much more rapid than that of the rest of the population.

Kirova (2006) states that, for adults, voluntary migration is a conscious choice made in the hope of attaining a better life. Referring to Ackers and Stalford's (2004) study, however, she notes that in no instances did children influence migration decision making for their families. Kirova poses the following questions:

> Yet do adults understand what life is like for a child whose entire universe has changed overnight? What is the lived experience of a child when his or her home is replaced by a space to live and when the new language does not serve as a guide to the world? What are the lived experiences of immigrant children in their day-to-day living between languages and cultures? (pp 185–86)

The Canadian picture books listed later in this article provide insight into the experiences of immigrant children. Each picture book tells the story of a child who is facing the challenges of starting a new life in Canada.

## Challenges Faced by Immigrant Children and Related Themes in Children's Literature

Citing her own 1983 article, Jalongo (1994/95, 81) points out that a child who relocates to a new country and culture, in addition to a new residence, is not just a "new kid" at school but also an "expatriate."

In their review of research studies on the challenges faced by immigrant children and their adaptive responses, Kirova and Emme (2006) discuss various intrapersonal and interpersonal problems associated with loneliness and isolation.

According to Kirova (2006), many immigrant children's first experience of change involves the loss of familiar objects in the home. Moving to a completely new environment, as happens in immigration, changes the relationship between the child and these familiar objects, resulting in the loss of the child's "sense of at-home-ness" (p 187).

Nodelman and Reimer (2003, 192) state that children's texts are "often about what it means to have a home or lose one or find a new one." In their opinion, "the most typical story line in children's literature is not so much a home/away/home pattern as it is a home/away/new home pattern" (p 198), which they describe as "a move away from the familiar experiences of home through new experiences that lead to a new and

better understanding of what both home and oneself are and should be" (p 198).

Citing Garbarino (1987), Jalongo (1994/95, 81) describes children's experience of relocation as a "loss of their natural habitat." Even if the distance is not great, relocation "can mean losing a network of people who know, respect and trust the child" (p 81). Viewing this from a child's perspective, it seems reasonable to assume that relocation can also involve losing familiar people whom the child respects and trusts, and that immigrant children in particular may experience this.

Glazer (2000) points out that young children are often afraid of separation and abandonment. She makes this observation in the context of discussing notable examples of early children's texts about common childhood fears and their value in helping children overcome those fears.

Citing Adler (1975) and Walling (1990), Jalongo (1994/95, 82) outlines five stages children may go through when adjusting to relocation:

- *Contact.* Excitement about exploring the new environment.
- *Disintegration.* Negative feelings when contrasting the old and new environments.
- *Reintegration.* Negative feelings associated with rejecting the new environment.
- *Autonomy.* A return of confidence and an increasing sense of belonging.
- *Independence.* Feelings of acceptance and appreciation of the differences between the two environments.

According to Galda and Cullinan (2002, 74), children's picture books are often about "growing up," reflecting the child's growing independence, capabilities and understanding.

# Selecting and Evaluating Children's Multicultural Literature

In this article, the annotation for each picture book consists of a plot summary only. Alberta Education provides guidelines regarding issues of sensitivity (Alberta Learning 2003, 103–09). Teachers of all grades are encouraged to consider these guidelines when choosing texts for classroom study.

When selecting appropriate multicultural literature to share with students, teachers may also wish to consider the evaluation criteria suggested by Peterson and Swartz (2008). Citing Finazzo (1997) and Landt (2006), Peterson and Swartz recommend that teachers consider questions related to the stereotyping of characters, the presentation of sociopolitical issues, the authority of the author and the illustrator, the recentness of perspective, and the accessibility of content for students.

Students' language proficiency may also be a factor in selecting multicultural literature. Hadaway and Young (2011, 288) suggest the following:

Books with specific cultural detail . . . may be challenging to English learners in the early stages of language acquisition, while books with universal themes and topics are more likely to provide a general cultural fit and be more accessible. For instance, themes of identity, family, acceptance, and cultural heritage are familiar across cultures and may have a natural relevance for English learners.

# Connections to the Alberta Program of Studies and Suggestions for Classroom Use

Providing discussion and learning activities for both immigrant and non-immigrant kindergarten and Division I students using multicultural texts (such as those listed later) can facilitate the following learning outcomes from the Alberta program of studies.[3]

English Language Arts
- General Outcome 1.1: Discover and Explore— specifically, "express ideas and develop understanding"
- General Outcome 1.2: Clarify and Extend— specifically, "consider the ideas of others"
- General Outcome 2.2: Respond to Texts
- General Outcome 5.1: Respect Others and Strengthen Community—specifically, "appreciate diversity" and "relate texts to culture"

Health and Life Skills
- General Outcome: Relationship Choices— specifically, "understanding and expressing feelings"

Social Studies
- General Outcome K.1: I Am Unique
- General Outcome K.2: I Belong
- General Outcome 1.1: My World: Home, School, Community

As Bainbridge (2010, 97) states, multicultural picture books provide a "vehicle through which understanding of individual human stories can be facilitated and the universal emotions and themes they contain can be explored."

The picture books listed below could be integrated into a unit on multiculturalism. For

example, a class read-aloud could promote discussion of the characters' feelings; encourage students to discuss their own feelings and experiences with regard to relocation; and motivate students to respond through personal writing, art, drama and other curricular activities. Discussion could be extended to include the challenges faced by immigrant families; the geographical proximity of the main character's home country to Canada; and the similarities and differences between the language, climate and customs of the home country and those of Canada.

# Canadian Picture Books About the Experiences of Immigrant Children

*Ajay*
by Ruowen Wang and illustrated by Hechen Yu
Toronto: Kevin & Robin Books, 2008

This story is told from the perspective of a non-immigrant child. The narrator, a young boy, meets Ajay, whose family has recently arrived from India. Ajay is helping his father earn money by selling crafts at a flea market. Concerned about the family's welfare, the boy returns to the flea market but finds them gone. He continues to think about Ajay and hopes that his new life will turn out well.

*The Boy in the Attic*
by Paul Yee and illustrated by Gu Xiong
Toronto: Groundwood, 1998

Seven-year-old Kai-ming Wong and his parents move from a Chinese village to an old house in a large Canadian city. The noise, bustle and strange language frighten and confuse Kai-ming. With his parents out looking for work, he is lonely, but he is too shy to play with others. One day he is surprised to see a face in the window of his empty attic. There he finds a strangely dressed boy about his own age. He and the boy, Benjamin, become secret playmates. Kai-ming is upset when his father tells him they are moving and Benjamin refuses to come along. However, after Benjamin explains why he cannot leave the old house, Kai-ming accepts that he will soon learn English and make new friends.

*The Chinese Violin*
by Madeleine Thien and illustrated by Joe Chang
Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 2001

One of the most cherished possessions of Lin Lin and her father is a traditional violin, which they bring to their new Vancouver home. Lin Lin feels overwhelmed and alone in the busy city. When her father plays his violin, she remembers her village and is comforted. Although saddened when the violin is broken, Lin Lin realizes that her father is working hard and determines to try her best at school. One day her father rewards her with a new violin, which she learns to play. She even performs in the school auditorium and is elated about the audience's (especially her father's) enthusiastic response.

*Courage to Fly*
by Troon Harrison and illustrated by Zhong-Yang Huang
Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2002

Meg and her family have moved from their Caribbean island home to a large city, which she finds threatening and unfriendly. On her way home from school one day, Meg finds a tiny, freezing swallow. She nurses the bird back to health, but it will not sing. An elderly Chinese man, who exercises in a nearby courtyard, tells her that the swallow is brave. She must give it the chance to fly. Meg realizes that she too must try to be brave. When she and her new friend Jenny free the swallow, Meg feels the joy of its song in her own heart.

*Dear Baobab*
by Cheryl Foggo and illustrated by Qin Leng
Toronto: Second Story Press, 2011

After the deaths of his parents, Maiko leaves Tanzania to live with his aunt and uncle in a North American city. Growing in their front yard is a little spruce tree. Because they are the same age, Maiko feels connected to the tree and starts confiding in it. He tells the tree about his friends and the giant baobab tree in his African village and about being teased at school. One day he learns that his aunt and uncle plan to chop the tree down. When it seems he cannot save it, a distressed Maiko runs away. His uncle finds him, and Maiko finally reveals his feelings. With help from his new friend Li, Maiko moves the little tree so that it too can thrive in a new home.

*From Far Away*
by Robert Munsch and Saoussan Askar, and illustrated by Michael Martchenko
Toronto: Annick Press, 1995

To escape war in their homeland (Lebanon), Saoussan and her family move to Canada. Because of her memories and because she does not understand the new language and customs, Saoussan's first kindergarten experiences are frightening and embarrassing. Comforted by her teacher and reassured by her father, she gradually becomes more confident, learns English and makes friends. Proud of her achievements, she decides that she likes living in Canada and fondly remembers her kind kindergarten teacher.

*I'm Ready to Go to My New School*
by Rupi K Sandhu and illustrated by Gauri Sharma
Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2004

On his first day of school in Canada, Harman's mother surprises him with a new blue backpack, but it does not cheer him up. He is worried that he won't make friends and that the other children will make fun of him if he doesn't understand the lessons. He wishes he were back in India with his old friends. However, with his mother's reassurance, Harman decides that he is ready for his new school.

*Lights for Gita*
by Rachna Gilmore and illustrated by Alice Priestley
Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994

Homesick for India, Gita is despondent when an ice storm spoils her plans to hold a fireworks party to celebrate her first Divali festival in Canada. However, she is comforted by her mother and is amazed at the reflected beauty of their own little window lights. When her friend Amy arrives, Gita is ready to try new ways of celebrating. This is the first of three stories about Gita, who is adjusting to her new life in Canada. The other two are *Roses for Gita* (1996) and *A Gift for Gita* (1998).

*Little Pria's Big Canadian Adventure*
by Tin-An Chen and illustrated by Angela Hodge
Mississauga, Ont: Cornucopia Books, 2004

Pria has just moved to Canada from India. She wonders what people in her new country are really like. A miniature Canada goose souvenir that she buys in the airport gift shop takes her on a magical adventure to discover the meaning of being Canadian.

*Lonely Luna*
by Majid Damircheli and illustrated by Wendy Siemens
Regina, Sask: Your Nickel's Worth Publishing, 2010

Luna's new home seems to her a desolate, frozen place. She tells the moon and the sun that she is looking for a friend. Although she is even lonelier after her mother leaves, she does not give up hope. She learns that there are many new children just like her. Luna does find a friend, and they join a circle of other children and spin around happily in the snow.

*Marisol and the Yellow Messenger*
by Emilie Smith-Ayala and illustrated by Sami Suomalainen
Toronto: Annick Press, 1994

After her father is killed in South America, eight-year-old Marisol, her mother and her younger brothers flee to Canada. She is homesick for her bright, sunny home and grieves for her grandparents and father. One night she dreams about four elderly weavers, who tell her they are her ancestral spirits. They encourage her to be brave and to look for her father, who is with her everywhere. Comforted by her dream, Marisol (along with her brothers) joins other children playing in the snow. When a little yellow bird flies into her apartment and makes itself at home, she is sure it has been sent for a special reason. As she falls asleep, she can hear her father's loving voice in the bird's song.

*No More Empty Smiles*
by Jan G Hansen and illustrated by Jennifer Falconer
Kitchener, Ont: Gooseneck Press, 2009

On his first day of school, Henning hides his real feelings behind a smile. He is embarrassed when the teacher puts him in the same class as his younger brother and sister and when the other children laugh at them. Remembering the wise example of his father and a former neighbour in Denmark, he decides to become a quiet, careful observer. When he feels ready, he lets the teacher know that he wishes to join the older class, where his new friend welcomes him. For the first time, Henning's smile is a happy one.

*Share the Sky*
by Ting-xing Ye and illustrated by Suzane Langlois
Toronto: Annick Press, 1999

Fei-fei's parents have left her in China with her grandparents while they start a new life in North America. She is happy and loves to fly her grandfather's many beautiful kites. When her parents send for her, she is apprehensive about her future. However, once reunited with her parents, she becomes excited about all her amazing new experiences. Best of all, her new classroom has a huge rainbow kite hanging from its ceiling, and her teacher can understand Chinese. She asks her father to write to people in their village to tell them about her new friends and about how she helped her classmates make kites.

*To Share One Moon*
by Ruowen Wang and illustrated by Wei Xu and Xiaoyan Zheng
Toronto: Kevin & Robin Books, 2008

Their new life in Canada has not gone as well as Niu Niu (Mandarin for *girl*) and her family had hoped, and her mother has returned to her former job in China. On the night of her second Moon Festival in Canada, Niu Niu sadly makes three wishes: that the moon's magic will keep families together, that the lonely Moon Lady in the legend her grandmother has told her will be reunited with her husband, and that parted loved ones will remember each other.

*A Turtle Called Friendly*
by Jean Sangwine and illustrated by Bernadette Lau
Oakville, Ont: Rubicon Publishing, 1997

Ming does not like living in Canada, especially in the winter. He tries using his limited English to make friends, but the other children ignore him. He wishes that he could return to China to play with his cousins and old friends. One spring day Ming finds a large brown turtle by the river in a nearby park. He names her Friendly and takes her to school—to everyone's amusement. He changes his mind about keeping the turtle as a pet, and after school he releases her back to her home. When he finds a stone shaped like a baby turtle, he gives it to his new friend Jamie for good luck.

# Notes

1. See www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/rt-td/eth-eng.cfm (accessed August 16, 2012).

2. See www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/wci/section4.asp (accessed August 16, 2012).

3. The following learning outcomes were taken from *English Language Arts Kindergarten to Grade 9* (Alberta Learning 2000), *Health and Life Skills Kindergarten to Grade 9* (Alberta Learning 2002) and *Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Alberta Education 2005).

# Further Reading

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# Guidelines for Contributors

*Early Childhood Education* is published to
- promote the professional development of educators in improving practice in early childhood education and
- stimulate thinking, explore new ideas and offer various points of view.

Articles from all educators are welcome. Classroom teachers especially are invited to consider writing about topics that interest them. Submissions are requested that will stimulate personal reflection, theoretical consideration and practical application. Teachers appreciate articles that present differing perspectives; innovative classroom and school practices; recent literature reviews; trends and issues; research findings; descriptions, reviews or evaluations of instructional and curricular methods, programs or materials; and child-related humour.

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**Treasurer**
Karin Giszas-Rivard, Calgary

**2012 Conference Codirectors**
Michelle Bezubiak, Edmonton
Danielle Kowalchyk, Sherwood Park

**PD Chair**
Pat Tarr, Calgary

**Journal Editor**
Anna Kirova, Edmonton

**Newsletter Coeditors**
Fran Galbraith, Edmonton
Kimberlee Wrathall, Calgary

**Alberta Education Liaison**
Natalie Prytuluk, Edmonton

**University of Alberta Liaison**
Ann Sheehan, Spruce Grove

**University of Calgary Liaison**
Cynthia Prasow, Calgary

**University of Lethbridge Liaison**
Pamela Winsor, Lethbridge

**PEC Liaison**
Markiana Cyncar-Hryschuk, Edmonton

**ATA Staff Advisor**
Joyce Sherwin, Edmonton

**Website Administrator**
Stephanie Funk, Medicine Hat

**REGIONAL PRESIDENTS**

**Calgary and District**
Joy de Nance, Calgary

**Central West**
Dawn Richards, Red Deer

**Edmonton**
Cathy Pattison, Sherwood Park

**Fort McMurray**
Allison Hebblethwaite, Fort McMurray

**North East**
Myrna Fox, Elk Point

**South East**
Melissa Goudy, Medicine Hat

**South Peace**
April Brown, Grande Prairie

**South West**
Debra Watson, Lethbridge

**University of Alberta**
Angela Hill, Spruce Grove

**University of Calgary**
Kimberly Goosen, Calgary

## Membership

Total membership of the council is currently 1,372.

## Conference and Other Programs

The council organizes an annual conference for its members on early childhood education. Attendance at annual meetings over the last several years has averaged 700. For information on the 2012 conference, contact Danielle Kowalchyk (dkowalchyk@me.com) or Michelle Bezubiak (bezubiak@telus.net).

Several regional organizations of the council carry on programs for members in their areas. The council supports these regionals. It also occasionally offers workshops and other activities in areas where regionals have not been organized.

## Publications

The Early Childhood Education Council publishes a newsletter, *Issues, Events & Ideas*, and a journal, *Early Childhood Education*. Members of the council receive these publications as part of their membership. Nonmembers wishing to receive copies of these publications may obtain them by paying the subscription rate of $30 (Canadian funds) annually and writing to the Early Childhood Education Council, ATA, Barnett House, 11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1.

## Website

The council maintains an Internet site at http://ecec.teachers.ab.ca.