

Professional Lives and Initial Teacher Education Experiences of Indigenous Early Childhood Educators, Childcare Workers, and Teachers in Northern Ontario

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Abstract

Drawing on our analysis of focus group and narrative data, together with a review of initial educator/teacher education programs designed for northern Indigenous educators/teachers, we propose culturally appropriate programs that address the unique needs of northern Ontario Indigenous educators and teachers. The professional trajectories and initial teacher/educator education experiences of 5 Indigenous early childhood educators and teachers provide insight into the challenges of becoming credentialed. We propose that accredited programs should be designed in collaboration with northern Indigenous leaders in order to respond to the identified challenges.

Keywords: northern rural Indigenous communities, professional development, northern rural teacher education, early childhood educator

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) calls to action challenge all levels of government to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families. The Ontario provincial government's role in Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care includes funding, licensing, and regulating childcare and ensuring that qualified educators staff early learning and childcare centres. In 2014, the Ontario Ministry of Education created the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA) requiring that at least half of the staff in a kindergarten classroom within a licensed childcare program be qualified as Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs or ECEs) who are in good standing with the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, a regulatory body created by the Early Childhood Educators Act in 2007. RECE or ECE accreditation requires successful completion of an approved diploma program in early childhood education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019).

A second mandate, which had implications for ECEs in First Nations communities, required that school boards offer full-day kindergarten for 2 years; children enter junior kindergarten at age 4 and senior kindergarten at age 5 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). Included in this mandate is the expectation that a registered ECE will work alongside a licensed teacher in kindergarten classrooms.

Educator/teacher positions in Aboriginal Head Start programs, which are community-based early childhood programs for Indigenous children and their families (Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association, 2018), and in kindergarten classrooms in remote northern Ontario First Nations communities often have been filled by community members who do not hold provincial qualifications. As a result, the provincial mandates created an immediate need for initial educator/teacher education programs for First Nations educators and teachers. In addition to addressing the provincial requirements, these programs must address calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and "recognize ... the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills of diverse learners" (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017, p. 23). Additionally, educator/teacher education programs for northern Indigenous educators must address the challenges of accessing postsecondary education while living and working in remote communities. Researchers have shown that a culturally responsive pedagogy is needed to counter hegemonic approaches that devalue students' identities and ways of being, reproducing systemic and historic inequities (e.g., see Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2009; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Underpinned by theoretical tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994), the purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the challenges and experiences of First Nations ECEs and teachers in becoming credentialed as RECEs and teachers. One of the authors of this paper, Roxanne, a First Nations early childhood supervisor in her community's licensed childcare program, narrates the story of her professional preparation and experiences as an ECE. The other two authors are non-Indigenous postsecondary teachers whose childhood and early teaching/childcare work took place in northern rural communities in Alberta and Ontario. One author teaches in a northern Ontario ECE program designed for northern Indigenous ECEs, and the other in a southern faculty of education. She conducts research with ECEs and teachers in First Nations communities. We conducted this study to deepen our understandings of ways to support the professional learning of ECEs and teachers in northern Indigenous communities, including the childcare staff in Roxanne's childcare program. In a modest way, our study responds to Call To Action #64 of the Truth and Reconciliation report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), as we identify issues and needs of Indigenous teachers and educators that have implications for teacher training. With the goal of

informing our own and others' work in supporting northern Indigenous ECEs' and teachers' professional practice through culturally responsive practices and programs, we used these research questions to guide the research:

1. What are the background experiences leading to participating First Nations ECEs' and teachers' professional roles?
2. What are the biggest challenges that participants have faced in their professional preparation?
3. What are participants' experiences in teacher education programs designed to address these issues?

Drawing from analysis of Roxanne's narrative and of focus group responses of four other First Nations ECEs and teachers, we propose themes about the unique circumstances and the issues faced by northern First Nations educators in order to become credentialed. We also examine the programs that are in place to support First Nations educators to fulfill the requirements. We conclude with implications for culturally responsive professional preparation and ongoing professional development of Indigenous educators working in remote communities.

Background to the Research

We provide background information about First Nations education and schooling in Canada. We then outline postsecondary programs that have been created in Ontario to serve professional preparation needs of First Nations ECEs and kindergarten teachers.

Education in Northern First Nations Communities in Canada

In Canada, historical relationships between Indigenous and mainstream English societies have had a devastating impact on all aspects of social and cultural life in northern Indigenous communities. Indigenous families struggle with outcomes of Canadian government assimilationist policies and interventions that have disrupted Indigenous family life, culture, and language (Ball & Lewis, 2011). From 1880 to the latter part of the 20th century, First Nations children were forced to attend residential schools sponsored by the federal government and administered by churches (the last school closed in 1996). Separated from their families and often from siblings while residing in the schools, Indigenous children did not experience adult-child nurturing or the intergenerational transmission of key cultural teachings. Additionally, the children were not permitted to speak their own language and were severely punished for doing so while in residential schools (Ball & Lewis, 2011). Hare (2011) explained that "the systematic denigration of the indigenous knowledge embedded in their cultural practices, values and languages was the most destructive feature of these schools, which were then thought to be necessary as part of the 'civilizing' agenda of governments and missionaries" (p. 395). The children in those schools, who became the parents and grandparents of today's children, lost a sense of pride in their Indigenous identities and culture. They did not experience family life and the daily care, love, acceptance, and feelings of security of being in the company of family members. Schools and school personnel presented threats to their ways of being and ways of interacting with others and with the natural world. Without the support of family, language, and culture, children came to see schools as threatening places where failure was a very real possibility (Hare, 2011).

Indeed, these assimilationist and genocidal policies and practices have led to "multi-generational educational failures among Indigenous peoples and educational outcomes well

below the national average” (Battiste, 2008, p. 86). Underfunding and external control of education, together with teacher shortages and rapid teacher turnover, are additional factors contributing to these educational outcomes in current times (Teach for Canada, 2019). Early childhood programming is often the focus of initiatives to change these outcomes, as “high-quality Indigenous-centred ECE can help Indigenous children cope with challenging environmental conditions, while strengthening their social, emotional, and academic well-being” (Conference Board of Canada, 2019, Looking Towards the Future section, para. 3). These initiatives recognize the need to revitalize Indigenous languages and knowledge, and to value traditional learning and teaching practices, involving parents and extended family (Hare, 2011).

Today, many First Nations communities’ schools are independently administered by a local education council. The education director is an elected band council member who holds the education portfolio (including elementary and secondary, where the schools exist) for the community. Education councils have some autonomy over the curriculum, creating locally developed curricula to teach the community’s Indigenous language and culture alongside the Ontario provincial curriculum. Many of the kindergarten teachers and some teachers in higher grades are community members who step into the role because the positions are difficult to fill with certified teachers. Where teachers from southern non-Indigenous communities fill teaching positions, teacher turnover is often very high. Because of their geographic isolation, many Northern Ontario First Nations ECEs and kindergarten teachers face unique challenges in gaining the mandated credentials (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2011). The distances that must be covered to attend postsecondary programs, together with the costs of the program and the cost of relocating for long periods of time, are prohibitive for many Indigenous ECEs and kindergarten teachers (Greenwood, de Leeuw, & Fraser, 2007). Weather conditions can affect educators’/teachers’ attendance in postsecondary programs, as they may not be able to fly out of their First Nations community due to winter storms. When a family crisis or social issues arise, they are faced with decisions that can result in a withdrawal from their diploma program, as the time that is needed to go to their home communities and return often exceeds the allowable time away from the program (Preston, 2008). Additionally, although many First Nations educators and teachers have years of experience, they may not have the formal academic prerequisites to be accepted into postsecondary programs.

In response to these enduring challenges, postsecondary ECE and teacher education programs have been developed, with the underlying assumption that “culturally valued and useful knowledge about childhood and childcare is embedded within the community and that this knowledge needs to be afforded a central place in the development of training curricula” (Ball & Simpkins, 2004, p. 482). In the following section, we describe programs in Ontario postsecondary institutions that attempt to address these challenges.

Professional Preparation Programs for Northern Indigenous Teachers and Educators

We highlight the preparation programs that have been accessed by ECEs and teachers who participated in our focus group in order to gain their early childhood/teacher credentials. Oshki-Pimache-O-Win The Wenjack Education Institute (Oshki Wenjack) is a postsecondary education training school created under the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) James Bay Treaty 9 and Ontario’s portion of Treaty 5 Territory to provide opportunities to Indigenous educators living in remote communities. Oshki Wenjack will provide education to anyone who walks through the door but the catchment is to primarily service the NAN Territory and surrounding area. Oshki Wenjack partners with the mainstream Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology

(OCAAT) to deliver a culturally sensitive ECE Diploma program for Indigenous educators. The Ontario Ministry of Education provides education and travel grants to support educators under the ECE Qualifications Upgrade program (Ontario ECE Grants Program, 2018).

The ECE Diploma program is delivered over five semesters. Students travel to the Oshki Wenjack campus in the northern city of Thunder Bay for 4 weeks out of every 15-week semester for face-to-face instruction and practicum. At the Oshki Wenjack campus, students complete practicum hours in Thunder Bay early learning settings and at their place of employment in their First Nations communities. This combination allows students to meet all requirements for practicum hours. It also recognizes the work that educators do in their communities' early learning settings.

In an effort to support incoming students in dealing with financial challenges, family needs, as well as academic issues related to language and learning styles, Oshki Wenjack offers a 3-day student orientation. The campus Indigenous Elder, faculty, and staff provide workshops on life skills, budgeting, defining learning styles, and training in the online learning platforms. Each day ends with a feast.

The campus includes a large kitchen and a cultural room to provide a home-like setting. Students are encouraged to prepare all their meals on campus and use the medicines (e.g., tobacco, sage, sweet grass, and cedar) in the cultural room. The students prepare bannock almost every morning on campus and are known to bring wild meat from home in order to cook traditional foods on campus. The educators continue with their full-time employment while studying full time in the alternative delivery model of on-campus, online, and independent study. In the history of the Oshki Wenjack Indigenous ECE program, 81 educators have graduated since 2010 and continue to work in their First Nation communities across Ontario (Oshki-Pimache-O-Win—The Wenjack Education Institute, 2016).

Another program is offered by Nipissing University, a mainstream postsecondary institution in a more southerly Ontario city, North Bay. Nipissing University uses an alternative delivery model in its Aboriginal Classroom Assistant Diploma Program (ACADP). Students attend face-to-face classes at the North Bay campus for two 6-week summer sessions over 2 years. They complete two 6-week practicums in their First Nations communities under the supervision of a certified teacher in the fall of each year. This program has been very popular because the summer sessions allow students to bring their children and partners along for support while away from their First Nations communities (Nipissing University, 2019a). Oshki Wenjack is entering a new partnership with Nipissing University to offer the ACADP starting the summer of 2018 with full enrollment.

In the southern Ontario city of St. Catharines, through the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education, Brock University offers an alternative online Bachelor of Education degree for Indigenous students interested in qualifications to teach children aged 4–13 years. Courses are delivered using a cohort model, where students choose to take courses face-to-face or online (Brock University, 2019). Additionally, a community-based B.Ed. program run by Brock University in partnership with the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) spans 5 years, with students leaving their community for 3 weeks at a time to be taught in the northern town of Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Although no longer being offered, the degree program was popular with Oshki Wenjack ECE graduate students wanting to complete a teaching certificate.

Confederation College of Thunder Bay offers a four-semester Educational Support program preparing students for employment as Educational Assistants, Special Education Assistants, and other support positions (Confederation College, 2018).

Programs at all of these institutions involve Indigenous and Non-Indigenous educators and students working together to ensure that mandates of regulatory bodies, as well as community needs, are being met. The programs place a strong emphasis on Indigenous language and culture, and include Indigenous knowledge and land-based curriculum. The goal is to train local educators/teachers as culturally proficient and professionally competent in order to contribute to the health and well-being of their communities (Brock University, 2019; Oshki-Pimache-O-Win—The Wenjack Education Institute, 2016).

Methods

Context and Participants

This research is taking place in the ancestral Treaty 9 and Treaty 5 territories of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Grand Council Treaty 3 territory. In the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) territory, there are 49 First Nations communities with a total population of 45,000 (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, 2019). From west to east across the northern half of the province, these communities cover 210,000 square miles (approximately the size of France). Many communities are accessible only by plane or by winter roads for the 3 to 5 months when lakes freeze over. Other communities are accessible by road, but are hundreds of kilometers away from large urban areas. Grand Council of Treaty 3 is a political organization representing 24 First Nation communities across areas of northern Ontario and southeastern Manitoba, Canada (Grand Council Treaty #3, 2019).

We are grateful for the opportunity to learn from and with ECEs and teachers in four First Nations communities in NAN territory and with Roxanne, who lives in a First Nation community in Treaty 3 territory. Focus group participants are three Indigenous kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers who are teaching in their northern rural Indigenous communities. They were selected because they have worked with a group of speech-language pathologists who provide speech and language services to children in participating teachers' and educators' classrooms, and who work with Shelley (~~a pseudonym for blind review purposes~~), the university researcher and author of this paper. The speech-language pathologists asked Shelley to assist them in conducting research to inform their modifications of assessments and approaches toward greater cultural responsiveness. In this respect, the focus groups were part of a reciprocal relationship (Castellano, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991); the participants' children and community would receive more culturally responsive services after their focus group contributions were used to inform the speech-language pathologists' practice, and the speech-language pathologists and Shelley would learn ways to improve their practices. Focus group participants' communities and Roxanne's community are 500–1,200 kilometers from an urban area of 50,000 or more people. The population of the five communities ranges from approximately 300 people to approximately 2,600 people. Services in all five communities include a K–10, K–11, or K–8 school (administered by local Education Authorities) and an Aboriginal Head Start program. Additionally, there is a health centre, police station, general store (the post office is usually in the store), churches, a hotel, and recreation facilities, such as a baseball diamond, arena, and community hall. Communities of more than 1,000 people have other amenities, such as a bank and fast-food restaurants.

As shown in Table 1, the five participating teachers/ECEs have many years of experience and a range of postsecondary education experiences. Marlene is a graduate of both the 2-year Native Teacher's Education Program at the University of Ottawa and of the 1-year Aboriginal Teacher's

Assistant Program of Confederation College in Thunder Bay. Sara and Kari completed the Aboriginal Classroom Assistant Diploma Program over two summers at Nipissing University. Sara is planning to complement her teacher training with an Indigenous Early Childhood Education program at the Oshki Wenjack campus. She and Crystal have completed the Native Language Teachers Certification (NLTC) at Lakehead University. The program provides certification for educators to teach their native language in First Nations communities. The program is offered over 3 years during the summer months.

Table 1

Participating Teachers' Years of Experience and Teaching Assignments

Teacher	Years' experience	Teaching assignments
Roxanne	8 years	Resource (one-on-one), ECE
Marlene	21 years	Kindergarten, Grade 1, Special Education
Sara	22 years	Kindergarten, Grades 1–3 and 5, Teacher Assistant and then took over from a teacher who left
Kari	10 years	Teacher Assistant, Special Education, and speech-language pathologist (SLP), working with children in between SLP sessions
Crystal	31 years	Voluntary teacher, Teacher Assistant, Native Language instruction, Kindergarten

Data Collection and Analysis

Our research methods honour the oral tradition of the Indigenous participants, as we invited four participants to share personal and experiential knowledge in a focus group and Roxanne to share her knowledge in a written narrative. Starting points for the focus group conversations and Roxanne's narrative were the following questions:

1. Tell us about your current and previous teaching/childcare experience.
2. Tell us about your teacher/educator preparation experiences.
3. What is most important in preparing you to support children's learning in your community?

We chose a focus group, rather than individual interviews, so that participants could engage in dialogue, sharing stories and experiences, and developing relationships with each other and with the researchers in concert with Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2010). We are not presenting the five participants' experiences as representative of all Indigenous ECEs and teachers in remote northern Ontario First Nations communities. However, from Roxanne's and Lori's perspectives and experience, the openness of the participants is reflective of First Nations community members' willingness to complete programs to receive credentials, particularly if alternative models are available.

This paper came out of Shelley's interest in the educators'/teachers' responses to initial focus group questions about their professional experiences and training. After conducting the focus group and an initial reading of the transcript, Shelley invited Lori to join her in taking a closer look at the data. Lori had been working with Shelley and Indigenous ECEs on the collaborative action research project over the past 3 years. Shelley and Lori greatly valued an Indigenous ECE's perspective in the interpretation of the data. Lori invited Roxanne, a former graduate of

the program and Indigenous educator who is currently supervising a licensed early childhood program in her northern First Nations community, because she had participated with Lori on other leadership projects following completion of her diploma. The four focus group participants had been promised anonymity when they participated in the focus group, as per the approved tri-council ethics protocol. Neither Roxanne nor her community were involved in the collaborative action research study, and Roxanne agreed to write a narrative of her experiences to enrich and validate the findings from the focus group responses. Roxanne wrote a narrative of her professional trajectory and experiences in her initial educator preparation program following the telephone conversation. Her narrative became the primary data source, as it provides needed contextual information about the themes found in the four educators' focus group responses.

Because the four focus group participants' communities are very distant from each other and because the participants enjoy time in a city where they can do some shopping and engage in the entertainment activities that are not available in their home communities, the focus group took place in an urban centre that was easily accessible by plane for all four educators/teachers. Shelley audio recorded the focus group session and a research assistant took notes while the focus group was underway. Roxanne's narrative emerged in a telephone call with the other two authors of this paper. Like the focus group, the telephone conversation started with the following questions:

1. Tell us about your current and previous teaching/childcare experience.
2. Tell us about your teacher/educator preparation experiences.
3. What is most important in preparing you to support children's learning in your community?

A professional transcriber transcribed the focus group conversation.

We used a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992) to analyze the transcript and Roxanne's narrative. Our coding process involved highlighting sentences and phrases that described each educator's professional work experience with young children, together with challenges and significant learning from their teacher/ECE professional preparation experiences. We used a constant comparative method (Patton, 2015) to identify themes that arose across all participants' experiences, as described in the focus group transcript and in Roxanne's narrative. We sent our interpretations of the data to participants for input before completing this report.

We discuss three themes in the following section and then present implications for educator/teacher education preparation for northern First Nation communities' educators and teachers.

Findings

Professional Experiences: Volunteer/Fill-in Work Led to Full-Time Teaching/Childcare Work

All five educators/teachers' teaching paths have common beginnings, as they started working in kindergarten classrooms as teaching assistants, as volunteer teachers, or as resource teachers with no formal credentials or training. Roxanne's narrative provides a context for this theme:

My journey of teaching began in 1998 when I asked for work in my community at our local school. It was around the month of April and continued until the end of the school year which was June. As you may be aware, jobs are so scarce in First Nations

communities. So, once you get a job, you most likely have to keep it. As this was a temporary position, after that school year was finished, I did not return.

On my first day I was put in “resource,” where I worked one-on-one with children. The principal directed me to the resource room and had told me what my responsibilities were. It was mainly helping children who needed support and that alone time. I personally saw that inclusive one-on-one with certain children was needed in order for the child to concentrate and succeed.

In 2002 I applied to be a relief worker in the baby room at my community’s childcare centre for 2 years while the regular staff went to school for ECE diplomas. This where I believe my faith in teaching infants was born, as I saw how these babies were sponges soaking up information. Fast forward to 2011 after I had three children and was looking for work. I saw a job posting at my local child care centre for a permanent childcare worker. I thought to myself that I could teach other children as I had been teaching to my own. I also had experience and I felt that children warmed up to me as I was patient, loving, fun, and energetic. I applied and I did get the permanent position, but after 8 months of working, I left on maternity leave and my son was born. I returned to work in April 2013 to find that my supervisor had enrolled five of us staff in the ECE program at Oshki Wenjack program where my supervisor had got her diploma.

Roxanne’s experiences filling in for fellow community members who held early childhood educator experiences parallel those of Sara, one of the four focus group participants. Sara took over the teaching responsibilities of the kindergarten classroom in her First Nation community after the non-Indigenous teacher left the community mid-year. Sara explained, “So the following year in September, I just started teaching. And I taught kindergarten, Grade 1 and 2 and 3 and 5 all these years. I think I took a year off, but I’ve been teaching since then.” Kari has had paid work from the beginning of her career. She has worked as a teaching assistant for 3 years and then as a full-time speech-language assistant for 7 years.

Two of the focus group participants started their careers as volunteers, however. Crystal started teaching children in her community on a voluntary basis before the community had a school. She told her story:

So, I took it upon myself to teach the few kids that we had, on a voluntary basis. And then Indian Affairs came along and said “Okay, you people need a school.” So, we got the school in 1975. And they just put me in the school as a Teaching Assistant. And at that time, I worked with the little ones to work on their English. And I did that for a while. Then I got into Native language. I took the summer courses at Thunder Bay and got my diploma in that. And I went back to the reserve and was just teaching Native Language. And then they asked me to go into the kindergarten classroom about 4 or 5 years ago. So, I’ve been there since then.

The volunteer theme continued as Marlene described how she started teaching. She had volunteered to “fill in” when teachers in her community’s school left the community for training, as there were no supply teachers in the community.

In order to continue working in their positions following the Ontario Ministry of Education’s licensure mandate, participants were required to complete formal training in accredited programs. All participants have received some formal training since their early days in ECE positions. We provide stories of their experiences, beginning with Roxanne’s narrative in the following section.

Challenge of Initial Educator/Teacher Preparation: Separation from Families and Ongoing Work Responsibilities

Despite the flexibility in scheduling of early childhood education/teacher education programs attended by participants, the geographic distances required participants to be separated from their children for weeks at a time, leading to feelings of guilt and loneliness. Roxanne narrates the difficulties she and her family faced:

Come September 2013, I'm officially going to Thunder Bay for school. I was a breastfeeding mother still. So, what did I do, I brought my 17-month-old baby, who was very much glued to his momma. I also brought my niece to babysit during the days when I was in class. After a week went by, my niece told me she could not babysit anymore because my school hours were too long. And yes, we had long days. We could be at school from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. most days. So, I called my husband. He came and got our son and took him home. ... This was really hard for me because I felt my bond through breastfeeding was going to be broken. As I think back I realize that my son was old enough to be on whole milk and there I was beating myself up about it. But at that time and in that moment, I felt I was being selfish because I was going to school and I was leaving my husband with four of our children. At the time, my children were ages 17 months, 3 years, 8 years, and 12 years old. While in school I was lonely for my children and my husband but I got the next best thing ... my mom. My mom enrolled in the program since we both worked at our local child care centre. Having her there just made it easier to get through the days.

As the five participants explained, being away from family was very difficult emotionally and, in some cases, it also had a financial impact on the family. Students were granted education leaves from their employer but were not given their regular pay. Participants who brought extended family and young children with them during their study weeks (especially when taking courses in the summer months) experienced other challenges (e.g., living in small hotel room living conditions, lack of sleep with infants, and needs of the kokum-grandmother/spouse).

When back in their communities, participants found it challenging to balance work, family, and their online courses. Roxanne describes a typical day while back in her community working and taking courses:

I had obligations to attend to, assignments to work on, attend to my children. Honestly, I felt like giving up at one point because it was too much for me to handle. But I kept going, getting encouragement my other school mates, help and leniency from the teachers. Some days, after work I knew that evening I had an online course to attend to. So, from work, I'd go home, cook supper, get my school bag ready, and then leave to go to the local school in my community for the online class. The reason why I went to the school was because the internet was faster than it was at home, as everyone on the community was on this one main system for internet access. But the school was not.

The alternate delivery methods of the Indigenous educator/teacher preparation programs had made it possible to complete the mandated training, but they had not entirely addressed the issues facing participants. As shown in the following section, however, the programs did address a concern that participants and their First Nations communities shared: ensuring that Indigenous languages, culture, and ways of teaching are supported and valued for generations to come.

Ways the Educator/Teacher Education Programs Made a Difference: “Turning Indigenous Culture into Teaching Methods”

Confirming findings in previous research (e.g., Battiste, 2008; Hare, 2011), participating teachers and ECEs observed that mainstream culture, communicated through readily available satellite television and access to the internet, as well as through historical assimilative practices, has had a heavy influence on parenting practices and children’s activities in kindergarten. Roxanne explained, “Parents are always the first teachers. Like the saying goes ‘Pass the truth onto the next generation. ... Teach them early what we learned late.’ I know some things now that I wished my parents had taught me but I understand that their experience in residential school systems has affected them and their parenting style.” The focus group participants lamented that Indigenous cultural knowledge was not being passed on to the children of today.

Traditional family interactions, such as going onto the land to fish and hunt are less and less common, according to participating teachers. Estimates of the number of children in their classes whose parents “take children out to the bush” ranged from 30% to 50%. As a result, as Crystal said, “kids spend time on their game systems. They don’t know what fishing means.” The teachers agreed that it is important for children to “know about the outside world” but also to “know about what they see around them.” Marlene said that she and her husband take their grandchildren “out onto the land to show them what we do out there because [her] daughter can’t do it.” Crystal gave an example of a 4-year old in her class who collected dirt and sticks to make a diorama of a beaver dam. She observed that this boy’s parents regularly take him out on the land and go fishing, so he is learning traditional ways at home, as well as at school. Crystal was saddened that he was one of the few children in her class whose family was able to provide these traditional experiences. If the families were not able to teach traditional ways, she and the other focus group participants felt it was important that these teachings be part of children’s schooling.

All participants agreed on the significant need for the children in their classes/childcare centres to learn the traditional ways of their communities and to recognize and show ways to overcome the enduring impact of residential schools. Roxanne describes how her educator preparation program supported her in taking up this important role:

Oshki was different from grade school, because there were more Indigenous teachers than there were Caucasian. At grade school I had to learn the French language and how to be Catholic. At Oshki, I learned about smudging. We incorporated different native languages: Ojibway, Cree, Oji-cree. And I learned syllabics. And that’s where I learned to use my Anishnaabe culture and turn it into teaching methods. I learned legends, myths, the uses of tobacco, sage, sweet grass, and cedar. I learned about clan systems, the medicine wheel, using the land for medicine, beading, etc. It was a real learning experience for me.

Oshki was like being home. They made it comfortable. They were caring about your needs. They helped in whichever way you needed it. The majority of my teachers were Indigenous. And the teachers used their own experiences in the classroom. It was like “hey, they’ve actually been through what we have been through, or what we may be going through now.” One teacher shared a real life story about their family living in poverty and about the effects of Residential School (alcoholism, physical, mental abuse). They talked about how determined they were not to live that lifestyle or not be a victim. So that really hit home for a lot of us because our parents went through that, and we may or may not have been in that same situation as the teacher was.

The shared experience and learning of Indigenous language and culture went hand-in-hand with a valuing of Roxanne's Indigenous knowledge:

At my placement, my co-operating teacher acknowledged that I was Indigenous and immediately asked if I was going to incorporate my culture. I told her eventually yes, but first let me get to know the children and everyone else in the centre. And when I did, the children loved the hand drumming, the pow-wow music, and the stuffed animals I brought to use to tell stories. I could immediately tell that the children there had not ever been exposed to Indigenous culture or language. I'm pleased that I was able to share this with them as it both was a journey and experience for us all.

In her work with young children in both her Indigenous community and in the community of her placement, Roxanne makes important contributions to children's cultural lives. As a young member of her Indigenous community, Roxanne seeks out ways to learn traditional teachings and perspectives that were not part of her schooling. She integrates traditional experiences that were part of her family and community life in a northern Ontario Indigenous community. Additionally, Roxanne completed the 2-year Indigenous ECE diploma program with a GPA of 4.0 and, as the class valedictorian, delivered a speech at her cohort's graduation. Roxanne is a leader in her community who was promoted to supervisor at the community's child care centre after receiving her ECE diploma. She co-presented with a colleague at a provincial conference and, continuing her connections to the Oshki-Wenjack ECE program, completed the Indigenous ECE leadership 5-month in-service program. Recently, she ran for band council in her First Nation community, and is fundraising to build a playground at her centre. Education for Roxanne has motivated her to take the steps in real change for herself and for the children and families in her community.

Discussion and Limitations

Participating Indigenous early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers have a wealth of experiences working with children, starting with volunteer work or filling in for someone else, all while having no formal preparation. Additionally, participants share with the children they teach a lifetime of experiences in remote First Nations communities, unlike the southern teachers who have been their colleagues over the years; who often teach for a few months or a few years and then leave the community. These shared experiences are important in supporting young First Nations children's pride in who they are and their overall learning. Recognizing the importance of this shared experience and of Indigenous knowledge, participants' assessment of the most important goal for their educator/teacher education programs is to support them in deepening their understanding of Indigenous knowledge, language, and ways of teaching, alongside those of mainstream non-Indigenous society. This goal is reinforced in recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). Given the importance of this goal, we suggest that it also be included in the policies mandating licensure of all ECEs in Ontario and in accreditation programs.

The theme of valuing Indigenous knowledge and the experiences of First Nations educators and teachers is paramount in addressing our overarching research purpose: to inform ECE and teacher education for Indigenous educators living and teaching in remote communities. This theme, arising from participating First Nations educators' stories of their professional childcare and teaching and professional preparation experiences, was also important in Ball and Simpkins's (2004) program evaluation of the First Nations Partnership Program in British

Columbia. Addressing this theme requires that non-Indigenous initial teacher/educator preparation program instructors and administrators participate in cultural safety training and continue reflecting on their organizational policies and practices that may create barriers for Indigenous educators. Also important is a second theme: addressing the challenges posed by geographic distances and family commitments, one that parallel themes identified in previous studies of First Nations teachers (Preston, 2008; Preston et al., 2011). Participants talked about leaving nursing infants at home hundreds of kilometers away while taking their face-to-face training and having to place trust in extended family members for the first time to care for their child over weeks of study.

Although our study's findings are based on focus group responses of only four participants and one ECE's narrative, the themes reflect the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous educators whose stories and voices are seldom heard in educational research. Their work with children and efforts to fulfill legislative mandates for licensure take place in remote communities that are often overlooked when researchers select research sites. As such, we believe that our research findings can make valuable contributions to conversations about programs supporting Indigenous ECEs' and teachers' professional learning and achievement of provincial licenses.

Four of the participants' experiences are only partially elaborated because they were not the main focus of the focus group discussions, which were meant to provide information for speech-language pathologists' assessment of young Indigenous children's speech and language. This limitation, together with a recognition of the richness and insights of Roxanne's narrative, leads us to propose the need for future research, using narrative methodology, on Indigenous ECEs' stories of their experiences leading to their full-time work with young children and their achievement of diplomas needed for licensure.

Implications for Early Childhood Education Licensure Preparation

The themes arising from our research provide important considerations for culturally responsive educator/teacher education programs that provide Indigenous ECEs with the mandated licence to work in Ontario early childhood settings. Of greatest importance is the need for these programs to support Indigenous ECEs and teachers in passing on their communities' traditional knowledge and in teaching in traditional ways, alongside learning knowledge and ways of teaching that are necessary for successful participation in broader society (Hare, 2011). In order to achieve these goals, those who design educator professional learning programs must build relationships with community members, as well as school personnel in each community and not assume that one model will be appropriate for all communities (Stack, Beswick, Brown, Bound, & Kenny, 2011). It is important to ensure that mainstream values and agendas that are embedded within many elements of schooling, such as provincial curricula and educator certification mandates, are framed within Indigenous culture and knowledge. An environment of mutual respect and establishment of goals supporting cultural learning and community interests, are essential. The challenges that participating Indigenous educators have identified in finding ways to teach both Indigenous and mainstream language and culture can be taken up in the co-construction of curriculum for educator preparation. This also involves recognizing the wealth of experience and knowledge of Indigenous educators who may or may not have formal mainstream credentials. ECEs and teachers can be viewed as role models for children and leaders in assuring the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge and language (Hare, 2011). In the spirit of truth and reconciliation, professional learning should involve relationship building, valuing perspectives of local Indigenous community members in creating understandings of Canadian

history, of appropriate teaching practices and roles of schools, teachers, and educators in Indigenous communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

In conclusion, participating teachers' focus group contributions and Roxanne's narrative provide insight into issues that should be considered when creating or adapting professional preparation programs for remote rural Indigenous teachers. Overarching all initiatives should be a respect for Indigenous families' and communities' knowledge and language, and for the rich experiences that educators bring to their programs.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank participating educators and teachers, and the Canadian Institute for Health Research and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding the research project.

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