2018

Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

Ontario

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Environments That Support Engagement and Expression

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We cannot help but be interested in our own good ideas: they give us a little boost of pleasure. "The having of wonderful ideas" (the expression is Duckworth's, 2006) is a guaranteed way to keep us involved, intent, and in love with the possibilities of a project. Such is *engagement – wanting* to do something, that is, making a commitment of energy and focus to a chosen direction of activity. *Expression* is the work of the body – hands and feet, head and heart – to create something outside ourselves by engaging with the world around us. It could be a conversation, a shared feeling in the smile between an infant and her sibling, a drawing or design with blocks, music on an instrument, or making up a play, creating a dance or a delicious meal, throwing a ball and watching it go, or repairing a broken machine. Engagement and expression are two of the four foundations for learning, alongside belonging and well-being, articulated in *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 7).

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Children describe anything they are told to do as work, and anything they *want* to do as *play* (King, 1979). When we play, explore, or create out of the authentic side of our being, we cannot help but be fully engaged. We have commitment to those things we ourselves decide to do. What is also clear is that multiple opportunities to use our creative side lead to high satisfaction, excitement, strong motivation, and, ultimately, contentment as human beings. John-Steiner, Connery, and Marjanovic-Shane put it beautifully:

> Thought, emotion, play, and creativity as well as the creation of relationships are an integrated whole. When some aspects of this totality are broken apart, learning and development are diminished (2010, p. 3).

A Positive View of the Child, a Positive View of the Educator

The Ontario Ministry of Education presents a view of the child as competent, curious, rich in potential, and capable of complex thinking (Callaghan, 2013, p. 12; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 14). Children are superbly capable of making meaning of their own experience (Wien, 2014). They appreciate having a choice to express that meaning, to share their interests and ideas for what to do after school. Incorporating multiple means for representation, action, expression, and engagement helps ensure that all children can be engaged in meaningful ways (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Educators[1] are equally curious, resourceful, rich in potential, and capable of complex thinking in reflecting on their programs, and educators also have rights to participate in expressing their creative side.

Connecting with Families

Educators have long understood that children "thrive in programs where they and their families are valued as active participants and contributors" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 4). Mohawk elder Marlene Brant-Castellano notes that Indigenous children are born into a web of relationships in which they unquestionably belong, whereas children in schools and mainstream settings must make a place for themselves in rule-governed institutions (Praamsma, 2017). The Ministry of Education asks educators to create participatory structures of belonging, as a matter of course, for all children

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1. The term "educator" has been used throughout this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

and families. After-school and recreational programs can focus on listening and understanding children, and respond with empathy and attunement to children's interests and life experiences at home and in their communities. An emphasis on relationships allows adults to be participants – co-learners with children – a situation in which everyone has a voice. Documentation can be an important tool for building the participatory structures that help educators to become co-learners (Wien, 2013). When documentation is shared with family members, they can become co-learners as well.

After School, What Do 9- to 12-Year-Olds Require? Freedom, Independence, and Opportunity

Children in after-school and recreational programs outside school require environments that complement but differ from those at school. Such programs offer experiences based in every child's freedom to have ideas, freedom of thought and movement, freedom from confinement, and freedom from adult control. Children who are 9 to 12 years old require more privacy, independence, and opportunity than younger children to determine their activity without adult intervention (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Huston & Ripke, 2006). And after school, they want more outside time and opportunities for vigorous physical activity, free of indoor constraints. This does not mean they do not require support or strong relationships. Their energy still requires channelling in positive ways, with choice of activity and easily accessible materials. But the capacity of children to take control of their own efforts is an essential aspect of their growth, well-being, and serious engagement with the world (Manning, 2006); after-school and recreational programs are environments where this capacity can find strong expression.

Expression is the capacity for children to try out their wonderful ideas in a safe and inclusive environment through the design and making of interesting projects in various art forms (visual, dance, music, drama, digital, etc.), based on children's interests and abilities. Designing through art forms, movement of the entire body, problem solving, elaboration of detail, anticipation of consequences, and meeting social limits on actions – all of these are part of expression and contribute towards building engagement, because they arise from the deepest parts of the psyche and connect to children's sense of identity. Such engagement and expression also support self-regulation and the construction of positive relationships across social groups (Clinton, 2013; Shanker, 2013).

How Do We Create Learning Environments That Support Engagement and Expression?

Three key factors in all learning environments are the organization of space, the organization of time, and the use of repetitive routines, or scripts for action. First, let's recognize that after-school programs and other recreational programs often take place in spaces that are not optimal for children's and caregivers' use. Such programs often have budgetary strictures and operate in the corners of the day, under time constraints. These factors can quickly throw programs into scripts for action that "get by" but are not optimal.

Questioning Our Scripts for Action

Scripts for action are repetitive routines that we use to get ourselves through daily life – for example, how to get dressed in the morning, how to drive a car, where to shop for food, and how to wash our hair. After-school and recreational programs have many such routines: how to get children inside and outside, and how to offer snacks, make materials available, or offer time in the gym. Transitions are a prime example of scripts for action, repeated the same way day after day.

Taking Scripts for Action for Granted as Normal

The repeated patterns of such routine tasks become automatic to us. And once such scripts are established, we take them for granted as normal, "the way things should be done". We seldom think of changing them until something disrupts the script.

We all need scripts for action; they are absolutely necessary to get us through the day. They help us because they free us to think of other more important things, but they can also hinder us because we forget to think that something could be done in a different, more creative or meaningful way. It's interesting for us to ask, What am I taking for granted in this situation that I could imagine doing differently?

Given these parameters, it is intriguing to ask ourselves how we can move towards richer, more supportive contexts for 9- to 12-year-olds that allow them to create with joy.

Helpful Conditions of the Setting

Providing a Calm, Uncluttered Space

A clean, uncluttered space in a neutral palette offers calmness and tranquillity, helpful starting points before and after school (see Callaghan, 2013; Lewin-Benham, 2011, pp. 66–79; Shanker, 2013, pp. 12–21).

A well-organized space with accessible materials and the opportunity to be outdoors at will offers children choice of activity and freedom of movement.

Documentation of children's presence – for example, in photos of them in activity, in their words in print that reflect what they think and say, in their drawings, paintings, designs, and plans – supports children's sense of belonging and offers families assurance that their children are cherished (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

Access to the outdoors and inclusion of natural materials indoors keep children closer to the natural world, its rhythms, and the contentment, healing, and sense of connection that nature provides (Cobb, 1977; Wagamese, 2012; Wells & Evans, 2003).

Providing Unhurried Time

Children 9 to 12 years old in after-school and recreational programs require free time as a complement to the intensity of their school days – time to decide what they will do, to relax, to play, to be themselves and not be subject to further requirements from adults beyond, of course, the need to respect social limits in treating others well. Time should be loosely structured and flexible, and provide ample opportunities for choice of activity, for rest, and for older children's own pace of activity to dominate.

Providing Conditions That Allow Children to Generate Ideas

Malaguzzi, as one example, argued that "once children are helped to perceive themselves as authors or inventors, once they are helped to discover the pleasure of inquiry, their motivation and interest explode" (Gandini, 2012, p. 44). Settings that welcome children and their families and offer participatory structures for being together, and in which educators are viewed as co-learners, open up spaces for new ideas to occur. Offered below, in the next few sections, is one example of how something new, emergent, and creative came about in an after-school program for older children. The full story appears in Wien, Sampson, West, and Bigelow (2014, pp. 105–117).

Opening Up a Taken-for-Granted Script for Action

Matthew Sampson was walking children from school to the child care setting, and two older boys complained that their homework assignment would be "so boring": "so boring" was their taken-for-granted script for homework. Sampson suggested that perhaps they could make it "fun and exciting", altering their flat affect towards a task to be done with the idea that they could generate something new. The boys caught this change in feeling; when back at the centre, they began to create characters and then draw them. As they drew, they became more and more excited.

The boys "were flooded with ideas" and "decided to create a 'post-apocalyptic zombie newscast' in comic book form" (Wien, Sampson, West, & Bigelow, 2014, p. 106). They kept drawing for several days after school, and other children joined them, adding characters, each with its own room (a piece of paper) to live in on a submarine. The first two boys taped their drawings together, and soon other "rooms" were taped to those edges. Three weeks later, the homework assignment was long completed and the drawing was still expanding. So many papers were taped together that the whole was too large for any table, and more and more children had flocked to the activity. The children were creating their own "zombie world".

Providing Materials That Support the Ideas

In this after-school program, it is important to note that paper, drawing pencils, tape, and scissors were all easily accessible, as was a large table where the children could draw together, in a small room that the centre used as a studio.

Listening to Children's Ideas, Expressing Interest, and Relating to the Ideas without Trying to Control Them

About four weeks into the drawing efforts, difficulty arose for the educators in the centre. The children began to mass produce a zombie army – trucks, tanks, jets, parachuting turtles, grenades, bombs, machine guns, sharks that spewed money, and so on (Wien, Sampson, West, & Bigelow, 2014, p. 108). The violence in the drawings upset some of the educators in the centre. Sampson and co-worker Justin West, however, saw that the violence was contained in the drawings and that the children's impulse to create together was so strong it was building

a culture of cooperation among the many children now participating. But the children's generation of war settings and events created continuing tension for the centre, sparking ongoing, unresolved discussions and reflection for months.

Connecting Children's Activity to Community Places

West, a student at the local art college, arranged for visits between art students and the main older boys who created the zombie world. Both adults and children could share their drawings and paintings during these visits, which culminated in the zombie world creation being shown for a week, alongside West's paintings, in the college art gallery, which was open to the public. Families attended, and the acknowledgment of the children's work, in the art gallery, was an affirmation for all concerned.

Facilitating through Indirect Means Instead of through Direct Instruction

If educators think of pedagogy as the study of ways of learning and teaching, they can see that facilitating through indirect means is one way to support a love of learning, creating, and relationship building. Malaguzzi argues that "the central act of adults, therefore, is to activate, especially indirectly, the meaning making competencies of children as a basis of all learning" (Gandini, 2012, p. 55). When educators provide the conditions that allow others to have their own wonderful ideas, their engagement and the expression that follows become deeply meaningful and memorable. Zombie world continued for over a year, infecting the entire centre, making those involved wonder about the children's concept of a zombie (ideas leapt from aliens to military personnel).

Goleman (2006), a renowned researcher of social intelligence, points out that "a simple sign that a child feels he has a safe haven is going out to play" (p. 178); peer play also has significant benefits, such as learning "how to negotiate power struggles, how to cooperate and form alliances, and how to concede with grace" (p. 178). With their zombie world on paper, these after-schoolers had created their own "outside world" of play, a safe haven that they were free to inhabit imaginatively and alter at will.

How Does Learning Happen? "asks educators to be attuned to what children know, what they wonder about, and their working theories about the world around them. Educators engage with, observe, and listen to children. They discuss with other educators, as well as with children and families and caregivers, the possibilities for children's further exploration in increasingly complex ways.

All are co-learners, constructing knowledge together" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 15). It is this learning together that so helps build community among children, educators, and their families.

Questions for Reflection

- Which interactions with children are most meaningful to you? Why? How can these interactions be expanded?
- How might you alter your environment so that it is less cluttered, clearer in organization, more inviting to families, and more participatory and relaxing, so as to reduce stress?
- How might you open up the organization of time so that there are no obvious transitions (wait-time with nothing to do), less adult control, and more freedom to choose for older children?
- How might you open up tight scripts for action that determine activity too rigidly? Here are a few ideas that others have found helpful:
  - encountering unusual materials (what happens if educators bring in a typewriter, an egg beater, a digital photo tablet, rolls of duct tape?);
  - asking the children to propose a group project;
  - watching for a "windhorse effect" (Wien, 2014), that is, activities that generate a whirlwind of positive, excited energy in which children cannot wait to create, participate, and be part of their community, as in the example of zombie world.
- What have you found works to open up scripts for action in your setting?
- If you can see a possibility, can you find a way to make a part of it a reality?
- Can you find at least a dozen contexts in your environment that invite children to be creative, to play with ideas, feelings, and others, to design and make, to explore and have fun? When creating a context – an environment for an activity – it is helpful to consider the following five aspects:
  - a space or "landscape" in which the activity might occur
  - the necessary materials arranged in view for use
  - ample unhurried time
  - someone who documents when something meaningful occurs
  - a display of documentation for review, discussion, and study with families and others

Expression of ideas is a powerful motivator to others, conveying the message that it is possible to have ideas, play with them, and make something out of them. Such expression makes us calm, happy, and gratified, and keep us engaged in our world.

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Dr. Carol Anne Wien is professor emerita and a senior scholar in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. She is widely known for her work on emergent curriculum and pedagogical documentation, which is inspired by the Reggio Emilia experience. She is the author of *The Power of Emergent Curriculum* and several other books; editor of *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom*; and co-author, with Karyn Callaghan and Jason Avery, of *Documenting Children's Meaning*. She speaks frequently at conferences and workshops across Canada and in the United States. She loves the arts — traces of the creative spirit – and constantly attempts to build them into daily life.

Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

Each Child Brings a Special Gift: Nurturing Indigenous Identity and Belonging

Pamela Rose Toulouse, PhD

Introduction

How can adults working with Indigenous children (aged 9–12 years) in the Canadian context foster a sense of self, belonging, and identity? What are the key elements of a quality experience for Indigenous children attending programs outside of the classroom? To begin answering these questions, we start with these facts:

- The term "Indigenous" refers to the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples of Canada.
- Indigenous children (aged 14 and under) represent 28 per cent of the total Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2017).

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- Indigenous children, in comparison with non-Indigenous children, are twice as likely to live in a lone parent home or with grandparents (Statistics Canada, 2017).
- Thirty-four per cent of Indigenous children living in Ontario live in poverty, compared with 15 per cent of non-Indigenous children (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2017).
- In some Indigenous communities, the life stage of children aged 7 to 14 years is often called "The Fast Life". This stage is ripe with growth, curiosity, and challenges (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011a).

Adults working in programs in which Indigenous children are present must address these complexities in a comprehensive and respectful manner. This brief examines the latest research and provides strategies to nurture the Indigenous child in a holistic way.

> Most Indigenous communities have teachings regarding the life stages of a human being. These teachings often include aspects of The Fast Life as described in this research brief.

Research Findings

In 2014, the Ministry of Education released *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*, which discusses concrete ways to enhance the learning experiences of children in the province. Several themes and key components from this document align with Indigenous worldviews, pedagogies, and approaches to child development. Figure 1 is a representation of those key ideas infused within an Indigenous model of teaching and learning.

Mother Earth: Exploration, Play, and Inquiry

The Educator: Information, Compassion, and Resources

The Indigenous Child: Balance in the Physical, Emotional, Intellectual, and Spiritual Domains

The Family: Culture, Language, and Engagement

The Community: Relationships, Values, and Connections

Figure 1.
Holistic Continuum of Learning

The Holistic Continuum of Learning model builds upon the foundations for learning and development in *How Does Learning Happen?* and represents key elements of a quality experience for Indigenous children. This holistic continuum of learning has the child at the centre, where balance in the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains is the priority (Toulouse, 2011). Children are also surrounded by teachers – their families, their communities, educators,[1] and experiences with the natural world ("Mother Earth") – that can affect that balance (Best Start Resource Centre, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Adults working with children in the middle years may be challenged by and gifted with characteristics and behaviours associated with this phase of development, called The Fast Life. This is a time to celebrate the rapid physical growth and changes that children will undergo. It is also a crucial time in children's intellectual development, as their curiosity and love for learning can be strengthened (or broken) during this period (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011a; Toulouse, 2011). As a child gets to the later stage of The Fast Life, emotional growth, maturation, and independence become front and centre. The Fast Life is truly the process of moving from being a child to becoming a respectful youth who is conscientious and aware. This is the time for discovering the gifts (i.e., skills, values, knowledge) that each child possesses and providing each child with opportunities to further explore those attributes. The core philosophy of The Fast Life is based upon the circle teachings, in which no one is to be left out and each child is to be valued and loved (Ball, 2012; Best Start Resource Centre, 2011a). Every teacher and influence in a child's life contributes to the child's development, as explored below.

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1. The term "educator" has been used throughout this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

The Family

The entire family represents the cultural dynamic of the child. Meaningful programs recognize and support the role of the Indigenous child's family as a conveyer of culture, language, and engagement. Adults working with children in the middle years need to understand the dynamics of Indigenous families. For example, most Indigenous children have significant people in their lives who are not related to them biologically (McCalman, Heyeres, Campbell, Bainbridge, Chamberlain, Strobel, & Ruben, 2017). Indigenous families are often extended groupings in which traditional clan members, Elders, or close friends take on a trusted familial role (e.g., auntie, uncle). Therefore it is important to really know the backgrounds of the children, including languages spoken at home. When planning activities with Indigenous children that involve print (e.g., instructions, books, digital media), educators should use a respectful, bilingual approach that recognizes that children may, as part of their everyday existence, speak non-standard English and/or French (also called FNMI dialects or English/French as a second dialect) (Ball, 2009; Toulouse, February 2013). The inclusion of mother languages in basic greetings is a good place to start (e.g., Anishinaabemowin, Haudenosaunee, Mushkegowuk, Michif, Inuktitut). Engagement with families is built upon time, trust, and understanding. Indigenous peoples value knowing who the educator is as a human being first, before that person's credentials are presented. Relationships are at the core of engagement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

> **Basic Greetings (similar to "hello")**
> *Aanii* (Ojibwe)
> *Shé:kon* (Mohawk)
> *Waachiyaah* (Cree)
> *Tanshi* (Michif)
> *Ainngai* (Inuktitut)

The Community

"Involved", "valued", and "connected" are words that illustrate the role of the community in authentic programs with Indigenous children. Nearly every urban centre in Ontario has an Indigenous Friendship Centre or Aboriginal Health Access Centre. These organizations can provide those community linkages to resources and events that are based in Indigenous traditions and needs (Best Start Resource Centre, 2011b). After-school programs in rural settings often have First Nations communities

located close by, and it is important for programs serving Indigenous children to make contact with cultural resource people in these communities. Each First Nation typically has an education department, or a cultural coordinator who has knowledge and skills that cannot be replicated. These types of experiences – learning with or from cultural resource people and participating in community events – are of value for all children. It is important that proper protocols are followed when connecting with communities (McCalman et al., 2017). The presentation of an appropriate gift begins the conversation for drawing upon the services and contributions of the community. To find out what the appropriate gift is, educators should contact the organizations or community and ask. The community is a teacher that fosters understanding and relationships between the children and the adults that work with them (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

> **Examples of Gifts**
>
> Tobacco
> (sacred medicine)
>
> Your time
> (with a visit)
>
> Food
> (traditional or contemporary)
>
> Donation
> (to a community program or project)

The Educator

"Informed", "compassionate", and "resourceful" are descriptors that encompass the character of the educator in relevant programs with Indigenous children. In these programs, the educator has many roles (e.g., teacher, counsellor, nurse, learner, mentor, event planner), and this by nature leads to a complex level of resourcefulness. Working with Indigenous children requires a clear plan for accessing Indigenous resources and connecting with the families and communities (Greenwood, 2016; Pearson, 2016). Being informed about the challenges that Indigenous children face and the strengths that they inherently possess is also key. Compassion is a fundamental part of the unwritten job description of an educator. Knowing and facilitating an educational environment in which the gifts of each child are nurtured is a highly valued skill (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017). This is especially important as Indigenous children in the middle years enter The Fast Life that is often imbued with awkwardness, curiosity, and change. The educator is part of the living story and development of identity essential for all children (Ball, 2012; Pearson, 2016).

Mother Earth

Exploration, play, and inquiry are conditions that include planned (and unplanned) interactions with Mother Earth in programs in which Indigenous children are present. Respect for the earth and the concept of stewardship are teachings that Indigenous peoples share (Toulouse, 2011). Therefore, programs that Indigenous children attend must include connections to Mother Earth and her children (e.g., animals, plants, the elements, the seasons). Mother Earth is one of the greatest teachers that our children will have, and it is important that caring for her is part of the program (Ntelioglou & Peterson, 2017). Indigenous children who are in The Fast Life stage are at the peak of curiosity in their development and also possess the ability to make positive changes. They have the language and skills to be a part of projects that focus on taking care of Mother Earth (e.g., Water Walks, community gardens). Indigenous children need that time in nature to explore and play individually and with others (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). These types of experiences are at the core of their creativity and the fostering of their emotional or spiritual intelligence (Greenwood, 2016; Toulouse, 2011).

Considerations

How can adults working with Indigenous children in the middle years foster in them a sense of self, belonging, and identity? The answer to this question is rooted in attaining a balance in the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of learning (Toulouse, 2011). The following considerations are critical to include in programs running outside of the regular classroom:

The Physical

- learning spaces that have equipment, posters, messages, and symbols in the original languages and cultures of the child (even if they are not fluent in either)
- meals and snacks that are provided as part of the program in response to issues surrounding food security
- memos and communication with parents/guardians that are accessible and include original languages of the families (e.g., basic greetings as an introduction)
- acknowledgment of traditional Indigenous land (e.g., the Greater Toronto Area is the treaty territory of the Dish With One Spoon) at the beginning of the program

The Emotional

- the presence of respectful humour as a way to establish that learning is the seamless integration of the informal and formal
- partnerships with parents/guardians and the communities in planning activities together (e.g., regular programs, special events, and field trips)
- celebrating of milestones in the child's life (e.g., retention or completion of program, traditional rites of passage, birthdays)
- educators' sharing of details of their life stories (e.g., their families, pets, hobbies, special memories) as a way to connect with the child and their family

The Intellectual

- availability of videos, books, and other resources featuring Indigenous authors and voices
- on-going check-ins (informal and formal) with Indigenous children and families regarding the benefits and areas of growth for the program
- learning strategies that include hands-on experiences, time for reflection, and real-world connections
- fostering of curiosity, inquiry, and play by providing quality time and diverse experiences for the child

The Spiritual

- presence of Elders, Métis Senators, and cultural resource people as part of the regular program
- site visits (real and virtual) to places of significance to Indigenous peoples in the area (i.e., land-based activities that reinforce cultural teachings)
- understanding of and compassion about the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and colonization on Indigenous children
- acceptance that the relationship between the educator and the child is a sacred one and that the effects of that relationship will be felt for many years to come

Conclusion

Indigenous children in the middle years come from diverse societies that are rich in culture, language, and history. The adult who works with them is faced with The Fast Life, a stage of child development that has its challenges and strengths. It is crucial to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but the acceptance of time and commitment to forming relationships is key (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Each child brings a special gift to this world, and it is our shared responsibility to nurture this.

Questions for Reflection

- What Indigenous considerations (e.g., physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual) does your program excel at or need to work on?
- How does The Fast Life stage affect the delivery of your program? What has it taught you and your team?
- What can you or your program do to focus more on time, trust, and building relationships with Indigenous children and families?

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Dr. Pamela Rose Toulouse is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Laurentian University. Originally from the community of Sagamok First Nation, she is a proud Ojibwe/Odawa woman who comes from a long line of educators. Dr. Toulouse is well known for her contributions in Indigenous education. She is the author of more than fifty resources, chairs various committees, works with a variety of school boards, presents regularly at conferences, and is active in her areas of research. She is a National 3M Teaching Excellence Award Fellow and has been cited in *Maclean's* magazine as one of the most popular professors at Laurentian University. Dr. Toulouse continues her life journey in the field of education by representing her Nation and profession in a respectful and meaningful way.
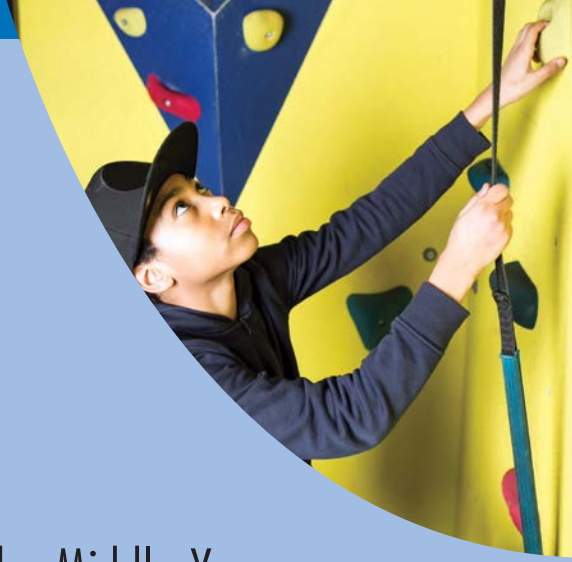
Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

Strengthening Children's Resilience and Mental Health

Laura Lynne Armstrong, PhD, CPsych

Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to provide helpful strategies to build children's resilience and well-being. While the brief focuses on child-centred strategies, resilience must also be considered within the context of intersecting external factors. Intervention and prevention mechanisms need to address family, community, and broader social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors.

What Is Resilience?

Children who are **resilient** have the emotional, social, and behavioural skills to successfully navigate life's challenges. Resilient children face hardships courageously and may even thrive when confronted with difficulties.

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Why Is Resilience Important?

Mental health can be understood as a continuum along which people may move, influenced by multiple interrelated factors. Providing constructive supports for resilience helps children learn skills for coping that can contribute to lifelong mental health and well-being. In Ontario, up to 21 per cent of children and youth – or approximately 650,000 – experience mental illness (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth for Ontario, 2015). The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2012) strongly recommends resilience-based prevention approaches for children, carried out in schools, after-school programs, and other organizations that children frequently attend.

Resilience and Meaning Mindsets

Organizations and individuals can **support and build resilience** in children by helping them cultivate a **meaning mindset**. For children, meaning can be found in the following thoughts and behaviours (Armstrong, in press; Armstrong, 2016; Armstrong & Manion, 2015; Frankl, 1986; Wong & Wong, 2012):

- believing in their own ability and skills to challenge unhelpful thoughts, problem solve, and take a healthy, realistic stance toward challenges
- in the face of difficult feelings, taking helpful action to feel less sad, angry, or scared
- helping others, volunteering, and giving to or creating something for others
- developing and maintaining positive social connections (e.g., secure, supportive relationships with adults and peers), and feeling valued by others
- being regularly involved in valued activities (e.g., sports, music, or other extracurricular activities) that they look forward to, would have difficulty giving up, and perceive as "fun"
- having curiosity, and openness to learning and other new experiences
- experiencing meaningful moments (e.g., experiencing nature, being excited by learning, noticing everyday joys)
- expressing gratitude or appreciation in everyday experiences
- maintaining hope, even in the face of difficulties

To help build resilience in children, it can be a good exercise
for educators to reflect with children and families on some of the ways
that children find meaning, as listed above, and then identify
specific ways to cultivate meaning mindsets.

Strengthening Meaning Mindsets

In a study of over 100 children, aged 6 to 12, from Eastern Ontario and Quebec, our research team found that having a meaning mindset predicted good mental health (e.g., fewer reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, obsessions, and behavioural concerns) (St. John & Armstrong, submitted; St. John, 2017). With children aged 9 to 12, we developed a group-based educational intervention that uses original music and hands-on activities to teach meaning mindset skills for resilience (Armstrong, in press). In our pilot research, the program significantly enhanced both meaning mindset and mental health in the participants, compared with a control group (Armstrong, in press).

Cultivating a **meaning mindset** fits well with the Ministry of Education's *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). More specifically, cultivating such a mindset involves creating programs that are based on a view of children as competent, capable, curious, and rich in potential, and focusing on the following four foundations for learning:

1) **belonging:** connecting with others, feeling valued by others, forming relationships, contributing to the community or to a group, connecting to the natural world

2) **well-being:** maintaining physical and mental health through self-care, sense of self, and self-regulation skills

3) **engagement:** being involved and focused, curious, and open, thereby developing problem-solving and creative-thinking skills

4) **expression or communication:** communicating and listening to others, developing the ability to convey information, ideas, and feelings through bodies, words, or materials

Strategies for Strengthening Resilience in Everyday Life

Below are several strategies, grounded in current literature and our research findings, that organizations could use to enhance children's resilience and mental health:

1) **Heathy thinking:** Existing programs, such as after-school programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, or other community services, can teach children about healthy thinking. More specifically, such programs can coach children about their "self-talk" – the many thoughts going on in a person's mind all the time. Most self-talk is reasonable or helpful, but some can be negative, unhelpful, or unrealistic.

   Negative thoughts are those that make feelings like sadness, fear, or anger build. The thoughts that cause negative feelings may also cause problematic behaviours, such as avoidance, giving up, refusal, meltdowns, aggression, poor performance, or other undesirable responses.

   Negative thoughts are generally "musts", "can't dos", "shoulds", or "awfulizing thoughts" and can include the following:

   - **Worry:** Expecting something bad, such as danger or embarrassment, **must** be going to happen when the likelihood of this is unrealistic:
       - "They must be saying something bad about me."
       - "I might make a mistake and people will laugh at me."
       - "Something bad is going to happen to me."

     Combat worry with more realistic thinking:

     > "What is the worst thing that could happen? What is the likelihood that would happen? If my friend said this to me, what would I say to my friend?"

   - **Self-defeating talk:** Inner self-talk that highlights weaknesses and perceived defects (can't dos), rather than strengths; a critical inner voice that loves to compare oneself to others and notice one's shortcomings:
       - "I'm so stupid."
       - "I can't do anything right."
       - "Other kids are so much better than me at this."
       - "I didn't play well. I'm useless."

Combat negative, "can't do" thinking with "can":

> "Have there been times when I have been good at this? What are some things that I am good at? What things do I like about me?"

- **Perfectionism:** Perfectionistic thoughts are also self-critical. The focus of perfectionistic thoughts, though, tends to be on performance failure, imperfections, or mistakes. Children may think that they or others **should** be perfect and that the consequences of perceived mistakes are more terrible or awful than they will actually be. Children who have perfectionistic thoughts may have meltdowns if things do not go right or may refuse to try things if they are worried about making mistakes:
  - "I don't want to try that because it won't go right."
  - "It wasn't right. I have to redo it."

Combat perfectionistic self-talk with more practical thinking:

> "Difficult things take practice. I will do well if I work hard. Nobody's perfect. What did I do well this time? What could
> I do better next time?"

- **Hopelessness:** Expecting that things will never get better or change, that no matter what they do things will be awful or terrible:
  - "Bad things always happen to me."
  - "No one understands me."
  - "I can't take it anymore."

Counter hopeless thinking with helpful, more realistic thoughts:

> "What would I say to help another child if they said this to me? Is this always true, or are there times when this is not true?"

Feelings that result from negative thinking are "alarm bells" to indicate something is happening and that action should be taken. The process of **recognizing feelings** presents an opportunity to choose thoughts and behaviours that can be more helpful. Adults can help children recognize and express their feelings in ways such as the following:

- In everyday routines, when children are calm, adults can speak to them one-on-one about a time in the day when they seemed sad, angry, or scared. Label the feeling and clarify whether it is what they felt at the time. Labelling the feeling enhances emotional literacy (feeling awareness) and makes children more aware of these feelings in the future. Recognizing their alarm bells gives them a chance to tune in to their thoughts.
- When reading books to a group of children, highlight the feelings that the characters are expressing and ask the children what the characters did to feel better.
- Tell a story, such as this one, for example:
  – Imagine that two children, Kerry and Sani, were both interested in the lead role in a play in an after-school program. Neither is picked for the role. Their friend Ali ended up in the lead role, while Kerry and Sani both got non-speaking parts in the play. Kerry thought, "This is terrible. I must be bad at acting. I never want to be in a play again." Sani thought, "I'm disappointed that I wasn't picked, but it's nice that my friend Ali was picked. I guess this means I'll have more time for playing with my friends after school since I won't have to memorize lines!" Kerry had a negative thought about the situation, while Sani had a helpful thought. In every situation, children can have different thoughts that lead to different feelings. People will feel bad if they're having negative thoughts and could feel a bit better if they are able to look at the situation in a different way. Also, teaching that two people can think and feel differently in the same situation builds social skills, such as being able to see the world from another person's point of view.

2) **Healthy behavioural tools.** Have a group of children come up with a list of brief, fun activities that they feel good doing (e.g., listening to music, kicking a ball, talking to a friend, writing a story, doodling, using a fidget toy). When they are feeling sad, angry, scared, or overwhelmed, they can use one of the feel-good activities to help themselves calm down or feel somewhat better.

Such activities are not meant as an avoidance of challenging feelings, but rather as a way to calm down a little bit in order to be able to think or problem solve in a more helpful way. When having distressing emotions, children find thinking clearly difficult. If you found your toes at the edge of cliff, could you focus on what you were thinking about? You'd need to step back from the edge of the cliff to move from survival brain to thinking brain.

In everyday routines, having a list of feel-good activities may be helpful so that adults can gently remind children what they can try to do as negative feelings start to occur. Also, getting to know common predictable triggers for a specific child (e.g., transitions, challenging work, obsessions, frustration), and helping the child use calming strategies when in situations that trigger unhelpful behaviours or feelings, may minimize the chance that the feelings or behaviours get more intense (Green & Ablon, 2006).

3) **"Me to we" environment.** Community organizations, after-school programs, schools, and other programs that children attend can work to foster a "me to we" environment in their everyday activities. More specifically, creating or doing something for others helps to build a sense of meaning (Frankl, 1986). Therefore, creating an environment where children are regularly involved in giving to or helping others – that is, in meaning building – can potentially build their resilience to mental health issues. Furthermore, working together toward a common goal and in shared activities also helps to build peer connections.

4) **Warm, supportive environment: Affection before correction and connection.** Think of moods as being like a traffic light: moods can fall under the categories of "green" (calm, peaceful, relaxed, neutral), "yellow" (a bit nervous, disappointed, agitated, frustrated), and "red" (angry, fearful, highly distressed, expressively sad). Addressing situations in which children are in yellow or red moods is challenging, because in such situations children do not process information in the brain as well as they do when they are calmer. It is still possible, however, to connect with a child who is feeling strong emotions. When a child is in a yellow or red mood, to address a concern in the moment, parents, teachers, or activity leaders can comment on the feeling – label it (e.g., "You're feeling sad that the boys didn't pass you the ball") and acknowledge the difficulty so that the child feels understood (e.g., "It's hard to be left out"). This shows warmth and affection, making the child feel valued. "Feeling" language also helps build longer-term self-regulation skills, and makes the child feel heard and understood. Even in frustrating situations, the feeling can be acknowledged first ("You're feeling angry"). Following this, more positive behaviours can be encouraged by stating the adult's concern

("I understand you're frustrated that you made a mistake in your work, but it's not okay to leave the room"). Follow this with an offer to help (e.g., "Would you like me to help you figure out what was tricky for you?"), which can lead the child to feel supported and build a positive relationship with the supportive adult (see Figure 1). Later, when the child is calm, problem solving for such situations in the future may be helpful (e.g., "Next time you're frustrated with your school work, instead of leaving the room, is there something else that you could try instead?").
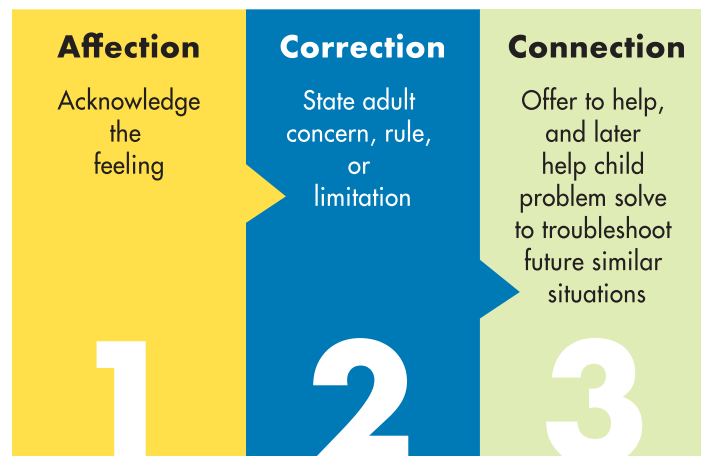

Figure 1. Affection, Correction, Connection

5) Culture of engagement. As meaningful extracurricular engagement is associated with well-being (Armstrong & Manion, 2015), creating an environment that provides many opportunities for child involvement in regular activities may be helpful. Finding out children's specific interests may help in directing them to activities that may be a good fit for them. Simply involving a child in any activity is not associated with meaning and well-being. Children have to be engaged in something that they find fun and look forward to for it to be meaningful and promote mental health.

6) Openness. Community organizations, clubs, and other environments can build an openness to learning, involvement in activities, and new experiences by praising effort rather than intelligence or some fixed, unchangeable quality (Dweck, 2007). "Fixed mindsets" in relation to any activity are predictive of fear of failure and reluctance to put in effort (Dweck, 2007). Instead of saying "You're such a good dancer" or "You're so smart", try "You worked really hard to do well at that" or "You must have practised really hard to do so well in that math contest." In circumstances of praise and celebration, there may also

be opportunities to enhance a child's self-analysis skills and problem-solving abilities. More specifically, to further reduce the potential for perfectionism and fear of failure, an adult activity leader or parent can say to a child, "What were you really proud of when you did X?" and "What would you do differently next time if you could change anything?"

7) **Gratitude (appreciating the moment).** Sometimes modern-day life is fast paced, and enjoying the moment may be challenging for children. After children have participated in an enjoyable activity (e.g., walking in nature, drawing pictures, playing a game) or while engaging in the activity, ask them what they like or liked about the activity. Noticing what they appreciate as it happens or after it happens may create in children an attitude of gratitude toward life experiences.

Conclusion

Building resilience in children to support their mental health can happen in the home and the community. Environments that foster a **meaning mindset** – that promote healthy thinking and behaviour, problem solving, helping or giving to others, meaningful extracurricular engagement, social connection, skills to build openness to experiences, and gratitude – enhance resilience in children.

Questions for Reflection

On your own or with others, use these questions as a starting point for thinking about your everyday experiences and practices:

- How well does my environment currently cultivate in children a meaning mindset – helping them learn to choose healthy thinking and actions in the face of challenges, encouraging them to give to others, fostering gratitude, engaging them in personally valued activities, and supporting them as they build and maintain positive relationships with others?
- In my environment, what are the gaps in cultivating a meaning mindset?
  - What can I do to support children in developing healthy thinking?
  - In what ways can I better use "feeling" language in everyday activities or in providing feedback about children's behaviour?
  - How can I better develop in children an attitude of giving to others in everyday activities?

- In what ways could I better praise successes to reward effort rather than an innate quality? What am I currently saying to children when they succeed at an activity? How do I respond to failure?
- How can we practise gratitude on a daily basis so that it becomes part of the everyday routine?
- In what ways could my organization communicate resilience-based strategies to parents so that skills children learn outside of the home can also be developed within the home?

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2018

Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

The Power of Positive Relationships

Mary Gordon, CM, ONL, LLD, and Lisa Bayrami, PhD

Importance of Positive and Healthy Relationships

Children develop, learn, and thrive best in the context of positive and healthy relationships with key people in their lives. The quality of children's interactions with family members, caregivers, educators,[1] peers, and the larger community is central to their well-being. Relationships are one of the strongest predictors of children's well-being (Newland, Lawler, Giger, Roh, & Carr, 2015). Typically, children first develop an emotional attachment to their parents/primary caregivers, which in later years extends to include others in their world (e.g., peers, teachers, other caring adults). The powerful attachments and relationships that develop with these key individuals support children's social and emotional health and well-being (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

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1. The term "educator" is used in this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

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Therefore, we must ask ourselves, how do we create the conditions that support and enrich these vital interactions that 9- to 12-year-old children need to thrive both within and outside the family and during and after the regular school day? The answer is by fostering warm and responsive relationships with caring adults in safe, caring, and inclusive spaces. These relationships contribute to a foundation of healthy growth for children in this age group.

Research shows that feeling connected to caring adults, peers, and the community contributes positively to children's engagement, particularly emotional engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). For adults working with children, nourishing these connections also leads to higher levels of engagement, positive emotions, and lower levels of negative emotions (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). When an adult connects with a child on an emotional level, it affects the child's perception of the support that adult could provide (Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michalowski, 2009). When children feel safe and supported, they are freed up to engage, focus, learn, grow, and feel happy.

Strategies for Building and Strengthening Positive and Healthy Relationships

Eliminating Perceptual Biases

Our perceptions have an impact on our behaviour. Adults working with children aged 9 to 12 should adopt an unbiased approach, which will positively influence the adults' thoughts, feelings, and actions. Recognizing and working to overcome their biases is the first step adults can take to gain a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics, interests, and experiences of the children and families they work with. For instance, asking families about their culture, what is important to them, and what their values are will provide more insight that will inform the development of an unbiased approach to working with children and their families. Adults must appreciate that Canadian families are diverse, with varied gender, cultural, linguistic, and social expectations and contexts. Recognizing and valuing the differences and commonalities between children's fundamental familial and extra-familial settings are important for fostering inclusion. Empathy is central in guiding this process.

For instance, during Ramadan, observant Muslim families fast for an entire month. Although it is a special time, it may also be a stressful one, given that such families do not eat until after sunset, and some children go to sleep later than usual. This may mean that Muslim children have less energy than usual

throughout the day, which will probably affect their behaviour. By being aware of children's personal contexts, adults can better empathize with and understand children and engage them in activities that are better aligned with their levels of energy. Taking a child's perspective, considering what the child is feeling, and demonstrating empathetic behaviours not only helps to model positive behaviours but also helps to build a deeper and different understanding of the child, supporting a healthier connection. Research shows that empathy plays an important role in increasing prosocial behaviour (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Wrigley, Makara, & Elliot, 2015), which in turn cultivates inclusion.

Recognizing and Reducing Stress

Recognizing and understanding the difference between misbehaviour and stress behaviour are key steps in this process of building and strengthening positive and healthy relationships (Shanker, 2016). Through "reframing" the child's behaviour and recognizing that the child is not misbehaving but perhaps dealing with too much stress, one begins to see the child differently. This provides the opportunity to implement strategies to help reduce factors in the program that may be adding to the child's stress load. Moreover, reducing stress levels of children and adults alike removes barriers and opens the door to better social connections, increased empathy, and opportunities to demonstrate empathetic behaviour (Shanker, 2016). For instance, a child may appear not to be listening and to be oppositional. When we reframe the child's behaviour as stress behaviour, our perception of the child changes. This shift in the adult's perspective leads to a reduction in the adult's own stress load. One begins to understand that the "negative behaviours" children display are in fact a way of communicating that they are not capable of responding effectively to all that is happening around them in specific situations. Noises, degree of lighting, emotions, inadequate sleep, and other relevant factors may be stressors that are negatively affecting them. Bright lights, for example, can be dysregulating for a child who is hypersensitive to them. Providing a quiet space in the room with dim lighting can be an effective response. Adults who work with this age group have a unique opportunity to help children unpack their stress. Adults can support children in identifying stressors and understanding the impact of these stressors, and guide children through the process of ultimately learning how to recognize and reduce the stressors on their own.

Understanding Temperament

Another key strategy for building positive relationships is to understand one's own as well as the child's temperament profile. Temperament is the way we react to people and situations (Chess, Thomas, & Birch, 1959). Temperament traits are

innate (not learned) but can change over time. Each trait should be understood as a continuum, as interconnected with other traits. The nine temperament traits are as follows:

- **mood:** the child's tendency to be cheerful or more serious
- **sensitivity:** how easily the child is affected by changes in the environment
- **distractibility:** how easily things in the environment sidetrack the child
- **intensity:** the degree of the child's emotional responses to a situation
- **rhythmicity:** the predictability of the child's biological patterns, such as sleep and hunger
- **activity level:** the child's level of physical energy and movement
- **adaptability:** the child's ability to transition from one situation to another
- **first reaction:** the child's level of caution or lack of caution in a new situation
- **persistence:** the child's tendency to continue with an activity despite frustration

Understanding children's temperament traits makes it easier to support them in regulating their emotions and functioning better in different situations. For instance, a child who typically demonstrates strong and dramatic emotional responses to disappointment (e.g., a change in an activity that the child really enjoys and was looking forward to) is one who has a high level of intensity. More awareness of the child's temperament can positively affect the way the adult perceives and responds to the child. When adults develop an understanding of their own temperament in relation to the child's, interactions become easier. For instance, if the adult also has a high level of intensity, it makes the adult more predisposed to demonstrating a strong emotional response, which could intensify the child's reaction. When adults are aware of their own temperament and hence able to regulate their emotions before responding to the child, interactions flow more smoothly. Adults could also share what they are feeling with the child. In essence, awareness of their own temperament profiles would support the interaction, as each adult modulates their own response to each child, hence easing the interaction. Self-awareness and self-care are valuable not only for children, but for the well-being of adults as well. These skills strengthen the connections between children and the adults working closely with them.

Respectful Listening

Yet another key strategy is to respectfully listen to children – really hear their voices, recognizing that children may express themselves in many ways (e.g., through various forms of creative expression, areas of interest, peer groups they associate with). It is vital to see children as competent collaborators capable of providing rich input and to thoughtfully consider their perspectives. When

children know their voices are heard, they feel safe to express themselves and share their deepest emotions. For instance, we respectfully and thoughtfully asked 9- to 12-year-old children about their worries and fears, and heard that the loss of important relationships, including loss of loved ones, is their most predominant source of worry and fear, followed by fear of isolation. This highlights the invaluable role relationships play in children's lives. Last but not least, adults working with children should aspire to model respect by speaking respectfully about children to other practitioners and parents.

Responsible Citizenship

Responsible citizenship is about participation and contribution (Gordon, 2005). Children feel a sense of belonging in the program and in the community when they engage in meaningful participation – for example, by planning an activity, engaging in joint decision making about what happens in the program, participating in a community event, or contributing their time and efforts to help others. Children experience this as participatory democracy. Those in this age group deeply appreciate the opportunity to be more independent with respect to steering their own experiences, especially as their awareness of the world around them and their role in it grows. A greater sense of involvement also enables children to strengthen their executive function skills, such as planning, organizing, collaborating, negotiating, decision making, problem solving, and other critical thinking skills.

Peer Relationships: Fostering a Sense of Belonging

As children's social environment expands, their focus broadens to include their peers and other key individuals in the community. The extra-familial environment becomes increasingly significant, and peer relationships function to support children's well-being in important ways (Goswami, 2012). Several studies have demonstrated connections between the quality of peer relationships, social competence, social acceptance, positive interactions with peers within and outside of school, and children's physical, social, and emotional well-being, as well as life satisfaction (Bendayan, Blanca, Fernández-Baena, Escobar, & Trianes, 2013; Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006; Gilman & Huebner 2003;

Goudena & Vermande 2002; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011; Newland et al. 2010; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2010; Zullig, Valois, Huebner, & Drane, 2005).

Through developing positive and healthy relationships with children and demonstrating empathy, adults can create safe and caring environments, thereby strengthening children's social and emotional competencies, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (e.g., being more inclusive and kind). Adults have a responsibility to model constructive behaviours and are in a position to do so. As a result of adults cultivating these positive skills in children, children engage in more positive peer interactions, are more inclusive of peers they perceive as being different in some way from themselves, including peers with special needs and mental health challenges, which in turn leads to an increase in feelings of belonging. This is important, given that research shows positive peer relationships predict children's well-being (Benson & Scales, 2009; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011).

There is a direct relationship between empathy and prosocial behaviour (Wrigley, Makara, & Elliot, 2015), as well as a relationship between increased prosocial behaviour and decreased aggression and bullying (Damon, Lerner, & Eisenberg, 2006). Empathy helps children learn how to understand and resolve interpersonal problems (Work & Olsen, 1991) and may help reduce conflict (de Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007), all of which positively influence the quality of children's experiences with peers. The research clearly indicates that creating an inclusive environment and fostering empathy, which supports the development of positive peer relations, have a profound impact on children's sense of belonging and overall well-being. Empathy cannot be dictated, but it can be demonstrated. Through modelling empathic behaviours adults are able to foster empathy in children and enrich their relationships with them. The impact of modelling by far surpasses that of "instructing or teaching", because modelling supports the development of empathy through construction.

Conclusion

Children are naturally curious, competent, capable of complex thinking, and rich in potential. Having rich and meaningful experiences and opportunities through positive and healthy relationships with important adults and peers enables children to acquire and refine the skills necessary for engaging with others and further developing their core competencies, which are central to navigating through their expanding social worlds. Caring adults are those who strive to strengthen children's rich potential. A positive shift in the climate of the shared environment is invaluable for both children and the adults working with them. The strategies discussed above are viable and important ways to increase the opportunities and supports for 9- to 12-year-old children in order to foster their well-being in the context of inclusive, safe, caring, and responsive environments. Adopting a common approach based on shared values, encouraging and supporting a sense of belonging, and connectedness will enable children to flourish.

Questions for Reflection

- We all have perceptual biases and are often unaware of these biases. Considering the implications, how might you identify and eliminate your perceptual biases in order to connect more positively with the children you work with?
- What strategies could you use to see the children you work with differently? How could you modify your responses and behaviour to reduce children's stress level when need be?
- How might you apply your understanding of temperament (your own as well as each child's) to guide your understanding of and interactions with the children you work with?
- How do you listen to children? What are some ways you could thoughtfully seek and include children's input to co-construct activities that are meaningful for them?
- How might you create an alignment between children's individual experiences and their shared environment in order to foster inclusion?
- How might you model respect in interactions between adults and children?

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Mary Gordon is recognized internationally as an award-winning educator, social entrepreneur, author, child advocate, and parenting expert. She is the founder of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in Ontario. In 1996, she created a local Roots of Empathy program and then later established a national and international organization with the same name. She has presented to and advised governments and international bodies, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations, and has participated in dialogues with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She is often a keynote presenter at international conferences, such as the Skoll World Forum and the UBS Global Philanthropy Forum. She has been made a member of the Order of Canada for her outstanding contributions to education. Her book, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, was a Canadian bestseller.

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Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

Pedagogies for Times of Climate Change: Closing the Gap Between Nature and Culture

Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, PhD, and Randa Khattar, PhD

> [We have to] challenge the nature-culture divide that underpins traditional western separations of human and environmental sphere and issues. (Affrica Taylor, 2017, p. 4)
>
> We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human. (David Abram, 1996, p. ix)

Today, more than ever before, we need to think critically and with care about what it means to invite children and adults to connect to their immediate environment. What is it we want and hope for ourselves, for children, and for families when we intentionally create opportunities for children to make connections within the world around them? What might connecting with the world mean for children as we witness climate change and other ecological challenges? (see Government of Ontario, 2012–2017)

Ontario

This research brief invites educators[1] working with children to critically reflect on what it might mean to create "opportunities to explore, care for, and interact with [what is referred to as] the natural world" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 21). Such a critical-inquiry orientation reflects the values and principles outlined in both *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) and *The Kindergarten Program* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), including their commitment to a capable and competent view of children, educators, and families.

Drawing on current research, this brief presents new ways of thinking about and engaging with an entangled human/nonhuman existence in the world.

Changing How We Think About Children's Connections with Their Environment

Researchers writing in the field of environmental education tell us that 21st-century ecological challenges require a fundamental shift in how we think about children's relationships with the world and the kinds of questions we might ask as educators (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Greenwood, 2013; Taylor, 2013). They tell us we need to start from a place of curiosity and attentiveness to create ecologically caring relationships. We also need to critically examine the language we use with children to describe our relationships with our immediate environments. In other words, we need to consider new ways to understand our interconnected and interdependent relationships in the world.

It's imperative that we think about children's connections with their immediate environments, because children are inheriting a precarious world in which they must learn to live well. The United Nations and the Canadian and Ontario governments recognize that we face profound ecological challenges that demand urgent action (Government of Canada, 2013; Government of Ontario, 2012–2017; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014). Earth scientists attribute interconnected ecological challenges such as climate change, mass species extinctions, ocean acidification, and dangerous levels of waste emissions to **predominantly human causes** (Carson, 1962; Crutzen, 2002; Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007). The recognition that these fundamental changes in earth systems are primarily human induced carries ethical implications, including that children are affected in different ways because of where and how they live.

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1. The term "educator" has been used throughout this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

For example, some children live near polluted rivers, while other children are sheltered from ecological precariousness.

Thinking Critically About the Separation of Nature and Culture

Environmental education researchers insist that the cause of many of our ecological problems has been the belief that humans are more important than, and separate from, nature. For instance, we often erroneously think that we can modify, "improve," or exploit nature without any consequence (Greenwood, 2013; Taylor, 2013). Alternatively, we might think that we can somehow "save" nature, as if it were possible to separate ourselves from the natural world in which we live (Taylor, 2017). These researchers therefore invite educators to question the idea that humans and the environment are two separate entities, or that nature and culture are totally distinct. Provocatively, they urge educators to focus their attention on the **connections** between humans and nonhumans (e.g., animals, plants, weather). They challenge educators to think about nature and culture as inseparable or, as Taylor (2013) calls it, as "**nature-culture**" (Taylor, 2013). Put another way, there is a **gap** in how we think about ourselves and nature that we need to pay attention to, and close.

Not all peoples view humans as separate from nature (Lupinacci, 2013). For instance, many Indigenous knowledges carefully attend to how worlds are created through relationships among animals, plants, humans, lands, oceans, and all natural systems (Battiste, 2014; Ritchie, 2013). We can reflect on these knowledges as a way to recognize and understand gaps in Western knowledges about nature. The decision to notice and pay attention is a pedagogical act that can work to reduce the divide between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture.

Fostering Children's Connections with the World Around Them

Rather than teaching children to "protect" the earth, we need to recognize that children are already deeply connected with it. We could begin, for example, by noticing how children, regardless of where they live, already have relationships with animals, plants, landforms, places, rivers, weather, and one another (see Common Worlds Research Collective, 2015).

Educational environmentalist Affrica Taylor urges us to "fundamentally rethink our place in the world" (2017, p. 2). Taylor (2013) proposes that we attend to our everyday small encounters with others (including animals, plants, and places). She highlights our need to recognize how the world affects us—even as we affect it.

Rather than focusing on creating "perfect" natural worlds with children, educators can provide opportunities to engage with the actual and imperfect worlds that children inherit and co-inhabit with other human and nonhuman entities. Closing the gap between nature and culture can be considered in relation to the four foundations outlined in *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014):

- **Belonging.** For example, when children go for a walk through their neighbourhood and connect with non-living entities, such as clay in a local riverbed, they can learn to value the relationships they share with the land.
- **Well-being.** When children closely attend to the well-being of other living things, such as a snail that crosses their path, they are learning to care for others and themselves.
- **Engagement.** When children explore and engage with the real world around them, they learn that it is good to participate and try things out, and to experiment with novel understandings and relationships.
- **Expression (and communication).** When children notice, interact with, and attend to their living environments, they develop capacities for new ways of communicating and vocalizing their theories and hypotheses about how to live responsibly in a precarious world.

Nurturing a More-than-Human Orientation

We experience the world through regular routines and habits, which are sometimes characterized by a sense of disconnection, or isolation, from an animate, breathing world. Interrupting these habitual patterns–for example, by lifting the gaze from digital devices or stepping outside to become (re)acquainted with our living environments–presents an educational alternative that acknowledges that the world is not composed only of humans.

This **ecological, more-than-human orientation** (Abram, 1996; Haraway, 2016) signals a shift from a humancentric perspective to one of active engagement, reciprocity, and care for a living, responsive, breathing world. This shift in orientation has the capacity, in the process of changing the ways we interact, to restructure how we see ourselves, our relationships with one another, and our place in the world (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2015).

Starting from a Place of Noticing with Children

In the move toward fostering children's connections with the world, educators might start from a place of noticing with children. We need to cultivate our own curiosity and sense of wonder as we engage children in their curiosity and explorations. We can start by asking questions, by examining closely, by noticing, and by giving the world a chance to affect us as much as we affect it.

We might notice connections with our immediate environments in multiple ways:

- walking through a forest or a park, or along a neighbourhood pathway
- paying attention to who else and what else inhabits our immediate environments
- listening to others (humans and nonhumans)
- becoming curious about our immediate surroundings
- taking time to attend to our connections with the world
- experiencing the environment with all of our senses

Making "Entering into Spaces of Noticing" a Habit

It takes time to nurture a habit of entering into a space where we pay attention to our own curiosities and wonderings. Learning how to slow down and linger with an experience takes practice. As outlined in *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) and *The Kindergarten Program* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), we can enter into spaces of noticing through **pedagogical documentation** that encourages educators to be co-learners alongside children and their families (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Pedagogical methods such as documentation of children's experiences help educators refine their habits of noticing and paying attention to the strategies children use to make meaning (Wien, 2013).

Educators may invite children to:

- slow down and pay attention to how nature and culture are inseparable (e.g., birds often build nests in the nooks of neon signs; raccoons and squirrels share our meals via composting bins; humans plant the forests where these animals live)

- closely examine something familiar, such as:
  - how leaves move when they fall from a tree
  - the migration of ducks or geese in a nearby park
  - how squirrels build their nests
  - the movements of crows as they forage for food
  - how forests reverberate with sounds
- document their observations through drawings, photography, written notes, and videography
- revisit their documentation and observe the events anew (educators could invite the children to think about how they might communicate with the crows or attempt to build nests that mimic the squirrels')
- share their documentation, learning, and thinking through a public exhibit.

Paying attention is part of the act of **reconnaissance**, which, as Rinaldi (2006) states, is "an attempt to re-visit and re-understand what has taken place by highlighting previously constructed relations, developing and challenging them, and consequently, producing new ones" (p. 131). When given the opportunity, children recognize and embrace the sensibility of reconnaissance as well.

Entering into a Space of Noticing Through Vermicomposting

After listening to children's repeated conversations about the earthworms encountered on the sidewalk as the children walk to and from school, educators purchase a compost bin and 225 grams of red wiggler worms from the local compost education centre.

The children welcome the challenge of learning to take care of the worms to ensure they will survive. They shred newspaper for bedding, collect dry leaves, and keep the bin moist. They learn what to feed the worms—fruit and vegetables but not meat or oily food; coffee grounds and egg shells but no dairy—and how much to feed them—no more than two 750-gram containers full of food scraps per week.

The most labour-intensive part of vermicomposting takes place in the classroom once a month: harvesting the worm castings to use as fertilizer in the garden. The children dump the contents of the vermicomposting bin onto a big tarp on a table in the classroom, or outside when the weather is not too cold, and some of them work for hours carefully separating the castings into small piles.

(continued)

Children care, in very practical ways, for the worms in the bin, and the worms respond to the children's care. The children have learned a lot about vermicomposting, for example:

- If the bin is too wet, the classroom will be smelly.
- If there is not enough air in the bin or too much citrus is added to it, the worms may get sick or leave.
- If the worms do not have enough food or the bin is too cold or too hot, the worms die.
- If the food is not buried or the bin is overloaded, fruit flies will join the worms.
- When harvesting takes place, the worms release a bad smell as a self-defence mechanism to keep predators away.
- It's easier to harvest outdoors than indoors because the worms will move deeper into the bin to escape the warm sun.

In this inquiry, educators are not interested in teaching children to become environmental stewards. Rather, educators are interested in how the children are noticing ways the worms respond, and how the children are learning to care for the worms on the basis of their response, rather than simply following the guidelines of vermicomposting.

Inviting Children and Families to Notice

When educators slow down to pay attention to a particular encounter, they create opportunities to invite children, and their families, to do so as well. Regularly inviting families to share their experiences and questions about their surroundings—questions asked on a weekend hike or bike ride, for example— contributes to making the classroom a place to nurture connection and curiosity, and to see the environment as a third teacher (see Callaghan, 2013). Inviting families to do so supports their sense of belonging, expression, well-being, and engagement within the program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, 2016).

Asking Pedagogical Questions

Pedagogical questions start from a critical-inquiry orientation. When educators move away from an orientation of "teaching" children or giving instructions about the world around them and instead listen attentively to children, they

create conditions for children to wonder. Educators might begin an inquiry by asking questions about the relationships that children encounter in their everyday lives and their environments. Pedagogical documentation can deepen the inquiry and encourage children to document their own learning (see Wien, 2013).

Creating inquiries in collaboration with children requires that educators become genuinely interested in exploring their own environments and investigating their own questions, such as these:

- How might we constructively, creatively, and practically engage with growing concerns about human-induced climate change, species extinctions, waste challenges, and so on?
- How might we work with children to transform understandings about our place in the world and how we think about and conduct our ecological relationships?
- How might we develop nature-culture pedagogies?
- How might we support children to create life-sustaining and enhancing ecological relationships?

Asking Pedagogical Questions About Children's Everyday Relationships with the Environment

An inquiry on, for example, children's relationship to the weather in this time of climate change might ask questions like these:

- What kinds of weather conditions and events do children encounter in their immediate environment? How are these conditions changing?
- How does weather shape and reshape children's environments?
- How are the children's everyday lives affected by the weather?
- How do children understand the effects of weather on the animals and plants that surround them?
- What might children learn from observing weather and its various effects over time?
- What kinds of ethics might emerge through understanding how changing weather patterns affect the lives of humans and other species?

More information about how educators are working with children to challenge the nature-culture divide is available on the Walking with Wildlife in Wild Weather Times blog at https://walkingwildlifewildweather.com/. Educators are encouraged to think about what they might do with children to create opportunities for them to notice and attend to their immediate environment.

Responding pedagogically to the environmental challenges that 21st-century children face means engaging in practices that attend to the many more-than-human relationships that children already have with others in their immediate environments. **The key to closing the gap between nature and culture** is to think and act alongside children and others, recognizing that all of us live in a more-than-human world.

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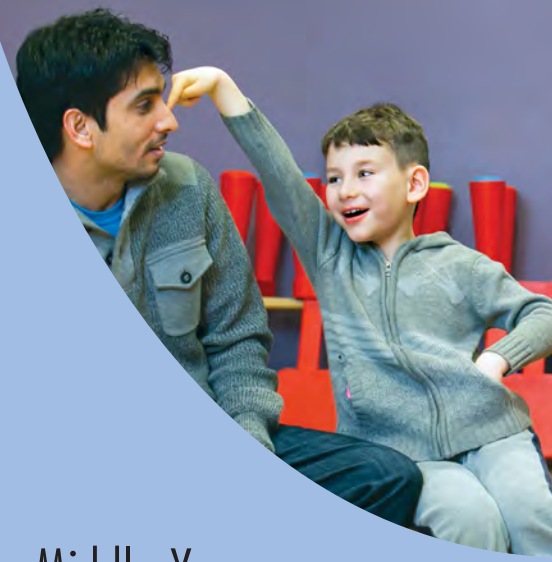
2018

Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years

Cultivating a Francophone Identity in French-Language Before- and After-School Programs

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Paulette Rozon, PhD

Before- and after-school programs can provide enriching experiences and stimulating environments that contribute to children's learning and development. In Ontario, in the context of a Francophone minority, it is the responsibility of educators[1] in French-language programs to create an environment that encourages children's acquisition of the French language and Francophone culture in all its diversity. These educators can support children on a path to building a Francophone identity while encouraging their development of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical abilities. The objective of this research summary is to raise the

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1. The term "educator" has been used throughout this brief to refer to all people who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

Ontario

awareness of educators in French-language before- and after-school programs regarding their responsibility with respect to building a Francophone cultural identity in children.

Francophone Identity

Children's identity is defined on the basis of a set of factors, including their origins, values, and family, as well as the surrounding environment. The Francophone social identity of individual children develops through their contact with others; it is based on how children perceive, among other things, their French-language skills and abilities to learn, interact, play independently, and make choices and decisions. That identity is also built on children's sense of belonging to various groups, such as their families, peers, and various interest groups at school, and in before- and after-school programs and community, cultural, or other activities.

A person can have several social identities, and sometimes one identity can become more important than another. For example, children may self-identify as Francophones. Their identity may manifest itself as they spend time with friends who speak French, listen to the music of French-speaking artists, and go to Francophone cultural events. The more the children are valued in experiences with their families, peers, and other people in their social network, and the more the contribution of the French language and the Francophone community in children's lives is highlighted, the stronger the children's Francophone identity will become (Alberta Education, 2016; Duguay, 2008).

"Identity results from the fusion of language and culture. … Language is the main conveyor of culture and studies show that identity is the result of socialization through language and culture." (loosely translated)

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 18)

Development of a Francophone Cultural Identity

Before- and after-school programs offered in French are privileged environments that encourage the development of a Francophone identity in children. Such programs provide various types of activities that contribute to children's linguistic and cultural self-determination, and to their feeling of belonging to the Francophonie in all its diversity. Duguay (2008) proposes three types of distinct but closely related activities that can influence the degree to which children affirm their Francophone cultural identity:

1. **Activities that enhance children's exchanges with their parents and friends** and their socialization in French with various groups at school and in their community: for example, enabling children to participate in activities (e.g., board games, movies) in French with their parents and friends, to take part in cultural and sports activities in French (e.g., shows, festivals, sports events), to speak French in public spaces (e.g., stores, restaurants), and to use French through information and communication technologies (e.g., social networks, social media).

2. **Activities that increase children's motivation to act independently** by encouraging them to make choices regarding their learning, discoveries, and creations; by allowing them to address challenges; or by cultivating positive and rewarding interpersonal relations with the people in their social network: for example, allowing children to be exposed to significant models or public figures of the Francophonie, to have important experiences with other Francophones their own age, to make linguistic choices and assume responsibility for their consequences, and to develop pride in belonging to the Francophone community.

3. **Activities that enable children to adapt to their own reality but also to transform it in order to improve it:** for example, enabling children to become aware of being Francophone and of living in the context of a Francophone minority, to fulfil their potential and develop their French-language skills during cultural and other activities in French, to take a position regarding issues about the French language and Francophone culture, to value, through concrete actions, the French language and Francophone culture, to affirm themselves linguistically and culturally in various contexts, and to engage in projects that aim to change a situation.

According to research (Landry, Allard, & Deveau, 2010; Cormier, 2010), children must first understand the social realities of the environment in which they live in order to understand the effect of their choices. This awareness can make children commit to changing the status quo. It is through opportunities for linguistic and cultural acquisition that children will be able to develop feelings of competence, self-determination, and belonging, to understand the social realities of their environment and community, and to become aware of the issues in society in order to engage in changing the status quo.

Cormier (2010) proposes seven "axes of intervention" that can help children have enriching and stimulating linguistic and cultural experiences. These axes anchor, complete, and overlap one another, forming a coherent whole that guides educators' choices of significant activities. The seven axes of intervention for educators are as follows:

- Actualization of learning potential – the children master their learning
  - Example of direction: Develop significant activities on the basis of children's knowledge, needs, history, fields of interest, and learning preferences.
- Positive relationship with the French language – the children have a feeling of competence regarding their language abilities in French
  - Example of direction: On the basis of their knowledge, develop children's French vocabulary with significant activities that encourage a communicative approach.
- Cultural acquisition – the children discover Francophone culture
  - Example of direction: Create a learning process (e.g., game, survey) in which children can discover Francophone public figures and persons important in a field of activity (e.g., athletes, politicians, authors, environmentalists, scientists).
- Development of self-determination – the children demonstrate independence, a feeling of competence and a sense of belonging
  - Example of direction: Encourage teamwork on an area of common interest (e.g., Francophone leaders in various fields, such as science, medicine, arts, sports, business) that requires cooperation.
- Identity negotiation – the children think about a way to define themselves in relationship to the French language and Francophone culture
  - Example of direction: Create activities (e.g., sports competition, art exhibition) that show the Francophone identity in a positive light.
- Awareness and engagement – the children have experiences that require critical thinking and making a change
  - Example of direction: Encourage debates on subjects related to minority groups in society (e.g., English-language notices in a hospital in a region

designated under the (Ontario) French Language Services Act,[2] racist comments against Francophones) and discussion about the children's commitment to change the status quo.

- Community leadership – the children contribute to the vitality of the Francophone community while developing their leadership skills
  - Example of direction: Create a project (e.g., organizing the Ontario Francophonie celebration day, promoting French-language services in the community) that engages the children, in partnership with Francophone public figures, business people, or community organizations.

Learning experiences in French-language before- and after-school programs contribute to the creation of a climate that fosters children's acquisition of Francophone culture. These axes of intervention are closely related to the four foundations described in *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years:* belonging, engagement, expression, and well-being. "These foundations, or **ways of being**, are a vision for all children's future potential and a view of what they should experience each and every day" (Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 7).

Francophone Identity and a Sense of Belonging

According to the model for the acquisition of Francophone culture (Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2009), Francophone culture has two aspects: the collective culture and the individual culture.

Francophone culture has distinct, dynamic, and progressive characteristics that are derived from the history of Francophone communities in Ontario and are recognized implicitly or explicitly by its members. This culture is based on a set of values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and ways of living together that evolve with the people that build it. It is the **collective culture**.

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2. More information on the French Language Services Act is available on the website of the Office of the French Language Services Commissioner at csfontario.ca/en/loi.

Individuals have a unique cultural background that includes their personal history shaped by the influence of their family, friends, neighbourhood, school environment, and ethnic origin. This background is the known universe of the child. It is the **individual culture**.

Figure 1 below (available only in French) shows these concepts and highlights the relations between the individual culture (represented by the circle in the centre) and the collective culture (represented by the outer circle), illustrating the constant interactions between the two cultures. Thus, individuals know the cultural referents of the collective culture and participate in it by enriching it with their individual culture, while the collective culture contributes to the construction of the identity of individuals by enabling them to acquire cultural referents from the collective culture.[3]
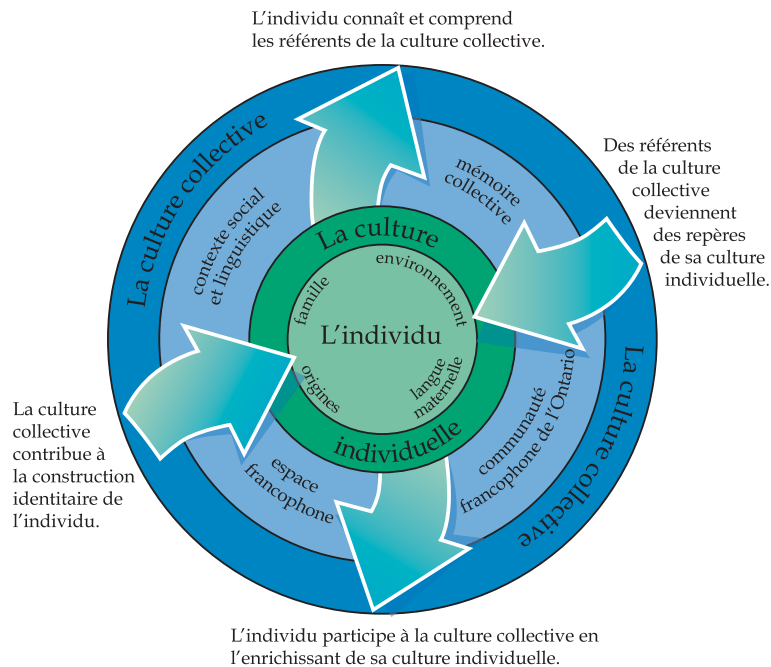

L'individu connaît et comprend les référents de la culture collective.

Des référents de la culture collective deviennent des repères de sa culture individuelle.

La culture collective contribue à la construction identitaire de l'individu.

L'individu participe à la culture collective en l'enrichissant de sa culture individuelle.

La culture collective

La culture individuelle

La culture collective

contexte social et linguistique

mémoire collective

famille

environnement

L'individu

origines

langue maternelle

communauté francophone de l'Ontario

espace francophone

Figure 1. The Acquisition of Culture

Source: Ontario, Ministry of Education. (2009). *Une approche culturelle de l'enseignement pour l'appropriation de la culture dans les écoles de langue française de l'Ontario*, p. 25.

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3. A summary of the foundation of *Une approche culturelle de l'enseignement pour l'appropriation de la culture dans les écoles de langue française* (2009) is available on the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada website at cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/312/Document-de-synthèse_EN.pdf.

In order for children to develop a sense of identity and of belonging to the Francophone community, they must become aware of the cultural referents[4] specific to the collective culture, recognize themselves in certain referents, and make them their own. This experience may help children feel they are part of the collective culture and participate in its renewal. This is a manifestation of the feeling of cultural belonging and of having a Francophone cultural identity.

The integration of Francophone cultural referents in before- and after-school program activities enables the anchoring of learning. The integration of such referents in activities should be planned globally and strategically. A vast range of activities that highlight knowledge, know-how, and existential skills encourage the transmission of Francophone culture and individual development. Educators should, however, avoid giving only a "traditional folklore" character to the notion of culture.

Cultural referents exist in all sectors of human activity. They can be selected from the children's daily life experiences and environment, and can reflect the cultural aspects of the regional, provincial, national, and global communities. They can also be found through historical research or scientific experiments. Together, these significant cultural referents for the Francophonie nourish collective memory and account for its modes of communication and its values, beliefs, ways of life, customs, achievements, and symbols (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2011, 2012).

The Banque pancanadienne des référents culturels signifiants pour la franco-phonie was created to support frontline workers (educators) in integrating Francophone culture in learning activities. This resource has over a thousand Francophone cultural referents that contribute significantly to the development of children's cultural identity and to the sustainability of the Francophone community, here and elsewhere. This database, as well as other resources that support the acquisition of Francophone culture, can be accessed on the page titled *Une approche culturelle de l'enseignement pour l'appropriation de la culture dans les écoles de langue française* on the Ressources éducatives de l'Ontario (REDO) website at redontario.ca/app_cult.aspx.

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4. Cultural referents significant for the Francophonie include public figures and characters; traditions, ways of life, and customs; demonstrations and gatherings; institutions and organizations; legislation and jurisprudence; achievements and works; and historical, linguistic, and contemporary heritage.

Cultural Role of Educators

Educators who are present in children's social network have a definite influence on children's cultural path. Given the frequency and continuity of the interventions of educators, their influence is a deciding factor in helping children to understand the importance of culture and establish a positive relationship with it. Educators have the responsibility to provide, on a regular basis, activities that enable children to engage with and become an active cultural actor in the Francophone community.

Educators play various cultural roles expressed through specific pedagogical attitudes and approaches that vary from one situation to another. Consequently, in order to fulfil their cultural mandate, educators can offer diverse experiences and provocations that can help children learn how to adapt to the context, cultural objects, and people.

The cultural roles that educators play can be described as **cultural model**, **conveyor of culture**, and **cultural mediator**. The observation and analysis tool in the text box below associates each of these three roles with concrete examples of ways that educators can include the cultural dimension in their professional life. This tool has various uses, including the following:

- observing pedagogical practices closely related to integration of the cultural aspect
- individual reflection on adopting cultural attitudes
- planning activities that include the cultural dimension
- implementing pedagogical practices focused on the integration of the cultural dimension

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Cultural Roles of Educators

I act as a cultural model:
- I show the value I give culture by communicating my interest in the French language and Francophone culture.
- I update my knowledge continuously, and I explore its cultural reach.
- I increase and diversify my cultural practices.
- I exchange cultural practices with others.
- I express my actions and thoughts about culture.
- I am open toward other cultures, including children's culture.

(continued)

I act as a conveyor of culture:
- I help children have experiences that enable them to discover, acquire, or enhance Francophone culture.
- I use resource persons, objects, and knowledge that have cultural legitimacy.
- I take advantage of the context, and I plan learning activities that help children:
  - engage in a process, reflection, or production with cultural reach;
  - acquire Francophone culture and its cultural referents here and elsewhere, past and present;
  - have exchanges in order to create meaning about cultural practices, objects, and knowledge.
- I establish a relationship between the targeted cultural elements and the suggested learning situations.
- I explain how the learning situations have a cultural, intercultural, or transcultural reach.
- I guide children so they are able to:
  - apply the cultural elements in other contexts;
  - be aware that Francophone culture contributes to the understanding and interpretation of the world and to building a Francophone cultural identity.

I act as a cultural mediator:
- I take into account the children's culture to guide them toward the acquisition of Francophone culture.
- I help children put in perspective their individual culture and the collective culture to which they belong.
- I encourage exchanges with people from my own culture and from other cultures.
- I help children speak in order to:
  - explain the sense and value they give cultural practices, objects, and knowledge;
  - interpret the world using their cultural referents;
  - establish connections between their prejudices, their values, and their opinions;
  - compare their representation of the world with that of their peers.
- I support children so they take into account cultural referents when they make a critical judgment.

(Adapted from the working document *Intégration de la dimension culturelle en salle de classe. Outil d'observation et d'analyse.* [*Integration of the cultural dimension in the classroom. Observation and analysis tool*] (Ontario. Ministry of Education, and Quebec. Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sports. 2015 [unpublished]))

In the context of a Francophone minority, building a Francophone identity in children is based on experiences that enable children to develop their feelings of competence, self-determination, and belonging. Educators in before- and after-school programs should act as cultural models, conveyors of culture, and cultural mediators by creating and providing children with authentic learning experiences that enable them to acquire the French language and Francophone culture, as well as the feeling of belonging to the Francophone community. Thus, educators contribute to the creation or expansion of a Francophone environment that reflects the dynamism and pluralism of the Francophone community and promotes the development of children's Francophone identity, well-being, and school success.

French-language before- and after-school programs can truly constitute an environment in which children acquire solid French-language skills and improve their knowledge of Francophone culture, here and elsewhere, past and present. In them, children can acquire a set of cultural referents that enable them to interpret the world and discover the distinct characteristics and expressions of the Francophonie, on a material, emotional, cultural, and intellectual level.

Questions for Reflection

Cultural roles

Consider the three cultural roles described in the text box on the previous page.

- What is the cultural role you are most at ease with? How does this role manifest itself in your daily professional practice? How can you better perform this role?
- What is the cultural role you are least at ease with? What will help you improve your performance of this cultural role in your daily professional practice?

Francophone cultural referents

Consider that cultural referents exist in all sectors of human activity, at the local, regional, provincial, national, and world level. Select ten Francophone cultural referents that you wish to include in your professional practice.

- How did you select these cultural referents? What problems did you face?
- What means will help you recognize Francophone cultural referents representative of the Francophone community here and elsewhere?

Practical application

On the basis of the cultural acquisition model presented in this summary, identify, with the children, a cultural referent of the Francophone community. Explore activities to include this cultural referent in a way that is meaningful for the children.

- How did you prepare the activity so that children were able to participate throughout the process? What problems did you face?
- How do you describe your cultural role in this experience with the children?
- How will this experience support the children's feelings of competence, self-determination, and belonging?

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