

Shaking the Movers 2024: Early Childhood



elm

Early Learning
at MacEwan



Table of Contents

Land Acknowledgement and Dedication _____	3
Belonging in Ward O-day'min _____	4
Contextualizing Belonging _____	5
Children's Perspectives _____	6
Educators' Perspectives _____	10
Families' Perspectives _____	13
Students' Perspectives _____	16
Concluding Thoughts _____	18
Thank You _____	19
References _____	20
Appendix _____	21

Land Acknowledgement

We want to acknowledge that what we call Alberta is the traditional and ancestral territory of many First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples who lived on and cared for these lands and the children of these lands since time immemorial. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies, and culture of the First Peoples who call this territory home. The place ELM calls home - where we live, work, play, and rest - is in Treaty Six Territory.

The First People's connection to the land teaches us about our inherent responsibility to protect and respect Mother Earth and to one another. With this acknowledgment, we honour the history of all that has occurred here - the joys and the sorrows and suffering, and we recommit to the process of ongoing collective healing for all human beings.

We acknowledge the rich traditions of storytelling for the First Peoples, that stories are told to teach, inform, inspire and entertain. We listen with open hearts and minds to our own stories and the stories of others.

We are reminded that the honouring of children has taken place on this land for many, many generations and that this land has always been a place of learning and sharing, so we are honoured to learn and share with you.

Dedication

With admiration, we remember and celebrate The Honourable Landon Pearson O.C. Landon's unwavering commitment to children's rights and well-being changed the landscape for how children's rights are understood across Canada. Landon's passion and service for children everywhere has left a legacy. Which continues to be felt today, not only in the lives of children and youth but also in the lives of the countless educators and advocates who have been inspired by her work. We are committed to Landon's vision and will continue our work to uphold children's rights.



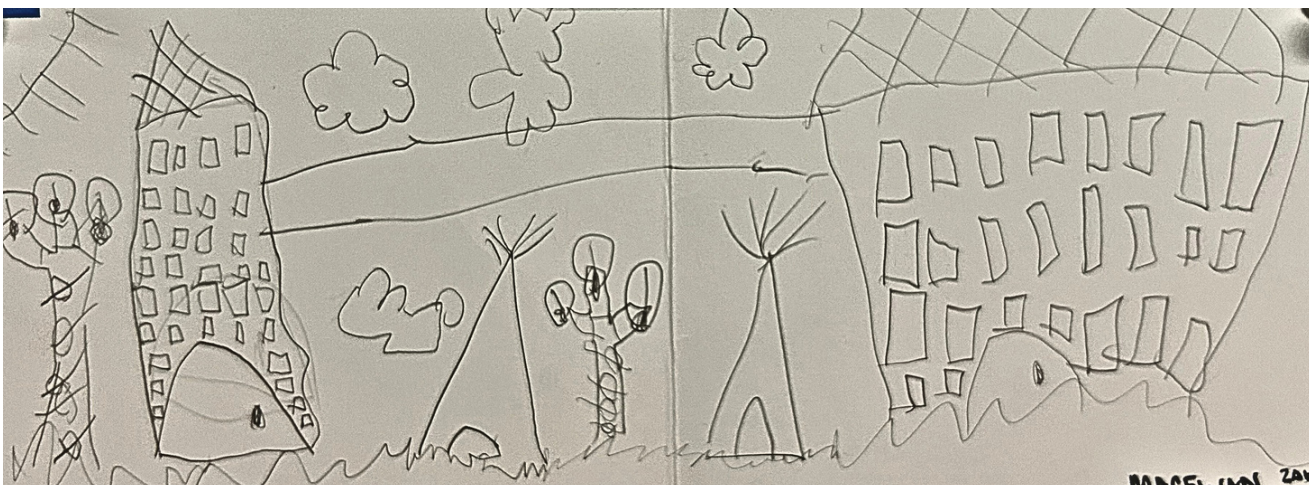
We give a special thanks to Hilary Pearson for funding the Shaking the Movers 2023-2024 Workshop Series.

Belonging in Ward O-day'min

Edmonton, also known by its Nehiyawewin (Cree) name amiskwacîywâskahikan, is in Treaty 6 Territory, in the province now known as Alberta. After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, as an act of reconciliation, Indigenous community members approached Edmonton City Council with a recommendation to rename the city's municipal wards with Indigenous names as a way to acknowledge that a diversity of Indigenous peoples have historically gathered - and continue to live - in the area for thousands of years. In 2020, Council passed that the city wards would have new boundaries and be known by new names (City of Edmonton, 2024).

MacEwan University, and therefore Early Learning at MacEwan, is in Ward O-day'min. O-day'min means strawberry or heart-berry in Anishinaabe, and represents the heart of the city. One of amiskwacîywâskahikan / Edmonton's most dense and urban areas, O-day'min is home to many people of diverse backgrounds, and is a space of many activities. Some of our neighbours are busy skyscrapers, imposing condos, Edmonton City Hall in Sir Winston Churchill Square, and vibrant residential areas - and some of our neighbours are struggling with houselessness, many of whom are Indigenous. This contrast calls attention to some of the stark discrepancies in contemporary Canadian society. amiskwacîywâskahikan / Edmonton continuously wrestles with concepts of belonging.

This is where the ELM early childhood community is - where we work, play, and learn together. Our STM project this year framed places where we belong to consider the meanings of belonging in the context of the specific place we are in - in Ward O-day'min; in amiskwacîywâskahikan / Edmonton; in Treaty 6 Territory; in what is known as Alberta, in what is known as Canada. What does it mean to belong in this place? In what ways might understanding children's belonging in spaces and places help us to reconfigure all of our spaces and places so that we can all belong together? May asking these questions lead us to discoveries that are as sweet as strawberries.



"MacEwan" drawn by Zahara

Contextualizing Belonging

Our Shaking the Movers explorations this year focused on spaces of belonging, and the ways that children's belonging in particular spaces can open communities up to deeper experiences of inclusion. Experiences of belonging both support children's enactments of their rights and reinforce those rights by providing spaces where children's whole selves are welcomed and encouraged. Similar to our Shaking the Movers project last year, which investigated the ways care and children's rights worked together to contribute to a world fit for children, our hope is that this year's explorations support our conversations about relationships with space and place while understanding the histories we live within as an early childhood community in settler Canada. We cannot separate this exploration from the fact that we live, play, work, and rest in Treaty 6 Territory in amiskwacîywâskahikan / Edmonton, Alberta.

Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework (Makovichuk et al., 2014) considers belonging an essential contributor to children's learning and growth in early learning and child care. Belonging is one of the three facets of the holistic goal of Well-being, alongside Physical Health and Emotional Health & Positive Identities. *Flight* suggests that children's sense of belonging reflects their social health - how they are learning to construct "respectful and responsive relationships" (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 94) with other children and adults, and how they cultivate relationships in particular spaces and places, both individually and in groups.

Children's rights ideas like respect, responsibility and reciprocity are visible in children's awareness of the ways their actions contribute to the well-being of others - other children and adults, other species, and the natural and built environments. We want to think away from the concept of belonging as ownership - belonging *to* someone or something - and dig our toes deeper into the ground of shared space and specificity of place - belonging *with*. The UNCRC recognizes belonging in multiple ways - many articles are directly related to children's belonging in families (as rights-holders); in nations (as citizens, although without civic rights such as voting); and in safety.

In early learning and child care, our spaces are dedicated children's spaces - purposefully scaled and organized for young children. The educators from ELM mindfully honour children's entry into child care, nurture the ways that they take up space, and support them by putting children's rights into practice in embodied and relational ways. Childcare spaces are unique, where children and adults experiment with different ways of learning how to be together. This year's STM focus encouraged ELM educators to make sense of how they intentionally and unintentionally contribute to children's sense of belonging.

Children's Perspectives

We focused our attention on the children from the Partridge Room, ELM's youngest citizens, as we explored what it means to belong in particular spaces and feel a sense of belonging. Our decision to ground our work among children ages 15 months to 2.5 years challenged us to think about children's expressions of belonging beyond verbal language. By attuning to children's gestures, gazes, sounds, body movements, facial expressions, actions, and single words, we wondered if these are the many ways children express and make sense of what it means to belong. As we moved through this project, we recognized the need to acknowledge that these are our own adult-centred interpretations of everyday moments with children. We were mindful of interpreting children's interactions with each other and their environment, and we hope that we have documented their perspectives authentically and respectfully.

Below are some encounters that called our attention:



We see this enacted in reciprocal moments as Jayce helps Dottie remove her snowsuit, followed quickly by Dottie helping Jayce remove his boots. Gestures of care led by the children happen daily in the Partridge Room, cultivating the notion that it is a space where they belong.

We notice moments of belonging within care routines and in play. Children's attunement to each other nurtures moments of care that encourage us to consider how children feel a sense of belonging and create spaces of belonging for others.





The Partridge Room is intentionally designed for the children, families, and educators who inhabit it, ebbing and flowing daily to the living and learning of childcare spaces. We see how children respond to the materials, furniture, images, and daily decisions that reflect them and their families. This is evident as Noah flips through a scrapbook with photographs of children from the Partridge Room. He pauses on a photo of himself and softly whispers, "Noah." Children's voices, whether verbal or more than verbal, are loud within childcare spaces - when we are open to hearing them. They echo through the Partridge Room, creating living and lived-in spaces of belonging.

An ongoing practice in ELM is to invite families to share pieces of their lives; playing the guitar for a group of children, sharing a family recipe, sitting down with a book to read to their child and inviting others to join and participating in play during drop off and pick up times. *Flight* (Makovichuk et al., 2014) reminds us that, "The child's sense of belonging to family and community is strengthened through respectful and reciprocal relationships, where educators recognize the value of family connections and contributions in understanding how each child makes meaning of the world" (p. 24).



In our conversations with students and with families, we shared three stories written by Chadya that highlighted moments that we interpreted as understanding of belonging within the Partridge Room.

Big tears fall down your face leaving long streaks across your rosy cheeks. You sit on your mom's lap, snuggled in close, and she wraps her arms around you. "I know" she says softly, nuzzling into your hair. You seem to melt into her a little further as she says "I have to go now." I hold out my hand to you and you reluctantly reach back, climbing off mom's lap. The tears continue to fall down your face and you become more vocal with your protest. Mom calls out a goodbye and through your tears you say "bye" and give a small wave. "Do you want to come see what is happening out the window, Winston?" I ask you as we start to walk away. You let me lead you across the room as mom walks out the door to the hallway, and we stop at the door to outside. I kneel down beside you and you move in close, your body pressed against mine as we gaze out the window together. I hold you close, my hand rubbing your back gently as you shake with emotion. "I see the slide and the treehouse outside. And over there are the swings. I wonder if the digger is awake? Oh, and look! There is a ball!" I narrate to you what I notice outside. "A ball?" you question, sniffing back tears. "An orange ball" I point out again. A smile starts to break the path of your tears as you lean closer and press your nose against the window. "Orange ball!" you exclaim and then stand up and turn around. "A ball?" you inquire and look towards where we keep the inside balls in a basket. You make your way over to the basket and choose a ball inside. "A ball!" you shout with excitement. You are ready to start your day.





Violet lays on the ground, tears streaming down her cheeks and a scream of frustration escaping her. Libby and I move close to her, wondering how we might help her. You gather close by as well, watching the scene unfold. As Libby and I talk about how we can help Violet, you look around and bend to pick something up. You return to where we are with long pieces of knotted yarn in your hands. You dangle the string above Violet, and she stops crying, watching the string swing back and forth. She smiles as she reaches for the string, and you smile, too, letting her take the string from your hand. You reach back for the string, but Violet holds on tight. "Me!" you say, a little uncertain. Libby offers to help unknot the string and hands you a piece and Violet another. You giggle and hold your string close, watching as Violet does the same.

The door to ELM opens and closes, but no one appears. A few seconds pass, and then a little head pops around the door frame to Mackenzie's office. "Dottie! I was wondering if it was you!" Mackenzie exclaims. Dottie, Mom, and Dad appear from behind the door frame laughing, and Dottie smiles as she's placed on the floor. Mackenzie starts to chat with Mom, Dad, and Dottie, asking about their week. Dottie shows Toast and Cedric to Mackenzie and then lifts her boots up to show those, too. She also points to Mackenzie's shoes, making a little noise of appreciation. "Have a good day!" Mackenzie calls as Dottie and her family make their way down the hallway.





The next stop is Meena's kitchen. "Dottie! Hi Dottie!" Meena calls excitedly, and Dottie holds Toast and Cedric up again. A little chat with Meena, and it is time to move on. First, Dottie and her family peek through Jennifer's window and give a little wave. Is there anyone in the reading room? A big hello, and Dottie is on the move again down the hallway and into the Partridge Room. Dottie bursts in, all smiles and ready for the day. She runs over to the educators, holding Toast and Cedric up again.

"Good morning, Dottie! You have Toast and Cedric," Libby says. "Hi, Dottie," Noah says, and Dottie waves back. Emmy comes rushing over, a big smile on her face, and Dottie matches that energy, calling, "Ehh!" Dottie heads back to her family, takes her jacket off, and moves into the room. A quick hug, kiss, and a wave goodbye signals to her family and the educators that Dottie is ready for her day.

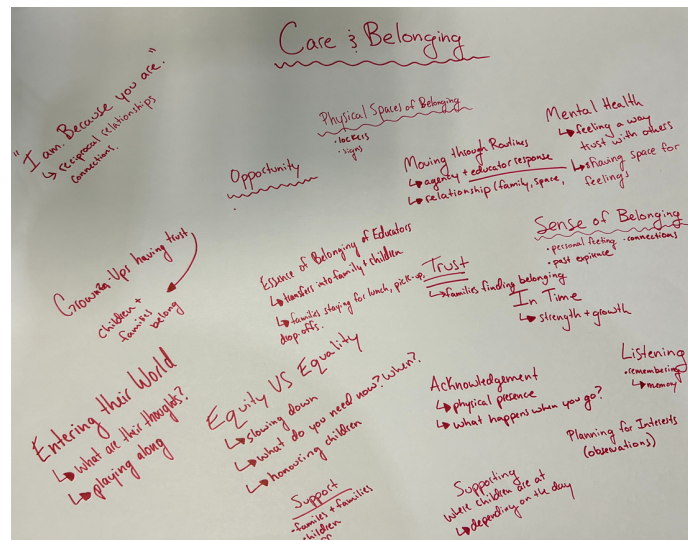
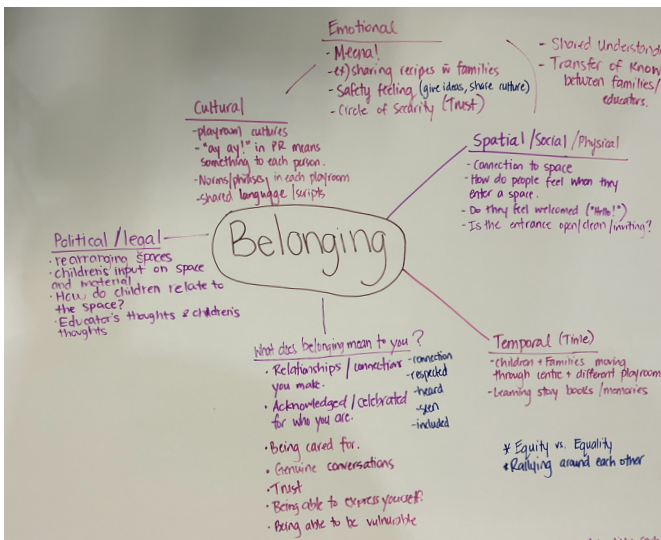
Educators' Perspectives

Belonging is a deeply personal experience. In an attempt to make sense of belonging, the educator team engaged in a conversation centered around Tillet and Wong's case study of educators' understanding of belonging (2018). The authors outline ten dimensions of belonging:

1. Emotional Belonging
2. Social Belonging
3. Spatial Belonging
4. Temporal Belonging
5. Cultural Belonging
6. Moral/Ethical Belonging
7. Political Belonging
8. Legal Belonging
9. Physical Belonging
10. Spiritual Belonging

We wondered how these dimensions might support educators' perspectives, knowledge and understanding of belonging. Small groups of 3 or 4 ELM educators and BECCS students engaged in conversation and used the following questions to guide their reflections.

1. What does belonging mean to you personally?
2. What are the ways that we set up spaces/contexts to play out ideas of belonging?
3. How do we do this for children? How do we do this for families?
 - a. What does this look like?
 - i. Relationships?
 - ii. Materials?
 - iii. Environments?
4. How do you cultivate spaces of belonging? What are some practices you engage with to do this - intentionally and unintentionally?



1. Being accepted
 - Having connection
 - Being included
 - Being respected
 - Being heard
 - Being noticed + seen
 - feeling safe
 2. Choose materials that speak to the children
 - explore meaningful topic through materials (playdough/books, paint/drawing)
 - rearranging the space to reflect individual/group
 - material and furniture at children's level (accessible)
 3. families
 - celebration
 - everyday check in
 - Learning stories
 - welcoming space
 - inviting participation (interest/talent)
 4. intentional
 - celebration
 - genuine greeting
 - positive feedback
 - affirmation of their belonging
 - gain trust
 - confidence
- Support*
being outside
"I feel I belong"
- welcoming family - books for children - sign welcoming - love*
- nurturing transitions*
- unintentional*
create ease through conversation

ELM Educators:

- Ana Sanford
 Chadya Sirdar
 Dawn Pearson
 Erica Farries
 Jennifer Sibbald
 Jill Vereschagin

- Kayla Gramlich
 Libby Campos Laux
 Linnea Van Sickle
 Mackenzie Newhook
 Michelle van Struen
 Rodan Sabejon

BECCS Students:

- Carmen Chalut
 Cayley Kowalchuk

- Iris Baguion
 Sage Duguay

A key message that emerged for educators was that belonging happens in a practice of relationships. *Flight* defines a practice of relationships as describing complex and dynamic interactions between the members of an early childhood community and begins with educators committing to learn with and alongside children and families (Makovichuk et al., 2014). This is a central value for ELM and is highlighted as we work from a rights-based approach and acknowledge that we all have the right to belong. Educators noted that they nurture a sense of belonging for children and families because the educators themselves feel that they belong within the ELM community. This strong dynamic of reciprocity emerged throughout our explorations, reminding us of the collaborative nature of community building, inclusion, and belonging.

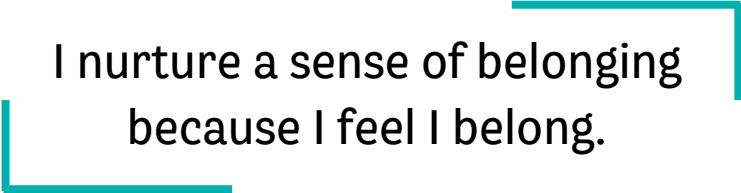
Additionally, educators identified some of the ways in which they know and acknowledge children and families:

- By attuning to their needs, understanding that not all families have the same needs but they all deserve to feel like they belong.
- By cultivating spaces for children and families to be seen and heard.
- By actively and authentically listening to children and families to establish and strengthen relationships.
- By thoughtfully arranging the time, space and materials to honour the current community.

Iris Baguinon joined the educator team as a senior intern and participated alongside educators as part of her final capstone project. The critical question at the heart of her project was: In what ways do educators create shared spaces and experiences that nurture a sense of belonging and participation in the early years, and what guides their practice? During her project, Iris investigated this question with educators and children in the Partridge room. She shares a selection of her findings here, which were gathered through observation, documentation and semi-structured interviews. For her full poster preset, please see Appendix A.

Findings	
<p><u>Educators' Understanding of Belonging.</u> Drawing from Tillet and Wong's ten dimensions of belonging, four of the ten dimensions aligned with educators' responses during the semi-structured interviews*.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional belonging: Educators conveyed that belonging is personal and relational. • Social belonging: Educators described how children recognize that they are part of a community through the ways they approach shared experiences. • Spatial belonging: Educators highlighted children's connections with the spaces and materials within the setting. • Legal belonging: Educators expressed that they respect children's toys from home as something that belongs to them. 	<p><u>Nurturing Meaningful Connections and Relationships</u> For children to experience a sense of belonging, educators need to nurture children's connections and relationships with educators, their peers, and the space. This is evident through observations of educators creating opportunities for children to contribute and interact with others and the environment. Educators also revealed that a shared interest in objects and play materials often brought children together. Through educators' active engagement for children to participate and collaborate, a shared belonging unfolds.</p>
<p><u>Using Rights-based Practice to Foster Sense of Identity.</u> <i>"When we view children as capable of building strong relationships, co-constructing knowledge with each other, we create spaces that reflect that... and I think [it] creates that sense of belonging because they can see themselves in the space." - Educator</i></p> <p>Through the lens of rights-based practice, educators use language that affirms and honours children's agency. As I immersed myself in the room, I noticed how educators make deliberate choices in arranging the room environment that encourages children's participation and how their curriculum decisions support children's understanding of inclusion.</p>	<p><u>The Importance of Reflective Practice and a Collaborative Environment</u> <i>"Looking for those moments where you can have conversations with your team and bounce ideas off each other." - Educator</i></p> <p>When asked about what guides educators' practices in nurturing children's sense of belonging and participation, they expressed the importance of having opportunities to reflect on their own, amongst each other, and with the guidance of a pedagogical mentor and their centre leaders. One educator particularly emphasized the significant impact and influence of having a collaborative environment on their professional growth and identity.</p>

Our explorations of belonging have sensitized us to the ways in which it is an embodied dynamic, particularly with young children. A child leaning into an educator as they read a story together; a quick and meaningful conversation in the hallway; a child lifted up to hug their parent at the half-door of the playroom - all of these illustrate how belonging is nurtured in small moments of care and recognition, reinforcing how everyone has the right to belong.



I nurture a sense of belonging
because I feel I belong.

Families' Perspectives

"Well-being is important to all human beings. For young children and their families, a positive sense of well-being is nurtured through participation in an environment that is consistent and where respectful, responsive relationships and community connections are valued" (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 92). In our ongoing exploration of belonging, we recognize the significant role of families. It was important to us to capture parent perspectives regarding their child/ren's sense of belonging. With most of our research unfolding with ELM's youngest citizens, we invited their parents to help us make sense of what it means to belong in spaces for children. On a late afternoon in March, while their children were still in care, 10 parents - representing 7 out of 12 families in the Partridge room - enthusiastically participated alongside us. After sharing stories from the Partridge Room illustrating children's right to belong, we asked parents to share their perspectives.

Echoing our experiences with educators, we had prepared the following questions to prompt our conversation.

1. What elements are present when you have a sense of belonging or feel like you belong?
2. What elements do you feel are necessary for your child to feel like they belong?

However, families felt no hesitation and jumped at the opportunity to discuss what belonging meant to them. We noticed an underlying theme emerge from the rich dialogue: a sense of belonging is nurtured in Reciprocal Relationships. The responses from families illustrate the many ways educators enter into *Reciprocal Relationships with Children* and acknowledge how educators build *Reciprocal Relationships with Families*.

Reciprocal Relationships with Children

Families shared ways they see educators nurturing a sense of belonging with their children in ELM. Through a rights-based approach, educators value and respect children for who they are and what they bring to the community. Our experiences highlight that when children are seen and heard, they reciprocate in the spaces in which they belong. Parents voiced some of the many ways they see educators create spaces of belonging for their children.

- *I can't speak for my child, but I feel that they have a sense of belonging in this space because they are respected and honoured.*
- *My child is always greeted by their name.*
- *Educators recognize and celebrate each child as an individual, knowing their personal likes and dislikes.*
- *My child is accepted for who they are and how they experience the world.*
- *My child's emotions are validated and educators support them through problem solving.*
- *Educators listen to my child. They offer them choices in the matters that affect them.*



Reciprocal Relationships with Families

Families expressed the ways they feel they belong by being known and acknowledged within these relationships with educators. We work with the understanding that families know their children best, so we enter into partnerships with families. Just as for children, we acknowledge that families have the right to feel they belong in childcare spaces. Care is extended to the families, developing a culture and community that cares. This was evident in the responses we heard from parents.

- *ELM is a space for everyone, we belong to the whole community and within it.*
- *We are authentically welcomed into the centre and playrooms.*
- *Educators thoughtfully and intentionally greet us and connect with us.*
- *Families get to set the pace, we are never rushed or pushed out the door. Instead, we are invited in to be in the space together with our child, their peers, and other families.*
- *Not only are our needs met, they are exceeded.*
- *Educators trust us as parents, and we don't feel like we are being questioned. They meet us where we are at.*
- *Our relationship is collaborative. Educators genuinely involve us in the daily encounters of children.*
- *When families feel comfortable, children feel comfortable.*



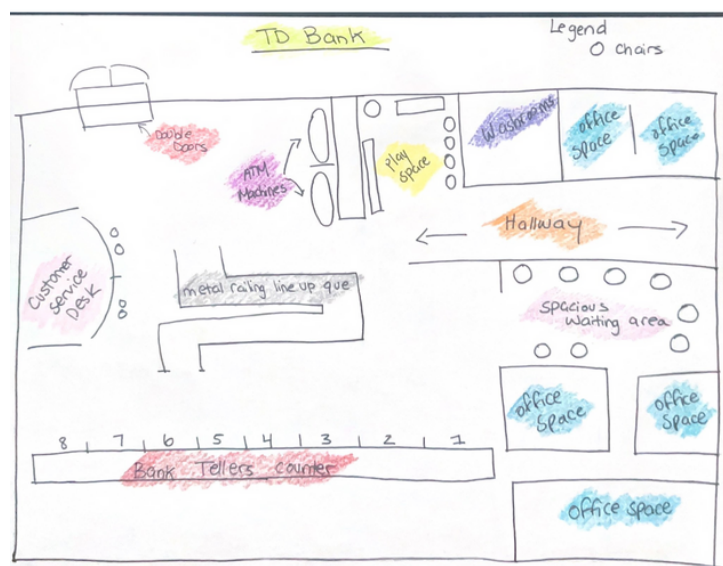
Flight (Makovichuk et al., 2014) reinforces the understanding that "Children and their families have the right to experience social recognition and acceptance, and see themselves reflected in their learning communities" (p. 94). Upholding this understanding in practice, the educator builds a foundation for inclusive spaces of belonging through reciprocal relationships with families and children. Through our family conversations, we recognize that when children are in a space where they feel they belong, they can create that for others. We see and hear the families' appreciation of this right to belong as ELM honours and celebrates the child and family.

Students' Perspectives

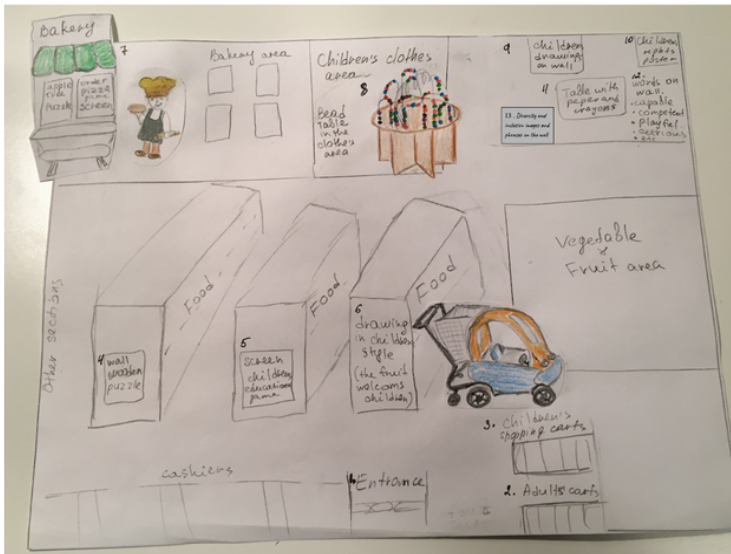
We continue to explore ways to integrate Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies (BECCS) students in our STM explorations. This year, we were fortunate that Iris Baguion was a student intern at ELM during the Winter 2024 term and contributed significantly to the STM projects. Additionally, fourth-year BECCS students in ECCS440: Professional Practices - Ethics, Caring, and Social Activism got involved through a collaboration with ELM educators exploring their understandings of the criteria for belonging and children's spaces.

In this, we were inspired by the work of Jennifer Sumsion, Sandie Wong, and Valerie Tillett, who investigated the Australian National Early Learning Framework and the ways that early childhood educators made meaning of belonging. The authors developed an analytical tool to investigate the criteria for and meanings of belonging, made up of ten different ways of belonging (dimensions) and three dynamics or politics of belonging (axes). In ECCS440, BECCS students explored these dimensions and axes, and used them to examine a variety of public spaces in their own communities to assess whether they were spaces where children could belong. They then creatively re-designed spaces to not only accommodate children and their families, but to emphasize children as citizens of these spaces and rights-holders in their communities. Students reimagined airports, banks, police stations, and grocery stores with children's rights and their sense of belonging in mind.

For example, Mariam H. considered how the design of banks generally don't take children and families into consideration. Calling attention to the typically family-unfriendly layout and long wait times of financial institutions, Mariam reimagined the space of her local bank so as to recognize the needs of children and families. Ultimately, Mariam noted that the attitudinal norms of financial institutions would need to change to acknowledge that children are community members



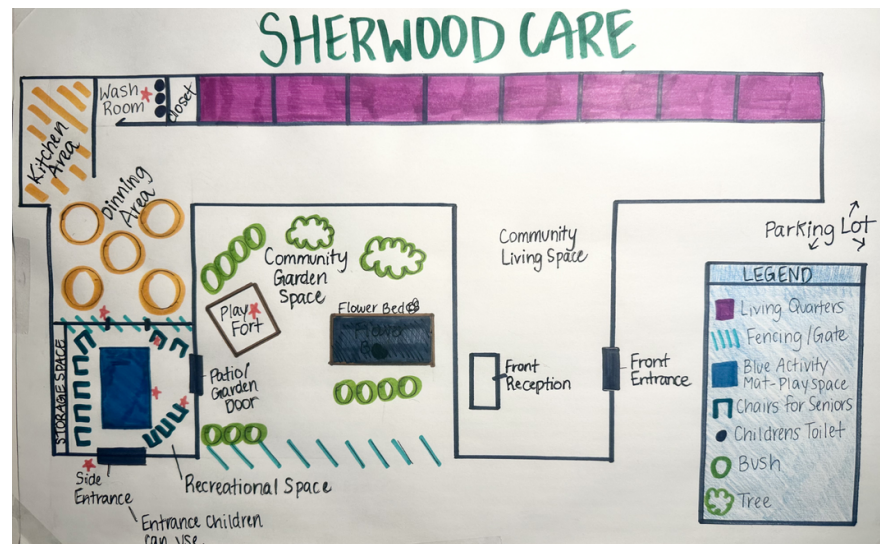
and make their space more accessible for them. The inclusion of wider pathways for strollers and a play space for children to engage with while their families conduct their business are reflective of this conceptual shift.



Iryna C. followed similar lines of thinking in her reconstruction of a grocery store where children belong. In her re-design, Iryna emphasized that by creating a welcoming environment for children, places of business can demonstrate in tangible ways that they care about and value children. She recommends having child-sized shopping carts available, and dedicating a space in the store to children's activities and information

related to childhood and nutrition as ways of acknowledging children as members of the community. She also recommends that all grocery store staff receive some professional development related to children, families, children's rights, and children's nutrition to further emphasize children's belonging.

Kaitlin O. reimagined a local long-term care facility opening its doors to share space with children from the nearby childcare centre. Mindful of some of the aspects of assisted living that might not match with the needs of young children, Kaitlin focused on creating a shared recreational space and



making changes to the outdoor garden. Modular play equipment in the recreational space could be moved or packed away to make space for adult recreational activities, and the garden could become a place where young children and seniors can meet to care for plants and appreciate natural beauty together.

In their reimagining of spaces, ECCS440 students put children's rights ideas into practice. When children are considered as community members, and the design of built environments reflects that, the possibilities for inclusion and belonging increase. We are grateful that Shaking the Movers provided such an enriching opportunity to imagine otherwise, and consider what might be required to ensure that spaces that exist become places where children belong.

Concluding Thoughts

Our reflections of belonging included various perspectives from children, educators, families and students. Pulling together these perspectives invited us to understand belonging as an embodied dynamic that unfolds in the small moments of care. Our findings illustrate the significance of being seen, heard, and valued within communities. We are reminded that belonging is rooted in respect, reciprocity and recognition of individual and collective identities. Places where we belong are nurtured through meaningful relationships, inclusive practices, and a commitment to creating inclusive spaces where everyone feels valued and welcomed.

As we continue to reflect on the ideas presented in this report we frame our work moving forward with the following ideas:

- How can we explicitly integrate joyful actions of reconciliation and belonging into the daily life of ELM and our early childhood community?
- We look forward to collaborating with local Indigenous communities, including kihêw waciston, MacEwan University's Indigenous Centre, to explore the possibilities of bridging Indigenous ways of knowing and being with children's rights approaches.
- We continue to seek meaningful ways to integrate BECCS students into the Shaking the Movers projects.
- Continue to engage in conversations about belonging within a variety of spaces with families, children, educators, and students. We hope to expand our conversations to make connections between belonging and reconciliation and our role in fostering spaces of belonging and reconciliation.

We are excited about the possibilities these goals offer to our early childhood community. By engaging whole-heartedly in them and inviting community members to participate alongside us, we echo the message a parent shared during our conversations about belonging: *If more people knew about children's rights the world would be a better place.*

Thank you

Thank you to the children and families and educators from ELM who engage and share with us every day. They place their trust in us when they bring their children and we cherish and honour the relationships that develop with them and their children through the time we spend together. Our ongoing work to deepen and show the significance of what it means to be early childhood professionals, is a continual "search for meaning that only the children can help [us] find" (Rinaldi, 2006. p. 98).

We are grateful for the ongoing collaboration and support we receive from faculty and students in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies program. Together, we continue to learn, reflect, and practice in deep and innovative ways.

Flight Alberta's Early Learning and Framework has been a significant guide in our practice with young children and their families. These ideas brought forward in *Flight* serve to underpin our work, express our pedagogical commitments, and inspire renewal, growth, and transformation.

We would like to acknowledge the ongoing collaborations and funding from The Muttart Foundation and The Landon Pearson Resource Centre. They encourage us to deeply consider what it means to uphold a rights-based childcare program.

Report Writing and Editing:

Chadya Sirdar Iris Baguinon Jennifer Sibbald Noah Kenneally

References

City of Edmonton. (2024). Indigenous Ward Naming Knowledge Committee. https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/city_organization/indigenous-ward-naming-knowledge-committee

Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, P., and Thomas, N. (2014). *Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework*. <https://www.flightframework.ca/>

Sumsion, J. & Wong, S. (2011). Interrogating 'belonging' in Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(1), 28-45. DOI: [10.2304/ciec.2011.12.1.28](https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2011.12.1.28)

Tillet, V., & Wong, S. (2018). An investigative case study into early childhood educators' understanding about 'belonging'. *European Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(1), 37-49. DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2018.1412016](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1412016)

Making Visible Educators' Everyday Practices: Belonging, Participation, and Identity in the Early Years



MacEwan
UNIVERSITY

Iris Baguinon, Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies

Early Learning at MacEwan (ELM)

The project took place at Early Learning at MacEwan in Edmonton, Alberta. ELM was founded in 1972 and has played a leading role in Alberta's early learning community. ELM provides quality care to children from 18 months to six years using an experiential and play-based learning. ELM strives to be a centre of innovation, leading the way in the early childhood education and care field.

Considering the context of the project, the focus was on the Partridge Room, the centre's toddler room for children aged 18 months to two years.

Shaking the Movers (STM)

Since 2019, ELM has been a participant in "Shaking the Movers" (STM), an annual youth-driven and youth-led workshop series that provides a safe space for children and youth as they consider aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in the context of their lived experiences¹. The Landon Pearson Centre created these workshops to give children and young people the opportunity to share their unique perspectives and experiences along with recommendations and input relevant to children's rights². ELM's focus this year is to explore children's identity and belonging through places and narratives.

What is belonging?

"Experiencing belonging— knowing where and with whom you belong— is integral to human existence."

Children's belonging manifests through their interest in the people, places, and things in their environment and acknowledges the significance of relationships and everyday experiences in their identities. Their positive sense of belonging is fostered when their belonging is shared with and reciprocated by others, including their educators. This project intends to understand children's experiences of belonging and how educators nurture their belonging while supporting them in their growing sense of identity.

Critical Question

In what ways do educators create shared spaces and experiences that nurture a sense of belonging and participation in the early years, and what guides their practices?

Objectives

- To observe how educators' nurture children's sense of belonging and participation from an outsider's perspective
- To explore what guides educators' understanding of belonging by making visible their everyday practices through documentation

Methods

Participants

Participants for this project include three early childhood educators with Level 3 certification.

- I situated myself as a participant-observer in the study to get familiarized with the rhythms of the playroom.

Measures

Observations

I spent a total of eight days at the Partridge Room as a participant-observer in the span of the ten-week internship. After the end of each day, I took fifteen to thirty minutes to write detailed field notes.

Documentation

To document moments of belonging between educators and children, I captured photos to create a "Living Wall". The "Living wall" is a form of pedagogical documentation that aligns with the concept of Ted Aoki's "curriculum-as-lived-experience" that honours children's voices by collecting and interpreting their work and imaginative play scripts³. For the purpose of this project, "Living Wall" was used to invite educators and passersby to question, imagine, and explore ways on how everyday moments can be turned into extraordinary stories of belonging.

Another form of documentation used is written letters to turn observations into narratives describing what I noticed and learned about educators' everyday practices. Letters were used as a way for educators to reflect on their practices.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the questions included in each letter to gain a deeper understanding of what guides educators' practices. Each educator was asked different questions related to the content of the letter. However, the first and last questions were the same across three educators to find similarities and differences in their responses.

Findings

Educators' Understanding of Belonging

Drawing from Tillett and Wong's ten dimensions of belonging, four of the ten dimensions aligned with educators' responses during the semi-structured interviews⁴.

Emotional belonging: Educators conveyed that belonging is personal and relational.

Social belonging: Educators described how children recognize that they are part of a community through the ways they approach shared experiences.

Spatial belonging: Educators highlighted children's connections with the spaces and materials within the setting.

Legal belonging: Educators expressed that they respect children's toys from home as something that belongs to them.

Using Rights-based Practice to Foster Sense of Identity

"When we view children as capable of building strong relationships, co-constructing knowledge with each other, we create spaces that reflect that... and I think [it] creates that sense of belonging because they can see themselves in the space." - Educator

Through the lens of rights-based practice, educators use language that affirms and honours children's agency. As I immersed myself in the room, I noticed how educators make deliberate choices in arranging the room environment that encourages children's participation and how their curriculum decisions support children's understanding of inclusion.

Nurturing Meaningful Connections and Relationships

For children to experience a sense of belonging, educators need to nurture children's connections and relationships with educators, their peers, and the space. This is evident through observations of educators creating opportunities for children to contribute and interact with others and the environment. Educators also revealed that a shared interest in objects and play materials often brought children together. Through educators' active engagement for children to participate and collaborate, a shared belonging unfolds.

The Importance of Reflective Practice and a Collaborative Environment

"Looking for those moments where you can have conversations with your team and bounce ideas off each other." - Educator

When asked about what guides educators' practices in nurturing children's sense of belonging and participation, they expressed the importance of having opportunities to reflect on their own, amongst each other, and with the guidance of a pedagogical mentor and their centre leaders. One educator particularly emphasized the significant impact and influence of having a collaborative environment on their professional growth and identity.

Implications & Key Takeaways

In this study, I explored how educators at the Partridge Room in ELM nurture children's sense of belonging and participation. While it was a small-scale study with a limited number of participants, my intention was to illuminate the possibility that listening to children's voices and using rights-based practice has the potential to enhance belonging and participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings⁵. Based on my findings, ELM exemplifies the dimensions of belonging and uses strategies and resources that support educators' reflective practice in demonstrating belonging. However, ELM is only one centre out of many in Alberta and Canada. The implication of this study, therefore, is to continue to make visible educators' everyday practices through documentation to encourage more early childhood educators to shift towards a "rights-integrative approach" in their practice as a pathway in nurturing belonging, identity, and participation in the early years⁶. When children's rights are to be realized in the early years, a shift in conceptualization, recognition, and validation of their roles in societies must be made to position the early years as a vital time for them to realize their rights and identities⁷.

In addition, the project findings suggest that providing educators with time and space to work together was a vital component of their practice. However, educators also expressed that not all centres have the time and resources to provide professional growth and development opportunities. This calls upon policymakers to create possibilities for educators to connect as a driving factor in developing collaborative environments in the field⁸. Educators cannot do the work alone; funding support should be provided to help them move their practice in ways that honours children's agency and sense of belonging⁹.

Concluding Statement

As ECEs, if we view and believe children are rights-holders, we should understand that our role in shaping their belonging and identity is crucial. Using ELM's practices, the educators from the Partridge Room revealed that it is possible to work through the lens of children's rights and how ECEs can draw from these rights in their everyday work with children. The question now is: "In what ways can a centre like ELM be a catalyst for other ECEC centres to shift towards a rights-based approach to early learning?"

¹Landon Pearson Resources Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights. (2024). Shaking the Movers. Retrieved from <https://carleton.ca/landonpearsoncentre/shaking-the-movers/>.

²Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. 2009. Belonging, Being, and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

³Bjartveit, C., Carston, C. S., Baxtor, J., Hart, J., & Greenidge, C. (2019). The living wall: implementing and interpreting pedagogical documentation in specialized ELOC settings. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 28-38.

⁴Tillett, V., & Wong, S. (2018). An investigative case study into early childhood educators' understanding about 'belonging'. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(1), 37-49.

⁵Shaik, N., Martin, C. D., & Moodley, T. (2023). Reframing listening for belonging and participation in early childhood care and education settings: a case in South Africa. *Early Years*, 43(2), 228-241.

⁶Di Santo, A., & Kenneally, N. (2014). A call for a shift in thinking: Viewing children as rights-holders in early childhood curriculum frameworks. *Childhood Education*, 90(6), 395-406.

⁷Bitterberg, A. (2013). Feeling a Sense of Belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An Exploration into a Community of Practice.