

Examining the Role of Emotional Connection between Educators and Immigrant Children in Early Childhood Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This literature review examines the role of emotional connection between early childhood educators and immigrant children in promoting academic development and social-emotional well-being in Canadian pre-schools. Based on the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) and the Ethics of Care (Noddings, 1992), the literature suggests that secure and nurturing relationships in the classroom substantially improve immigrant children's adaptation and learning experiences. The literature also highlights the impact of teachers comprehending diverse cultures, offering emotional support, and experiencing training to help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps. Educators can influence the lives of immigrant children by fostering welcoming and inclusive classrooms through strategies such as bilingual support and emotion-centered teaching. Additionally, the literature underlines the value of connections and identifies areas for further research, including evaluating emotional adaptation and promoting safe interactions. Future studies should examine the long-term impact of emotional connections on immigrant children's academic and personal development.

Keywords: Emotional connection, immigrant children, early childhood education, attachment theory, cultural adaptation, Canadian pre-schools.

Introduction

The chapter explores attachment's role in education, focusing on emotional connections between students and teachers. It uses Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969) and Noddings' Ethics of Care (1992) to examine how secure relationships foster academic and emotional growth. My personal experience as a mother and an immigrant highlights the importance of educators providing emotional security and inclusion for immigrant children, underscoring the significance of attachment in early childhood education.

My Learning Journey

Understanding the meaning of attachment and redefining it in my educational journey as a student and an educator was essential in shaping how I learn and teach. During my primary and secondary school, some teachers' confidence entrusted in me and their admiration increased my dedication to their subjects. On the other hand, other teachers' teaching practices made me insecure and afraid, undermining my interest in their subjects. This situation generated many questions for me, such as why this happened, what I had differentiated perceptions for them, what brought me closer and what distanced me, and whether it was just a question of affinity.

I began to comprehend this context when I started university to study psychology. By examining John Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969), I understood how crucial security is for learning and how it is fostered through emotional connection. According to Bowlby (1969), emotional bonds formed in childhood, particularly with caregivers, affect social, emotional, and cognitive development. A secure attachment provides a foundation for exploring the world and healthy development, while a lack of this bond can create insecurity and relational difficulties (Bowlby, 1969). If a child who feels safe with their caregivers is more willing to learn, make mistakes, and try again, then why not foster an emotional connection between educators and students within the school environment? This connection can help establish a trusting relationship, providing an emotional base for learning. Researchers and academics in child development including Bergin and Bergin (2009), suggested that when children feel cared for and secure in the teacher-student relationship, they can learn more effectively and are more likely to share their mistakes and lack of interest.

Afterward, in my psychology degree, while studying Carl Jung's theory of analytical psychology, my understanding and appreciation of human connection grew significantly. Jung (1928) emphasized the need to eliminate preconceived theories when interacting with others, pointing out the importance of active listening and empathy to truly understand emotions and feelings. This perspective sparked in me a reflection on how such deep, empathetic connections could be formed between educators and children who had never met before. Thus, I enrolled in a bachelor's degree in education, where I was introduced to Nel Noddings' Ethics of Care theory. Noddings emphasized that the primary and most important task of schools is to care for children before making any academic demands (1992). She further defined that "A caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings..." (Noddings, 1992, p. 15). This fostered interdisciplinary ideas in me, including the role of attachment,

emotional connection, and caregiving, not just as an ideal but as a concrete strategy for promoting learning that transcends academic achievement and engages the whole child.

While Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory highlighted the fundamental need for secure relationships in early childhood development for adequate cognitive, social, and emotional development, Noddings' (1992) ethics of care theory, on the other hand, extended this idea beyond parental care to something that should be intentionally cultivated in educational settings. This suggested me that care can be a concrete strategy for promoting learning; after all, both authors agree that secure attachments provide the emotional security necessary to explore new knowledge.

My Positionality

As a mother, I gained a deeper understanding of attachment and caregiving in education. I felt comfortable leaving my daughters at school when I felt genuine affection from their educators. My daughters' emotional connection with their early childhood teachers made them excited to attend their school. However, immigration disrupted this sense of security, and real-life challenges challenged my beliefs. The critical phase of my daughters' adjustment brought uncertainties, forcing me to reflect on reestablishing attachment and caregiving in unfamiliar environments with language and cultural barriers. Secure relationships are essential in education for developing resilience and a sense of belonging.

A child who moves to a new country needs to adapt by learning a new language and adjusting to different cultural practices (Cavicchiolo et al., 2020). However, the process is not gradual enough and affects all perspectives of the comfort zone. Upon arriving in a foreign land, integrating into the new culture requires agility in almost everything, such as creating new friendships, building a support network, accessing the most diverse and necessary services, and understanding how the local system works (Cavicchiolo et al., 2020). Understanding how each of my daughters would experience this process was essential to developing an effective school adaptation plan.

When I reflected on this challenging context, I recognized the value of schools and, consequently, the profound responsibility of educators in this process as a bridge between the family and the new reality. In most cases, educators will be the first contact with this new society and will play a critical role in bridging cultural gaps and promoting inclusion (Tardif-Grenier et al., 2023). On the other hand, although there is sometimes an intention on the part of early childhood educators to properly accommodate immigrant children in the new context, in practice there is no adequate sensitivity to understand the context of immigrant children and effectively help them feel part of the new culture and be able to develop appropriately like the natives (McDevitt, 2020). In her TEDx Talk (2024), therapist Anne Power argued that when a human being builds an attachment with another person, it changes the body's chemistry, making the brain function fully and expanding its capacity to learn.

By connecting all the theories, I cited through my immigrant mother experience, and besides my job with pre-school children from diverse ethnicities, I realized how essential this connection is for immigrant children. Furthermore, reflecting on how children would experience this process will be crucial to developing a mentally healthy generation in countries that receive significant numbers of immigrants. In Canada, for instance, in 2016, close to 2.2 million children had at least one foreign-born parent, this number represents 37,5% of the child population (Statistics Canada, 2016). For these reasons, I seek to understand this context, how the emotional connection between early childhood educators and immigrant children can directly impact their academic development and provide insights for Canadian pre-schools that annually receive thousands of children of diverse ethnicities. In 2021, 53% of immigrant parents and 54% of non-permanent resident parents reported using childcare services in the previous 12 months, highlighting the significant presence of immigrant children in Canadian early childhood programs (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Research Topic and Question

The process of learning is deeply intertwined with emotional security and human connection, especially in early childhood education. For immigrant children, adapting to a new cultural and educational environment presents unique challenges that go beyond language barriers and academic expectations. Emotional connection and secure attachment with educators can serve as a vital support system, fostering a sense of belonging and stability that enhances learning and overall development.

Grounded in Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory and Noddings' (1992) Ethics of Care, this literature explores how emotional bonds between educators and immigrant children shape their educational experiences. As early childhood educators serve as one of the first points of contact for immigrant children in a new country, understanding the role of emotional security in their adaptation and learning is crucial. This paper is guided by the following topic and central question:

Research Question

How does emotional connection and secure attachment between early childhood educators and immigrant children influence their academic and social development?

Literature Review

This literature review aims to understand how the emotional connection between early childhood educators and immigrant children impacts their academic development, to provide insights for Canadian pre-schools. The central proposition that emerges from this review is that establishing strong emotional connections, coupled with implementing culturally responsive practices, is critical for nurturing the socio-emotional well-being and academic success of immigrant preschool children.

Introduction and Context

In recent years, the number of immigrant preschool-aged children has surged in several countries (McAuliffe & Ochoa, 2024), posing challenges to early childhood education. Cavicchioli et al. (2020) analyzed data from 2328 children across 561 Italian primary schools and concluded that immigrant children's adaptation involves more than learning a new language and making friends. Despite the belief that children adapt faster than adults, this process presents significant emotional challenges (González-Moreira et al., 2024). While parents play a crucial role, the quality of interactions with educators impacts emotional security, social integration, cognitive growth, and overall academic readiness (Harlow, 2019).

Much research exists on social inclusion's impact on learning, but few studies examine the link between emotional connection and the academic success of immigrant children in Canada. The emotional connection goes beyond personal affinities—it involves children trusting educators to express their emotions, insecurities, and needs, assured of understanding and acceptance, enabling exploration without fear of judgment.

Thesis Statement

This literature review argues that emotional connections between educators and immigrant preschoolers are essential for their adaptation, fostering socio-emotional well-being and academic success in early childhood education. To explore this, the relationship between socio-emotional development and academic success will first be examined, followed by a discussion of the role of educators in fostering emotional connections, and finally an analysis of pedagogical strategies that support the emotional and cultural adaptation of immigrant children.

The Impact of Social-Emotional Development on Learning Success

Developing socio-emotional skills in childhood impacts learning and lifelong differences. In the early school years, children form initial social relationships outside the family, spurring behavioural development (González-Moreira et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2022). Jackson et al. (2023) examined 17 preschool classrooms in the U.S. to assess whether emotion-focused teaching during social-emotional learning activities is more effective than standard practices. The study found that children with emotion-focused instruction exhibit improved academic and social skills.

Immigrant children face challenges such as language barriers and emotional distress from cultural adaptation. Khalfaoui et al. (2020) reviewed 14 articles from 2008—2018, identifying factors that foster a positive classroom climate in multicultural early childhood settings. The review confirmed that warm, respectful interactions promote a balanced learning environment and essential life skills. This highlights how a caring teacher-student relationship can ease these challenges, giving children the social and emotional support necessary for academic success.

Guo and Dalli (2016) examined two Chinese immigrant children, ages four and a half, in a New Zealand early childhood education center, observing how they expressed skills in a new sociocultural setting driven by a desire to belong. The children sought to learn English and incorporate cultural practices from home, motivated by the need for connection. Similarly, Keles et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of seven studies on preschool interventions promoting social inclusion for children from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. They found that social inclusion is crucial for socio-emotional development, influencing learning by creating safety, encouraging peer relationships, and supporting wellbeing (Keles et al., 2021). Together, these studies indicate that prioritizing emotional well-being alongside cognitive skills fosters belonging and stability, essential for the long-term educational engagement and growth of immigrant children.

This whole context highlights the importance of incorporating emotional connections into early childhood education as a key element in meeting the unique needs of immigrant children. Quality interactions in childhood have a significant impact on a person's life (Bowlby, 1969). In the context of immigration, the role of educators expands, as teachers often serve as key agents in breaking down cultural barriers and helping children adapt to a new life context.

More than Literacy: The Strength of Educators and their Interactions

Early childhood educators' responsibilities extend beyond basic care and reading (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). They significantly influence children's academic, emotional, and social development, impacting their ability to build relationships and adapt culturally throughout life (Conte et al., 2023; Gagnon et al., 2019; Khalfaoui et al., 2020). This role is crucial for immigrant children, who face challenges like cultural identity, language barriers, prejudice, and social adaptation, alongside educators' perceptions (Conte et al., 2023; Murthy et al., 2021). Educators are often the first contact for new societies, bridging cultural gaps and promoting inclusion (Vesely et al., 2013; Tardif-Grenier, 2023).

Educators can support immigrant children by reinforcing their linguistic and cultural identity. deSouza? et al. (2022) reviewed 24 articles on child development, focusing on how immigrant children adopt a new language while maintaining their mother tongue and the impact of this duality. Recognizing their native language strengthens immigrant children's identity and belonging (deSouza? et al., 2022). However, educators should be cautious of potential discrimination from this valorization of diverse cultures. Keles et al. (2021) highlighted that educators should promote intergroup exchanges and create a safe environment for social integration. This emphasizes educators' roles as linguistic and emotional facilitators, aiding immigrant children's social and academic adaptation.

Additionally, beyond language and cultural adaptation, meaningful and supportive relationships between teachers and children foster emotional resilience. By cultivating warm and trusting relationships, educators help children develop social trust, emotional regulation, and a sense of belonging—skills that are fundamental to their long-term well-being (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). This demonstrates that inclusive educational practices and increasing academic commitment enhance emotional stability, reducing risks such as anxiety and isolation (Keles et al., 2021).

It is important to recognize that what happens in children's lives outside of school also directly affects their learning process (González-Moreira et al., 2024; López et al., 2020), such as lack of access to quality food, limited emotional and social support. Fakhari et al. (2023) used the photovoice methodology in a study with immigrant families and early childhood educators in Halifax, Canada, uncovering financial, linguistic, and cultural barriers for accessing early childhood services. This literature showed that understanding the various risk factors that can lead to negative child development goes beyond the concern of achieving goals based on generic cognitive development charts (Fakhari et al., 2023).

Beyond teaching reading, math, and science, educators need to facilitate cultural integration, enhancing children's emotional and social development. Therefore, teachers must create a welcoming and inclusive environment to ensure that immigrant children feel supported, laying the groundwork for academic success and a sense of belonging.

Supporting Cultural Adaptation: The Role of Affectionate and Appropriate Interaction

Assessing emotional connection requires developing caring teacher-student interactions that foster emotional safety and support effective learning for immigrant children. McInnes et al. (2024) conducted a 20-week study using participatory co-design, collecting data through journals, focus groups, interviews, and observations on the social-emotional development of multilingual children in early education. They found that educators who shared children's native languages better supported their engagement with emotional literacy resources while developing spoken English. Conversely, Langeloo et al. (2019) performed a systematic review of 31 studies on teacher-child interactions, revealing that multilingual children faced unequal learning opportunities compared to their monolingual peers. Both studies illustrated that interactions in a child's native language enhanced the emotional engagement and understanding in a new culture, ensuring full participation and equitable educational opportunities while fostering a special teacher-student connection.

Additionally, McDevitt (2020) conducted a qualitative case study with two immigrant early childhood educators in New York city, which revealed that the educators' lived experiences as immigrants shaped their responsive teaching practices for immigrant children, including the use of multiple languages to create inclusion and attention to children with language barriers. Furthermore, Brezicha and Miranda (2022) directed a comparative study based on two independent investigations that examined schools serving newly arrived immigrant students. According to Brezicha and Miranda (2022), when educators were immigrants or had experience with immigrant children, teachers developed greater empathy because they identified with their students' experiences, creating a unique relationship.

In addition, children who do not have support to help them manage their emotions appropriately can increase their anxiety levels (González-Moreira et al., 2024), triggering a series of emotional and behavioral problems. Vasseleu et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research with 17 early childhood educators in Australia, using observations, reflection journals, and semi-structured interviews. The results from this research acknowledged that the early childhood education environment can be a protective or risk factor in the development of children's ability to manage their emotions, depending on the level of support and professional preparation of their educators (Vasseleu et al., 2021). Therefore, educators who use resources and strategies to help children identify their own and others' emotions in a loving and age-appropriate way and understand the children will promote greater social and emotional adaptation of students (McInnes et al., 2024).

Gaps in Reviewed Literature

This literature review seeks to highlight how an affective relationship between educators and children can transform their development throughout their lives. Although many articles provide important foundations, important gaps need to be addressed in future research.

Contradictions

Although many articles advocate emotional connection, there is an important discussion about whether you can touch a child to regulate their emotions and make them feel welcomed. Johansson et al. (2020) conducted mixed-method research with preschool teacher students, which reported a controversial issue considering the current global scenario, where there were several reports of abuse, including within the family context. However, touching, such as hugging, can create bonds and regulate the emotional system more easily (Johansson et al., 2020). It is up to future research to identify how to establish healthy and safe boundaries for children.

Limitations

The literature review led to two key limitations. The first is the lack of instruments to assess and measure the emotional adaptation of immigrant children more accurately, considering different cultural contexts (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). In addition, no studies adequately represented the cultural diversity within the same classroom, leaving gaps in how different immigrant groups interact and adapt (Keles et al., 2021; deSouza et al., 2022).

Emerging Topics and Trends

These trends emphasize the need for more empirical research on strategies for implementation and their long-term effects on immigrant children's development. Evidence shows that strong emotional connections between educators and immigrant children enhance emotional well-being and academic success (Langeloo et al., 2019; McDevitt, 2020;

Vasseleu et al., 2021). Additionally, integrating culturally responsive practices, like bilingual support, fosters connections reduces isolation and aids adjustment (Keles et al., 2021; Langeloo et al., 2019; McDevitt, 2020; McInnes et al., 2024). Finally, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of professional development for educators to offer more tailored support for self-regulation (González-Moreira et al., 2024; Khalfaoui et al., 2020; McInnes et al., 2024; Vasseleu et al., 2021).

Recommendations

This chapter aims to provide practical recommendations for educators and educational institutions, outlining strategies that can be implemented to strengthen emotional connections, foster cultural inclusion, and ultimately improve the learning experiences of immigrant children. Additionally, potential barriers to implementing these practices will be discussed, and directions for future research that can deepen the understanding of this important topic will be proposed, especially in the specific context of Canadian preschoolers.

Implications for Practice

Incorporating culturally responsive approaches and focusing on emotional well-being will allow educators not only to improve immigrant children's engagement in academic activities but also to build resilience, belonging, and confidence in the long term, as emotional safety plays a critical role in a child's ability to learn (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

This literature emphasizes a vital strategy: fostering emotional safety among students by establishing a space to share their feelings, concerns, and needs openly, confident in being understood and accepted. According to Khalfaoui et al. (2020), teachers need to be attentive to their students, communicating calmly and maintaining eye contact while engaging with their interests. Furthermore, consistent classroom routines and nonverbal cues allow children to engage fully, even when facing language barriers (Khalfaoui et al., 2020).

In addition, using the child's native language and culture can facilitate emotional support and develop a sense of safety (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). Incorporating the experiences, knowledge, and skills children bring from their homes can validate their identities and foster a sense of belonging (McDevitt, 2020). Furthermore, peer interactions that positively share multiculturalism can reduce discrimination and create a safe environment for social integration (Keles et al., 2021).

An additional recommendation is to implement emotional awareness activities. Educators can use breathing exercises, hugs, and verbal expressions to help children identify their own and others' emotions (Jackson et al., 2023). Another action is to implement a lesson on identifying angry and sad facial expressions, in which teachers help children provide labels for their emotions (Jackson et al., 2023). These strategies should be adapted to children's age and comprehension levels to enhance their social and emotional adaptation.

Physical contact is important to consider. Johansson et al. (2020) highlight how touch, such as hugs, aids in emotion regulation and fosters a sense of welcome in children. Future research should focus on establishing healthy boundaries for children, especially given the current abuse reports. Johansson et al. (2020) emphasize that touch strengthens bonds and facilitates emotional regulation.

Finally, it is essential to promote training programs for educators that focus on cultural mediation and empathy regarding each child's challenges during migration (Fakhari et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2021; McDevitt, 2020). Immigrant educators or those with experience working with immigrant children can aid in developing other teachers' capacity for empathy, which fosters emotionally responsive relationships (McDevitt, 2020).

Potential Barriers

Certain educators and policymakers might hesitate to emphasize the socio-emotional well-being and cultural adjustment of immigrant children over academic issues (Brezicha & Miranda, 2022). Additionally, insufficient understanding among some educators or administrators regarding the importance of emotional bonds and cultural awareness could pose an obstacle (Brezicha & Miranda, 2022; McDevitt, 2020).

Furthermore, implementing culturally responsive practices will require a deep understanding of and sensitivity to the diverse cultures of immigrant children. Educators will need specialized training, schools will need to hire bilingual staff, and culturally relevant teaching materials will need to be purchased to support language (McInnes et al., 2024). Pre-schools may not have sufficient budgets to fund these initiatives without additional government support (Fakhari et al., 2023).

Suggestions for Future Research

Several issues raised in this literature require further research, especially in the Canadian context. Future research should identify the rate of families returning to their home countries due to children's adjustment issues and emotional distress resulting from migration.

Another critical area of research that needs to be understood and established is about safe boundaries for physical interactions between educators and students. This involves exploring how touch fosters connection, regulates emotions, and ensures safety while also addressing the reporting of physical abuse.

This literature highlights that emotional connections between educators and immigrant children promote well-being and impact academic success. However, additional research is essential to understand these interactions and their lasting effects.

Conclusion

This literature review explores how the emotional connection between early childhood educators and immigrant children directly impacts their academic development, providing insights for Canadian preschools. The central theme that emerges from this research is that establishing strong emotional connections, coupled with the implementation of culturally responsive practices, is critical to fostering the adjustment, socio-emotional well-being, and academic success of immigrant preschool children (Fakhari et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2021; McDevitt, 2020).

The literature review found that emotional safety through trusting relationships with educators is crucial for learning and development. When children feel cared for, they learn better and are more comfortable expressing their needs (Brezicha & Miranda, 2022; Guo & Dalli, 2016; Langloos et al., 2019). Additionally, acknowledging immigrant children's linguistic and cultural identities enhances their belonging and emotional health, aiding their adjustment to new environments (Fakhari et al., 2023; McDevitt, 2020; McInnes et al., 2024). The review emphasized educators' role as cultural intermediaries who create inclusive environments, essential for immigrant children's academic and emotional success (Fakhari et al., 2023; Keles et al., 2021; McDevitt, 2020).

In conclusion, the literature review shows that emphasizing emotional connections and cultural sensitivity in Canadian preschools enhances academic engagement for immigrant children. It also fosters resilience, a sense of belonging, and long-term confidence, directly answering the initial inquiry regarding the influence of emotional connections on their academic advancement.

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