Chapter 11
Creating a Culture of Inclusion in Pre–Kindergarten: An Integral Analysis of Beliefs, Understandings, and Practices of Early Childhood Educators

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to understand how beliefs, understandings, and pedagogical practices of early childhood educators affect, and are affected by, their relationships with children, classroom team members, parents, and colleagues, as they create an inclusive culture in a pre-kindergarten classroom. To explore this research problem from multiple perspectives, integral theory was selected as the conceptual framework, and a multi-methods exploratory sequential design was employed using integral methodological pluralism. Data about educational experiences, culture, behaviors, and systems, were collected from five early childhood educators in pre-kindergarten classrooms in four urban schools, followed by a questionnaire of classroom practices, document analysis, and a focus group. Findings revealed that important factors for creating an inclusive classroom culture included: early childhood educators’ positive beliefs toward inclusion; a social constructivist theoretical perspective; and the ability to build strong relationships with children, parents, and colleagues.

INTRODUCTION
The provocation for this research study emerged from questions surrounding challenges to implement inclusive education within early childhood classrooms in the province of Alberta, Canada. In Alberta, the transition from segregated special education programs toward inclusive education is relatively new. A framework for inclusive education in all schools was not published by the Government of Alberta until 2010, and schools are still coping with what inclusive education looks like within the classroom. A Blue
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Ribbon Panel on Inclusive Education in Alberta Schools (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2014) concluded that effective implementation of inclusion in Alberta has not been realized due to inadequate support and resources in the areas of shared vision, leadership, research and evidence, teacher professional growth, and community engagement. While these issues are not isolated to Alberta, they exemplify the problem of systemic change without providing adequate resources and time to connect policy to research and practice (Fixsen, Blasé, Metz & Van Dyke, 2013; Odom, Buyesse & Soukakou, 2011; Lieber, Hanson, Odom, Sandall, Schwartz, Horn, & Wolery, 2000). Despite these challenges, Alberta school districts continue to forge ahead to make inclusive education a reality in their schools and classrooms albeit with varying degrees of success.

Schools in the province are faced with considerable complexities in regard to inclusive education for students in grades 1 to 12, but inclusion becomes increasingly difficult to implement prior to kindergarten. While kindergarten is universally funded by the provincial government and available to every child, what is lacking for pre-kindergarten children are inclusive programs in which all children have access to an environment that is flexible and can respond to a diversity of needs, rather than a segregated special education model that includes children who require specialized supports, interventions and services based on a medical diagnosis, and excludes those who don’t (Leiber et al., 2000).

The main challenge to providing inclusive pre-kindergarten programs is that provincial grants are given to school boards to support children with medically diagnosed disabilities or delays and those who are learning English as a new language, making it financially difficult for school boards to create programming that is inclusive and representative of a range of learners. This funding model also requires a process of assessing, labeling and sorting children into those who are defined as normal and don’t require support and those who are viewed as lacking, deficient and needing extra services to get them ready for school. This deficit based concept is grounded in principles of developmental psychology, and has come under fire from postmodernist thinkers as a limiting perspective that presents problematic assumptions about children and does not address the complexities of working with children and families in the 21st century (Manning, 2011; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2010; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008). School boards must also make sense of conflicting government requirements that “educating children with special education needs in inclusive settings is the option of first choice” for families and the provision of “systematic and planned contact with children who do not have special education needs” is to be part of the program design (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 15).

These challenges, alongside changes in thinking about how young children learn and develop, have created a need for Alberta school boards to reconceptualize how programming prior to kindergarten is provided for children. What is emerging from this shift is juxtaposition between a traditional, medically informed, deficit based and segregated provision of pre-kindergarten programs for children with special education needs, and a postmodern, progressive vision of pre-kindergarten programs that represent a democratic, inclusive and strengths-based model for all children. Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are in the midst of this disequilibrium and are key players to influence and be influenced by these discourses.

Problem Statement

In the province of Alberta, Canada, early childhood education is undergoing change to reconceptualize pre-kindergarten programming that is inclusive of all children in light of postmodern views and theoretical perspectives about diversity and the impact of experiences, relationships, environment and culture on learning. This thinking has created tensions between the view of difference as a deficit that needs
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