

2021

Shaking the Movers: Early Childhood

Early Learning at MacEwan



Early Learning
at MacEwan



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Landon Pearson Resource Centre
for the Study of Childhood
and Children's Rights



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Acknowledgments

As Treaty people and settlers, we are reminded of our responsibility to care for community as it has been cared for on this land and in this gathering place of Indigenous, Inuit, and Metis people for many, many generations. We begin by offering our respect and observing the privilege we have to work and live on Treaty 6 territory and recognize the historical trauma and victimization that has resulted from colonial practices. Through truth and reconciliation, may we find our way forward.

We are honored to present the explorations of rights-based practices that the educators of ELM have engaged in for the past two years. Critical times are questioning times, and so as a centre we asked ourselves, how do we see and hear children? With the vulnerability of educators alongside children and families, this work is possible.

Thank you to the children and families of ELM who engage and share with us every day. We recognize the many unknowns the pandemic brought forward for children and families. We are honoured by their trust in us as we navigated new normals together.

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 even during these challenging times.

We would like to acknowledge the partnership with The Muttart Foundation and The Landon Pearson Resource Centre work in collaboration to deeply consider what it means to uphold a rights-based childcare program. Additionally, when exploring children's rights, our program draws inspiration from Boulder Journey School - Seen and Heard Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education, Reggio Emilia - A Pedagogy of Listening, and Ann Pelo and Margie Carter – From Teaching to Thinking.

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Foreword by The Honourable Landon Pearson O.C.

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No one was really prepared for the pandemic. All over the world countries had let their defenses down. Surveillance units like the one Canada set up after SARS were dismantled and so signals were missed. As a result the responses to the threats to public health represented by Covid 19 fell into the hands of epidemiologists and politicians. The good news was the huge investment that was made almost immediately into the development of vaccines as the ultimate weapon. Almost every other decision made was problematic. At first it seemed that the most vulnerable were the elderly. And so they were for reasons that had less to do with the pandemic than with the pre-existing wretched conditions of so many long-term care facilities. Now, after more than a year and a half it seems to me that children and young people are among those who have lost the most. And there isn't even a vaccine available for those under twelve yet. What is quite clear is that over this whole pandemic, as politicians and experts have tacked this way and that, few of the decision-makers who have been shaping the conditions under which we are now living have applied a child rights lens to the various policies they have adopted on our behalf because virtually every one of the many rights of children that are articulated in the UNCRC have been severely curtailed. As a result I am convinced that we need the input of children and young people to ensure that before a new worldwide crisis overwhelms us we have opened the necessary channels for them to be heard.

How can our young people help to make this happen? Let's look at the three packages of rights, the three "Ps" as they are called into which almost all of children's rights fall, Provision (as in health and education), Protection as in protection from violence and exploitation and Participation as in the right to be heard. And remember that these are tied together by the four guiding principles of the CRC; the right to life and development, bests interests of the child, non-discrimination and, of course, meaningful participation. Many young people complain that no one ever listens but In order for children and youth below the voting age of 18 to become effective civil and political actors they need to acquire real advocacy skills. In the area of provision rights, the right to education for example, young people have to learn how to strategize with respect to making schools more responsive to their ideas. To have their protection rights respected young people must demand easier access to a complaints mechanism. And their participation rights will only be secured when the appropriate machinery is constructed so that young people can step on the levers of power. Designing a scenario for action in each of these areas would be a valuable exercise for building strategic skills. Furthermore young people have knowledge that is unique to their generation. They know far better than the rest of us how to make good use of the electronic media. The next rights-challenging crisis will be upon us before we know it so it is imperative that those who will be most affected by it be well-armed, ready and able to propel movers to act in ways that will benefit us all.



Background

Early Learning at MacEwan (ELM) is a childcare and lab school program within MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta. ELM offers quality, supportive and inclusive child care for up to 47 children aged 18 months through six years. We strive to be a centre of innovation in our community for early learning and child care knowledge, theory, and practice.

In 2018, ELM began collaborating with The Muttart Foundation and the Landon Pearson Resource Centre to host STM Early Childhood Workshops. ELM values honouring children's rights, supporting young voices through authentic conversations, and ensuring children have the opportunity to shake up the individuals making decisions about them, so planning and programming respect children's rights and serve their best interests.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child consists of 54 articles that set out children's rights and how governments should work together to make them available to all children. Knowing we would find ourselves linked to multiple articles, we selected Article 12 as our pillar because they all interrelate. You have the right to give your opinion and for adults to listen and take it seriously (UNCRC, 1989).

As a centre, we have a favourite interpretation of this article from the Honorable Landon Pearson herself. From the child's point of view, she writes, "there can not be talking about us, if you are not going to listen to us" (Pearson, 2020, p.3). We noticed how Article 12 gets expressed in different ways with children, families, educators and students. In our conversations, we wondered - have we listened to children? Drawing from Flight Alberta's Early Learning and Curriculum Framework, ELM recognizes that children interact and learn in multiple learning communities and their learning is profoundly influenced by the relationships within and between these communities and specifically with respect to the relationship to the family.

Our first STM event was a massive celebration with the entire ELM community in February of 2019. Educators, children, families, and faculty, shared their ideas and wonderings about Article 12 and most importantly celebrated the child's right to be seen and heard. This event invited us to wonder what it could look like to host ongoing events or conversations about children's rights with the community.

Well, we all know what happened in March of 2019.

The Covid-19 pandemic required our full attention. We engaged in a two-year exploration of how to work within a children's rights framework during a pandemic. With guidelines and limitations that still continue to impact early learning communities, ELM wanted to resist some ways that adults easily take the reins and create plans of action. ELM educators were forced to stop, re-think, and ask how are we listening when times are challenging?

Landon writes, "there can be no return to the way things were before the pandemic broke, but there can be a new normal, better than before, that children and young people exercising their civil and political rights can help us to construct" (Pearson, 2020, p. 3). As the dynamics of our program were changed and challenged and our commitment to ongoing conversations about children's rights, we, educators, children, and families collectively found our new normal.

And so, our second STM event shifted and became a series of online conversations. Educators brought playroom events, children's voices, challenges, and happenings to explore alongside families through the lens of Article 12. As these conversations unfolded, we remembered that the everyday moment is worthy of celebration. That rights-based programming is done in relationship. The children open us up and bring us back to endless possibilities. When we listen wholeheartedly, we can understand things in new ways.

Ann Pelo and Margie Carter have a beautiful message about the educators' role in a culture of inquiry. We believe it is reflective of listening, "being fully present in the moment-by-moment unfolding of life that we share with each other and with children, leaning forward with eager curiosity and with glad engagement, confident that what offers itself is worthy of full attention." (2018, p.53)

Being fully present as an educator during the pandemic was such a challenge. So much was uncertain, and we still needed to show up in relationships with children and families. What ultimately emerged from the stress, uncertainty, and profound negotiation - with children, restrictions, and our own needs as people and educators - were the incredibly rewarding learnings that we will share in this report.

A Relational Approach to Rights

A big part of our journey was taking a relational approach to children's rights. In our 2019 report, we acknowledged that we wanted to engage more deeply with families regarding children's rights and reflect more on rights-based practices.

In our relational approach, we tried to consider that:



Rights are not objects or things: Rights cannot be held or seen - instead, we can understand them as choices, dynamics, and ways of being. Instead of thinking of them as entitlements, or things that can be given to people or taken away from people, we understand rights as ways of being with each other.



Rights happen through doing: Rights are enactments - particular ways of acting, interacting with, and relating to/with others. When we see them in this way, we engage in doing rights with others. Rights become a verb.



Rights are interdependent: One person having rights does not mean that another person has less rights - all people's rights are dependent on other people having rights and the ways we choose to interact. All rights work together, and this is really the only way that they can exist. This was one of our most important learnings.

Keeping these ideas in mind in our explorations with children highlighted some aspects of adult-child relations, such as the ways that we organize our lives together, and how they centre and focus on adulthood; the differences in experience, power, and size between adults and children; and how often children's vulnerabilities are understood as deficits, when we could think of them otherwise. Instead, a relational approach to children's rights proposes that we think about children being differently vulnerable than adults. We can see this approach mirrored in Flight in the practice of relationships and in the idea of educators being co-imaginors of possibilities - where we might imagine alongside children, families and other educators ways of seeing and valuing children's vulnerabilities as just being different rather than making them less than.

During the response to the pandemic, ELM educators considered children's rights from a relational perspective again and again. They put the theory of children's rights, specifically around Article 12, into their practice with and alongside children and families. They did this through listening and tuning in, slowing down and looking closely, making space for each other, working together, cultivating spaces where self-governing could take place, and remaining present with challenge and discomfort.



Listening with children in relationships

Understanding and advocating children's rights in early learning and childcare communities needs to be a priority. As a centre, we return to this knowledge from Hall and Rudkin that we explored during our first STM, that "children of all ages offer valuable insights about rights if society can become attuned to children's ways of communicating" (2011, p. 10). It is our responsibility to listen and honour what is being communicated by the children. Additionally, Davies reminds us that "community holds and enfolds these listening encounters" (2014, p. 5). Perhaps the core component of true listening is a willingness to learn from and be changed by what the other says. "When adults assume attitudes that are in any way dismissive, judgemental, or all-knowing, we may silence all but the most outspoken of children and risk that even those brave voices fall on deaf ears" (Hall & Rudkin, 2011, p.17). This was a message the educators of ELM closely connected with during our two-year journey of exploration of children's rights. It invited us to pay attention to the notion that what we do, as educators, matters. The stories that follow emerge from a space of being vulnerable alongside children in how we challenge ourselves and each other when things get uncomfortable.

Listening with children: Slowing down and looking closely

We continue to advocate for children's rights within a new normal. Over the past almost two years, educators have gone through waves of worry and uncertainty. When we returned in June 2020 from the closure, the field was confronted with revisioning their programs due to the health and safety guidelines in place, many of which were at a considerable disadvantage to the way we build relationships with children and families, ultimately, limiting children's choices and experiences.

Previously our program would have a playroom dedicated to sleeping and another playroom where children would rest and then play without the risk of waking sleeping children. However, with the safety restrictions and guidelines, we could not mix cohorts. The playrooms now needed to accommodate both children who slept and children who didn't in the same space. ELM educators were required to pivot how they thought about this time during the day and tuned into children's voices for equitable solutions.

Discussions among children and educators took place on how sleepers can fall asleep and how resters can rest and play while respecting sleepers' needs. Children suggested some strategies that might help all children get their needs met, "quieter voices" and "help each other sleep." Based on the conversation with children, educators proposed that children rest on their beds before moving to play quietly with a peer. The plan was agreed on and executed, but in the days following, educators noticed the resters making multiple trips to the bathroom, their lockers, or their friend's mat, which was quite distracting for the children attempting to sleep. There were lots of reminders about staying on beds. It was not an enjoyable time for anyone. "I don't like resting on my bed because I want to play," Simone said. Natalia agreed and added, "I don't like being on my mat because it is too boring." The children's voices and actions were loud - the plan was not working. So, children and educators continued to talk and listen with each other until an equitable solution was found. Through both their verbal and nonverbal expressions, listening to what the children needed created a more relaxed rest for everyone.

How easy would it have been for educators to say, "Nope, this is how rest time will go," but working that way does not uphold children as citizens and active participants in society. The educators were able to return to the understanding that children have important insights into issues of daily life and routine, and by slowing down and listening with each other, a diversity of children's rights and needs were able to be met.

Listening with children: Making space for each other and working together

Ellen Hall and Jennifer Rudkin from Boulder Journey school remind us that:

Children's ideas about conflict resolution sometimes include the establishment of rules. When a conflict occurs in traditional classrooms, the teachers make a rule and inform the children. In more participatory classrooms, teachers and children consider the problem together. If children actively participate in creating the rules, they have a better understanding and reasoning of why the boundaries are necessary. As a result, the teacher need not assume the role of the enforcer. Instead, the children remind one another their agreed upon standards of behavior. (2011, p. 61)

We think about this message as a large group of children engaging in rough and tumble play, running, and wrestling. The educators wonder about children exploring personal boundaries, power, and movement. But not all children in the group wanted to play in this way. Educators knew it was important to listen to the children's ideas. We could easily set up playroom rules that we thought were safe for all children. But if we believe children have a right to give their opinion on matters and decisions that impact them, we need to commit to it. So, children and educators of the playroom met on several occasions to decide how to explore these large movements in the room. We heard children say, "we are all okay with the pushing" or "that's too rough." They were negotiating what is too rough and what is okay with each other. Children decided and shared that they needed a soft space, and educators brought in a blue crashmat. The children discussed how to know when someone wanted to play in the crashmat space. The educators suggested a whiteboard sign-up with visuals for those who would like to engage in the pushing and wrestling so others know whose in and whose is not.



Dawn, an educator, reflects: My education and experiences help me know that children learn about their own personal boundaries through rough and tumble play. Having the opportunity to express whether it is okay or not helps them and others recognize these boundaries. This is important to me because it gives children the leadership to take the play in their own directions, and as educators, by supporting these ideas and honouring their needs, children have the capacity to safely explore these big ideas without them being stopped or taken too far where children get hurt. We challenge ourselves and each other when things get uncomfortable.

When we honour children's voices, they become aware that they are contributing different opinions, sustaining their own ideas, and at the same time participating in constructing a joint result. Children thus feel that each one of them is valuable and competent. This is reaffirmed throughout the Flight Framework, "children have the right to participate in their early childhood communities and to be valued and respected for who they are and what they bring to the community. Educators working with this understanding invite children to participate in making choices, communicating ideas and opinions, and influencing the community through collaborative decision-making" (2014, p. 30).

Listening with children: Self-governing

From our youngest children in the centre, we saw autonomy emerge - "Respecting children's rights and autonomy does not mean leaving them to act and decide on their own. It means being available as a support and guide when needed and stepping back to allow children to engage in their own process when possible" (Hall and Rudkin, p.56).

Linnea and Erica, two educators, share the following perspectives:

Linnea reflects: When we were all gathered for team time, I began to sing 'Little Green Frog' I was quickly halted mid-song as many of the children communicated that they did not want that song. 'The Birds, The Birds' children proclaimed with others holding up their pointer fingers to echo the choice being voiced. I stopped singing and followed their lead. I walked over to the cupboard and grabbed the birds. Not knowing the lyrics to the particular bird song, the children wanted to sing. Erica noticed and joined me. Together with the children, we sang the song. I learned the lyrics quickly and eventually began to sing with the children as Erica returned to tidy the room.



Erica reflects: I paused my own agenda. I noticed the children making their requests and Linnea laughing as she stated, "I don't know this song." Together we respected the children's team time choices. Their pointer fingers being seen, and their request for the birds being heard. We see these ideas reflected in the Flight Framework "ideally early childhood communities reflect the democratic values where opportunities to learn from each other are enriched, and possibilities for living peacefully together are enhanced" (2014, p.110). Linnea takes a moment to learn from Erica - they show respect for each other while also valuing children's voices - Linnea didn't know the song, and Erica came in and modeled interdependence and sharing of knowledge.

How easy would it have been to say, "Today we will sing 'Little Green Frog,' tomorrow we can sing 'The Birds' song," and that be the end of it. But when adults position themselves above the children, we risk silencing their voices. We come back to the words of Landon Pearson, "...if all of us have rights then all of us have responsibilities as well" (2019). This is why human rights are fundamentally about relationships, creating a culture of mutual respect and compassion, and learning from one another, something we can often forget when considering little children.

Places of Vitality

When we imagine rights-based early childhood communities, we imagine Places of Vitality. In the Flight Framework, places of vitality are described as active, welcoming communities that invite children, families, and educators to come together and pool their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. They are "communities where people exist in relationships that encourage growth, creativity, innovation, problem solving, and progress, as people come together and pool their individual perspectives, wisdom, strengths, and skills" (p.13).

The COVID- 19 pandemic has provided an important moment for us at ELM to connect and regroup as a community and grow in relationship, belonging, and community. It has also led us to a deeper understanding of how ELM is a place of vitality. This work is not done alone or in isolation; children's rights are done in community with families. And, it is an ongoing process. The following are some comments from families that are helping us think about that through that process and our continued conversations:

"Everyone has a role, and everyone has a part. Each child has a part to play, and I am glad my daughter's part is valued."

"How can we bring this out into the community? How do we show children's voices not only within the walls of early learning programs?"

"I want my child to feel comfortable and to share openly in conversations. I want him to know that when he voices an opinion it is heard by someone. It might not go the way he wants, but he was heard and there were considerations about his opinion."

"My kids don't have an issue with having a voice and I have learnt how to honour their voices by watching all of you (educators)."

"I have learnt that my boys are little, but they are not little, they understand. I know how much they can contribute and it's exciting to me."

"Conversations with children seem simple, but they aren't. They are complex. Especially when you take them seriously. "

Over the course of the pandemic, and as it continues, the entire early childhood community of ELM - children, families, and educators - have been consistently putting children's rights theory to the test in our lived experiences together. As described in the UNCRC - children's rights are not only aspirational, but they are essential to the types of living and learning that we want to be doing together. As we can see from the comments above, that work is digging new roots and sprouting new shoots as we continue working together.

Concluding Thoughts

We hope that what has become clear through this report is that in grounding our living and learning relationships with children and families in children's rights-based ideas has led to new understandings of how much our curriculum decisions are influenced when we listen with children and make space for their self-governance. One of the cornerstones of the Flight Framework is an understanding of children as mighty learners and citizens. When we make space by listening with, children learn and demonstrate their capacities to be with each other with profound care and delight. They solve problems, they help each other get their needs met, and they assert their views and choices.

Moving forward, Early Learning at MacEwan is faced with exciting new ways to continue to shake the movers. We are presented with new questions that will help shape our work in the coming years:



With the newly instituted Bachelor's of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies program, we wonder in what ways can students become involved in STM processes?



As the pandemic persists, but restrictions are lifted, how will we continue to move our explorations of children's rights relationships forward?



This call moves us to action and seek ways to involve the early childhood and learning community. How can we support stakeholders to engage in a rights-based practice with young children?

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