

# **Intercultural Early Learning; Transformative Elements for Creating a Sense of Belonging Amongst Immigrant Children and Families**



# Overview

- Rationale for an Innovative, Alternative Model of Early Learning
- Foundational Principles
- Development of the Program
- Objectives of Program
- Overview of the Intercultural Early Learning Model
- **Transformative Elements**

# Rationale

- Newcomer parents describe gaps between their values/perspectives on child rearing and those represented in the early learning and care environment
- Social and Economic barriers in Accessing Programming
- Larger significance of “sense of belonging” and importance of more *seamless* transition to early education environment

# Foundational Principles

1. be genuinely responsive to the unique early learning needs of newcomer children growing up in a particularly complex social/economic and multicultural context;
2. provide cultural and linguistic continuity for young newcomer children through both first language and English instruction;
3. be culturally sensitive and inclusive of the newcomer families' perspectives;
4. be holistic, strength-based and equity-based, building on the combined expertise of government organizations, community partners, communities, and researchers.
5. be collaborative, inter-relational, and interdependent so that mutual learning becomes fundamental to the success of the project.

# Foundational Principles

6. To be a place where an intercultural community is built rather than a place where problems are fixed.
7. To recognize that children attending the program are not “at risk”; they are in the program because they deserve and have the right to learn in their mother tongue.
8. Be premised on the recognition that there is richness in diversity, both among and within communities that allows for similarities to emerge.
9. Help children develop a sense of belonging to both their home culture and language, and the Canadian culture.
10. Recognize the importance of building a support system and partnership within the broader school community (e.g. multi-age language and culture-based extracurricular activities).

# Development of the Program

- 2006-7 Edmonton Public School Board and MCHB share concerns regarding unique challenges newcomer families face in accessing appropriate early learning
- New funding from Alberta Ed (2007) for early childhood programming for English Language Learners makes it possible
- Other organizations join effort: Region 6 Children's services, U of A, Capital Health, ABC Headstart, and Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

# Operational Objectives

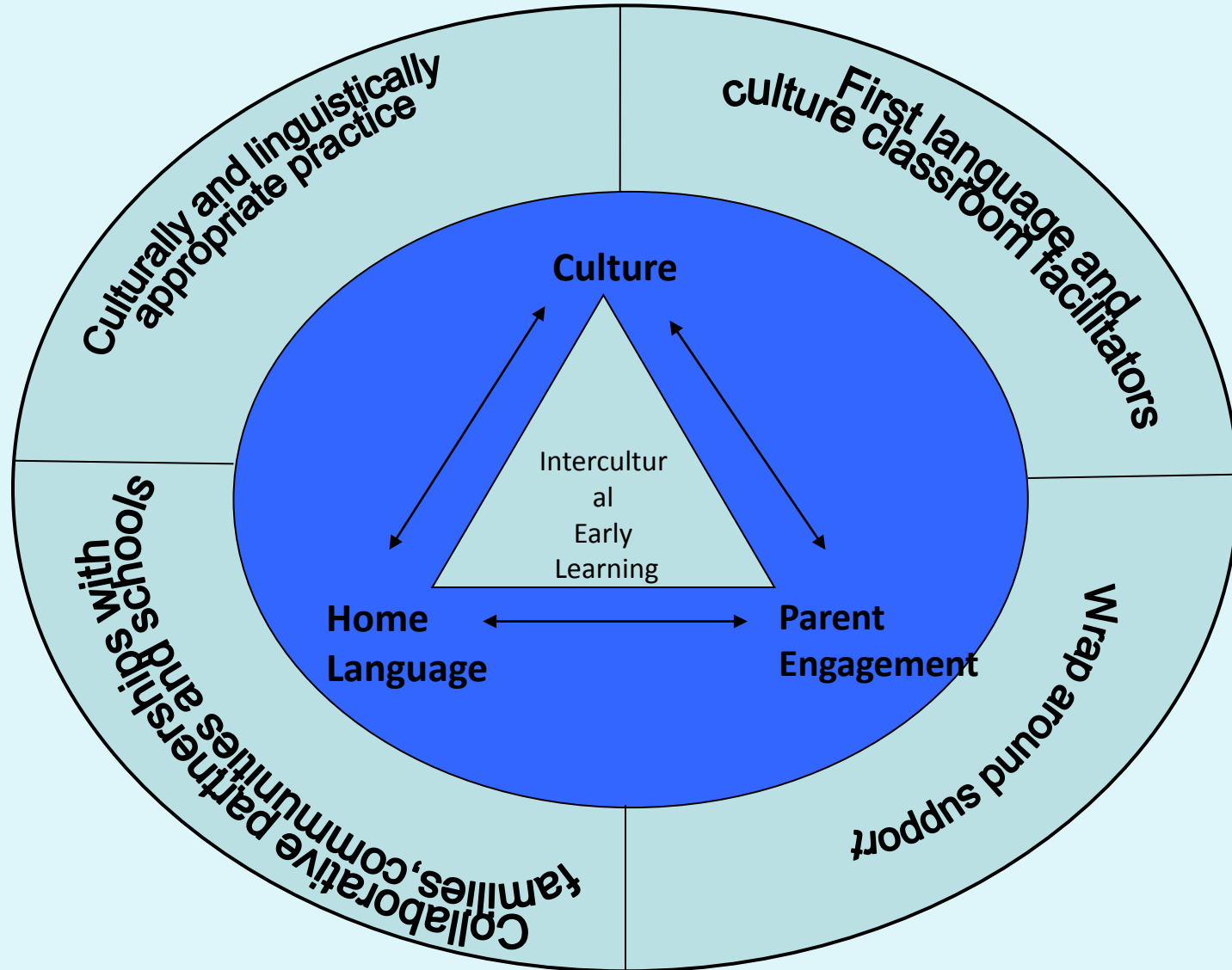
- 1) To assist preschool children to grow in the knowledge of their first language while acquiring English
- 2) to create a school environment that feels natural and culturally familiar for the children, actively contributing to cultural identity and a sense of belonging
- 3) to support parents to access a set of supports for family wellbeing and integration into Canadian life
- 4) to encourage these same parents to contribute to program development from their wealth of life experience and cultural knowledge.

# Program at Balwin School

- Operates 4 mornings a week
- One pre-school teacher
- First Language and Culture Facilitators (FLFs) promote Somali, Kurdish, Sudanese Arabic languages and culture
- Cultural brokers –promote connections in ethno-cultural communities and play a key role in wrap-around support for families
- Monthly parent meetings

**The Evolving Model: What  
Program Elements are  
Transformational in terms of  
Fostering a Sense of Belonging?**

# Intercultural Early Learning Model



**Culturally and Linguistically  
Appropriate Practise:  
Curriculum and Pedagogy**

# Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Curriculum

- Negotiating cultural meanings of early learning and care
  - Socio-cultural approaches to learning
  - Multiple paths to skill development
  - Behavior must be meaningfully interpreted
- Developing curriculum topics
  - Choosing universals with culturally specific expressions
    - E.g., babies, market, tea serving, weddings, celebrations
  - Developing appropriate activities
    - E.g. Do they portray culture meaningfully? Are they developmentally appropriate?



# Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Curriculum

- Culturally relevant activities
  - Songs
  - Story telling
  - Arts and Crafts
  - Cooking
  - Play
- Meaningful classroom environment with cultural artifacts



*(Kirova & Paradis, 2010)*

# **First Language and Culture Facilitators**

# First Language and Culture Facilitators for **Linguistic Continuity**

- Parents articulate value of maintaining first language in terms of social and emotional benefits i.e. communication/identity with parents and extended family, cultural community
- Growing evidence of cognitive & academic value
- Legitimizes use of first language in the public sphere, i.e. school environment

# First Language and Culture Facilitators For Cultural Continuity:

- Visible cultural community presence in classroom
- Culturally embedded ways of communicating affirmation and care
- Consistency with cultural ways of learning, playing and interacting
- Problem solving in culturally commensurate ways
- Aligning curriculum and play with what is embedded in home and culture



**Engagement, Wrap Around  
Support, and  
the Role of Cultural Brokers**

# Engaging families

A critical part of fostering a sense of belonging for families is nurturing authentic program involvement by recognizing and drawing on their strengths, i.e. social and cultural capital

“Despite rules and guidelines to obviate it, delegitimizing of newcomer families’ social and cultural capital by dominant institutions such as schools, erode the families’ protective potential and create emotional conflict for children”

*Beiser et al. (2002) p. 226*

# Recognizing the strengths of families

Examples of social and cultural capital

bilingualism

biculturalism

education; openness and aspirations

resilience

supportive community networks

attitude

collective & family capital

Give rise to

cognitive versatility

cross-cultural awareness

motivation

openness

social supports

family responsibility

sense of belonging

resilience

creativity

# Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement

- Monthly parent meetings
- Focus groups with community leaders, elders and families
- Focus groups with parents and extended family on program impacts
- Everyday interactions made 'user friendly' through open door policy and role of FLFs and cultural brokers

# Recognizing and Responding to Everyday Challenges

- Linguistic and communication barriers
- Unemployment, underemployment ,poverty
- Negotiating new systems for accessing programs and services
- Health and mental health issues; premigration trauma
- Isolation and loneliness
- Family conflict

# Holistic/Wrap Around Support

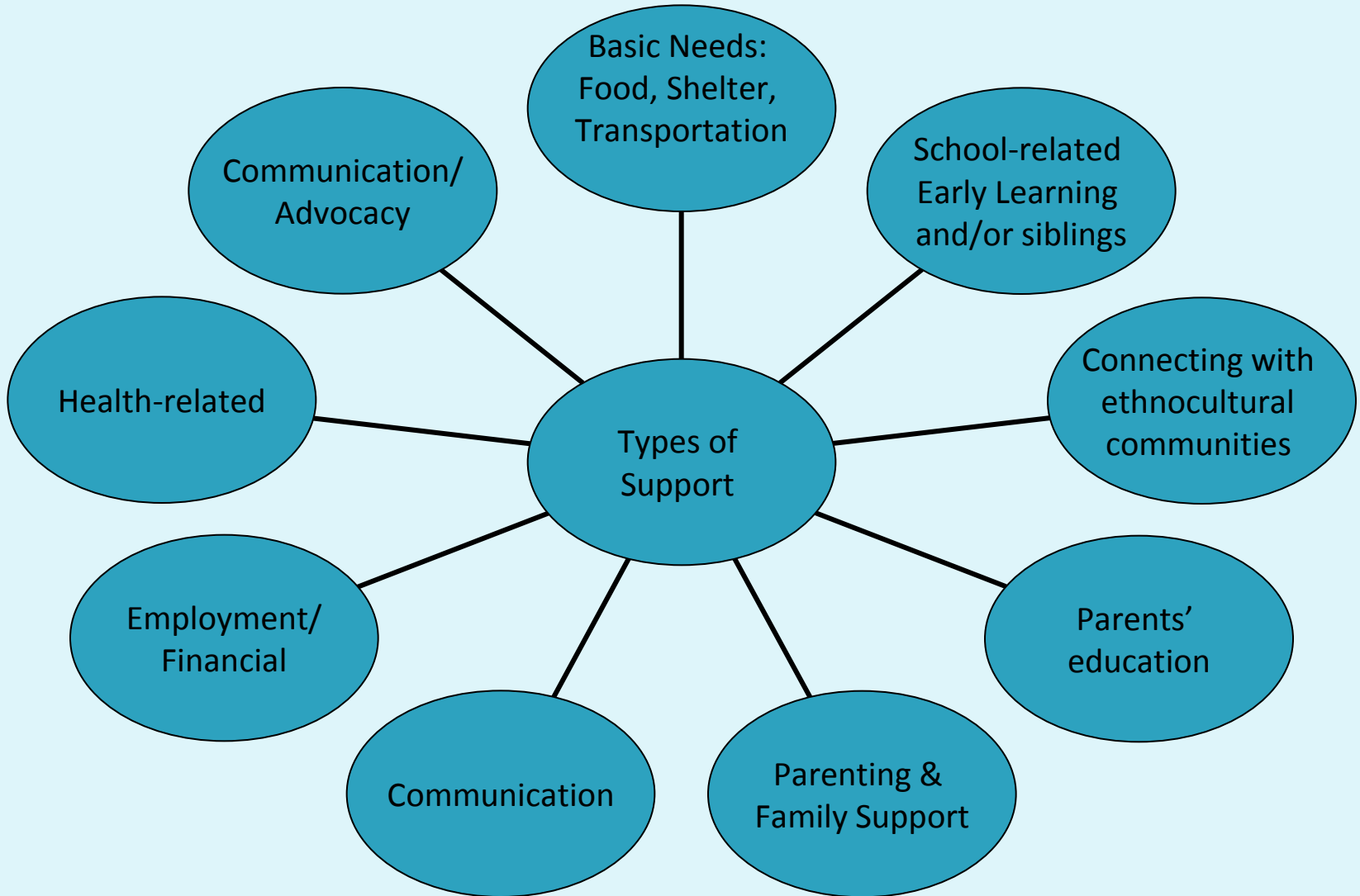
Through the work of *Cultural Brokers*:

- Work primarily outside of the classroom
- Make visible the realities of the family context – pre-migration and present circumstances
- Support families with home visits and referrals for supports-both within mainstream agencies and ethno cultural communities
- Develop holistic relationship of trust by responding to immediate needs of families
- Parents see program as a place of connecting: they are understood and receive effective, relevant support

# Nature of Support Provided by Cultural Brokers

- Intensive, integrated and ongoing
- Holistic and broad in Scope

# A wide scope of support



# In the words of the Brokers:

## Basic Needs

You go deeper with the family cause of the program: they start to tell you things once they know you. "our financial situation is not good, we are short on food...the rent"

There is too much information and they get confused...there is lots around communication,... but they have that confidence and they want to learn.

When the family is illiterate in their first language this makes it even more difficult for them. She [the mom] had lots of questions. She had a letter from the school, a letter from capital housing...and no idea what these were about. Whenever she opens the mail she needs someone with her... but you can't be there 24 hours a day so she puts it in a pile and waits for me to come.

We have a lot of single moms. It's a transportation barrier; sometimes I have to pick them up for the parent meetings.

A New Way of Life;  
Communication, School  
Time and Logistics Issues

## Negotiating a New System

The school really needs us there on site; they are always asking, "please can you come to the office, we have a family here who we are having some problems with'. Sometimes it was the older kids [in the family] fighting in the classroom

# **Collaborative Partnerships with Families, Communities, and Schools**

# Importance of Parents as Partners

- Opportunities for meaningful interaction
- Reciprocal relationships
- Focus of meetings *jointly* set by parents and classroom team
- Fostering sense of belonging and feelings of ownership

# In the words of the Parents:

*We bring knowledge. We may not contribute any resources but we bring knowledge. We are asked how we treat our child at home and they try to respect, follow that.*

*We come together as a community seeing our children together.*

*We feel we are respected by having the broker to teach our child our language. And having a broker who speaks our language during meeting, like this Focus group, is good. If there was nobody who speaks our language we would not come to this focus group or to this school.*

*It's a big big help...and a hard job to look after all these kids from different background. Thank you on behalf of the parents for a great job. It takes not an ordinary person to do that, to work with parent from all cultures*

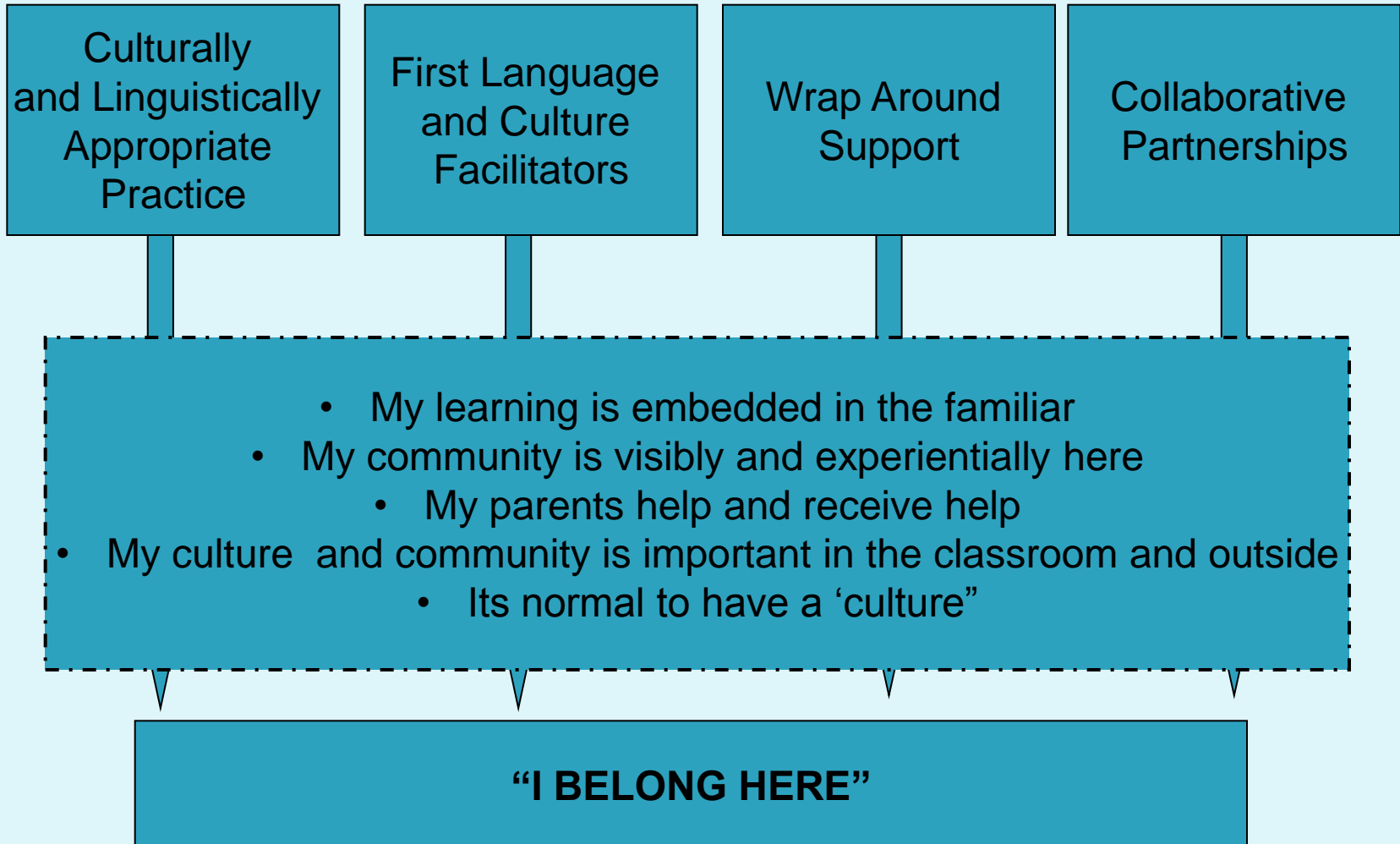
# Working Collaboratively

- Necessary to negotiate existing ways of knowing and practicing
  - Finding common language
  - Developing “New” practices
  - Seeing richness in diversity
- Having a common focus: “We are all *partners* in supporting healthy development of our children” and constantly revisiting goals

# Program Learning and Challenges

- Creating a program that is inclusive of multiple cultural perspectives is hard work; importance of the “third space” for listening, learning and innovation
- Common areas of tension:
  - Assessments
  - School readiness vs. cultural identity & self esteem
  - Shifting roles as a result of a new model collaboration
- Program is relatively resource intensive

# Conclusion



# References

- Beiser, M., Hou F., Hyman, I., & Tousignant M. (2002). Poverty, family process, and the mental health of immigrant children in Canada. *American Journal of Public Health, 92 (2), 220-227*
- Kirova, A & Paradis, J. (2010). *The role of an Intercultural Early Learning Program for Refugee and Immigrant Children on the Development of the L1 and L2 Skills and Abilities*. Final Report.