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From the Editor's Desk

I am pleased to share the 2022 issue of *Early Childhood Education* with you. As we consider our two years of working and managing through the COVID-19 pandemic, I think we can all agree that our learning has continued despite the challenges. The journal continues to include new and exciting information on early childhood practices and research. I hope this issue finds our members and readers well during this stressful time.

This issue includes three articles spanning several areas and topics, which I think you will find interesting and informative, and one review of three children's picture books.

In her article "Nahawahkohtok: Revisioning and Situating Citizenship in Early Education," Patricia Steinhauer asks us to consider what citizenship might mean to Indigenous Peoples and how citizenship is shaped by the foundational value of Indigenous Peoples' connection to and kinship with all living things. She encourages early childhood educators to incorporate this understanding into their curriculum and everyday teaching.

In their article "Literacy Instruction Through the Layers of Reading Development," Miriam Ramzy and Michelle Bence discuss the complexities of teaching literacy, especially reading instruction. Using their Layers of Reading Development (LRD) graphic, they outline the developmental progressions of each component of early literacy instruction, as well as how each component links to the others. They then describe how the LRD model can be used to provide teaching applications for early childhood and elementary classrooms.

Luke Muscat, in his article "On the Move: Embodied Literacy and Symbolic Thought in Early

Childhood," discusses the developmental progression of symbolic thought in the early years and its relationship to literacy. In doing so, he challenges early childhood teachers to embrace an embodied approach to supporting literacy education, in which students are fully engaged as they explore and respond to the characters, plots and settings of children's literature.

In her book review, Christina Leung uses feminist poststructuralist theory and queer theory to examine three recently published children's picture books—*Rainbow: A First Book of Pride*, written by Michael Genhart and illustrated by Anne Passchier (Magination Press, 2019); *It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity*, written by Theresa Thorn and illustrated by Noah Grigni (Holt, 2019); and *What Are Your Words?: A Book About Pronouns*, written by Katherine Locke and illustrated by Anne Passchier (Little, Brown, 2021). Leung encourages us to use these books to create opportunities for adults and children to reflect on and reconceptualize their understanding of gender and gender identity. In addition, the books have the potential to challenge heteronormative discourses and provoke meaningful gender conversations with children.

All articles in *Early Childhood Education* are peer-reviewed by our dedicated reviewers. We appreciate their ongoing constructive feedback in maintaining the quality of this journal.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *Early Childhood Education*!

Sherry Woitte
University of Alberta

Nahawahkohtok: Revisioning and Situating Citizenship in Early Education

Patricia Steinhauer

Patricia Steinhauer, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program and the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.

Abstract

In the public education system, curriculum is often seen as a way to shape a citizen. For First Nations people, citizenship is a complex issue. Throughout Canada's history, First Nations people have collectively been denied many of the rights and benefits associated with citizenship while their traditional lifeways have been undermined by settler colonial state-making. Exploring what citizenship might mean to Indigenous Peoples, the author presents an understanding of citizenship shaped by the foundational value of Indigenous Peoples' connection to and kinship with all living things. Early childhood educators are encouraged to incorporate this understanding into the curriculum.

Waciyē wakohmakantik ekwa nitohtemtik. Greetings, relatives and friends. I am a nehiyaw iskwew (Cree woman) and a member of Saddle Lake Cree Nation in Treaty 6 Territory. My parents are Genevieve and the late Walter Steinhauer. I am the middle of five children, including my three sisters and one brother, and the parent of a daughter and a son. My maternal grandparents are Madeline and Maurice Quinn, and my paternal grandparents are Sarah and August Steinhauer. On my mother's side, I am a direct descendant of Chief Papastew, a leader of the Papaschase Indian Band No 136 in the Territory now known as Alberta, and, on my father's side, of Henry B Steinhauer. I was raised in my home community of Saddle Lake Cree Nation, and I

currently live and work in amiskwacîwâskahikan, now known as Edmonton.

I want to honour kîse manitou, our spiritual ancestors, my ancestors, nîtsanak and my descendants and ask for their support. Our courageous spiritual ancestors and the great leaders in my lineage gifted me the living blood and memory that inform and guide my walk as a human being. With deep and heartfelt gratitude, I thank them.

Moving Toward Seeing Nahawahkohtok: A Nehiyaw Concept of Citizenship

In the Alberta government's framework to guide curriculum design and development in the provincial K–12 education system, citizenship is identified as a key competency to be developed in students (Alberta Education 2020). This is not a new idea. In educational design, curriculum provides the means to shape a citizen. My hope, in this article, is to open a conversation with early childhood educators that will bring new considerations into their understandings of Indigenous identity and shift the ways in which curriculum is used to shape citizenship.

My Experience of School

My first two years of formal education—playschool and kindergarten—took place at a federally operated and administered school program offered on my home Indian reserve. It was not until I was an adult that I realized I had attended an Indian Day School. Today, I am classified as an Indian Day School Survivor, a label that makes sense to me when I reflect on what went on in that school.¹

My late father and others wanted more for their children, and following those few years of early education, my siblings and I attended an off-reserve provincial school. In my nine years at that school, beginning in the mid-1970s, I focused only on survival. I was exposed to so much cultural ferocity that when, as a young neyihaw iskwesis (girl), I came out of the school, I felt battered and felt that I had been denied a fair school experience.

When I look at my own children and their early school experiences, I recognize that not much has changed. My children will be survivors, too, as they work to meet the outcomes of the provincial education system, including outcomes related to the development of successful citizens. I love to hear the success stories of Indigenous children who graduate from the provincial K–12 system and go on to become amazing leaders. At the same time, I know that their stories are in part about surviving the system—a part that is too often left untold.

To protect my own children from cultural violence, I chose not to send them to school in their early years. My decision was guided by my doctoral work in Indigenous language and thought systems, as well as by my own experiences with teaching and learning. As an educator, I was aware of links established between early childhood education and developmental and academic outcomes. At the same time, I knew that children's early years are formative years, and I wanted to ensure that my children would be surrounded by people and experiences that would affirm and shape them as who they were— young neyihaw children. I wanted my young children, before they entered school, to understand foundational ideas of the meanings of iyinisiwin (wisdom), to develop their intelligence in the neyihaw knowledge system, to develop the critical consciousnesses of neyihaw mâmitoneyihcikan (Cree language and thought) and their inherited gifts of neyihaw intelligences, to experience sophisticated multi- and omni-dimensional knowing, and to feel what it means to be a neyihaw. At school, I knew they would be told and shown otherwise.

I kept my children at home with me until, in the last decade, I needed to re-enter the workforce and had no choice but to send them to school. They began school when they were seven and five years old. With this, I knew that a key outcome of their educational experiences would be being shaped to be citizens of Alberta and Canada.

What Is Citizenship to Young Indigenous Children?

In my early school days, we would routinely stand to sing “O Canada” and “God Save the Queen.” I

never questioned my participation. Back then, I did not know why we were made to sing these songs, but now I realize that these enforced actions were part of a process intended to shape us into Canadian citizens.

As a young student, I was a neyihaw acknowledged in Treaty 6, and the school and classrooms in which I spent all those years were situated on my ancestral homelands. None of the school's educators shared this information with me. My father, however, often spoke about the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (which included the first legal recognition that Indigenous Peoples have title to their lands), offered his own understanding of the importance of the *British North America Act of 1867* (which united Britain's colonies in our Territories as the Dominion of Canada), and asked, “What do you think about self-government, my girl?” These conversations took place as early as my elementary school years, and the concepts he discussed felt like faraway notions. I had no idea how to relate or apply what I was learning from my father to what I was learning at school. At school, I was taught about the early European explorers of our Territories and about the fur trade, but I never learned about the importance of the Royal Proclamation, our title to our homelands or our rights as Indigenous Peoples.

Going Back to the Beginnings

We are the land. We're from this land. . . .
Education is about awasisak (our children). It's based on the Land. (Elder Jimmy O'Chiese, personal communication, February 3, 2020)

For Indigenous Peoples, Canadian citizenship has a complex history. In spite of the fact that Canada sits on Indigenous Peoples' homelands, throughout much of Canada's history, those First Nations people whom the federal government has registered and legally defined as having “Indian status” have been denied many of the rights available to other Canadian citizens.

With the 1867 Confederation of Canada, Indigenous Peoples were legally established as “wards of the state.”² As Blackburn (2009, 67) notes, “Politicians, administrators, and missionaries argued that [Indigenous] people had to become ‘civilized’ before they could take on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, including the franchise and the ability to own property.” (The right to vote was not granted to Status Indians until 1960.) Individual First Nations people could, however, prove that they were “civilized,” and acquire rights of citizenship and a parcel of land, by legally ceding

their Indian status (a process known as voluntary enfranchisement), and then presumably assimilate into Canadian society.

Most Canadians are unaware that, in this country, many First Nations do not own their reserve lands. Under modern agreements, First Nations administrations may have some jurisdiction over the defined Territories they occupy, but the title of their reserve lands remains with the federal government. As Ovide Mercredi (2015, 29), former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, has stated, the federal *Indian Act* authorizes First Nations people “‘to use and occupy’ that land. Use and occupy—it doesn’t say anything about ownership.” Mercredi also discusses the *British North America Act*, which defined the specific relationship between “Indians and lands reserved for the Indians” and Canada’s federal government. Section 91(24) of the act endowed Parliament with jurisdiction over Indians and the authority to make laws for Indians and Indian Lands.

Prior to the *British North America Act*, Canada had enacted other colonial legislation focused on the enfranchisement and assimilation of First Nations people—the 1857 *Gradual Civilization Act*, which set a precedent for the 1869 *Gradual Enfranchisement Act*. In 1876, these acts were consolidated as the *Indian Act*.

Indian Residential Schools Era

Soon after the 1876 enactment of the *Indian Act*, the federal government began its initiative to establish Indian Residential Schools throughout Canada.

In 1879, the then prime minister John A Macdonald commissioned Nicholas Davin to undertake a study of similar schools in the United States.³ In his report, Davin (1879) praised the model used in the United States, in which the government provided funding to churches to administer and operate the schools, and he pointed to the schools’ effectiveness as a mechanism for assimilation. Encouraged by Davin’s findings, as well as by an earlier study by Egerton Ryerson (1847) that had reached similar conclusions, the federal government began to actively invest in the development of the Indian Residential School system.

In an 1887 presentation to Parliament, Macdonald stated, “The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change.”⁴ The residential school system, funded by the federal government and run by various religious groups (most by Roman

Catholic churches and others by Anglican, United, Methodist and Presbyterian churches), provided Macdonald with a mechanism to rapidly move forward his assimilationist agenda.

As noted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC 2015), the first residential school opened in 1883 in Battleford, Saskatchewan. By 1930, 80 residential schools had been established, and by 1996, when the last residential school was closed, a total of 139 residential schools had been in operation, in every Canadian province and territory except Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and New Brunswick. An estimated 150,000 (at minimum) First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and youth attended the schools.

Although residential school attendance had, at no point, been legally mandatory for all First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and youth, the federal government introduced regulations related to the schools that, in effect, ensured that they did attend. For example, Indian agents were empowered to order to place in a residential school any child whose parents they deemed unfit, and they could also arrest and return to the school any child who had escaped.

In 1920, during Duncan Campbell Scott’s tenure as deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs, “the *Indian Act* was amended to allow the government to compel any First Nations child to attend residential school” (TRC 2015, 32). In the same year, Scott described the purpose of this and other federal policies: “[O]ur object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”⁵

The *Indian Act*

Since its enactment in 1876, the *Indian Act* has been used repeatedly as a tool to undermine and dismantle Indigenous governance, to assume control of and assimilate Indigenous Peoples, and to enable the colonial settlement of Traditional Indigenous Territories by non-Indigenous people (Blackburn 2009; TRC 2015).⁶

The act identified Indigenous Peoples as wards of the state, which gave the state sweeping powers and broad latitude in the regulation and management of Indigenous Peoples’ collective and individual lives. In addition to enabling the federal government to compel attendance at residential schools, the act has provided the government with the legal authority to do the following:

- *Replace traditional governance systems (for example, Hereditary Chiefs) with elected band*

councils that operate with restricted governing powers. It was not until 1951 that the act permitted women to be part of band councils.

- *Deny Indigenous Title.* In 1927, it became illegal for Status Indians, without the consent of the government, to hire lawyers or to initiate land claims against the government.
- *Redefine the boundaries of Traditional Territories and establish (much smaller) reserves.* Until 1985, only people with Indian status had the right to live on reserves. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, people living on-reserve could leave or return only if they were issued a pass to do so by an Indian agent. Similarly, a permit issued by an Indian agent was required in order to sell goods off-reserve.
- *Define who is (and who is not) recognized as a Status Indian and therefore entitled to the rights and benefits associated with that status, and remove that status and the associated rights and benefits.* For example, until 1961, a man with Indian status who graduated from university or who became a doctor, a lawyer, a minister or another type of professional lost his status. Until 1985, a woman with Indian status lost her status if she married a man without status, and their children would also be denied status. Any woman without Indian status would gain it if she married a man with status.
- *Restrict or prohibit Indigenous Peoples' cultural and spiritual practices.* For example, in 1884, Potlatch ceremonies were banned; in 1895, any other ceremonies, cultural festivals and dances (including Sundance ceremonies and powwows) were banned; in 1914, dancing while off-reserve was banned; and, in 1925, dancing was completely outlawed. Such restrictions and prohibitions disrupted the intergenerational flow of cosmologies, Traditional Knowledge, Oral Histories, values, spiritual practices, ethic and lifeways.⁷

The Treaties

Under international law, a foreign sovereign nation can enter a territory that is *terra nullius* (a territory that has not been organized as a sovereign nation) only with the “freely informed consent of the original inhabitants” (Venne 2007, 4). The British Crown adheres to this law and, as early as 1701, established agreements, formalized as treaties, with First Nations people in territories that Britain was colonizing. The earliest treaties—the Treaties of Peace and Neutrality (1701–60) and the Peace and Friendship Treaties (1725–79)—were negotiated while Britain was competing with France and, later,

with the United States for control of North America.⁸ These treaties focused on commercial relations, safe passage of the British through the territory and the formation of military alliances with First Nations people.

Treaty-making continued after the 1867 Confederation of Canada. Convinced that Canada’s “future lay in its expansion across North America,” the federal government negotiated and signed 11 Numbered Treaties with First Nations in the western and northern regions of what is now Canada between 1871 and 1921.⁹

To gain access to arable land and extractable resources, as well as to land that could be parcelled out to new settlers, the terms of the written treaties included First Nations surrendering title to large tracts of land within their Traditional Territories. First Nations people would retain the right to harvest on those lands.

The treaties’ terms also included the establishment of reserves, where First Nations people were encouraged to settle. Because the reserves are located on “surrendered” Territories, First Nations people who live on reserves are governed both by their band councils and by the Canadian government.

Along with the terms that served the Canadian government’s goal of western expansion, the written treaties also included clauses that supported the government’s assimilation agenda. These included promises to provide schools or teachers to the treaty First Nations and to provide tools and other equipment to encourage First Nations people to settle into the life of farmers or ranchers.

Many Indigenous people’s archival memory and understanding of the intent and meaning of the treaty-making process differ sharply from those of the federal government.¹⁰ Cree legal scholar Sharon Venne (2007, 3), citing a 1975 decision by the International Court of Justice, challenges the very basis of the British colonization of Indigenous Lands, arguing,

Our territories were not *terra nullius* (“land of no one”), because we were here. As Nations, we had our own governments, our own laws, our own political and legal systems operating in our territories. These were all in place at the time of contact with the colonizers.

Although representatives of the Canadian government and First Nations people came together to negotiate and come to agreement in the treaty-making process, government agents alone wrote the texts of the treaties (the documents recording the terms of the agreements). Drawing on what she has learned

from First Nations Elders, Venne notes discrepancies between what was said and agreed upon during the treaty-making process and what appears in the written treaties:

If you listen to the way the Elders tell it—as I have listened to them—the Elders at treaty-making told the Treaty Commissioners, “We are not selling our land. We cannot sell our land. This land belongs to us. We can let you use some of our land but we will not sell our land. We have a relationship with the land. The Creation placed us here on Great Turtle Island and this is our land. However, we will let you live in our land.”

If you listen to the non-indigenous people and read their papers, it’s a different story. The non-indigenous people tell us, “Look, it is written down. Peoples ceded, surrendered, and released the land to the colonizers.” When you read between the lines, the papers suggest that Indigenous Peoples gave up to the colonizers our governments, our legal systems, our children, our life. This is not honouring treaties made in “good faith.” (p 7)

Anishinabe Elder and leader Jimmy O’Chiese emphasizes the importance of holding to the terms that First Nations negotiators verbally agreed to in the treaty-making process:

If you ever look at the wampum belt—the first treaty that was negotiated—it says it right there, “Side by side.” Not integration, side by side. Because we had our own education; we had our own laws; we had our own governance. We had our way of life, and we shared that with the Europeans that came here. And you must share that—work together. That’s what that treaty was. Two laws, not only one side. Things will never work if only one side of the treaty is interpreted, if only one law is interpreted. (Cook 2017, 22)

On how individuals can make a difference, he says,

Learn from one another. Learn about what it means to co-exist on this land now called Canada, but that we always called Turtle Island. Share with one another and learn what it truly means to share with one another. Education is part of the treaties. Learn about the education that we once had before Europeans arrived. Recognize the land-based education that was written on the land, and help bring it back the way it has always existed.

We need to work together. That’s how it was meant to be. (p 23)

Finding Nahawahkohtok: Recognizing Colonial Fort Logics

The Cree name for Edmonton, amiskwacîwâskahikan, translates as Beaver Hills House, identifying it as a historical gathering place for local tribal Peoples. For me, this vision of Edmonton as a house where Indigenous Peoples come together is overlain by the city’s equally true history as a colonial fort, a site established to advance the Canadian government’s expansionist and assimilationist agendas.

Two years ago, I visited Fort Edmonton Park for the first time. I had somehow missed this popular school field trip site in my more than 13 years of teaching. My children and I had been invited by my aunt and cousin to join them. As we wandered through the park, I felt unexpectedly agitated. Actors, playing historical characters in the various buildings on the site, brought the fort to life. When we were in the tavern, I told my family that, in the past, First Nations people were forbidden to enter this building, a historical fact not evident in the actors’ portrayals. As we continued to visit each building, I found myself avoiding the actors. I was afraid that my agitation would be visible, that I would express how I, placed back in that time, would have felt. Silenced, I wondered, *Where are the Indians?*

Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2009) has shared his own story of a family visit to Fort Edmonton Park. While there, he overheard someone say, “The Indians are dancing outside” (p 2), and visitors had to leave the fort—to go “outside”—to see the actors at the Indian camp. Historically, forts were set up as trading posts to support western expansion and settlement, and they offered both physical and figurative protection, preserving Western colonial life. Donald writes,

The fort, as a colonial artifact, represents a particular four-cornered version of imperial geography that has been transplanted on lands perceived as empty and unused. If we consider the curricular and pedagogical consequences of adhering to the myth that forts facilitated the civilization of the land and brought civilization to the Indians, we can see that the histories and experiences of Aboriginal peoples are necessarily positioned as outside the concern of Canadians. (p 3)

Elsewhere, Donald (2011) describes the “pedagogy of the fort,” a continual effort to expand, enclosing more and more territory and erasing

anything outside its walls, including Indigenous Peoples. Similarly, Western educational practices continue to preserve and privilege the fort mentality and to extinguish and devalue Indigenous knowledge systems that existed prior to colonial imposition and contact. We need to go back to untangle the historical truths and untruths that continue to misinform education and curricular theory and practices.

Seeing Nahawahkohtokh: A Nehiyaw Concept of Citizenship

At the time I wrote this article, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation revealed that the remains of 215 children had been uncovered in a mass grave at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. This discovery has reopened wounds for many Indigenous families across Canada, including my own, and my prayers and offerings honour them. This is the dark legacy of our country's history, and we must not forget it. We must continue to honour the children who attended Indian Residential Schools and the many who died there and never returned home. We must recognize the intergenerational trauma that has its roots in settler colonial practices.

It is time to dismantle the colonial fort walls. We must create hope and ensure that Indigenous knowledge systems are honoured in early years education. My nehíyaw mind has been shaped by many mentors, and through the teachings they have shared with me, I have come to understand that we must go back to our language and thought systems.

Maskwacis Elder Jerry Saddleback has shared with me his understanding of the Cree term *nahawahkohtokh*, a word that guides my understanding of citizenship. *Nahawahkohtokh* refers to belonging in a sophisticated kinship grounded in a nehíyaw world view. From the teachings of my home place, I understand that our language system operates in spiritual and multidimensional ways, and that the meanings housed within a word continue to teach and to deepen as we live. *Nahawahkohtokh* cannot be directly translated into English, because Cree and English differ widely in application and usage. I offer this rough translation, knowing that its meaning will further unfold as we continue to experience and live under the guidance and natural law systems contained in the word.

My initial translation should be taken only as a start to understanding and living in *nahawahkohtokh*. Nehíyaw Knowledge Holder Jeff Wastesicoot has

said that the first part of the word, *naha*, is related to the idea of *nahastaw*—to put forth a path in a sophisticated alignment, adhering to natural law or intentional order (personal communication, June 22, 2021). The next part of the word is *wahkohtokh*, which acknowledges *wahkohtowin*—kinship beyond the immediate family and humanity, extending to all living entities in the universe and to kinship of our past, present and future related. A related word is *wahkomâkanak*, which refers to ancestors or relatives.

Nahawahkohtokh can be understood as the idea of citizenship—the informed conscious act of living in harmonious coexistence and kinship. I emphasize understanding *wahkohtowin* as a foundation relational value—that is, our connection and kinship to all living things. Our understanding of these terms will deepen as we live out their truths. By continuing to acknowledge the interconnection and symbiosis that is the fabric of the living world, we will begin to recognize our place within the sophisticated system of *wahkohtowin* and mirror the kinship ways of living together.

Classroom Considerations for K–3 Teachers

Elder Jerry Saddleback recently shared with me that to learn about nehíyaw knowledge, we learn in levels or stages—beginning at an introductory stage. In approaching Indigenous knowledge learning, Lightning (1992) shares that one must understand these “stages of knowledge”: “For understanding to happen I needed to comprehend holistically. I not only had to learn something intellectually, I had to learn it emotionally as well.”

Maskwacis Kokom (grandmother), Elder and scholar Mary Moonias reminds me that “for teachers to learn to be with our children, they have to come be with us, to learn from us. They will not learn it from books. They have to come here. That is the only way” (personal communication). I continue to sit with *nohkom* Mary, respecting that the nehíyaw knowledge system operates differently from Western notions of “being the expert.” Learning in nehíyaw ways is a lifetime of apprenticeship and commitment to progressing through the nehíyaw stages of knowing. Sitting with nehíyaw mentors provides me with rich mentorship and modelling, love and compassionate ways, and language, history, knowing and rich life experiences, which they each lovingly share so that I may become a better teacher.

In my own community upbringing, I am aware that nehíyaw wisdoms, teachings, Protocols,

ceremonies and language usage are distinct to the People of each specific Territory, community and land base. This distinct knowledge is sacred and is perpetuated and protected by the Knowledge Holders and practitioners of every distinct Indigenous People connected to their sacred land. Land memory and land base are best understood as living and connected to the physical body of an Indigenous person. Therefore, identity for Indigenous children honours land as living and sacred. It is so important to situate teachings to match the People of each distinct place. Teaching materials—such as worksheets, posters, web resources—that highlight Indigenous teachings, Indigenous Laws, Indigenous languages and so on must be carefully sourced, as they may not honour the distinct knowledges of a local Indigenous People. It is important to take time to learn local teachings, knowledge and language dialects from local community understandings.

As I honour nehiyawewin māmītoneyihcikan (Cree language and thought), it is challenging to provide universal practical classroom applications for teachers, as I must uphold and respect the distinct and sacred knowledges that live across Treaty 6, 7 and 8 Territories; the Métis regions; the province of Alberta; the provincial regions—or however one views geography. A critical understanding is that universal applications perpetuate pan-Indian realities that disregard the physical identity of land and the Indigenous Peoples of each distinct place. It is vital for educators to invite, visit and learn from local community-recognized Knowledge Holders and practitioners. Indigenous parents, staff and community members are important links to local Indigenous communities and can facilitate great opportunities for educators to become active community members. It is through this process that one can begin learning the local knowledge, Protocols, and ways of knowing, being, seeing and relating on the land that a school is situated on. This process will take time; however, the process is both edifying and rewarding as one journeys into learning holistically.

A possible classroom idea is an Indigenous parental and community engagement project that ideally is student driven. The project theme can focus on the earth, the environment or conservation. Inviting local Elders and Knowledge Holders to guide the project design and help deliver it to students allows educators to include Indigenous teachings that will strengthen and provide holistic approaches to selected topics (such as the importance of recycling or water conservation). Ideally, the project should be centred in relationships—wahkohtowin—seeing kinship to all

living things (trees, rocks, water, sun and so on) as living relatives in a kinship of interconnection and symbiotic reliance. Through this process, activities such as recycling move from action and responsibility toward deeper understandings of identity and land. The project can come full circle to recognizing the value-based seeing within nahawahkohtohk—living all together in respectful relationship with one another. This type of project design offers a glimpse into experiential and living processes, providing deeper meanings of citizenship in relation to nahawahkohtohk and acknowledging the broader responsibilities we all have as citizens of this land.

Living Nahawahkohtohk

As early educators, we can start this process by establishing early concepts of citizenship that honour coexistence and by beginning in a nehiyaw system of belonging and citizenship. This honours the intent of treaties—to live together and share our land. I invite you to begin this rigorous and respectful practice by sharing an understanding of citizenship as belonging and relating in a good way, as living in nahawahkohtohk.

I leave you with a song composed by the late nehiyaw Knowledge Holder nimis Roxanne Tootoosis, who shared many important teachings that honour nahawahkohtohk.

Niya oma acahk, kinahtahwêhtin
 (I am a spirit, I am healing you)
 Kiya oma acahk, kinahtahwêhin
 (You are a spirit, you are healing me)
 Mahmoh oma peyak
 (United be one)
 Mahmoh oma peyakwan
 (United let us be one)

Notes

1. In this article, the word *Indian* is sometimes used because of its legal and historical context.
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Literacy Instruction Through the Layers of Reading Development

Miriam Ramzy and Michelle Bence

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Michelle Bence, MA, has more than 18 years of teaching experience and a passion for early literacy. Over the past few years, she has worked extensively with several school boards in Alberta, investigating professional teacher learning and evidence-based early literacy practice. She is a PhD student at the University of Calgary and is examining the connection between oral language development and early literacy acquisition.

Abstract

In early literacy, teachers often struggle to understand the five critical reading components—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension—and how to teach them. To address teachers' questions, the authors created the Layers of Reading Development (LRD) graphic, which outlines the essential components of early literacy instruction and the developmental progressions, as well as how each component links to the others. This article provides an overview of the LRD graphic to support teachers in planning and implementing reading instruction.

Early literacy development is both fascinating and complex. Teachers often struggle to understand the critical reading components that students need in order to build strong early

reading skills, as well as how to teach those components. Although a great deal of research discusses the five main reading components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension), teachers are often confused about which corresponding practices they should prioritize to best support each component. They are also often frustrated by conflicting literacy approaches that place different emphases on each component.

In working with elementary literacy teachers in Alberta, we frequently hear the following questions:

- “What do I teach and how?”
- “How do I know that I am delivering a balanced program?”
- “How do I make sure that I am helping my students build a strong foundation for later reading success?”

To address these questions, we created a quick-reference graphic that outlines the essential components of early literacy instruction and the developmental progressions, as well as how each component links to the others. The result is the Layers of Reading Development (LRD) graphic (Figure 1).

In this article, we provide an overview of the LRD graphic to support teachers in planning and implementing reading instruction. First, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the graphic. Then, we briefly describe each of the six components (layers) in the graphic. We look at the graphic vertically to understand the foundational nature of the bottom components and the interwoven nature of the upper components. Then, we look horizontally across each layer to examine the developmental progressions and suggested teaching presentations. We end with a discussion of the limitations of the graphic in its application to the classroom context.

The Layers of Reading Development

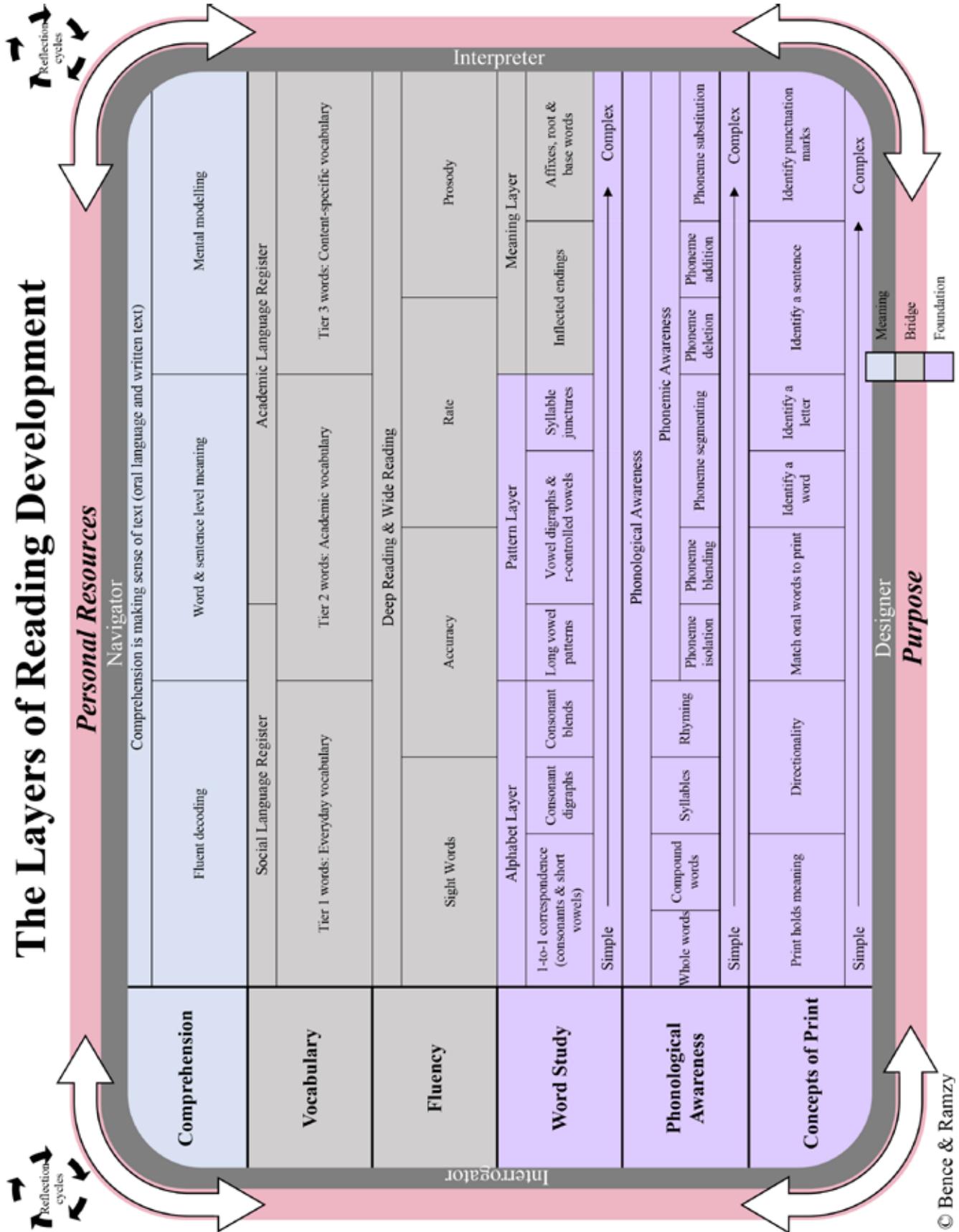


FIGURE 1. The Layers of Reading Development (LRD) graphic.

Positioning Ourselves

Miriam

Having held multiple positions in an Alberta school board, including K–5 teacher, vice-principal, literacy and numeracy coach, K–12 literacy facilitator, and director of student learning, I have lived the complexity of teaching children how to read and the challenges teachers experience in supporting all learners.

After years of dipping my toes into various and varied programs, techniques, tools and approaches, I have come to recognize that there is a finesse, an artistry, involved in teaching children how to read. There is no one-size-fits-all program, model or binder. Rather, teaching children of all ages to read should be approached with purpose and intentionality. Children’s background knowledge and experiences; their language, culture and social context; and even the role of space should all be considered alongside the core processes (such as phonemic awareness).

Through my graduate studies, I deepened this understanding, experiencing it first-hand as a literacy tutor and a graduate assistant and through my PhD research and analysis. What I have come to understand is that reading is complex, that teaching children to read is complex, that teachers must consider a plethora of personal and professional factors when planning for instruction, and, finally, that it is possible to do this really well.

Michelle

In my preservice teacher education, I was fortunate to work with a mentor teacher who was a Reading Recovery specialist. Through this experience, I watched as struggling readers wove together the disparate reading processes until the words on the page began to make sense, opening their worlds.

Witnessing this literacy power, I learned the value of listening closely to each child, seeking out their strengths and then flexibly adapting my teaching to their needs. Later, applying these lessons with struggling readers, I realized just how complex the reading process is. Teaching literacy foundations was critical, but merely teaching a set of skills was not enough.

With a background in child psychology, I have always been fascinated by the cognitive processes that underlie learning to read, but my journey into graduate research was where I truly came to understand how social experiences influence children’s literacy learning, both in and out of the classroom. I experienced this directly, working with

various schools around the province, and it became abundantly clear that teaching reading is always contextually situated.

It is the marriage of teaching the critical processes and attending to the contextual factors that makes excellent literacy instruction. I have learned that, as with teaching in general, teaching reading requires wisdom and figuring out what to teach, how to teach it and how to honour what each child brings to the process to allow all children to experience the magic of reading.

Situating the LRD Graphic in the Reading Research

The abundance, and at times inundation, of available reading research—research articles, professional learning opportunities, videos and even blogs—can make it challenging for teachers to determine what to implement and what to avoid in their classrooms, as well as how and why.

Hearing this from various teachers, coaches and administrators, we endeavoured to look across the research and synthesize the current literature into a graphic. The following seminal research and models guided us:

- Hoover and Tunmer’s (2020) Simple View of Reading
- Scarborough’s (2001) Reading Rope
- Duke and Cartwright’s (2021) Active View of Reading
- Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model
- Serafini’s (2012) Expanded Four Resources Model

Literacy development is often viewed through one of two theoretical lenses—a cognitive perspective or a sociocultural perspective. Cognitivists suggest that literacy consists of decontextualized, discrete skills (sounds of letters, knowledge of words and so on) taught developmentally (Chall 1983). Socioculturalists view literacy as socially constructed, meaning that what children pay attention to and interpret when learning to read is influenced by their experiences.

We have found that reading is always complex, with no single recipe for successfully teaching all children to read. Therefore, our LRD graphic connects these two perspectives, reflecting a view that students are agentive meaning makers who need critical skills for successful reading but also recognizing that learning to read always functions within a larger ecology (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson and Degener 2004).

The LRD graphic represents a united framework for literacy instruction, as shown in Figure 2. It includes the idea that reading instruction begins with considering the broader, external factors, such as children’s background experiences, cultural literacy perspectives and purposes for reading. It also depicts students as agentive, active participants who combine and call on different reading processes according to their purpose. Finally, at the heart of the graphic are the six core processes (layers) that students use to enact the reading practices that are critical to becoming successful readers.

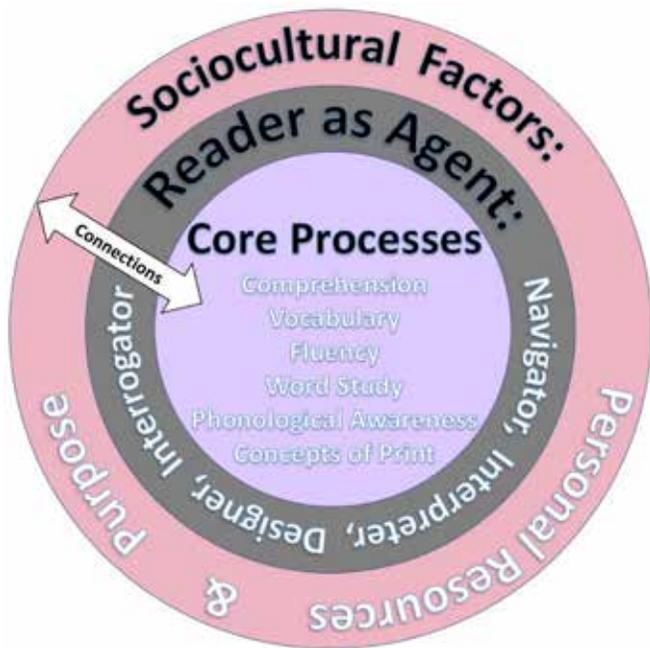


FIGURE 2. Framework for the LRD graphic.

Beginning with the Outside in Mind: Sociocultural Influences

The outer frame of the LRD graphic (pink band) reflects a sociocultural perspective and considers the influences of children’s familial and cultural communities on literacy development (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson and Degener 2004).

We suggest that learning to read cannot be separated from the setting in which it occurs. Individual students bring into the classroom unique ideas formed from their cultural experiences and bring their knowledge and skills with letters, words and text to their interpretation of written language (Bruner 1966).

Consequently, whatever literacy instruction we deliver in the classroom, we must always attend to each student’s resources, beliefs, values and habits of mind and how they influence the student’s purpose for reading and meaning making.

Student as Active Meaning Maker: Literacy Practices for Purpose

The inner frame of the LRD graphic (grey band) reflects a view of the student as an active agent. A growing body of research suggests that skilled readers take an active role in reading, showing that they are strategic and that they are engaged in deploying reading practices for various purposes (Duke and Cartwright 2021). This is different from the more traditional view of the student as a passive receiver acquiring disparate reading skills.

Strongly influenced by Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model and Serafini’s (2012) Expanded Four Resources Model, we see students as active agents in the reading process. They apply reading skills to four reading practices:

- Navigator (to break the code)
- Interpreter (to construct unique meaning from the text)
- Designer (to use the text to represent their ideas)
- Interrogator (to consider what the author’s purpose was and what influences the text may convey)

Students learn which practices they need to use in which combinations for different reading purposes. Of course, a student’s reading purpose is always connected to existing linguistic, cultural and textual factors (Freebody and Luke 1990).

The Inner Layers: The Six Core Processes of Reading

At the heart of the LRD graphic (the six inner rows), we draw on decades of research suggesting that six key cognitive processes are critical to the act of reading and require focused instruction:

- Comprehension
- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Word study
- Phonological awareness
- Concepts of print

Although most of the research highlights only five core processes (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension), we felt it critical to add the sixth—concepts of print—given its foundational role in early reading (Piastra et al 2012).

Beginning with an expanded model of Hoover and Tunmer’s (2020) Simple View of Reading, we conceptualize reading as engaging two interrelated and equally essential components:

- Recognizing words on the page
- Making meaning of the words on the page (language comprehension)

Both components are critical to becoming a skilled reader. If either component is lacking, a student will not be a skilled reader. These components also work reciprocally, meaning that as the student increases their ability to recognize words fluently, they also increase their comprehension abilities, and as they

develop their comprehension, they are also more likely to be able to identify unknown words.

Drawing on Duke and Cartwright’s (2021) Active View of Reading and Scarborough’s (2001) Reading Rope, we suggest that six core processes underlie word recognition and language comprehension,

TABLE 1. Summary of the Six Core Processes of Reading

<i>Core process</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Evidence of impact on reading development</i>
Concepts of print	Understanding how books and print work, such as reading from left to right and top to bottom. This construct represents children’s earliest experiences with text.	Clay 2005; Piasta et al 2012
Phonological awareness	Developing conscious attention to the sounds in spoken language, including words, syllables, onsets, rimes and individual phonemes.	Ehri et al 2001; Goswami 2003; Wackerle-Hollman et al 2015; Wasik 2001
Word study	Understanding orthographic patterns of the English language. This includes the ability to associate graphemes (letters) with phonemes (sounds) and to blend those phonemes to produce a word. It also includes knowledge of specific phoneme–grapheme relations (for example, knowing that the letters <i>sh</i> together typically represent the sound heard at the beginning of the word <i>ship</i>). Understanding, recognizing and applying long vowel patterns and syllable types (applies to reading and writing). Developing awareness and knowledge of the smallest meaningful units in language (for example, recognizing that the word <i>returnable</i> has three morphemes: <i>re</i> , <i>turn</i> and <i>able</i>).	Bear et al 2012; Connelly, Johnston and Thompson 2001; Cunningham 2000; Goodwin and Ahn 2013
Fluency	Reading with accuracy, rate and prosody. If a child can read with fluency, it means that they are able to identify/read a word automatically (sometimes referred to as reading by sight).	Fuchs et al 2001; Geva and Farnia 2012; McArthur et al 2015; Rasinski 2012; Stevens, Walker and Vaughn 2017
Vocabulary	Understanding the meanings of words and phrases, and their role in both social and academic language registers. This includes how words relate to one another, semantic understanding, concept knowledge, and connotative meaning, all of which aid in understanding text.	Beck and McKeown 2007; Dickinson, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek 2010; Weaver 1979; Wright and Cervetti 2017
Comprehension	At the text level—The organization of language to convey meaning, such as how words are ordered within a sentence (syntax). Some aspects of language structure are encompassed in other constructs. Beyond the text level—Reasoning about aspects of text moving beyond vocabulary and printed text, such as when making inferences or when interpreting the nonliteral meanings of metaphors and figures of speech.	Aukerman et al 2015; Duke and Cartwright 2021; Elleman 2017; Kendeou et al 2009; Oakhill, Cain and Elbro 2015; Paris and Myers 1981; Shanahan et al 2010; Weaver 1979; Wise et al 2007

including concepts of print, phonological awareness, orthographic understanding of patterns in words, fluency, enacting vocabulary and comprehension. When students learn to read, they draw on these processes in an interconnected way, enacting a complex reading system (Duke and Cartwright 2021). This perspective reinforces the necessity of teaching all six core processes at all stages of reading development.

Examining the Six Core Processes

In this section, we explore the six core processes involved in reading. We briefly describe each, including the seminal research that has guided our thinking. Then, we discuss ways to engage with the LRD graphic vertically and horizontally, including implications for teaching practice.

Table 1 provides a summary of the six core processes and the relevant research.

Understanding How the Core Processes Function

Although learning to read is a complex process, we have created the LRD graphic as a tool that teachers can engage with to demystify the process. We begin by looking at the graphic vertically to understand the foundational nature of the bottom components and the interwoven nature of the upper components. Then, we look at the graphic horizontally to examine the developmental progressions and suggested teaching presentations.

Let's begin with an analogy. Certain elements are essential for a plant to grow: light, air, a suitable temperature, water, a growing medium and space. However, as a gardener would contest, the foundational element is light. Similarly, in reading instruction, multiple co-constructing elements are necessary for students to become skilled readers: concepts of print, phonological awareness, word study, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

The legend at the bottom of the diagram indicates the three categories that the core process fall into:

- Foundation
- Bridge
- Meaning

The core processes in purple—concepts of print, phonological awareness and word study—are what we call the foundations of reading development. However, just as a plant requires more than light to grow, these foundations of reading do not paint the whole picture. A child requires all six core processes to become a skilled reader.

The foundational elements are critical to supporting students in unlocking the bridge (grey) and meaning-making (blue) layers. Bridging the reading process are fluency, vocabulary and some aspects of word study. These components connect the foundational elements of reading instruction with comprehension—what we explain as meaning making. The bridge components are essential in moving students from simply decoding (focusing on sounding out and naming the words on a page) to reading the words, all the while building a mental model and scaffolding their comprehension of the text.

The final piece of the reading puzzle is comprehension—students' ability to read a text and make sense of it, connecting the clues on the page with their related background knowledge and experiences. Although comprehension is at the top of the graphic, its location does not denote a hierarchical position. As Duke and Cartwright (2021) eloquently explain, there is substantial overlap across all six layers, and as practitioners, we must introduce, model and scaffold all of the core processes in our instruction, starting with our earliest learners. The layers are all equally important in the reading process, and we must interweave them in our daily practice.

Applying the Core Processes in the Classroom

In the research, there is consensus around the core processes of reading development. What is missing is how to apply the core processes in the classroom. What might each of these six processes look like in practice?

Word Study	Alphabet Layer			Pattern Layer			Meaning Layer	
	1-to-1 correspondence (consonants & short vowels)	Consonant digraphs	Consonant blends	Long vowel patterns	Vowel digraphs & r-controlled vowels	Syllable junctures	Inflected endings	Affixes, root & base words
	Simple							Complex

FIGURE 3. Sample developmental progression in the word study layer of the LRD graphic.

This gap in the research led us to unpack each layer in the LRD graphic, synthesizing what the most up-to-date research has demonstrated as effective practices, processes and strategies.

The bottom three layers of the LRD graphic—concepts of print, phonological awareness and word study—are the foundations of reading. Each includes a developmental progression that runs horizontally. Within each developmental progression, the items on the left represent the easiest skills for children to learn. As we move to the right, the skills become more challenging.

As an example, Figure 3 is the developmental progression in the word study layer. The first item is one-to-one correspondence (consonants and short vowels). This represents the starting point for instruction; we begin by teaching children the associations between letters, including short vowels and their corresponding sounds. Once a child has developed automaticity in these one-to-one correspondences, the next step is teaching consonant digraphs, the next item to the right.

We have included these developmental progressions in the foundation layers of the graphic to support teacher practice. They can help teachers decide where to start instruction, what subsequent steps to take and what to assess.

The other three layers—fluency, vocabulary and comprehension—do not lend themselves to a developmental continuum. Instead, we have synthesized the skills, processes and organizing tools that can help teachers make sense of these more complex components of reading development.

The LRD graphic can be used across the Universal Design for Learning continuum, from whole-class, universal instruction to targeted instruction for small groups. It can also be applied to individualized interventions.

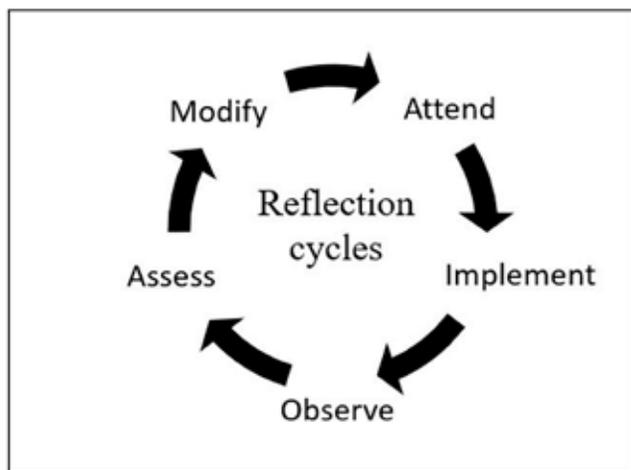


FIGURE 4. Teacher reflection cycle within the LRD graphic.

The Teacher’s Role and the Reflection Cycle

The final, but no less important, piece to our LRD graphic is the teacher reflection cycle, shown in the two upper corners. Figure 4 offers a closer look at this cycle.

This reflection cycle shows the teacher’s responsibilities in the reading process. Given the multidimensional aspects of the reading process—including the core processes, different purposes for literacy and students’ varied experiential histories—the teacher’s responsiveness is integral. Thus, teachers must become constant reflectors, using their knowledge and expertise to first *attend* to each student’s resources and purposes. Using that information, teachers choose to *implement* literacy instruction in various ways, *observing* and *informally assessing* what is working and what isn’t working with each of their students. Then, teachers *modify* their literacy instruction delivery to implement personally meaningful approaches for students by showing flexibility in their practices. This cycle repeats as students move through the process of literacy learning.

Returning to our gardening analogy, although we begin the growing process with the same essential ingredients—light, air, a suitable temperature, water, a growing medium and space—we must first consider the needs of the particular seed we have been given and the context of where we are trying to grow it. As the seed sprouts, we must adjust the amount of water, fertilizer and exposure to the elements in an ongoing fashion. We refine our actions in response to the seed, always watching for signs of growth and distress and adjusting as we go.

Similarly, teachers need to enter into literacy instruction with an understanding that constant reflection and modification are required. One-size-fits-all programs do not make for successful readers. Instead, using their wisdom, their knowledge of their students, and ongoing observation and assessment, teachers make instructional choices to create powerful literacy instruction.

Limitations

We end with a discussion of some of the limitations of our LRD graphic in its application to the classroom context.

The first limitation is that the graphic, because it is layered in format, appears to represent a reading process hierarchy. None of these core processes are more important than the others. Moreover, teachers should not approach the graphic as a list to work through, checking off items as they go. Instead, in

practice, the layers should all be embedded and integrated to meet the needs of all students.

Another limitation is the amount of information that can be conveyed in a single-page graphic and a short article. We cannot convey all the possible factors that may influence the process of learning to read. In our graphic, we have attempted to address some of the foundational cognitive and sociocultural practices; however, we do not address other influences. Missing are discussions of executive function processes, such as attention, working memory and motivation, which we know also have an impact on the reading process. Nevertheless, we believe that the LRD graphic provides an excellent place to begin our thinking about reading instruction.

Most important, we want to emphasize that our LRD graphic is a living document. We will reflect and revise the language as the research continues to deepen our understanding of how we can support children in learning to read. When we share the graphic with practitioners, it is always with the caveat that it is not “done” or “complete” or “finalized”; rather, we are simply sharing the most up-to-date version. In fact, by the time this article is published, we might have made small changes to the graphic. Visit www.layersofliteracy.com/resources/ for the most up-to-date version.

Conclusion

Teaching children to read is a complex process. There is no lockstep procedure or one-size-fits-all model in which all children will learn to become skilled readers. Rather, literacy instruction is a complex, interwoven, delicate dance that requires teachers to constantly reflect and shift their practice based on all the resources children bring to school, to the active reading process and to a particular text. Our hope is that our LRD graphic acts as a supporting cast member, alongside teachers’ experience, expertise, and deep knowledge of their students and their students’ contexts and histories.

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On the Move: Embodied Literacy and Symbolic Thought in Early Childhood

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Abstract

A crucial emergent and early literacy skill is the ability to hold an image in one's mind. For our youngest learners, the capacity for and command over mental symbols are the foundation for both their dramatic play and their academic readiness. This article guides early childhood educators toward embracing an embodied approach to emergent and early literacy. The author provides an overview of how young children develop symbolic thought, discusses the relationship between symbols and literacy, and considers how to creatively engage children's imaginations as a catalyst to emergent and early literacy.

As I pulled Maurice Sendak's classic 1963 picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* out of my bag, my preschool-aged students gasped. Feeding the suspense, I said, "Close your eyes and imagine that you are a Wild Thing. What do you look like? Do you have fangs, pointy ears and claws? Are you big, small or medium? Do you have feathers, fur or scales—or everything? What do you sound like? On the count of three, open your eyes and roar your terrible roars!" Amid the eruption of howls, tiny, pinched faces with gnashing teeth and scowling eyes stared back at me. The children crouched low to the ground, their backs curved like hissing cats and their small arms reaching forward with spread, claw-like fingers. After feigning shock, I turned on an instrumental piece of music and began to read aloud in a cool and mysterious voice: "The night Max wore his wolf

suit and made mischief of one kind and another . . ."

For our youngest learners, literacy is a full-body experience. Children cannot passively listen to stories or share personal tales—their entire being is engaged as they explore the emotions of the characters, imagine the settings of enchanted and far-off places, project themselves wholeheartedly into books, and recount their personal narratives with enthusiasm.

When we envision what emergent and early literacy looks like, images of traditional read-alouds, phonic drills and print worksheets tend to come to mind before acting, dancing, singing, drawing or playing. As early childhood educators, we should consider the skills and capacities children are acquiring, or have already obtained, when interacting with the multidimensionality of literacy. Of course, this is tricky, given that our young students span the spectrum of early childhood, from birth to eight years old.

Children arrive in our learning spaces as individuals with varying developmental backgrounds; thus, understanding where our children are developmentally and who they are as creative beings is central to the teaching process. We must ask ourselves, How does this child play imaginatively? What stories unfold in their artwork and in their interactions with others? What life experiences do they draw upon?

I encourage these types of questions because a vital early literacy skill is the ability to hold an image in one's mind. Holding an image in one's mind is a sophisticated developmental milestone that enables young children to evoke, visualize and express the semantic meaning of language (Christakis 2016; Dombro, Jablon and Stetson 2011; Franklin 2000; Gwathmey and Mott 2000).

In this article, I provide a brief overview of how young children develop symbolic thought, discuss

the relationship between symbols and literacy, and consider how to creatively engage children's imaginations as a catalyst to emergent and early literacy.

The Development of Symbolic Thought

For those who care for infants and toddlers, literacy will look and feel different than for those who educate preschoolers and early elementary students. Understanding how symbolic thought develops empowers early childhood educators to sculpt curricula and activities to meet their students' individual needs. Furthermore, having a sense of how symbolic thought is obtained and mediated by the support of teachers and caregivers helps direct our attention toward the implications of symbols for later learning in reading and writing.

Around the age of two, children experience cognitive and emotional shifts that permit the use and manipulation of symbols (Berk, Mann and Ogan 2006; Piaget 1952; Vygotsky 1980). A symbol can be broadly described as a representation, whether physical or abstract, that stands for something else. Language is symbolic, because a certain configuration of characters represents a concept; for example, the word *flower* stands in place for a tangible flower and tends to conjure a mental image of a flower. Symbolic object substitution, then, is the process of detaching the meaning from an object and then projecting one's desired meaning onto the object. The growth that enables symbolic object substitution is the progression from object permanence (the ability to comprehend that objects exist separate from oneself) to object constancy (the understanding that objects exist both physically and symbolically) (Franklin 2000; Koplou 2021; Vygotsky 1980).

To self-regulate, children may use symbolic object substitution to conjure images, feelings and sensations of their attachment figure as a means to soothe. I once had a young student who would "call" their grown-up on a toy phone every morning after drop-off and say, "I love you, Momma. See you at the end of the day." This imaginative routine gave the child some control over the situation, while satiating underlying anxieties that occur during separation, by reaffirming the day's agenda.

Moreover, the very definition of imaginative and dramatic play is the manipulation of symbols (Cohen 2008; Rubin 2001; Vygotsky 1980), and it is during dramatic play (particularly group play) that children experiment with and practise the sophisticated language use, symbolic comprehension and

semantic competence essential to developing emergent and early literacy (Cresswell 1988; Franklin 2000; Healy 2004; Vygotsky 1980).

Children arrive at the ability to separate symbols from objects on different developmental timetables (Lieberman 2018). As mentioned earlier, this progression in ability tends to occur around the age of two. Before that, a toddler's pretend play is limited to using realistic-looking objects in a prescribed manner, such as pretending to drink from a toy cup. Around age two, dramatic play progresses to less realistic toys, such as a child declaring a small cylindrical log to be a cup. In the third year of life, imaginative limitations are scant as children pretend without support from the concrete world, such as miming drinking from a cup with their hands (Piaget 1952; Vygotsky 1980).

Since this progression occurs during toddlerhood, those who care for toddlers or who lead toddler classrooms are in a dually exciting and challenging position. They get to witness the exhilarating arc of symbolic thought while also having to manage and plan for the varying needs of a group of children in flux. Consequently, they need access to diverse materials in order to mediate the different needs of children.

The first sign of symbolic object substitution tends to be a child's transitional object. During early childhood, when cognitive processing requires concreteness, the symbol of the attachment partner can be extracted, abstracted and embedded in transitional objects (Stern 2000; Winnicott 1960). Transitional objects are symbolic representations of the attachment between the child and their primary caregiver (Koplou 2021; Stern 2000; Winnicott 1960) and are physical reminders that the child is loved by their attachment partner (Lieberman 2018). Although the transitional object itself is concrete, the child's assignment of meaning to the object requires the use of symbols; hence, the child uses symbolic object substitution to remove the conventional meaning of the object and instill the desired meaning of their attachment partner. The transitional object becomes the child's proxy for their attachment figure when needed, thereby bridging the concreteness of object permanence and the abstraction of object constancy.

In middle childhood and beyond, concrete and formal operations become accessible (Piaget 1952), and the child can hold the symbol of the attachment partner in their memories, thoughts, feelings and imagination—a cognitive and socioemotional capacity that becomes crucial to school readiness, socialization, literacy and mathematical thinking. Although the transitional object is an important breakthrough in the child's ability to self-regulate,

the transitional object also confirms two important developmental milestones: first, the child has formed an attachment with their primary caregiver, and, second, the child has the cognitive capacity to create symbols.

This connection between transitional objects and school readiness deserves a moment of reflection. If emergent and early literacy depends on the manipulation of symbols, a capacity that blossoms from the transitional object and the child's relationship with their caregiver, then learning difficulties assumed to be cognitive or intellectual variation may actually be the consequence of a socioemotional attachment injury. Although continuing along this line of thought is outside the scope of this article, the socioemotional needs of our youngest learners are of paramount importance. The backbone of academic learning is not always in the mind but also in the heart.

Connecting Symbols to Literacy

With their newfound power and command over symbols, young children enter the world of imagination and dramatic play with a zest for life.

As educators of these spirited youngsters, our role is to harness their creativity and support their imaginations toward authentic, meaningful learning. A variety of open-ended materials and objects for exploration and dramatic play become staples in our learning spaces, because every opportunity for children to facilitate imaginative use of symbols further strengthens their skills. Hence, scheduling large and fluid chunks of time for children to play, to create art and to investigate provocations is essential to early childhood curriculum (Christakis 2016; Franklin 2000; Healy 2004; Swann 2008).

As Vygotsky (1980) has taught us, dramatic play involves a sophisticated use of language. Children embody language during dramatic play—they physically move their bodies to enact symbols by generating various actions, behaviours and postures. This process of embodied cognition recruits the body, mind and spirit as spaces for holding and accessing knowledge (Jensen 2000). For children, learning starts on the physical and emotional levels before the cognitive and conceptual levels (Christakis 2016; Healy 2004). Letting children explore life through sensation, feeling and embodiment serves as the launch pad for children to access and manipulate abstract concepts.

Let's return to the process of holding an image in one's mind. Developmentally, the image is the manifestation of sensory experiences that have

merged to form a conceptual mental structure, also known as a schema (Matlin 2013). Children's ability to draw upon and command their schemas in order to produce symbols and images, such as in art and dramatic play, influences emergent and early literacy, because language is symbolic.

Thus, our commitment as early childhood educators to emergent and early literacy is twofold. First, we must provide opportunities to build our students' schematic knowledge about the world through multimodal provocations. Second, we must use methods to elicit, engage and recall our students' mental images during their interactions with literacy.

This perspective on the relationship between symbols and emergent and early literacy applies to all facets of early childhood and acknowledges the important contributions of early childhood education workers. Although the objectives and responsibilities of educators differ from birth to Grade 2, literacy is sequential and accumulative. Development cannot be skipped—the literacy skills employed in elementary school depend on the emergent and early literacy skills acquired earlier.

How can we use embodiment, dramatic play and the creative arts to build symbolic strength and channel this strength into emergent and early literacy? As a dance teacher turned early childhood educator, I have made movement exploration and embodiment a core practice in my classroom. In the next section, I showcase how embodiment is a powerful method for supporting the development and use of symbols in emergent and early literacy.

Embodied Literacy

Literacy operates through and along simultaneous receptive and expressive pathways, with reading and listening representing input and writing and speaking characterizing output. An embodied approach serves and supports both the receptive and the expressive dimensions of literacy, because the body, mind and spirit house powerful ways of knowing and communicating.

Let's return to the vignette with which I opened this article. As I started reading, my students danced, acted and roared their way through *Where the Wild Things Are*. Together, my students and I co-constructed a learning moment wherein we all actively contributed to the experience. I afforded them the space to take charge, express themselves and connect with each other.

In picture books, the illustrations alone are stimulating and captivating, yet the reader must repetitively link images to text as an ongoing procedure to unfold the story. For all learners,

especially our youngest, uniting meaning with text can be deepened through an embodied approach to literacy. When Max is being mischievous, what does that feel like in our bodies? Why is Max's behaviour mischievous? What does it mean to gnash your teeth? Why did the Wild Things gnash their teeth? Answering these questions is not simple. Inferring the essence of a word is complex and requires knowledge of symbols. Linking language with bodily sensations, emotions and art can bridge this gap.

Embodied literacy and creative expression are powerful tools for generative components of literacy (such as discussion, retelling and writing). After dancing *Where the Wild Things Are*, my students took turns silently acting their favourite parts of the story while their peers watched and attempted to place the gestures within the sequence of the story. By embodying the story, my students had their entire being as a resource for comprehension, sequencing and expression. This charades-like form of retelling is incredibly stimulating and inclusive for young learners, because it is not dependent on spoken language.

Once they are confident about their understanding of the story, students are prepared to start the writing process. During this process, young children's ideas and thought processes are often interrupted by the mechanics of writing, which they have not yet automatized. Children are more advanced pictorially. Having them start with illustrations to capture their ideas provides them with a visual aid to prompt and organize their writing.

For preschool-aged children, this writing could solely focus on drawing a detailed picture of their very own Wild Thing, perhaps writing their Wild Thing's name and labelling parts of its body. In kindergarten, I would encourage students to go one step further and write as much as they can about their Wild Thing, describing what it looks like by using their picture and perhaps some activities that their Wild Thing likes to do. Grade 1 students could take this to another level by writing a three-page small moment story (beginning, middle, end) about their Wild Thing and adding the action words that they danced.

When trying to retrieve the vocabulary to describe something, such as an action, children may need to move their body or enact the gesture to produce the word. With the story and the characters living in their body, children are likely to begin their writing process confidently and to be able to generate rich material. This is because their understanding of the content is fully integrated with a mind-body connection.

Immersing children in literacy using an embodied approach further empowers them to experience language through their body and to make integral connections to the self (Griss 2013; Jaffe 2000; Landalf and Gerke 1996; Leonard, Hall and Herro 2016; Schmidt and Beucher 2018). Miming and creative expression ground abstract symbols in tangible, bodily sense making. Dance, much like dramatic play, encourages students to dive deep into the semantics of language beyond the literal words (Furmanek 2014; Gabbei and Clemmens 2005; Griss 2013). Embodiment can support uncovering the hidden meaning of texts, strengthening comprehension and accessing substantive recall.

During a read-aloud of *Where the Wild Things Are*, children may hear and comprehend the story of Max travelling to a far-off land after being sent to his room. Yet, through movement annotation and teacher scaffolding, they can be motivated to find the deeper connotations of the story. They can explore the theme of not judging others by their appearance; they can acknowledge and appreciate that we all have a Wild Thing inside; they can understand that anger, loneliness and love are intense and layered emotions; and they can recognize that we all have the power to say no and to advocate for ourselves.

With their budding theory of mind (Healy 2004), the experience of embodying and "taking on" the emotions of a character scaffolds children's developing empathy and perspective taking. Using art, movement and drama brings narratives to life, integrating dramatic play and creative expression as mediators in the construction of meaning. Supported by both Piaget's (1952) cognitive developmental theory and Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural theory, children construct and process meaning about the world during dramatic play; thus, embodied literacy channels the natural imaginative entropy of children to create meaningful learning.

An important consideration of embodied literacy is the inclusion of English-language learners (ELLs), students with expressive or receptive language variations, and children along the spectrum of neurodiversity (Greenfader and Brouillette 2013; Molenda and Bhavnagri 2009). The ever-growing diversity of our student body is a reality and a strength of the 21st-century classroom; therefore, addressing the needs of these populations is critical. These learners benefit from an embodied approach, because they get to experience words coming to life through their individual movement and emotion. Further, by witnessing language coming alive through the drama, movement and art of their peers, linguistically diverse students are enabled to

draw inferences on the semantics and pragmatics of words.

Embodied literacy activities also have socioemotional and community-building implications for the early childhood classroom (Leonard, Hall and Herro 2016; Molenda and Bhavnagri 2009; Schmidt and Beucher 2018). These learning experiences can promote friendship among students by highlighting and supporting social skills, including helping, taking turns, sharing, dividing labour, negotiating, coordinating, exchanging information and perspective taking (Johnson and Johnson 1999). For the linguistically diverse students in our learning communities, friendship and social acceptance have inherent implications for their academic and psychosocial well-being (Takeuchi 2016).

As research continues to guide teaching practices and inform our ways of learning (Christakis 2016; Fiore 2014; Griss 2013; Healy 2004; Jensen 2000), traditional, static approaches to learning are proving to be insufficient for reaching the needs of all students. Especially for students who require more hands-on, tangible learning, an embodied approach may provide a gateway to learning and can be an effective modality for educators to explore.

Final Thoughts

Early childhood educators have a responsibility to support children through their most formative and influential years of life. From birth, children experience the world through their bodies and emotions until language and symbols become accessible. During these early years, imaginative play, dramatic arts and physical provocations become the symbolic building blocks for emergent and early literacy. To engage with literacy, a child must have command over symbols in order to elicit meaning from words and channel meaning into words. Thus, the development of symbolic thought and the ability to hold an image in one's mind are entwined with the multifaceted nature of literacy. To evoke imagery in the pursuit of literacy, an embodied approach engages the whole child, recruiting the body, mind and spirit through dramatic play and creative expression.

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Reconceptualizing Gender Through Children's Literature: A Review of Three Picture Books

Reviewed by Christina Leung

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Creating an early childhood education classroom and community that provide a safe and comfortable space for all children and families involves acknowledging and reflecting on our own understanding of gender and children's gender identity development.

To enhance gender equity in our classrooms, we must first consider gender theories in early childhood education. Here, I outline these gender theories. Then, I review three pieces of children's literature that can facilitate gender discussions and foster gender equity in kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms.

Gender Theories in Early Childhood Education

The following information on theories about gender and gender identity development comes from Blaise and Taylor (2012).

Early theories on gender and gender identity development in young children have been framed around the familiar nature-versus-nurture debate.

Gender-as-nature perceives gender as "biologically determined, fixed, and stable" (p 88). From this perspective, gender behaviours are simply biological instincts, and we view young children's behaviours as appropriate based on what is considered natural or normal for boys and for girls. For example, playing dress-up or nail painting may

be perceived as naturally a girl activity and playing with tools and trucks as naturally a boy activity.

In contrast, gender-as-nurture views children's gender identity and gender behaviours as "the outcome of their socialization" (p 88). Children learn how to be boys or girls by watching and copying the behaviours of others; when a child's behaviour matches what is considered normal for their gender, they are rewarded with a positive response. In other words, children's gender identity is developed by conforming to and reproducing gender norms that are normalized and taught by others in society.

Both sides of this debate assume that gender is assigned to a child—either biologically or passed on through the process of socialization. They also assume that gender is a binary concept and that all children will identify as either a girl or a boy. These perspectives on gender and gender identity development have been challenged more recently by both feminist poststructuralist theory and queer theory.

Feminist poststructuralist theory shifts thinking away from the nature-versus-nurture debate and seriously considers the role children play in their own gender development and in constructing their own gender identity. Young children's understanding of gender is constructed based on their experiences with dominant gender discourses: "Gender discourses are more than ideas and beliefs about what it means to be female or male. They also regulate our gender behaviors by establishing what society considers to be 'normal' or 'natural'" (p 90). According to feminist poststructuralist theory, the gender behaviours observed in young children are not natural based on their gender; rather, they are regulated behaviours based on dominant gender stereotypes that comply with societal gender norms.

Queer theory insists that societal gender norms and gender identity development are always linked to heteronormativity. Heteronormativity assumes that everyone is (or should be) heterosexual and that everyone's gender is either female or male. Heteronormative gender discourses classify young children's activities and behaviours as being either feminine or masculine and gender identity development as being the appropriate performance of either masculine or feminine behaviours, based on one's gender.

Through these dominant heterosexual discourses, "children build a sense of who they are, who they should be, and who they want to be" (p 93). In K-3 classrooms, heteronormativity influences the way children think and feel about themselves and has the potential to be problematic for children who engage in nonstereotypical gender behaviours, or children who do not feel that they fit into the gender dichotomy. According to queer theory, "Gender is never fixed or stable. . . . When children perform their gender in more fluid and blurred ways, we can see that gender dichotomies are never finally settled and that there are different ways to be gendered" (p 94).

So how do we as early childhood educators improve our professional practice and create opportunities for ourselves, and the children we work with, to challenge gender stereotypes in order to improve gender equity in our classrooms? According to Blaise and Taylor (2012), it is critical that educators reflect on their own beliefs about gender, gender identity and heterosexuality and consider how those beliefs influence their classroom practice. For example, do you use gendered language in the classroom, (such as "boys and girls")? Why do you use this language? What message might this language send to children? How might this language affect the children in your classroom?

Another way to improve gender equity in our classrooms is to provoke gender conversations with children. This will not only reveal the children's current understanding of gender; it will also create opportunities to challenge and question stereotypical gender norms.

Recommended Picture Books

These picture books are examples of children's literature that K-3 teachers can use to reflect on their own beliefs about gender and to provoke gender conversations with children in developmentally appropriate ways.

***Rainbow: A First Book of Pride* written by Michael Genhart and illustrated by Anne Passchier Magination Press, 2019**

Rainbow A First Book of Pride, written by Michael Genhart and illustrated by Anne Passchier, challenges the heteronormative discourses of the nuclear family, which assumes that a family includes one female parent and one male parent.

Genhart (he/him) is part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and is a licensed clinical psychologist in the United States. From his own experiences as a gay man and his 30 years of working with children, teenagers and adults, Genhart recognized a significant need for more-inclusive children's literature.¹ In a 2021 interview, he stated, "It's super important for kids to see themselves and their families in a book. If you don't see yourself in books, you can feel invisible" (Schooling 2021).

The illustrations in *Rainbow* were created by Anne Passchier (they/them). Passchier is from the Netherlands and currently lives in the United States. In their work, they focus on inclusivity, positivity and 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy, and they have illustrated several children's books focusing on identity and the 2SLGBTQ+ community.² In *Rainbow*, Passchier's illustrations challenge the concept of the nuclear family and heteronormative gender identities by portraying a diverse representation of families and characters with nonstereotypical gender identities.

The text in *Rainbow* is simple and short. The book shares with the reader the meaning behind each colour on the rainbow flag and signifies pride as a celebration of love, hope, diversity and acceptance. The pictures offer many opportunities to challenge heteronormative discourses and provoke gender conversations in an age-appropriate way.

***It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity* written by Theresa Thorn and illustrated by Noah Grigni Holt, 2019**

It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity, written by Theresa Thorn and illustrated by Noah Grigni, can also support educators in reflecting on their own beliefs about gender and provoking gender conversations in the classroom.

It Feels Good to Be Yourself is Thorn's (she/her) first children's book. She wrote it for her daughter, who, before the age of five, was able to express that she was not the gender that was assigned to her at birth. Thorn's goal was to create a book that her daughter could see herself in and to share that experience with all children.³

The book is illustrated by Noah Grigni (they/ them), who is nonbinary transgender. They came out as transgender at the age of 14, and they chose to illustrate this book because it is a resource they wish they had had when they were a child. In the illustrator's notes, Grigni writes, "Language is power. . . . Without access to words like *transgender* and *non-binary*, I struggled to define myself from a young age, and I felt isolated and unseen" (p 33).

Thorn and Grigni have created a book that challenges dominant heteronormative gender discourses and represents various gender identities, as well as providing young children and adults with the language and concepts that can facilitate conversations about gender. *Gender identity* is defined in this book as "who you feel like within yourself" (p 30). *Gender expression* is defined as "how you choose to present yourself to the world" (p 30). A number of gender concepts are also defined, including *transgender*, *cisgender* and *nonbinary*.

The book's text and illustrations highlight various ways one can be gendered and focus on gender identity development and expression as personal and unique experiences. At the end of the book are resources that can support professional practice, including a glossary of helpful terms, a note about pronouns, organizations, helplines, recommended documentary films, and recommended books for kids and for adults.

What Are Your Words?: A Book About Pronouns
written by Katherine Locke and illustrated by Anne Passchier
Little, Brown, 2021

What Are Your Words?: A Book About Pronouns, written by Katherine Locke and illustrated by Anne Passchier, promotes gender equity and challenges the dominant gender dichotomy as it normalizes the use of gender-inclusive pronouns.

Locke (they/them) wrote this book to introduce children to gender-inclusive pronouns. They acknowledge the importance of having these conversations with children early, as young children are constructing their gender identity and discovering who they are.⁴

What Are Your Words? is about a character named Ari, who has learned about gender-inclusive pronouns from Uncle Lior. Every time Uncle Lior sees Ari, they ask, "What are your words?" Ari learns that different people use different pronouns to describe who they are and that we do not know what someone's pronouns are until they tell us. The

book also acknowledges that pronouns are personal and, for some, fluid. One day, someone asks Ari, "What are your words?" Ari feels unsure and realizes that someone's gender identity and pronouns can change based on how they feel.

In an interview, Locke stated, "For readers who identify with Ari, I hope that they know that their identities are not fixed and that they are welcome to experiment with different labels, different words, and different pronouns as they figure out who they are" (Makhijani 2021).

The three picture books reviewed here create opportunities for adults and children to reflect on and reconceptualize their understanding of gender and gender identity. Young children are actively constructing their own gender identity and are influenced by dominant gender discourses. Combined with classroom practices that promote gender equity, these books have the potential to challenge heteronormative discourses and provoke meaningful gender conversations with children. Representation in the classroom is imperative to building environments and communities that are safe, comfortable and inclusive for all children and families.

Notes

1. "Rainbow: A First Book of Pride," Michael Genhart's website, <https://michaelgenhart.com/welcome/rainbow-a-first-book-of-pride/> (accessed November 20, 2021).
2. "About," Anne Passchier's website, www.annepasschier.com/about/ (accessed November 20, 2021).
3. Theresa Thorn's website, <https://theresathorn.com> (accessed November 21, 2021).
4. "About," Katherine Locke's website, www.katherinelockebooks.com/about/ (accessed November 20, 2021).

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- Blaise, M, and A Taylor. 2012. "Using Queer Theory to Rethink Gender Equity in Early Childhood Education." *Young Children* 67, no 1 (January): 88–96, 98. Also available at www.researchgate.net/profile/Mindy-Blaise/publication/290316392_Using_queer_theory_to_rethink_gender_equity_in_early_childhood_education/ (accessed February 3, 2022).
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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 and educational researchers 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.

Please submit manuscripts by e-mail as a double-spaced Word document. A cover page should include the contributor's name, professional position, degree(s) held, address, phone number(s) and e-mail address. To ensure blind review, use only the article title in headers within the manuscript.

Manuscripts may be up to 3,500 words. References to literature made in the text of the submission must appear in full in a list at the end of the article. Literature not cited in the text but providing background material or for further reading should be similarly listed.

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Following the review process and acceptance of an article for publication, authors will be asked to submit the article by e-mail, along with a short biographical sketch of the author(s).

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Jodi Nickel, Mount Royal University

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A specialist council for ECS and Grades 1, 2 and 3 teachers

Joining the Early Childhood Education Council will permit you to

- belong to a professional organization that is interested in your work and area of specialization;
- participate in a provincial ATA organization concerned with educational issues relating to teachers of young children;
- contribute your opinion on matters concerning early childhood education;
- meet other professionals interested in and involved with early childhood education;
- participate in activities sponsored by the ECEC regional for your area;
- attend the annual Early Childhood Education Council conference to glean new and exciting ideas and to share your concerns with colleagues;
- receive *Issues, Events and Ideas*, a newsletter published several times a year, featuring council news and ideas for classroom use; and
- read *Early Childhood Education*, a journal published once a year, to keep informed of current early childhood research and writings.

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Council Notes

Constitutional Objective

The objective of the Early Childhood Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association is to improve practice in early childhood education by increasing members' knowledge and understanding of this specialty.

Membership

Total membership of the council is currently 2,444.

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 600.

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 and 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 www.ecec-ata.com.

Personal information regarding any person named in this document is for the sole purpose of professional consultation between members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

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