



**Quality Indicators and Dispositions in  
the Early Learning and Child Care  
Sector: Learning from Indigenous and  
Newcomer Families**

**Final Report**

Prepared by:

Chelsea Freeborn, Alvina Mardhani-Bayne, and  
Cheyanne Soetaert

MacEwan University  
May 2021

## Executive Summary

In 2020, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University began a joint research project aimed at examining the following research questions:

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

### *Overall Findings*

- A scoping review of recent academic literature revealed diverse viewpoints and experiences for Indigenous and newcomer families.
- Focus groups in Edmonton identified a need for ongoing engagement of Indigenous and newcomer families in order to centre their voices in policies, programming, and practices.
- Case studies of four centres in Edmonton revealed a need for culturally responsive child care that is specific and focused on individual families and children, and stemming from strong images of both children as well as families.
- In order to provide specific and culturally responsive child care, educators must engage in critical reflection and ongoing professional learning, and must work to continually engage with and deepen their practice of relationships in their work with children and families.
- Educators' engagement with *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014) in pedagogical practices supports continual growth, critical reflection, and co-learning. This observation was made by educators with experience working with both Indigenous as well as newcomer families.
- Culturally focused as well as mainstream child care programs can achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous and newcomer children and families.

### *Based on these findings, it is recommended that:*

- Pre-service and in-service educators receive ongoing opportunities to work with *Flight*, reflect critically on their practice of relationships with children and families, and develop dispositions such as a strong image of the child (and family)
- Practical tools are developed for educators and child care leadership that draw connections between this research, *Flight*, and some practical strategies for achieving research outcomes

## Introduction

While much research defines high-quality child care and essential dispositions of child care educators, this research tends to be Eurocentric, erase the voices of children and families experiencing care, and collapse multifaceted groups into monolithic 'others' (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Peeters & Vanderkerckhove, 2015; Quintero, 2012). As such, very little is known about the indicators of quality and educator dispositions that are expected, understood, and needed by Indigenous and newcomer families in the Edmonton context.

In order to address the gaps 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 four research questions:

1. For Indigenous 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 Indigenous children and families?
3. For newcomer families, what are indicators of quality in early learning and child care?
4. 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 scoping reviews of current academic literature and identified existing understandings of indicators of quality and desirable educator dispositions (Freeborn, Mardhani-Bayne, & Soetaert, 2021a; Mardhani-Bayne, Freeborn, & Soetaert, 2021b). This information was then used to create guiding questions for focus groups made up of educators who support Indigenous and newcomer families, and Indigenous families (Freeborn, Mardhani-Bayne, & Soetaert, 2021b; Mardhani-Bayne, Freeborn, & Soetaert, 2021c). Finally, case studies were conducted on Edmonton child care centres identified by educators and families in the focus groups as being of high quality (Mardhani-Bayne, Freeborn, & Soetaert, 2021a). This document summarizes and discusses the overall findings from this project.

## Definitions

While varying definitions are used throughout the literature, for the purposes of this research project, several definitions are used here and with case study participants. 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. We use the term 'Indigenous' to signify "persons of First Nations, Inuit, or Métis descent, regardless of where they reside and whether their names appear on an official register. Self-identification is a fundamental criterion for defining Indigenous peoples" (Government of Canada, n.d.). 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).

## Overview of Results

### *Scoping Review*

This project began with a scoping review to assess what the current literature states in response to the research questions. Using a modified version of Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) methods, researchers first defined a series of search terms and then used those terms to identify relevant literature across several databases. These searches resulted in the identification of both local and international research on Indigenous and newcomer families, and each source was reviewed by multiple researchers to confirm alignment with research questions. For more information on the scoping review methods, please see the scoping review reports (Freeborn et al., 2021a; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021b).

### *Scoping Review Results*

The scoping review resulted in the creation of two documents, one focused on Indigenous families and their children, and another focused on newcomer families and their children. Findings from the Indigenous-focused scoping review on indicators of quality included the following:

- Indigenous families, educators, and community members must be at the centre of definitions of quality in order to ensure that their life experiences and cultural contexts are reflected.
- Few families discussed in the literature preferred Indigenous-focused child care. Instead, many expressed a desire for child care that combined developmental milestones, social skills, and Indigenous knowledges.
- Indigenous families valued connections between home and the centre (such as the involvement of parents, Elders, and communities).
- Indigenous families valued centres that foster identity, encourage child and family autonomy, implement culturally relevant programming, and stimulate learning within the context of family.
- Indigenous families desired child care that focuses on relationship building to strengthen connections. While the exact definition of 'family engagement' varied, most sought

environments that mitigate power imbalances, value parental voice, and strive for increased cultural safety for families.

- Some studies incorporated stakeholder perspectives that advocated for a strength-based approach and a practice of relationships to foster cultural safety.
- Indigenous families face several barriers to accessing child care such as a general lack of childcare spaces available, affordability, accessibility, limited family support, and transportation. The literature also discussed the distrust that some Indigenous families hold for centre-based care.

Findings from the Indigenous-focused scoping review included the following educator dispositions:

- Indigenous families described the significance of relationship building through programming that is flexible, family-focused, and culturally relevant.
- Indigenous families preferred educators who practice cultural humility, which in turn fosters the development of educators' cultural and historical knowledge.
- Indigenous families valued educators who work from a pedagogical approach that focuses on diversity, decolonization, and the ethics of care. These families also desired educators who implement Indigenous child development theory perspectives into child care.
- Some families favoured a cultural match with educators (i.e. educators with an Indigenous background) as it may increase communication and inclusion. Some families also valued preservice education for educators that focuses on social justice and diversity.

Findings from the newcomer-focused scoping review included the following indicators of quality:

- Newcomer families preferred child care settings with a traditional academic focus (math and science) over those focused primarily on free play.
- Newcomer families sought out child care that employed bilingual staff to enhance communication and strengthen educator-parent contact.
- Families favoured centres that promote communication and language skills for children. However, some families valued teaching of the majority language, while others desired access to their native language.
- Families preferred centres with lower ratios to increase educator-child interactions. While exact ratio numbers were not negotiated, families appreciated more individualized attention for their children.
- Most newcomer families shared that child care programming with similar cultural backgrounds – reflecting consistent beliefs and values – bridged connections and fostered a welcoming environment. Nevertheless, some families preferred the opposite and appreciated a centre that only focused on teaching the dominant culture.

- Families valued child care that encourages centre-family and family-family partnerships to build a support network. These partnerships can be built through meetings, field experiences, and community gatherings.
- Most newcomer families desired child care that emphasizes health and safety.
- Newcomer families desired educators that hold qualifications and credentials (e.g. bachelor's degree or training in child development). However, the preferred qualifications varied across families.

Findings from the newcomer-focused scoping review included the following educator dispositions:

- Families desired staff who are affectionate and supportive.
- Families preferred educators who are flexible in their work and can adapt programming and activities to fit the needs of newcomer children.
- Some newcomer families preferred child care that valued bi- and multilingualism to increase cultural safety. While the results were mixed, most families agreed that educators should embrace a flexible disposition towards language and view it in a holistic manner.
- Families appreciated educators who value learning experiences outside the centre and who take action to reduce tension around cultural differences (such as integrating cultural practices during mealtime and adjusting expectations).

Overall, findings from the scoping review revealed diverse viewpoints from Indigenous and newcomer families. For more detailed information on the scoping review findings, please see the scoping review reports (Freeborn et al., 2021a; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021b).

### ***Focus Groups***

Following the completion of the scoping review, researchers sought to engage Indigenous and newcomer families in a series of focus groups in order to further knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and values of families in Edmonton. Using results from the scoping review, researchers crafted questions for focus groups and then worked with community partners to identify participants.

Ultimately, no newcomer families were available to participate and, in response, the researchers sought to engage educators instead. Consequently, the focus groups consisted of educators who support Indigenous and/or newcomer families, along with Indigenous families. For more information on the focus group methods, please see the focus group reports (Freeborn et al., 2021b; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021c).

### ***Focus Group Findings***

As with the scoping review, the focus groups resulted in the creation of two documents, one focused on Indigenous families and their children, and another focused on newcomer families and their

children. Findings from the focus groups with Indigenous families and educators who work with them revealed the following:

- 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.
- For some Indigenous families, the role of trust is key in their relationships with educators.
- Families' abilities to access and engage with child care must be at the forefront of policy, program, and practice decisions.
- Educators feel that *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* supports their continued reflection and inquiry (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014) .
- Educators believe that a *practice of relationships* as described in *Flight* is essential for high-quality support of Indigenous families and children (Makovichuk et al., 2014).

Findings from the focus groups of educators who support newcomer families and children included the following:

- Consistent, multimodal (e.g. written, oral, etc.), and multilingual communication with newcomer families is paramount.
- Educators value the funds of knowledge of newcomer families and children, and seek to acknowledge, appreciate, and make space for families' and children's experiences and practices.
- There is tension between home language and majority language use in centres, with educators having to balance opportunities for varied language use with societal expectations around English proficiency and their own language skills.
- Openness and flexibility are important dispositions for supporting newcomer families and children, and allow educators to build relationships with them.
- Continual growth, seeking, and co-learning are essential to the work of educators, and they consider *Flight* integral to both their learning and practice (Makovichuk et al., 2014).

Overall, findings from the focus groups revealed a need for ongoing engagement of Indigenous and newcomer families in order to centre their voices in policies, programming, and practices. For more detailed information on the focus groups, including findings and further discussion, please see the focus group reports (Freeborn et al., 2021b; Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021c).

### **Case Studies**

The final stage of this research project consisted of case studies of high-quality child care centres in Edmonton. In order to centre the voices of educators and families, researchers asked focus group participants to identify possible sites for case studies. Four sites ultimately agreed to participate. Leadership from each site completed interviews with researchers and then shared documentation such as centre policies, examples of communication with families, and photographs of play spaces.

These interviews and documents were then compiled and analyzed as case studies. For more information on the case study methods, please refer to the case studies report (Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021a).

### *Case Study Findings*

The case studies included a range of child care sites, each with a different program focus (e.g. focused on Indigenous care or offering inclusive programming). Below, findings from across this range are described:

- A spectrum of approaches can support quality care and educator dispositions. There is not a "one size fits all" approach that is necessarily suitable to all child care contexts.
- For some centres with a particular focus supporting Indigenous or newcomer families and children, many policy, program, and practice decisions are made through the lens of culture.
- Centres with a particular focus supporting Indigenous and newcomer families and children promote a sense of belonging through elements such as books, musical instruments, images, and food.
- All case study sites, despite their programming focus, prioritize educator dispositions of continual reflection and deep curiosity, and support educators in pursuing professional development.
- The importance of educator dispositions that engage in a practice of relationships with children and families transcended all case study sites, with centre leadership recognizing the variety and complexity of family experiences within a strength-based approach.
- Educators in case study sites hold strong images of both children and families, and this disposition, as found in *Flight*, influences how educators plan for, engage with, and reflect on children and families (Makovichuk et al., 2014).

Overall, these case studies revealed a need for culturally responsive child care that is focused on individual families and children, and that stems from strong images of families and children. In order to achieve this, educators must engage in constant reflection and professional learning, and must work to continually engage in and deepen their practice of relationships with the families and children they support (Makovichuk et al., 2014). For more detailed information on the case studies, including findings and further discussion, please see the case studies report (Mardhani-Bayne et al., 2021a).



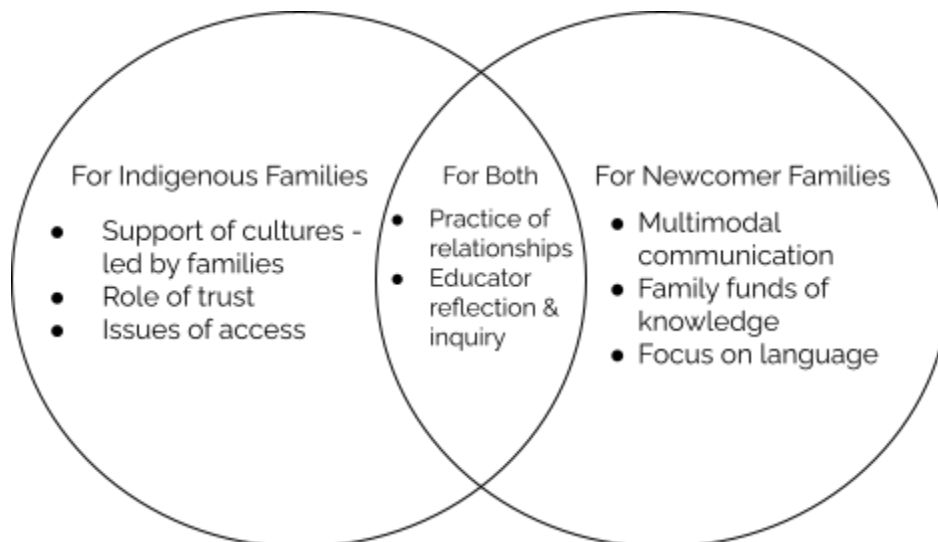
## Final Discussion

Across the entire research project, there were numerous distinctions made between the experiences of Indigenous families and newcomer families. First, Indigenous families sought opportunities that supported family and community culture, and sought autonomy and self determination in this process. In addition, an educator disposition of fostering trust in educator-family relationships is pivotal for some Indigenous families. Finally, issues of access such as cost and transportation were omnipresent in Indigenous families' ability to engage in quality child care experiences.

For newcomer families, multilingual communication and the consistent use of multimodal language choices were pivotal to a quality child care experience. Similarly, the role of both home languages and English required thoughtful reflection and consideration from educators. Furthermore, educators sought opportunities to engage in families' funds of knowledge and thoughtfully considered how to create opportunities for families to engage in programming and practices. Despite these distinctions, some strong parallels of experiences emerged from the qualitative inquiry. First, a practice of relationship supports high quality family engagement experiences with Indigenous as well as newcomer families. This would include specific dispositions such as openness and flexibility, particularly for newcomer families.

Furthermore, the use of *Flight* in child care programs to support programming and pedagogical approaches to working with children and families encourages educators to seek opportunities for continual growth, reflection, and co-learning (Makovichuk et al., 2014). This observation was made by educators with experience working with both Indigenous as well as newcomer families.

### Distinctions and Similarities between Indigenous and Newcomer Experiences



Overall, there is not a "one size fits all" approach when considering aspects of quality for child care centres in Edmonton. Educators and families engaged in the qualitative inquiry described the importance of knowing more about individual families and supporting them in specific ways. This aligns with the *practice of relationships* described in *Flight*, and demonstrates that individualized child care where educators are constantly learning about families is essential for high-quality care for both Indigenous and newcomer families (Makovichuk et al., 2014).

The varying strategies to realize quality suggest that both culturally focused programs as well as mainstream programs can achieve positive outcomes despite very divergent approaches. What remains critical is centre leadership support for the development of educator dispositions such as co-learning, seeking a practice of relationships with children and families, and conscious and reflective strong images of the child and family. Each of these will be discussed below.

In regards to dispositions, despite some uncovered distinctions, there is a general need for educators to continually seek opportunities for learning, reflection, and curiosity. The educator as a professional should not remain stagnant following their pre-professional education. Rather, educators should seek opportunities to further their professionalism and reflect on their practice as well as maintain a sense of curiosity for learning. According to *Flight*, a foundational educator disposition includes the active learning alongside children and families to inform curricular decisions (Makovichuk et al., 2014). These desires to learn can only be realized with the full support of and strategic decisions from a centre's leadership team.

Another theme transcending Indigenous and newcomer family experiences in this qualitative study was educator engagement with children and families, where educators build unique relationships with children and families based on the desire to meet them where they are at. This multifaceted and complex role in a practice of relationships with children and families is discussed in depth in *Flight* (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Recognizing that families are the experts in their children and thus know them in ways that educators cannot, educators view families and their relationships with them as pivotal in the care of children. Educators must also reflect on individual family practices that support children's identity in order to deepen their understanding and relationship with children and families. Through this process, educators can recognize the complexities of experiences for children and families within a strength-based approach.

Finally, educators holding a strong image of the child and family, according to *Flight*, can support educators with their "everyday experiences - influencing how [they] plan, how [they] engage, how [they] talk about children and how [they] interact with families" (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 39). The image of the child (and family) reflects educators' dispositions in relation to socio-cultural learning

and the role that cultures play in children's environments. For this reason, having a strong image of the child and family deeply influences relationships, and educators must actively seek regular opportunities to engage with their image of the child and family.

## Next Steps and Recommendations

Themes emerging from the scoping review, focus groups, and from the case study conversations highlight the role that educators have in meeting the needs of Indigenous and newcomer families. In response to this research project, documents will be created for both educators as well as centre leaders in the field. The purpose of these documents is to develop a series of one-page summaries on the themes derived from the research of both the focus groups as well as case studies that will offer educators and leaders tangible resources.

The documents will act as a resource for educators and centre leaders and will provide them with clear links to the research. Each document will begin with a definition and brief explanation of the theme, giving clarity and offering an introduction. Specific examples of the theme will then be included to communicate the idea and give more context for child care providers. Educator thoughts derived from the focus groups and case studies will be integrated into each document. In relation, the documents will reference *Flight* by drawing connections between the themes and Alberta's curriculum framework (Makovichuk et al., 2014). The aim is to connect the research with programming that is already being used by educators in the Edmonton area to encourage application of these ideas. A summary of identified barriers associated with each theme will then be outlined to bring awareness to the challenges that may arise. Along with this, a series of strategies will be explored to offer possible solutions and problem-solving techniques. Finally, the documents will close with a list of specific recommendations to offer educators and centre leaders practical ways to apply, explore, and follow-up with these findings.

## References

- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19-32.
- Freeborn, C., Mardhani-Bayne, A., & Soetaert, C. (2021a). *Quality indicators and dispositions in the early learning and child care sector: Learning from Indigenous families* (Scoping Review Report). Edmonton, AB: Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. Retrieved from <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications>
- Freeborn, C., Mardhani-Bayne, A., & Soetaert, C. (2021b). *What we heard about child care: Focus groups with educators and Indigenous families* (Focus Group Report). Edmonton, AB: Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. Retrieved from <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications>
- Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, P., & Thomas, N. (2014). *Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework*. Retrieved from [flightframework.ca](http://flightframework.ca)
- Mardhani-Bayne, A., Freeborn, C., & Soetaert, C. (2021a). *Leading from the field: Practices to support Indigenous and newcomer families* (Case Study Report). Edmonton, AB: Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. Retrieved from <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications>
- Mardhani-Bayne, A., Freeborn, C., & Soetaert, C. (2021b). *Quality indicators and dispositions in the early learning and child care sector: Learning from newcomer families* (Scoping Review Report). Edmonton, AB: Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. Retrieved from <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications>
- Mardhani-Bayne, A., Freeborn, C., & Soetaert, C. (2021c). *What we heard: Educators supporting newcomer families* (Focus Group Report). Edmonton, AB: Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. Retrieved from <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications>