



Educators Supporting Indigenous Families: Culture

In spring 2021, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University conducted focus groups with in-service educators who support Indigenous families. Many themes were derived from these conversations, including that **there is an identified need for educators and programs to support family cultures in child care environments, but this process must be determined and led by families.**

Support for Cultures in Child Care Environments

Support for Indigenous cultures in child care environments requires educators to create a learning space where all beliefs, traditions, and life experiences are valued. This support can take place in various forms, which includes implementing cultural practices into programming (such as cooking), displaying cultural items in the room (such as moss bags), and inviting members into

the space (such as Elders). While respect, encouragement, and implementation of cultures in child care is integral, the support must be diversified and meet the needs of the individual families. Therefore, cultural support is family-led.

Educator Dispositions

In the focus groups, individuals identified various characteristics that guide educators in their practice with children and families. In relation to the specific theme – educators value the funds of knowledge of families and children – educators shared the following dispositions valued in the field:



Open-mindedness



Respectfulness



Willingness to learn



Educator Voices from the Field

Most educators agreed that supporting families’ cultural identities is significant to offering quality child care that encourages wellbeing and fosters belonging. Educators stated that this support must take place from a genuine position of learning, where culture is at the “forefront of building community as a room, building community as a centre, and a community in our general community.” Educators believed that this support begins with a desire to learn from families, respecting “how much they want to share” about their culture and approaching situations from a relational perspective.



Relationship to Flight

According to the *Flight* Framework, there is an identified need for educators to create and foster relationships with families (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014, p. 50). The connections made between educators, children, and families increases the vitality of the greater social community (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 50 - 52). An integral part of relationship building is respecting and appreciating various cultural practices. Educators must acknowledge the vital role that families play in a child's life. In doing so, educators value these individuals as equals, allowing families to take the lead and influence what support is needed and how it is offered (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 49-56). Refer to the *Flight* website offered in the references section for access to additional information and teachings.

Barriers

While creating a culturally inclusive atmosphere has benefits for both the families and the educators in the learning centre, there are some barriers that are associated with this. Educators shared that a lack of communication can create an isolating experience that produces misunderstandings; there may be a disconnect between what educators think families need versus what they actually need. Educators stated that this barrier affects relationship building, which in turn influences the cultural support received.

Strategies

- Educators can engage with families in a respectful manner to learn more about their culture and experiences. This interaction

can be initiated by the educators but should be family-led. In other words, offer opportunities for families to share if they are willing, but it is ultimately their choice in what and how much they want to share.

- Educators can develop trust with family members by fostering and creating relationships. Families are more likely to share aspects of their culture with educators they have a connection with. By asking questions and approaching situations from a strength-based perspective, educators can begin to understand how to support that family and their culture.
- When families are open to collaborating, educators can implement aspects of their culture into the learning environment. For example, incorporating books, music and other cultural items into the space, along with planning learning experiences (such as cooking and ceremonies) for the children and families.
- Educators can invite members from the cultural community (such as family members and Elders) into the child care space to share teachings and lead some of these activities.
- Educators can approach families from a non-judgmental stance and be open to new ideas or learning opportunities. Educators who expand their worldview and get creative with programming offer a learning environment that is culturally reflective and responsive to the needs of families; it becomes a safe space to grow and develop.

Recommendations

- Educators can read the additional “inspirations for practice” documents to fully understand the themes and how they work in conjunction with each other.
- Educators can seek knowledge from other organizations, professionals, and families to engage in the process of life-long learning.
- Educators can search the Edmonton Council of Early Learning and Care website and click on the ‘resources’ link to gain additional knowledge and learn more about different organizations/partnerships in the area: <https://www.ecelc.ca/resources>
- Educators can uphold a positive image of the family by speaking about and with them in a positive manner, regardless of differences in culture, experiences, and values.

References

Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, P., & Thomas, N. (2014). *Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework*. Retrieved from flightframework.ca