



What We Heard: Educators Supporting Newcomer Families

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Introduction

Newcomers to Edmonton, like newcomers to many areas, come from a variety of places and hold diverse views around what constitutes high-quality child care, and what kinds of dispositions are desirable in an early childhood educator. Existing research on the needs and expectations of newcomer families in these topics has revealed diverse and inconsistent viewpoints (Mardhani-Bayne, Freeborn, & Soetaert, 2021). Moreover, existing definitions of quality and advantageous educator dispositions have not typically included the viewpoints of newcomer families, but instead relied on Eurocentric, reductive rating scales (Quintero, 2012). Therefore, more work is required to understand the beliefs and values of newcomers in Edmonton, which in turn can be used to further support these communities.

In order to address this gap in our collective understanding, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University began a joint research project in the spring of 2020 to explore these areas. Specifically, the project focused on two research questions:

1. For newcomer families, what are indicators of quality in early learning and child care?
2. What are the essential dispositions child care educators demonstrate that meet the needs of newcomer children and families?

To answer these questions, researchers first conducted a scoping review of current academic literature and identified existing understandings of indicators of quality and desirable educator dispositions. This information was then used to create guiding questions for focus groups made up of educators who support newcomer families. This "What We Heard" document highlights the outcomes of these focus groups.

Definitions

While varying definitions are used throughout the literature, for the purposes of this research project, several definitions are used here and in the focus groups. In particular, 'newcomers' are defined as families who have arrived in Canada in the last five years as immigrants, refugees, or through other means, from another country. Additionally, 'child care,' 'child care centre,' and 'centre' are used interchangeably here to refer to the out-of-home spaces where children under the age of six years old are cared for by adults other than their family members, including licenced child care spaces. The term 'educator' is used to denote the employed individuals who plan and care for children in child care centres. Finally, the term 'dispositions' refers to the "tendencies [of educators] to respond to situations in particular ways" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 22 as cited in Davitt & Ryder, 2019, p. 20). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2002) defines dispositions as "the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviours ... as well as the educator's own professional growth" (p. 53).

Focus Group Information

Initially, focus groups of newcomer families were planned for the spring of 2021. Unfortunately, no newcomer families indicated interest in participating in focus groups during the recruitment period. In response, the researchers chose to gather data from educators who support newcomer families, with a focus on educators who are 'on the ground' with newcomer families in order to continue to centre the voices of newcomers as much as possible. Potential focus group participants were initially identified through existing networks and stakeholders associated with ECELC, and in-service educators were invited to participate in focus groups.

Participants in the focus groups were asked questions about their experiences, their ideas around high-quality child care, and their understandings of educator dispositions. The questions that guided the conversations discussed here were based on information from the scoping review but remained largely centred on experiences with newcomer families, in order to ensure that data collected were specific to the Edmonton context. At times, educators with little to no experience with newcomer families participated in focus groups, but only responded to general questions, such as "Is there anything that we did not talk about today that you think makes a good child centre?" A complete list of questions is available in the appendix.

Three focus groups consisting of in-service early childhood educators (n=9) were held online in a digital meeting room in March 2021. The following table provides some information on each participant:

Participant	Years of experience	Experience with newcomer families	Notes
A	Five	None	<i>This participant responded to general questions</i>
B	Five	None	<i>This participant responded to general questions</i>
C	Two	Currently supporting	
D	Not shared	Currently supporting	<i>Also currently supporting Indigenous families</i>
E	Four	Limited previous experience	
F	Seven	Currently supporting	<i>This participant self-identified as a newcomer Previously operated her own day home Currently working at a not-for-profit centre</i>
G	Seven	None	<i>This participant responded to general questions</i>
H	Seven	Currently supporting	<i>This participant self-identified as a newcomer</i>
I	Twenty	Currently supporting	

Data Analysis

Across the three focus groups, participants' responses were compiled around each question asked. In order to form a synthetic understanding of educator perspectives, these compiled responses were read and considered together. From these multiple readings, repeated ideas from several educators emerged and were identified as themes that were prevalent for all focus groups. Additionally, quotations that summarized or captured these themes were identified and are included in this report.

Identified Themes

Below, five themes emerging from educator focus groups in their discussion of newcomer families and children are described. Quotations from participants are included in quotation marks to provide additional information and to honour the voices and ideas of these educators.

- Theme 1: Multimodal and multilingual communication with families is paramount

Across all of the focus groups, educators stressed the need for consistent communication with families using multiple modes (e.g. written, oral, etc.) and multiple languages. Educators shared that newcomer families appreciated face-to-face communication, pictures and videos of their children, communication through apps, emails, phone calls, in-person meetings and celebrations, volunteering within the centre, and documentation such as learning stories. However, educators did not always have the language background needed to communicate with all newcomer families. When faced with a language barrier, some educators relied on online translation websites, while others believed that image-based communication made it "easier to know what the children have done during the day."

For the educators in the focus groups, consistent communication with newcomer families allowed for relationship building, which in turn made future communication easier. As one educator said, "it's really important to me to make sure that we are sharing those learning stories with those families, talking about the children's learning.... [It] makes the relationships very strong. And so if we ever do need to have a very hard conversation... with those families, because we've kind of worked towards this very positive relationship, it really strengthens our relationship to be able to handle these really difficult conversations."

Finally, educators also stressed that different families may have preferences in terms of communication, and that it is important for centres to "correspond with families in whatever way works best with them" in order to best support newcomer families.

- Theme 2: Educators value the funds of knowledge of families and children...

Families' and children's funds of knowledge are made up of the knowledge and skills that they have gained through their experiences at home and in the larger community (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). In focus groups, educators discussed how acknowledging, appreciating, and making space for

home and community knowledge can help create relationships between educators, families, and children, build a sense of community, and provide educators with new ways to support families and children. As Participant C explained, learning about families and children's experiences and practices "... helps us to understand what the children are doing, if the family is more interdependent rather than independent... I think that's very important for us to know. It is easier to support the child and include them in the community." While they did not use the term itself, for the educators in these focus groups, a funds of knowledge approach was foundational to their understanding of how to meet the needs of newcomer children and families. However, as will be described below, such an approach was not always viable in practice.

□ Theme 3: ... But, there is tension between home language and majority language use in centres

While educators were universally in favour of supporting children's home languages (one of children's funds of knowledge), they also pointed to infrastructural and systemic barriers that prevented full home language use in centres. Educators named benefits to using children's home languages, saying that doing so can promote understanding between children and educators, creativity, a "sense of safety, and a sense of belonging." Many educators described how, when a child from a newcomer family first joins their centre, they seek out examples of their home language in order to use simple words and phrases with the child and, as one participant said, "create a common ground."

Despite the desire to support children's home languages, educators described how a lack of diversity in child care staff can be a barrier. As one participant explained, "... if you have a team that only speaks English ... it's going to be a little bit limited on how we can help families.... We really need to help all of the new families that are coming into Canada and all of these children as well too." For many of the educators interviewed, a lack of language match between child and educator meant that only basic words or phrases from a child's home language might be incorporated in the centre.

Educators also described how the dominance of English in Edmonton meant that home languages were often overshadowed by English in the day-to-day operations and programming within the centre. Educators recognized that prioritizing the majority language over the home language was not always ideal, but they felt it was necessary. As one educator said when asked about which language(s) to support in the centre, "Here in Edmonton, there's this prioritization... [of] English and that's not necessarily very reflective of our multicultural society.... I really hope that we move away from that as a society and really start to cherish everyone's languages, especially Indigenous languages, especially newcomers' languages. So I don't know, I feel very torn because you don't want this disconnection to happen to these children if they are learning English more than a language that they could use to speak to their families or a language that they can speak with their parents.... I think it really perpetuates this hierarchy that's pushed onto our society here that English and French are at the top of the pyramid and then, these other languages fall under that." Educators who attempted to offer a solution to the tension between home and dominant language use described using home languages in their centres when possible, but nevertheless emphasized the need for instruction in English for all children.

□ Theme 4: Openness and flexibility are the most important dispositions

In describing their priorities as educators, many in the focus groups discussed the need for openness and flexibility. For these educators, openness was related to a funds of knowledge approach: Educators acknowledged that each family had their own unique home practices around child care and described being open to learning about and incorporating these practices. Educators went on to describe how, when a particular home practice was identified, they strove to remain flexible by incorporating it as much as possible. Further, when directly asked about the personal qualities that are important in an educator, several focus group participants discussed the importance of being “open-minded,” “non-judgmental,” and “adaptable” in order to be “welcoming” and to help families feel “comfortable.”

At times, educators described the barriers to openness and flexibility that they faced in their centres. One participant described how individual educators may have varying levels of comfort in terms of their openness and flexibility, saying, “It’s how comfortable the educators in the room feel communicating with the families and adapting themselves and changing their own mindsets about how to integrate [families’ cultural or language practices]... instead of going over the superficial language as in one, two, three.”

When faced with families who have contrasting expectations around learning and play, educators described how openness to learning about the families’ needs and flexibility in responding to those needs was a supportive strategy. For example, educators in these focus groups strongly believed that learning through self-directed play was the optimal way to support children in general. However, some newcomer families preferred educator-directed learning. When discussing whether or not to emphasize self-directed learning over educator-directed learning for newcomer families, one educator explained, “I think it doesn’t matter to me as long as you can incorporate families’ needs. I’m from a different culture. I’m Chinese so I grew up having a lot of teacher-directed learning opportunities. Studying in Canada, I started doing more child-directed activities... but if the family really wants some teacher-directed... time or learning opportunities, I think we just have to meet families’ needs sometimes.” Another educator described having a “balance” between different kinds of approaches to learning in order to support newcomer children. For these educators, openness to learning about families’ needs and expectations along with the flexibility to incorporate different opportunities to meet those needs was a combination of dispositions essential to supporting newcomer families.

□ Theme 5: Educators can always grow, seek, and co-learn

In addition to emphasizing the importance of openness to learning about newcomer families and children, educators also discussed the need for ongoing professional learning opportunities, and using their learnings to inform practice. For educators, learning could take many forms and included gaining Alberta-specific knowledge (including an understanding of *Flight: Alberta’s early learning and care framework* (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014)), obtaining a relevant degree, and taking specific professional development courses on newcomer family support.

Educators with knowledge of *Flight* noted that it supported their understanding of ideas such as the importance of building relationships with families and children, learning through play, the impact of the child care environment on children, and the need for self-reflection as an educator. *Flight* also gave these educators a shared language for describing and discussing their work with others. Overall, educators viewed the ideas of *Flight* as foundational to the decisions they made with and for families and children, and considered learning about *Flight* essential to their practice.

While most educators in the focus groups did not have a post-secondary degree, those who did described how post-secondary learning was important to developing their skills and informing their approach. For example, one educator with an educational background in graphic design described how it allowed her to acknowledge and appreciate the creativity of children. Another educator with a liberal arts degree described how her post-secondary experience allowed her to examine and “unlearn” her own biases, saying, “What kind of educator would I be if I didn't have my undergrad? And I do feel really grateful to have had that educational background... I felt like it does make me a very unbiased educator, an educator who looks past... some of the very problematic thinking that we have here in Canada about newcomers.” This same educator went on to describe the need for post-secondary and professional development learning opportunities that included discussions of trauma-informed care and other ways to support newcomer families.

Discussion

For all of the educators in these focus groups, a practice of relationships was essential to their high-quality support of newcomer families. As *Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework* describes, to engage in a practice of relationships is to seek out, appreciate, and nurture the relationships that exist between educators, children, families, and the larger community (Makovichuk et al., 2014). As seen in each of the themes described above, knowing more about individual families and children and supporting them in terms of their specific needs was a way for educators to develop relationships and help families and children feel included and welcome. Paramount to engaging in a practice of relationships was a willingness to be open, flexible, and constantly learning about families and the profession of child care in general. These dispositions are also encompassed in *Flight*, which describes dispositions to learn such as “I/we are participating” (relating to listening to and sharing ideas) and “I/we are seeking” (relating to questioning and learning more) (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 60).

While a practice of relationships was identified as a fundamental approach to supporting newcomer families and children, educators often faced barriers to implementing such a practice. These barriers may be due to the composition of the educator team at a centre, the individual dispositions of an educator, and/or systematic valuing of some cultural practices over others. At times, educators could respond to these barriers by incorporating variety in their centres, but this was not always possible.

Next Steps

The data gathered from educators who support newcomer families demonstrates how important relationships are to high-quality care and how individualized, specific consideration of families' and children's needs is crucial. Further, these conversations with educators revealed the relevance of the dispositions of openness, flexibility, and continual learning. Overall, information from these focus groups establishes how several ideas from *Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework* are being taken up by educators in their support of newcomer families and children. Given the importance placed on *Flight* by several participants, it is reasonable to recommend that in-service educators continue to receive support in their understanding and use of this framework. Additionally, given that these conversations revealed the need for constant communication with and consideration of newcomer families and children as unique participants in child care, future research focused on the voices of newcomer families is in order.

Immediately, more work must be done to learn how the ideas discussed here are being implemented in child care centres, especially in light of the barriers described by some educators in this study. To that end, educators in these focus groups were also asked to identify local child care centres that they had positive experiences with and that they felt the researchers could learn from. The next phase of this project involves case studies of those child care centres in Edmonton that have been identified by educators as providing high-quality care. These case studies will focus on how child care centre directors make decisions around the sometimes competing needs and expectations of newcomer families, children, and educators.

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Appendix: Newcomer Focus Group Protocol

MacEwan Land Acknowledgement: We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous peoples. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

The First People's connection to the land teaches us about our inherent responsibility to protect and respect Mother Earth. With this acknowledgement, we honour the ancestors and children who have been buried here, missing and murdered Indigenous women and men, and the process of ongoing collective healing for all human beings. We are reminded that we are all treaty people and of the responsibility we have to one another.

Focus Group Questions:

Introductory question:

- Why did you choose your child care centre for work?

Communication questions:

- Can you tell us about how you share information about what's happening at your centre?
 - What do you like about how you share information about your centre? (Yamamoto & Li, 2012)
- Can you tell us about how your centre supports newcomer parents who prefer to use a language other than English? (Poureslami, Nimmon, Ng, Cho, Foster, & Hertzman, 2013).
- Is learning about a family's culture, language, and practices important to you? (McDevitt, 2016)
 - Can you tell us more about why it's important to you?
- If you are able to learn about a family's culture or language, are you able to incorporate that into your work? For example, are you able to incorporate a family's home routine around napping into naptime at your centre? (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020; Yamamoto & Li, 2012)

Curriculum and programming questions:

- Ideally, how does a child learn things at your child care centre? If you walked into your centre and saw a child learning, what would they be doing?
- Is it important to you that a child have more self-directed learning opportunities, where children make decisions about what they do, or more educator-directed learning opportunities, where educators decide what children do? (Yamamoto & Li, 2012)
 - Can you tell us more about why it's important to you?
- Is it important to you that a child have more opportunities to learn their home language, or learn English in your child care centre? (Yamamoto & Li, 2012)
- Can you tell us about a good experience a child has had with learning language at your child care centre? (Beneke & Cheatham, 2016)

Educator dispositions questions:

- When you think of an early childhood educator, what kind of personal qualities are important to you?
- What does the ideal educator look like in terms of their educational background? (Yamamoto & Li, 2012)

Concluding question:

- Is there anything that we did not talk about today that you think makes a good child centre? (Jun, 2006)