



CHALLENGING OURSELVES IN OUR PRACTICE

The Challenges of Cultural Competence

Exploring the Impacts of Race, Culture and Identity on Early Childhood Educator Practice

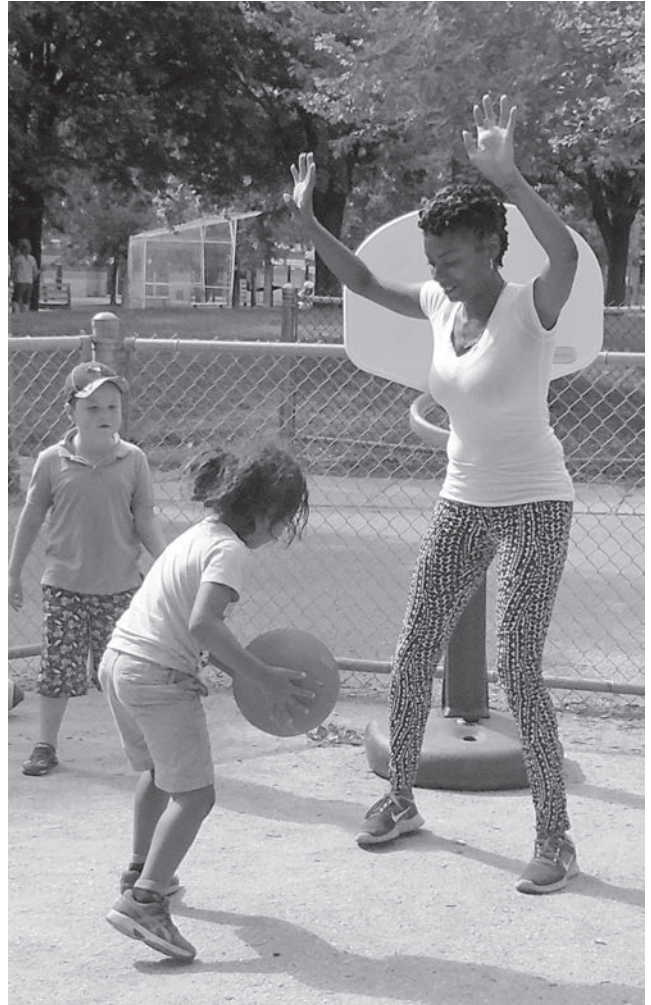
by **Chanequa Cameron and
Lyndsay Macdonald**

Introduction

The notion that early childhood is a critical period for establishing a strong foundation for cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development has become well established within the sector (NAE, 2015). As many experts would agree, children begin to make sense of their world in early childhood, making it a prime time for children to develop positive ideas about their self-identity which goes hand in hand with a child's ethnic background and culture (Friendly & Prabhu, 2010). There is also a growing trend in professional learning and training across the early childhood sector that is reflective of the diverse makeup of the Canadian population.

This article will explore, from the professional perspective of the authors, how race, culture and individual identity impact the professional practice of early childhood educators (ECEs) and workers in Canada. This topic will be explored through a cultural competence lens as the authors' present research alongside culturally competent recommendations for professional reflection and personal stories.

To begin, we must look closely at the term, *cultural competence*, and what that means to the professional work of ECE's. Although



research in the field dating back as early as 1993 has examined cultural competence in pre-service training (Brunson, 1993), there is currently no operational definition of cultural competence that is specific to the Canadian ECE sector (Obegi & Ritblatt, 2005). Other countries, such as Australia operate a professional learning program that recognizes cultural competence as an element of supporting a child's understanding of who they are. (Professional Learning Program, 2013).

There is further research in several other professional areas to support embedding cultural competence in training and work practices, such as in immigration work, medical care and child and youth care work. To truly define cultural competence, one must draw from past research which says that, "cultural competence" is "the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, [socio]cultural, and linguistic diversity" (Lynch & Hanson 1993). Furthermore,



Obegi and Ritblatt (2005) support that culturally salient care provides children with “a sense of security, belonging, and personal history” (p.1).

Reflective Practice

Cultural competence is not a given skill for every early childhood educator or child care worker, but rather an individual’s level of cultural competence depends on a number of professional characteristics such as educator beliefs. Becoming culturally competent is a continuous professional practice that requires intentional effort and development. This brings us to the importance of including cultural competence in the reflective practice of ECEs. As ECE’s reflect upon their work with children they should be mindful of how their actions and reactions to culture and racial identity craft their relationships with families and more specifically the children that they serve. Reflective practice has long been used in the early childhood education and care sector, but what are the key elements of reflective practice? Arguably, reflective practice can mean different things to ECEs (depending on where they live and the populations they serve). However, if we look specifically at the work of ECEs in Ontario it can be noted that not only is personal and professional reflection important but so is ongoing professional learning. An article titled, *The Evolution of Professional Learning for RECEs in Ontario* looks at why it is an integral part of our work by saying,

“Decades of research have identified that the learning and ongoing professional learning of early childhood educators and staff is a critical element in the provision of high quality ECEC. As regulated professionals, registered early childhood educators also have ethical and professional responsibilities to enhance their practice and gain new skills and knowledge to cope with the ever changing needs of children and families. In the context of Ontario’s going agenda to ‘modernize’ childcare and the broader ECEC sector, increased attention has been devoted to the professional learning of the ECEC workforce,” (Dixon & Halfon, 2015)

Due to the fact that ongoing professional learning and reflective practices are tied to ethical and professional responsibilities we believe that this is where the underlying elements of cultural competence fit in. Within the realm of professionalism we urge ECEs to question what moral and culturally competent responsibilities they may appreciate based on specific areas of



their work. With this article we also ask you to question what cultural competence specifically means to you. Our hopes are that with the information presented in this article, ECEs will move toward a more sound appreciation of differences and will make efforts to both question and recreate their methodology for understanding differences through critical pedagogy.

Five Elements of Cultural Competence Found in our Review of the Research

A search of both national and international literature on cultural competence was completed to compile a working list of suggestions to guide ECEs in their reflective practice. The authors suggest these six elements of culturally reflective principles as a starting point for Canadian ECEs to model what it means to provide culturally competent care.

I. To understand and evaluate our teaching beliefs by reflecting on our own racial and cultural identity and understanding of biases

Research offers that, unexamined biases keep us from fully recognizing when we profile children and families in ways that limit possibilities for teaching and learning (Long et al, 2014). Teachers’ racial identities do influence their conceptualizations of teaching and understanding culturally diverse young students



(Han, West-Olantunji & Thomas, 2011). Moreover ECE's need to continually evaluate their teaching beliefs through reflecting on what impact our own racial and cultural identities and biases have on relationship building and learning facilitation offered to children.

2. To embody and demonstrate qualities of ethics, morality and empathy

ECE is a valuable sector of our society, and with this come many professional obligations due to the vulnerability of the young children in our care. Clarke and Watson's (2014) study of an inner city child care centre located in London, England found that failure to employ ethnic minority staff or have appropriate translation services was the reason the centre failed to attract or meet the needs of minority groups. This tells us that employers have a duty to make the workplace reflective of clients served whilst providing services that meet the needs of clients specifically in the area of language services. Most importantly, ECEs need to demonstrate ethical, moral and empathetic proficiency in order to embrace the magnitude of culturally salient care.

3. To engage in and value reflective practices individually and as part of a team

While engaging in reflective practice ECEs should identify and record goals to help them build strong trusting relationships with all of the children and families in the program. One article which examined cultural competence in ECE settings stated that, "Becoming culturally competent is about building respectful relationships. It occurs over time, by our connection with others and through our daily experiences with children and families in local communities. It is as much about what we do every day, the little decisions we make and words we use, as it is about what we think, what we understand and what we believe." (Connor, 2012)

4. To make an honest and on-going commitment to research topics initiated by children and families in ECEC settings

A well-established approach to early childhood education that has gained considerable recognition internationally is the idea that children learn best through play experiences that are

It became clear to me that, like my own African-Canadian culture with which I identify, all of the families were so different: their needs were different, dialect and often understanding and appreciation of the care given were different. That is when I realized that I needed to also pay specific attention to the learning environment that I created with the children — to maintain culturally inclusive versus culturally offensive climates.

reflective of their interests and developmental needs. ECEs can often be found recording detailed observations of children as they play and interact with others; this practice supports educators to plan within individual zones of proximal development while adjusting learning experiences to meet the individual learning needs of each child. When educators and child care workers do not have a well-established understanding of specific topics, it is critical to acknowledge that there is room for growth and move towards conducting research. An article on supporting cultural competence for teachers' states, "Far too often educators focus on teaching multiculturalism and diversity without first engaging in learning that ensures that they are themselves fully competent in the cultural aspects of the knowledge

they seek to impart to their students (Day, 2014)." Therefore teachers need to see themselves as lifelong learners as well as researcher.

5. To work from a perspective that each situation and individual is different due to their unique experiences with culture, race and identity

As ECEs it is important that we both recognize differences while also valuing them. By valuing differences through a culturally competent lens ECEs play a huge role in supporting children's development of positive self-identities. These two main points are supported in research where it states, "as diversity grows, the challenge to early childhood services grows to address the dimension of equity these important traits raise. On the surface, their impact may appear to be manifest strictly as classroom practice issues. Yet, as early care and education settings are working to deepen their sensitivity to culture, it is increasingly acknowledged that cultural values and their resultant interaction styles also manifest themselves within the infrastructure of the programs (Phillips, 1993)." This tells us that our attitudes towards certain preconceived notions and understanding helps us create the programs offered to children. Our competent understanding of children and diversity has a big hand in the development of programs as well. So the key is to start with staff development so that they are prepared to appreciate and value the differences in



children they serve and create learning environments that will foster both global citizenship as well as culturally competent individuals.

A culturally competent lens:

Chanequa's Experiences with Cultural Competence

I have always taken pride in my work as an ECE and the opportunity I have to look at my work through the lens of being an ethnic minority. In my formal training as an ECE I was taught to be a reflective practitioner and to value reciprocity, resiliency and most importantly to listen. For me, reflective practice means that I should take my experiences and reflections and build upon my skills, to become a better ECE, better caregiver and to make better connections with families. Of course we all have difficulty at times connecting with people, however the core elements of ECEC should propel each and every ECE to find true purpose and meaning within their work.

My first hugely meaningful and culturally competent experience came from my work in a small suburban city just north of Toronto. In my three years of work at this centre with children from infancy to school age, I learned the value of connecting with families through language, as many of the families that enrolled at the centre were new immigrants. What I reflected on most often was how I could ease the stress of change and transitions for the families I served. This is why I dedicated myself to learning how to read some *Pin Yin* and to speak and correctly address families in Mandarin. I was also very mindful to learn and observe the core values of the families I served.

This working experience has made me appreciate the notion of cultural competence and will forever guide my professional work as an RECE.

...Had the educational team approached the situation from the standpoint of “Let’s find out how we can best support this child and his family”, rather than “Let’s find out how can we get this dangerous kid out of our classroom”, perhaps we could have positively impacted the trajectory of this child’s life.

The children and the families I work with now and in the future have so much to teach me and I welcome those lessons- after all part of my job is not to become what I am not but rather to try to understand what I am not and where I have not come from.

Lyndsay's experiences with cultural competence

For me, the idea of cultural competence as a critical element for working with, educating and caring for young children became obvious through reflections of my own practice but also through attentive observations and research.

An anecdote from my professional practice serves as a reminder to be aware of and attentive to biases that we undoubtedly hold in order to serve children and their families to the best of





our ability. I was working in a school-based kindergarten program where biases were left unexamined and lead to the profiling of a young child experiencing behavioral challenges. His educators had him labeled as a “problem”, he was “aggressive”, “dangerous” and his parent was profiled as “unhelpful” and “uncaring”. Decisions were made hastily with very little reflection or discussion and the child was removed from the program.

My training in early childhood education left a lasting impression of the importance of research – not just in universities – but within the classroom and with children as researchers. Early childhood professionals *are* researchers who investigate topical issues related to their practice and to the field at large. In the scenario I described above,

Conclusion

Cultural competence and the idea of exploring the impact of race culture and identity on ECE practice came up as a topic of interest because as our nation diversifies, so will the ECE sector and the clients they serve. At the beginning of the article the authors were mindful to state why ECE is a critical period for supporting healthy development as well as the fact that this is a period when children begin to make sense of their world which is prime time for supporting positive understanding of self and identity related to ethnic background and culture. The paper also explored from a professional perspective how race culture and individual identity impact our individual practices. This was done by sharing personal stories, reviewing research and tying it in to professional learning and development trends.

In summary, cultural competence is supported in other sectors such as immigration, health care and child and youth care so it should also be supported through training, certification and professional development for ECEs. Culturally competent educators have the ability to think and feel in a way that builds upon respect, understanding and acknowledgement of ethnic and cultural diversity. Moreover, cultural competence is not a given skill, it requires continuous professional development. Finally, we would like to end this article with the following anecdote. “Although reflecting on and challenging one’s identity is a life-long process, embedding racial identity development theory into the multicultural courses for early childhood teacher candidates as well as professional development for practicing teachers can help decrease their resistance while increasing their knowledge and skills in order to become effective educators of culturally diverse

Culturally competent educators have the ability to think and feel in a way that builds upon respect, understanding and acknowledgement of ethnic and cultural diversity. Cultural competence is not a given skill, it requires continuous professional development.

students.” (Han, West-Olantunji & Thomas, 2011)

Chanequa Cameron works as a Registered Early Childhood Educator with a public school board in full day kindergarten. She is also serving her 3rd term on the board of directors for the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, while also fulfilling the role of member council representative for the Canadian Childcare Federation’s member council. Chanequa’s written achievements include articles surrounding ECE awareness and advocacy and curriculum consulting and development for Vanuatu.

Chanequa is an advocate for several social causes and initially engaged in advocacy initiatives at the age of twelve by writing local MP’s and other constituents to have a crosswalk installed near the middle school she attended. Chanequa has also mentored and peer tutored numerous ECE students during her career. Chanequa is an active member and pursues advocacy initiatives with professional associations such as the AECEO, CCCF, OCBCC and CUPE Local 4400.

Chanequa holds a Diploma in ECE and a Bachelor of Child Development from Seneca College and is currently enrolled in Ryerson University’s Masters Program for Early Childhood Studies. chanequacameron@tdsb.on.ca

Lyndsay Macdonald currently works as Research Officer at the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (CRRU) and as National Coordinator of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC).

Lyndsay’s research interests include the history of child care policy and the development of child care systems in Canada and internationally. Lyndsay has also researched how the professionalization of the early childhood education and child care workforce has impacted the child care movement in Canada.

Lyndsay advocates passionately for child care policies that support all Canadian families, parents and guardians to maintain a healthy work life balance and that put children at the centre of system building.

Lyndsay holds both a BA in Early Childhood Education and an MA in Early Childhood Studies from Ryerson University School of Early Childhood Studies. lmacdonald@childcarecanada.org

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