

Classroom Challenges in Developing an Intercultural Early Learning Program for Refugee Children

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The project described here was aimed at piloting an intercultural, multilingual, early learning program that was genuinely responsive to the circumstances and early learning needs of preschool refugee children and parents from three ethnocultural communities—Somali, Sudanese, and Kurdish—in a large city in Western Canada. We discuss the unique challenges faced by the classroom team consisting of a first-language facilitator for each of the three languages spoken by the children in the classroom and an English-speaking teacher. Because of the lack of sufficient time to consult families and communities about their cultural practices and expectations for young children before the beginning of the program, these challenges included setting up the classroom environments and routines, managing the four languages, negotiating the emerging curriculum content, and learning to work as a team in a multi-sectoral project.

Cet article décrit un projet visant le pilotage d'un programme d'apprentissage interculturel et plurilingue pour jeunes enfants qui s'est avéré authentiquement adapté aux circonstances et aux besoins en apprentissage d'enfants réfugiés d'âge préscolaire et de leurs parents originaires de trois communautés ethnoculturelles – somalienne, soudanaise et kurde – dans une grande ville dans l'Ouest du Canada. Nous discutons des défis particuliers qu'affronte l'équipe pédagogique consistant en un moniteur de langue première pour chacune des trois langues parlées par les enfants dans la classe et un enseignant de langue anglaise. N'ayant pas eu le temps de consulter les familles et les communautés avant le début du programme au sujet de leurs pratiques culturelles et de leurs attentes par rapport aux jeunes enfants, nous avons dû, entre autres défis, établir le milieu et les routines de la salle de classe, gérer les quatre langues, négocier le contenu du nouveau programme d'études et apprendre à travailler en équipe dans le cadre d'un projet multisectoriel.

Newcomer families encounter a number of stressors in their lives that may include underemployment or unemployment, language problems, separation from former social networks, perceived or real discrimination, family conflict, and perceived cultural incompatibilities (Dachyshyn, 2008). Furthermore, families with young children experience additional challenges related to child care and early education opportunities, including: (a) lack of *awareness* about the availability and benefits of early education and services; (b) lack of *accessibility* to quality programs due to limited space, complex enrollment processes, language services, and transportation; and (c) lack of *responsiveness* of the early care and learning community to the needs of newcomers due to a shortage of bilingual/bicultural providers

and/or culturally competent staff and inappropriate parental and community involvement strategies (Matthews & Jang, 2007).

Children of newcomer parents often encounter their own set of challenges as they try to make the transition from their home to preschool or school settings, to learn the language of their host country, to fit into their peer group, and to adapt to the community at large (Guarnaccia & Lopez, 1998; Kirova, 2007). Although the importance of valuing a child's home culture and language and infusing multiculturalism and diversity in early learning program content have been emphasized by researchers (Matthews & Jang, 2007), there is a dearth of research on practices that build on the strengths of newcomer families and children.

Background: Multi-Sectoral Nature of the Project

The overall aim of the pilot project described here was to develop and document an intercultural early learning program intended to meet the specific needs of refugee families with children 3-4 years of age. It was based on the unique partnership among government and nongovernment stakeholders including the provincial government departments of education, Children and Youth Services, and Health and Wellness, the Public School Board (PSB), a number of not-for-profit agencies, and members of the Somali, Sudanese, and Kurdish communities.

As researchers with already established trusting relationships with the ethnocultural communities involved in the project, we were asked by the steering committee to:

- facilitate families' articulation of their goals for their preschool children;
- gather data about indigenous preschool practices;
- support the implementation of indigenous practices in the classroom context;
- disseminate to stakeholders information that would guide the development and implementation of other intercultural early learning programs; and
- build knowledge that contributes to intercultural early learning practices in a multicultural society.

The Program: Setting and Participants

The pilot program was situated in a school located in an area of the city with a high density of newcomers. The program was designed to include 16-18 children who were 3½ years old by September 1, 2007 and their families. The families were selected from the Kurdish, Somali, and Sudanese communities living within the boundaries of this area of the city. Through the process of establishing a parenting group at a family support center, they had already formed inter-group relationships. Although an effort was made to include an equal number of children from each linguistic and/or ethnocultural group represented in the program, the actual number of children from each community was as follows: five Kurdish-speaking children, nine Somali-speaking children, and three Sudanese Arabic-speaking children. The program was offered four days a week for half a day from 9:30 a.m. to 12:00.

In order for the program to meet its goals in relation to linguistic continuity for the children while learning English, time was to be divided equally between instruction and activities in English and instruction and activities in the children's native languages. First-language

facilitators (FLFs) for each linguistic group were selected by their respective communities. They did not have teaching certificates, but had gained some experience working with young children in preschool settings in their countries of origin and/or in Canada. A monolingual, English-speaking first-year teacher with the PSB was hired as the classroom teacher.

Theoretical Framework

The overall goals of the intercultural early learning program for refugee preschool children were grounded in a theoretical framework drawn from a number of distinct yet interrelated bodies of knowledge. The development of the theoretical framework was entrusted to the researchers and was drawn from the literature about multicultural education, postcolonialism, developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) for young children, and sociocultural-historical learning theory. In reviewing these literatures we assumed a critical stance rooted in the analysis of class and power structures that influence empowerment and education for liberation.

Multicultural Education: Goals and Pitfalls

Because multicultural education in Canada emerged as an application of the federal multicultural policy in the education system (James, 2001), it has been linked to notions of original federal multiculturalism that promoted ethnocultural retention. The need for learners to “study ‘foreign’ cultures, participate in ‘multicultural days’ or go on field trips to ‘cultural communities’ and community centres” (Pon, 2000, p. 234) was thus viewed by multicultural educators as a remedy for racism and ethnic hostilities that could stem from people’s lack of familiarity with other cultures (Gosine, 2002). In this premise, the practice of multicultural education became characterized by *folklorization*, and from its inception its principal aim was to develop knowledge and understanding of the *other*, or of minority groups. This approach has resulted in multiculturalism that has constructed minority groups in static, essentialist, and exoticized terms while also situating such groups outside the Canadian nation (Bannerji, 2000; James, 2001).

Intercultural and antiracist education emerged in opposition to this solidification of borders between majority and minority cultures. Developed mainly in France and in Québec, intercultural education aims to create a common space, a “*vivre ensemble*” (McAndrew, 1996) based on mutual understanding and recognition of similarities through dialogue. In the course of this pilot project, we sought to arrive at new understandings of intercultural pedagogy in an early childhood context.

Continued Colonialism

In addition to identifying multiculturalism as a distinct feature of being Canadians, we also tend to pride ourselves on our humanitarian efforts both at home and abroad. Heron (2007) suggests, however, that our colonizing history continues to the present day as we determine that our *planetary consciousness* or our knowledge and awareness of the needs of others dictate that we have an *obligation* to step in and help. This obligation in turn provides us a sense of “entitlement” to intervene (p. 38), which in turn relegates those helped to a position of inferiority and deficiency as well as the exotic other (Razack, 1993).

This is particularly the case with respect to offering help and programs to families with low

socioeconomic status (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008), a category that could be applied to most newcomer families. hooks (2000) critiques the middle-class tendency to help the deficient other, “All too often people of privilege engage in forms of spiritual materialism where they seek recognition of their goodness by helping the poor” (p. 130). In fact, our supposed altruism legitimizes the status of the middle class as the “dominator culture” (hooks, 2010, p. 26) and “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” prevails (hooks, 1994, p. 197).

Having absorbed “colonial master narratives” (Cruz, 2009, p. 135), newcomers continue to play their part as the object of dominator culture. Thus those who internalize the notion of being *guests* in their country of residence are unable to feel responsible for their condition (Hage, 2002). Hage suggests that it is imperative for both newcomers and the majority culture to move beyond the indebted nature of guesthood to a position of “honour and responsibility” (p. 13).

With language acquisition as a major focus of the intercultural early learning program, power and privilege in this regard also need to be addressed. Srinivasan (2009) proposes that *linguicism* is perpetuated by the descriptions we use, that is, Languages Other Than English, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, which set forth the English majority culture as the norm against which all other groups are compared. This can result in newcomer parents internalizing the idea that English competence is the single greatest determining factor in having a good life in Canada. As researchers, knowing that strong linguistic ability in the home language is of paramount importance to later acquiring other languages, a parent seeking more English for their young children becomes highly problematic (Nieto, 2010; Tabors, 2008).

Furthermore, too often in early childhood education we become “unintentional perpetrators of dominant political discourses” (Srinivasan, 2009, p. 163) because we do not examine the *taken-for-granted* (Fleer, 2003) ways we talk with and about newcomer families. By speaking about language and culture differently, as Srinivasan herself does (i.e., Languages *Othured* by English, and Culturally and Linguistically *Identified*), we can thus bring in to focus the othering inherent in our language and thereby perhaps begin to provide newcomers with an alternative way of picturing what a good life in Canada might look like.

Seeing newcomers as having rich *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) is the position we sought to bring to the development of the intercultural early learning program. Prakash and Esteva (2008) write, “The newly minted expert as well as the established scholar have much to learn about living well from the uneducated and the illiterate—if they can give up the arrogance of their expertise” (p. xii). By assuming such a position, we hoped to address some of the power imbalance inherent between majority-culture early childhood education and newcomer families.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP): Proponents and Critics

Despite criticism about the lack of regard for the particularities of special-needs and minority populations (Mallory & New, 1994; Spodek & Saracho, 1991) that led to a revised edition of the *Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)* document being published (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), current early childhood theory and practice are still predominantly based on the original views of the child and pedagogical practices carried over from the first edition. A third edition of *DAP* has recently been published, and in this document the increasing number of newcomers to the United States is acknowledged as bringing into focus issues of “home language and culture, second language learning, and school culture” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 2). The perspective taken, however, seems to be in line with US policy to *close the*

achievement gap, which predisposes viewing children and families as deficient and in need of intervention to bring them into line with majority culture expectations of learning and development.

Because the *DAP* philosophy dominates the early childhood practices in Canada as well, it was crucial for the pilot program to attempt to develop alternative practices in which children and their families and communities were central and a space was created where knowledge, skills, and identities could be formed based on inclusive principles.

Sociocultural-Historical Learning

A sociocultural-historical view of learning provides an alternative to the developmentalism inherent in the current early childhood practices guided by the *DAP* document. Influenced by Vygotsky (1978), Wertsch (1991) describes the basic goal of a sociocultural approach to the human mind as creating “an account of human mental processes that recognizes the essential relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical, and institutional settings” (p. 6). In this theoretical framework, human development is understood to occur “through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 368). The idea of change is particularly important, especially in relation to the transition between cultures experienced by newcomer parents and their children.

Research Methodology

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) methodology was used in the pilot project. This is an umbrella term for a wide range of similar approaches that challenge prevailing biases and preconceptions about people’s knowledge, and has proven valuable in a wide range of sectors and situations (Chambers, 1997; Pain & Francis, 2003). As a collaborative participatory process, PLA methodology requires all participants to become co-researchers. Therefore, data were not gathered, but were co-constructed and generated collectively during all phases of the process. Focus groups, individual interviews, open-ended research conversations, field notes, focused and/or casual observations, and analysis of documentation were used as data-generating research sources. Conversations were audiotaped and transcribed for participants to check for accuracy and intended meanings (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Struggles and Tensions

Although the theoretical framework on which the intercultural early learning program was to be built was supported in principle by all stakeholders in the project, its implementation in practice proved challenging. The data presented in this section came from individual interviews, team meetings, and classroom observations and exemplifies the struggle of translating theory into practice.

Background Challenges: Hurried Start

Although the conversations among stakeholders started several months before, when the Department of Education announced the intent to fund English-language learning (ELL) programs for 3- and 4-year-olds beginning in September 2007, the move to realize the dream of

an intercultural early learning program began in earnest. Along with some of the stakeholders involved, we resisted the hurriedness with which the program was to be implemented. If the purpose of the program was to be responsive to families in a grassroots way, then much time was needed to consult with families and community members from the ethnocultural communities that would be involved.

It became apparent that we did not have the luxury of time and that family and community consultation would have to be conducted at the same time as the implementation of the program rather than serving as the basis on which a future program would be built. This was a less-than-ideal situation that was many times justified with comments such as those expressed by one PSB stakeholder, “It was a window of opportunity and if we missed it, that next year we probably would just see a proliferation of ELL sites that would follow a typical early learning model” (Interview, September 2007).

Parental and Community Involvement

Parental and community involvement in the project became an ongoing topic of discussion. As expressed by one settlement community worker, this program needed to engage communities and involve families in ways not defined by *middle-class terms*. In her view, most early care and learning programs wanted parents’ involvement such as joining the board of the agency or spending time in the classroom. Such expectations did not take into account that newcomer parents are “overburdened with other responsibilities, mostly making a living” (Interview, September 2007).

Based on our experience of working with refugee and immigrant families in the context of already existing early care and learning settings, we knew that the particular needs of these families were not being met in existing programs, and unless the ethnocultural communities that the program was intended to serve were given voice, this program would be no different than those already in existence. Earlier research has documented the detrimental effect of DAP practices on refugee children and families (Dachyshyn, 2008), and so this pressure presented an ethical challenge. Without the prior consultation with families and communities, we had little concrete information to use in the development of classroom practices, so what we would have to offer would differ little from the programs already in existence.

To say that the pressure to begin the classroom program exemplifies the power relation between on the one hand the school board and government and on the other hand the communities the program was intended to serve is to dismiss the realities of the families and communities involved. Parents had heard from the cultural brokers (members of the ethnocultural communities employed to assist newcomers in the settlement process) about the planning of a program where their preschool children would be able to learn in their home language and in English, and they were clamoring for their children to begin attending. The brokers received daily inquiries from families who were wondering when the program would begin.

We still feel unsettled about how this central aspect and core value behind what we were trying to do played out. We had set out to co-create a program along with the community members involved. In reality, we did have the voices of the FLFs and cultural brokers, but first-hand parental input did not begin until well into the pilot year. Were we yet again perpetuating the cycle of the development workers *doing good* on behalf of the less fortunate?

Classroom Challenges

The classroom was established with an English-speaking teacher and three FLFs coming together with only one week to prepare. A representative of the PSB articulated this concern:

You know, as much as we are trying to facilitate something new it's not easy work for those in the class ... and how do we safeguard them? I think that that's an important piece ... The conversation for me is that theory and ideas are important because they need to influence practice but practice has to influence theory back you know and it has to be that sort of back and forth influence. (Interview, September 2007)

This tension between theory and practice was clearly directed toward us as the researchers and academics aligned with the project. The need for innovative and unique approaches to meeting the needs of refugee families presupposes calling into question already existing practices. This situation put us in a difficult position because we were clear about what kind of program we did not wish to offer and a theory of what might better suit the population to be served, but we were thin on practicalities. Not having time to consult with the families and communities about their goals for their preschool children's learning that would be consistent with their indigenous childrearing practices and cultural expectations, we were faced with the necessity of operating in somewhat of a void.

Classroom Staff

Implementing a project of this nature based on the theoretical framework outlined above brought a particular set of challenges when it came to selecting classroom staff. For example, selecting the English-speaking classroom teacher was a task with multiple layers of complexity. Because the Department of Education and the PSB were funding the program, a provincially certified and school board-approved teacher had to be hired. However, given the innovative nature of the project, many stakeholders, including us, were reluctant to hire a teacher with already entrenched views of developmentally appropriate early childhood practice and a simplistic view of multiculturalism. In the teacher's own words, "I was chosen because I didn't have any experience in preschool, in ESL, so I didn't have preconceived notions of what the preschool program should look like" (Interview, September 2007). Each of the FLFs was chosen by the cultural broker on behalf of her respective community and brought a background to the project that was valued by that community. All three FLFs expressed a strong commitment to helping young children to maintain facility in and appreciation for their home language and culture.

As researchers, we were involved in the discussions about the goals of the program, but left the classroom team to do the actual planning and setting up of the classroom for the first week of school. When we returned to the classroom to see how preparation for the arrival of the children was progressing, it immediately became apparent that although it was assumed that the teacher selected did not hold preconceived notions of what an early learning classroom should look like, in fact the classroom had been set up to mirror any other early learning center established for majority-culture children and families; primary-colored plastic materials and English print dominated the room. Not to isolate the English-speaking teacher as the sole source of this conundrum, the FLFs too had a hand in establishing the design of the classroom. In the

face of their anxiety to prepare for the arrival of the children the following week, they reverted to what they had seen and experienced in other Canadian majority-culture early care and learning programs.

We believed that we needed to raise the topic of the role of open space and the need for the children and families to *recognize* themselves and their cultures in the classroom. Not seeing any acknowledgment of the importance of the topic, we reluctantly but firmly stepped in and started opening the space by taking the plastic toys and materials out of the classroom while the classroom staff watched us in disbelief. It was a difficult day for all of us.

The First Days

When asked how she thought the first day would go, the English-speaking teacher replied,

The schedule that I kind of made up, I don't know if we're going to like really follow it. I think tomorrow's going to be more so just getting to know the kids, doing routines you know getting them used to the routines. (Interview, September 2007)

On the first day, the Kurdish-language facilitator expressed concern that the Kurdish children were very shy. "I think it's going to be a challenge for them to interact with the other kids" (Interview, September 2007). She felt, therefore, that the main task of the first week would be to "let the kids get to know each other" (Interview, September 2007). At the outset of the program, the Somali-language facilitator was worried that there would not be enough structure and discipline, "We need some sort of structure because like when children go to kindergarten they will need that" (Interview, September 2007). The Sudanese Arabic-language facilitator emphasized that for the first while it would be important for her to "sit close" (Interview, September 2007) to the children from her community to be a source of comfort.

Routines, no routines, sitting close, structure, boundaries, and discipline: there seemed to be little consistency of thought as to how things would go when the children began attending. In fact, the previous experiences and practices of the classroom staff with childcare and early learning centers based on DAP dominated, and a classroom routine with a circle time, centers time, and a snack time was adopted.

The intent in hiring the FLFs was that they would provide cultural and linguistic knowledge that would be infused into the classroom environment, routines, and the learning experiences to be carried out with the children. However, the only *culture* reflected during the first few weeks of the program was that of DAP. How did this happen? Did we not make ourselves clear in articulating how the goals of the program were to be achieved by genuinely incorporating children's home culture into the everyday life of the classroom? Were we fair in our expectations that in the absence of a *road map* and guidance from their communities and the parents, these particular individuals would somehow make it happen? How were we to remain loyal to the goals established with the collective efforts of all stakeholders while remaining critical yet constructive and supportive in our feedback to the classroom staff? Our attendance at Monday morning planning meetings became crucial in order to address such questions.

Planning and Curriculum Negotiations

Central to Monday morning planning meetings were the three cultural brokers who in addition

to the FLFs represented the ethnocultural communities involved in the project. The Kurdish broker acknowledged the innovative nature of the program, and because this was her first time undertaking such a project, she was aware that there would be struggles. She realized that although many partners and stakeholders were involved in planning the project, ultimately the responsibility for the outcome of the program lay with the people working daily with the children, including the cultural brokers along with the FLFs and the English-speaking teacher. She saw the role of the brokers as threefold: first as liaisons with parents, bringing information to and from the program; second, as a source of suggestions for curriculum during planning, “because we are older, we know about the customs more” (Interview, September 2007); and finally, as regular classroom participants to offer insight and support.

The desire to expose children to traditions that might otherwise be lost was strongly expressed by both the cultural brokers and the FLFs. For example, during the planning sessions, they started remembering games from their childhoods. These were used day to day in the classroom, sometimes with simplified rules. Cultural artefacts were gradually brought into the classroom to replace the plastic toys and materials. One of the most popular play areas was a marketplace where children could *buy* and *sell* food and other items. Playing *family* evolved, with *parents* sending their *children* to the market to buy food.

During one planning session, discussions of the place of music in community life made the team realize that music marks every important life event. This, along with the anticipated English-speaking teacher’s wedding, inspired children’s interest in weddings. With the guidance of the Kurdish-language facilitator and broker, the children spent several days preparing for a Kurdish wedding that they themselves enacted (several times) at the end of the week. They learned a traditional wedding song and a dance, *purchased* wedding attire at the market, cooked appropriate food, listened to Kurdish wedding music, and watched a video of a real wedding. With the parents’ permission, the FLFs painted henna designs on the children’s hands. Later the children were introduced to wedding traditions from the Somali and Sudanese cultures.

Despite these *successes*, we felt that much richer representations of indigenous childhood activities could be accomplished if we had direct access to the larger communities whose cultures were represented in the classroom rather than relying on only a few individuals to speak on behalf of these communities and children’s parents. Based on our knowledge of critical multiculturalism literature and the personal experiences of one of us as a first-generation immigrant, we were acutely aware of the danger of stereotyping associated with limited understanding of the in-groups variations characteristic of all cultures. Unfortunately, these meetings took place only in the second year of the program.

Managing the Four Languages

As stated above, the program began with three Sudanese Arabic-speaking, five Kurdish, and nine Somali children. Although the use of multiple languages in the classroom was new to all classroom staff, it seemed that each individual had her own idea as to how this would be handled. The English-speaking teacher said of the use of multiple languages in the classroom, “My hopes are for the children to learn the conceptual knowledge of English but also really to focus on their language and bringing that into the classroom” (Interview, September 2007). The Kurdish-language facilitator believed that it would be important to let the children speak whatever language they were most comfortable with at first and that probably signs and gestures would be used with those who could not speak English. The Somali facilitator expected that she

would be explaining to the children what they would be doing step by step: for example, time to wash your hands, and time to eat. The Sudanese Arabic-language facilitator as she sat close to the children, planned to talk with them about the names of the toys they were playing with, and as they grew to be comfortable and *happy* she would use toy materials such as blocks to introduce numbers and then letters, perhaps five per day.

Not only the use of multiple languages, but also the imbalance between the numbers of children in each of the three linguistic groups became issues in the day-to-day workings of the program. One of the greatest challenges to the integrity of the program was that many of the Somali children enrolled were fluent in English, with only minimal knowledge of their mother tongue. This compromised the aim of the program, which was to maintain the home languages of the children from the three linguistic groups involved. In reality, the largest group, the Somali children, were in need of a heritage language program in order to learn their home language rather than this program that was intended to maintain home languages while also helping the children to learn English in anticipation of kindergarten. English, therefore, quickly became the dominant language of the classroom.

Once again, we felt called to provide suggestions so that the overall intent of the program would not be lost. To provide linguistic continuity for the children, we suggested exploring which popular folk tales were found in various forms across cultural and linguistic groups. During one of the planning meetings, *The Enormous Turnip* was identified as one such story, the difference being that this vegetable is harvested in various ways and the players involved in the struggle to unearth it also vary.

We suggested that the English-speaking teacher first tell the story to all the children with the aid of a picture book, and then that the FLFs tell the same story in the children's home languages. Enacting the story while it was being told by each of the classroom staff members was the next step in developing the activity. Making headdresses for the various characters as well as a papier-mâché turnip were follow-up activities that the children enjoyed over two weeks. The idea of bringing root vegetables typical to the children's countries of origin and burying them in the sand box, as well as bringing traditional clothing for the farmer and his wife and children to wear, precipitated a dramatic play episode in which the children engaged repeatedly for several weeks.

Although these suggestions provided some structure as to when and how the children's home languages were spoken in the classroom, the predominant use of English remained. The children formed bonds with other children and adults from other cultural groups and used their common language, English, to maintain their relationships. However, because the children were hearing four languages, they picked up words and phrases from the other languages. Although this situation may not have been optimal for the development of home language, it seemed to heighten children's awareness of and interest in all the languages spoken in the classroom.

This central aspect of the program still leaves us searching for answers. Research evidence supports the notion that home language development should be the focus, but families are immersed in an English-only reality. Trusting the future of their beloved children to (inconclusive) research evidence that in the end they will be fluent speakers of English if the home language is fostered seems too frightening and uncertain a condition for many newcomer families.

Structural Issues

A key criticism that can be leveled against the first year of the pilot program was the lack of involvement of majority-culture children. The Kurdish cultural broker spoke to this fault when she said, “We need some other kids, you know, to be adjusted to a different culture and for them to be adjusted to us” (Interview, September 2007). She believed that it was important for newcomer children to be with majority-culture children at this preschool age because this would mirror their kindergarten and continued school experiences. She also believed that it was important for majority-culture children to have this intercultural experience, not only because of the opportunity to learn the languages of the other linguistic groups, but also because they could influence their families at home and bring about greater appreciation for diversity. Although this issue was a focus of repeated discussion in the Steering Committee during the planning of the pilot, in the end, budgetary constraints indicated that only children who would receive funding from the provincial government ELL enhancement initiative would be able to attend the program.

The decision to focus on Kurdish, Somali, and Sudanese Arabic-speaking families was another exclusionary aspect of the project. As one stakeholder wondered, “We’ve identified three communities and how does that impact other communities that maybe weren’t involved with the process and how can a model be developed where more communities can be included?” (Interview, September 2007).

Exclusion also became an issue in the Sudanese community. There was a great deal of discussion beforehand at the Steering Committee level as to which of the many languages spoken by the Sudanese community in the city should be the language of focus in the pilot project classroom. Eventually, it was decided that Sudanese Arabic, the language of commerce and education in Sudan, would be used. As it turned out, this attracted only a few families and served to exclude many more.

Key Learnings

This pilot project sought to go beyond the usual conceptions of parents’ involvement by involving the cultural communities in shaping the program. Time constraints at the beginning of the year precluded some of the foundational work that could have been done in that area, and much of the consultation occurred later in the year. However, the experience of the first year still yielded some important learnings that were articulated at the end-of-year meeting of the Steering Committee, classroom team, and ourselves.

First, the pilot year clearly demonstrated that families and communities should be involved before a program begins so that they will be consulted about the goals for the program and for their children. Because this was not possible, the involvement of cultural brokers and FLFs was essential in making newcomer families feel comfortable and enabling them to understand their role in their children’s educational experiences in Canada. Many of these families were still unsure about the language they were supposed to use with their children at home. Because most felt that they did not understand how things worked in this culture, they “don’t think they have anything worthwhile to contribute and they are afraid to embarrass their children” (Interview, September 2007) as one of the FLFs explained. Such sentiments clearly align with the internalization of the settler narrative as discussed above. However, when parents saw that their ideas were not only welcomed, but also actively sought and implemented in the classroom

practice, most became eager to share their cultural knowledge and childrearing traditions. The presence of cultural brokers and FLFs diminished the barriers of communication and made this ongoing sharing of cultural practices possible. It is worth stressing here that much more time and effort need to be devoted to working with ethnocultural communities, especially those that are newer and thus not well established, to articulate their expectations as well as their indigenous ways of being with young children so that they can be incorporated meaningfully in early childhood teaching practice.

Second, in an intercultural program that aimed to honor families' home culture and language, the materials, the cultural artefacts, and how the classroom was set up were central to meeting the set goals of the program. Because language and culture are learned only in context, the physical environment of the classroom must reflect the children's and families' cultures. Although communities and families contributed culturally authentic cooking utensils, dishes, baskets, clothing, hangings, music, and musical instruments, without the presence of the FLFs as regular classroom staff, these cultural artefacts could easily have become *decoration items* and thus not have contributed to the children's meaningful exploration of culturally relevant ways of using these artefacts and learning the vocabulary related to their use.

Third, providing sufficient planning time for the classroom team was essential for intercultural understanding to develop among its members as a basis for genuine collaboration and negotiation of meaning that over time became shared. With support from communities, school administration, and researchers, the team members gradually recognized the challenges described above as open, shared spaces that allowed for new meanings and new approaches to working with young children to emerge. Without such continual support and in the absence of available alternative models to follow, DAP would prevail and so would the superficial approach to culture for which majority-culture multicultural practices have been criticized.

Finally, creating new, culturally responsive, and intercultural early childhood practices was a process of self-reflection on the part of all parties involved. Of the 15 people involved either as members of the Steering Committee or as members of the classroom team during the pilot year of the project, only six were from the ethnocultural communities: the cultural brokers and the FLFs. The disproportionate representation of members of the majority culture paired with parents' desire to help their children become as *Canadian as possible* so that they could be successful in school and in later life created a situation where bringing cultural elements back into the conversations was accomplished in the already existing frame of dominant discourses of cultural appreciation, multicultural education, and parents' participation. It was our role to model critical questioning of our own intentions and interrogating our own privileged position of power based on specialized knowledge. Ultimately, each stakeholder had to face the question *What is the position from which I define success, and why do I consider the time, effort, and hard-to-quantify results worthy of pursuing?*

The fact that the program is now in its third year with 23 children from the three ethnocultural communities and children from the majority culture who live in the neighborhood in attendance is a testimony to the commitment of all stakeholders in developing a new intercultural, multilingual, early learning pedagogy. Our decision to describe the not-so-easy beginnings is based on the value we place on the ability of the team to see the challenges as opportunities. Transformative learning is never easy, and we hope that the experiences shared here speak to this.

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