



Issues, Events & Ideas



Early Childhood Education Council  of The Alberta Teachers' Association

No 144 April 2018

President's Message

Happy New Year, ECEC members! I hope that you were able to have a restful winter break and that you are enjoying being back in your schools.

It was wonderful to see so many of you at our recent conference in Banff this past November. Despite the slippery driving conditions, the snowy grounds made the Banff Springs Hotel seem magical as the venue for our learning. Be sure to check out the conference highlights section for a snapshot of the conference if you were unable to attend this year. I learned so much from the sessions I attended and left Banff renewed and inspired.

Something we will try, beginning with our 2019/20 ECEC conference, is to move the date of the conference to the end of April. There are several advantages to this switch: it will allow for delegates and speakers to travel with (hopefully) less snow and ice on our Alberta highways; it makes sense to hold our AGM closer to the end of the financial year; and our conference planning committee will have more time for planning and putting finishing touches on the conference during the school year, instead of during the summer leading up to the November conference. We are looking forward to seeing how a spring conference goes.

Enjoy the rest of the winter (even though the calendar tells us it's spring!). I hope with the longer days comes warmer weather and you are able to take your students outside to enjoy snow!

Lisa Schoeler

Mission Statement: To improve the practice of teaching young children by increasing member knowledge and understanding of this specialty. The ECEC acts on behalf of young children and their teachers to promote excellence in education.

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International Play Association Conference

We had the pleasure of attending the International Play Association conference held in Calgary this past September. This triennial conference is a blend of research presentation and practical ideas, attracting delegates from all over the world. Participants are teachers, researchers, and workers in childcare or recreation, but all have a belief that play is the best way for children to learn.

Peter Gray: The Decline of Play, and Mental Health Consequences of That Decline

This plenary, the first of the conference, highlighted some interesting facts about play.

Sadly, society is taking play away from children when play is nature's way of ensuring that children learn the skills necessary to have a successful life.

We are biologically driven to play—to learn the things that can't be learned any other way.

Characteristics of Play

- Intrinsic motivation—how children find their passion
- Guided by rules—structured by the players themselves
- Always has an element of imagination—entering the world of imagination underlies all higher-order thinking

There is no such thing as unstructured play. Children make the rules and they build the structure. It's how they learn to be human beings. In play, children learn very quickly that even if you are the best, you can't act like you know it!

We don't allow children to be away from adults, to get into trouble and be able to get

out of it—and then we wonder why they are not confident or competent.

- Society is feeding the fear that it's not safe!

The consequences:

- Play = making friends; children feel empowered and in control.
- Loss of play = loss of control; this leads to depression, anxiety and other mental disorders.

Gray says that there is “play deficit disorder” in the world, and the only solution is to bring back play.

Playing in Nature

The Experience of Tupinamba Children (Brazil)

Christina Cabiciere Profice and Léa Tiriba

- Nature = psychological development and well-being
- Children's feelings/knowledge about nature relate to their experiences with nature.
- Students are free to explore school surroundings (rivers, sandbanks) during recess times.
- There is trust in students.
- Need to promote “wall less” style of life in urban contexts

Bringing Back Nature to Children Through Play in Home Gardens (Malaysia)

Mega Suria Hashim, Ismail Said and Nurul Nadiah Sahimi

- Need to find many different ways to give nature back to children.
- Outdoor environments shape children physically, socially and emotionally.
- Size, texture, form and colour are important to intrigue children.
- Don't be afraid to let your kids get dirty!

Outside Is Where I Need to Be (New Zealand)

Cheryl Greenfield

- Gardening teaches about growth and caring.
- Children develop holistically in an optimal outdoor setting with lots of regular contact with nature and the natural world.
- Empathy arises from positive responsive relationships.
- Nature offers a far greater variety of open-ended materials with which children can engage, transform and have a relationship; this offers the opportunity for negotiation, the meeting of minds and the development of a shared understanding, thereby facilitating children's deepening moral development.
- Playing in and being out in the natural world also increases opportunity for learning about cause and consequences.
- Facing risks and challenges, which are a part of everyday life, provides a direct impact on moral and spiritual growth.
- If we try to eliminate risk, we inhibit our own and children's lives and limit their potential.

Risky Play

One of the more interesting plenary sessions involved risky play and how the definition varies from country to country. In India, young children up to the age of six play on the train tracks literally on their doorstep. Babies are placed on the track to feel the vibrations so that when they are older, they will move out of the way when the train comes around the bend. After the age of six, they are allowed to go beyond the tracks and play unsupervised in the river Ganges.

In Japan, mobile play centres were brought in to replace areas where the tsunami wiped out homes and play spaces. Former playgrounds are now sterile housing units. The mobile play spaces have been successful in treating PTSD symptoms in children.

We went to several sessions where we played and created with nature and loose parts. Our group created the willow tree wells in Olympic Plaza. We created paper helicopters, made games and art with loose parts, danced and built giant cardboard structures, and explored many varieties of outdoor playground made from natural, instead of plastic, materials.



Closing Remarks

Peter Gray ended the three-day conference with thought-provoking comments.

- Childhood has turned into resume building and away from exploration.
- Children need child directed activities.
- Risk assessment—our moral view is that it's wrong to let your child out of your sight.
- Society needs to be educated about the actual statistics.
- There is risk in everything, so think about the risks if you *don't* let your child go to the park—like a lack of problem-solving ability.
- Children who are allowed to go out and explore often find no other children.
- The real risk is the emotional cost to our children.

Conclusion? Restore neighbourhood play. Trust our children and stop overprotecting them. Capable kids are empowered kids. Let go and let them grow!

The next Triennial Play Conference will be held in India in 2020.

Submitted by Jennifer Deruyter and Joy de Nance



Advocate for Young Children Award

Presentation to Elan La Montagne

ECEC Conference, November 2, 2017

A force to be reckoned with—firm, committed, well read, researcher, thoughtful, fiercely loyal, marathon runner, dedicated particularly to meaningful and challenging educational experiences for all children—these are some words that easily come to mind to describe Elan.

I have known Elan La Montagne for over 20 years in a number of capacities within the education community in Calgary, and I believe that she is most worthy of this award and honour.

When I first met Elan, she was a student in my Early Childhood Education class at the University of Calgary, in the Faculty of Education, now the Werklund School of Education. At that time, it was very evident that her practice in teaching had a strong focus on the child and the importance of providing strong developmentally appropriate programs for young children in the classroom from an inquiry-based approach.

She displayed many notable attributes as a preservice teacher; one in particular was the thoughtful way she took up her work and interactions with the children in her class, her classmates and her teachers.

She was confident to question, examine and research her work to deepen her teaching and learning practices. In all cases, her focus was ensuring that the individual children within the classroom were provided with strong learning opportunities.

Another strength was her collegial and collaborative interactions with others she worked with.

Once Elan became a teacher, I had the opportunity to place student teachers in Elan's class in several schools where she worked. Once again, it was very evident that she put the children first with respect to understanding their diverse needs and planning appropriately for their learning. Whether it was planning a field trip for the children or ensuring that all children had snacks and felt part of the group, Elan ensured that it was an inclusive classroom.

Most recently, she has launched into an administrative role. Although her focus now is to work with the teachers, Elan is always looking out for the children in the school to ensure that they have the best education possible.

In that vein, Elan maintains her own professional development through attending conferences and keeping up with current research to support her work in schools. It should also be noted that she has been a dedicated member of the provincial Early Childhood Education Council and served as a strong voice for young children in Alberta.

In her quiet and unassuming way, she maintains a strong focus on what is best for children and their education.

I believe that Elan La Montagne is very deserving of the Advocate for Young Children award; her actions exemplify the educator that we would like to be an advocate for our children in Alberta.

Please join me in a round of applause to welcome Elan and thank her for her dedication and care for children in our province and around the world.

Cynthia Prasow

ECEC Conference 2017



Keynote: Vince Gowmon— Remembering to Play

Vince spoke from a place that early childhood educators related to—a place where childhood had been lost. Enchantment, wonder, being with and connections are so innate to children’s learning, and yet they seem to be fading in their lives. Children are surrounded by so many influences and “the more we push and promote things that can be measured, the more they feel that they can’t measure up.” As adults, we often have an image in our heads that life looks like an arrow that reaches to the sky, and when we don’t follow this linear path there must be something

wrong with us. In fact, life is “messy, playful, imaginative, adaptable and very creative.”

Vince spoke about how play is one of the best ways to support all of these things. As he discusses in his book *Let the Fire Burn—Nurturing Children’s Creative Spirit*, humans need to know what really lights the fire within themselves. Building the fire within is a way for children to get their creative spirit going and it is something that we all long for—“to be touched in our hearts.” As adults, we spend much of our time asking children questions, when so often what we need to do is listen to what they are saying and allow them to explore and question things themselves. Vince also spoke about how we also seem to be stifling our children’s creative capacity because many toys now do more for the child instead of letting them figure it out for themselves. They never have to solve a situation themselves or build on their learning if the answer is always there. Children’s learning should therefore not be as much about product but about process. Unfortunately, he mentions, “it becomes easier to just do things *for* children then it is to be *with* them.” This lowers their creative spirit and does not give them the time they need to build their hearts.

The fire within comes, as Vince explains, with the metaphor that “a flame does not flicker in a straight line.” We need to be playful and allow children the time to get messy and figure things out. We need to stop using phrases like “Yes, but ...” when speaking to children’s ideas and start using more “Yes, and ...” to help them on their journey. When adults create beliefs around how children should play, express themselves and act, this becomes “the edges of their playground.” When we do not question, “we shrink the playground.” When we ask questions, we inspire their willingness to expand their learning. When a child comes up with a new idea, why not ask, “What would that look like?”

Vince pushed us to all think about what that looks like in our classrooms. Are we building creative capacity in children, or are we letting the bells of the day dictate how children can explore and expand their creativity and emotional literacy? What can we do as educators to light the fire within?

Breakout Session: Vince Gowmon—The Gift of Empathy

Vince's first breakout session expanded on his keynote; he stated that in order to build empathy in our classrooms, we need to be empathetic ourselves. Empathy is "a vital tool in helping to regulate children." By being empathetic ourselves, we build the calm of our classrooms. We acknowledge that it is okay to feel. As teachers and educators, we can build a culture of empathy in our classrooms so that it is about supporting each other's needs. When we build this culture in the classroom, it expands to students' daily interactions, because they feel safe and have developed ways to work through difficult or challenging situations.

Vince also spoke to the influence of technology in conversations and how this is contributing to our decrease in empathy. Conversational language is used less as students have more screen time and fewer face-to-face conversations. By using more conversational language in class, we can build conversational language in our students. When students are experiencing frustration and are not able to communicate their needs, use language like "I see that you are frustrated/angry" or "I wonder if this is room for an apology." By asking them to expand on their emotions through "tell me" phrases, teachers can help students build resilience and calm within themselves. When we model this approach, we actually use less energy by making a connection to them instead of trying to correct or direct their learning. This is important to our work every day, because

when we show someone empathy, we "acknowledge their feelings and allow them to feel." By feeling another person's emotions we create a feeling of being felt.

Throughout this session, Vince asked us to continue to self-reflect. How do we feel when we are heard? What do we hope that someone will understand when we are frustrated or overwhelmed? What would make us feel like others cared? How could we all bring this feeling back to our own lives as well as the lives of the students in our care?

This was a great chance for everyone to take a moment in a beautiful setting to remind ourselves that we are all human and that empathy is a significant area of focus in all of our lives.

Breakout Session: Vince Gowmon— Cultivating Intuition

This session was one of healing and openness for all. By being more aware of our needs, we can provide insight and support to others. This was a very emotional session, but one that allowed us time to be present and open to new possibilities and genuine support from others. Vince asked us at the beginning of the session to be very open to whatever may come during our time together.

He asked how often we spend time reflecting on our day's challenges and lives in ways that allow us to be more aware of our feelings, our body and the energies around us. If we lived in the moment, what would that be like? How would we view our lives differently? How much more intuitive would we be about what signs might guide our journeys? Having this time to reflect in this session and connect with others in our profession was very powerful. It really was time to just be. What better gift can be given to educators than that of time?

The questions we all should ask are How can we bring the gift of time and reflection into our daily lives and the lives of our students? How can we build openness and

intuition in our students? How can we bring back to our classrooms the childlike existence that we all long for?

Vince's focus was based on the Heartmath Institute's work about the signs of intuition: the desire for more, preoccupation, feeling good, dreams, flow, joy and so on. Using time in our day with students to reflect on their learning and their feelings allows them a chance to build resilience and openness to their work. Reflection can be done through meditative practices or even through conversation in which everyone is willing to be supportive of each other's needs, once again building a culture of support and empathetic practice.

The entire session left us with many new ways to openly build this in our students.

Keynote: David Smith— Geographic Literacy for 21st-Century Children and Their Teachers

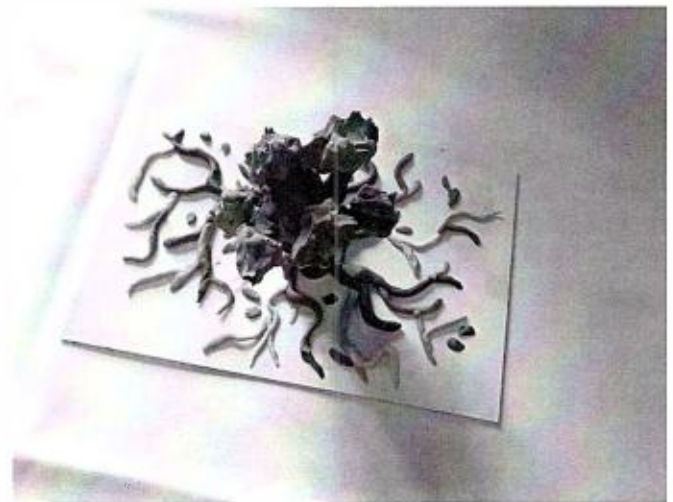
David's eye-opening and thought-provoking session spoke of the realities of seeing our world from multiple perspectives. He reminded us that we are all in this together and that the discrepancies between nations are staggering. Discussions about the world's food, water and resources are of great importance; his book *Geography and Social Justice* has been around for decades and reprinted several times because these significant areas still need to be addressed. How can educators be agents of change and inspire our students to take up these causes with us to create better situations for the future?

He stated that first is the recognition of these areas; however, without action we will see a significant decline in the availability of necessities, especially in the countries that have the least. There is only one environment, and we need to take care of it and teach our children how to do the same.

At the end of David's presentation, he reminded us that the world we live in needs to be left to the next generation in a way that is not a steady decline.

Breakout Session: Heather Mackay and Jamie Hachette—Critical Literacy in the Classroom

Heather and Jamie's sessions always challenge you to think about how literacy is used in your own context. They described *critical literacy* as the concept that anything



can become text—a person, objects, a place. Everything has some sort of world view attached to it and can be a great vehicle to expand literacy in your classroom. This session, filled with ideas, allowed the participants to really look at the world around them in a new way—for example, stained glass windows could inspire a conversation about how they were made, the math involved in making them or the colours that they show. Making literacy live in your everyday context allows for greater possibilities.

One of the many activities we were immersed in showed how you can take the text in a story and change it into what it could become—moulding it in clay, building with wire or rewriting it to fit a different story. Why not have students experience literacy through both visual and conversational language skills?



Learning to remix stories in unique ways could change a book drastically but allow for great adventures through the process. Teaching students about how to create their own stories

through the Book Creator app also provides multiple learning opportunities.

Creating an “opposite” text can also create a new or inspiring vision. For example, a book about Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf might be written from the wolf’s perspective, showing how he feels that no one has heard his side of the story. Altering perspectives allows students more time to build on their language understanding and creativity.

Having students write stories from their own perspective by using a story as their model also builds meaningful connections. Be open to the possibilities and explore them through various modalities and representations. Literacy lives in everything we do—why not bring it to life throughout their learning?

Kim Wrathall



Above and top right, Make and Take Social Night; right, Friday night dance.