

**“YOU NEED TO GET INTO THEIR SPACE”: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE
MOE THE MOUSE TM PROGRAM**

by

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Abstract

Early education programs for preschoolers often have a greater impact on language and literacy outcomes than those offered later on (Ball, 2007; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004; Townsend & Konold, 2010), particularly when the programs are strengths based, culturally attuned, and relationships focused. Moe the Mouse TM is one such program, addressing early speech, language and preliteracy skills within a culturally relevant framework for preschoolers with Aboriginal backgrounds. To date, there has been little empirical research on the Moe the Mouse TM program. The current study sought to explore the perspectives of people who use or support the program through focus group discussions and qualitative analyses as one step in evaluation of the program .

Methodology:

Sixteen practitioners who used or supported the Moe the Mouse TM program were recruited through a local community centre to give their perspectives on the program in focus group discussions. Three of the groups met just after they received training on the program, and the fourth group, six months later. Using qualitative methodology, participants' audio-recorded discussions were transcribed and sorted into broad thematic categories, allowing a discovery of themes important to participants.

Results:

Within the broad topics of culturally relevant curricula and perspectives on Moe the Mouse TM, two major themes emerged from the participants' discussions. These themes included (1) supporting a child's identity through adaptable and engaging programs, and (2) building a diverse and capable team from all aspects of a child's community.

Discussion:

The emergent themes of supporting children's identities and relationship building contextualize the Moe the Mouse TM program as one that is strengths-based, culturally relevant and relationship building. The themes also reflect the need to individualize a program within a playful and engaging group context. In early childhood education, there is a need to support Aboriginal communities in self-determination, cultural programming, and intergenerational healing through cultivating relationships and exploring strategies that practitioners and families can use. From the participant' points of view, Moe the Mouse TM approaches these broad goals.

Preface

The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Board reviewed and approved this study: UBC BREB number: H13-03112.

All parts of the data collection, analysis of the research data, and preparation of this manuscript were primarily done by the author with input from the research supervisor, Dr. May Bernhardt, thesis committee members Drs. Barbara Purves and Dr. Paola Colozzo, and community consultant, Corine Sagmeister.

Research for this project was collected on the traditional First Nations territories of southern British Columbia, Canada. The communities have access to the research, including the original anonymized data.

While the researcher did a clinical internship with one of the Moe the Mouse TM creators and has an affinity towards using the program in practice, he is not an employee of the B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society and is not receiving financial compensation through the Moe the Mouse TM program.

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Glossary

Words and labels used throughout this study include the term Aboriginal, liaison personnel, and the Moe the Mouse TM facilitator.

Aboriginal

This study uses the term Aboriginal to include people living either on or off their traditional lands from nations and communities that are included in the terms First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Participants in this research study represented a broad range of ancestries, both indigenous to Canada and not, and the children whom these participants worked with were equally diverse. For this study, those participants and the children who came from Aboriginal backgrounds represented both First Nations and Métis communities. None of the participants expressed that they had Inuit ancestry. Because the term First Nations technically does not indicate Métis or Inuit, the term Aboriginal is used by the participants and researcher throughout the study (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Council of Ontario Universities, 2013; Madill, 1981).

Liaison personnel

Connections between Aboriginal children with their traditional culture and language can present challenges, particularly outside of the community or off reserve. Some schools have Aboriginal liaison personnel on staff to connect students with traditional cultures in a variety of ways. Liaison personnel work to help students, educators, families, and other staff to understand and nurture the rich diversity of traditions and histories that the students bring to the classroom.

The term liaison can also refer to personnel from within a community who help bring a person into the community. This liaison person can help explain the etiquette and protocol for engaging with the community in a culturally safe way.

Moe the Mouse TM facilitator

The Moe the Mouse TM program can be used in groups or in one-on-one sessions where the facilitator, or person leading the session, brings Moe to life. In the community of Kenora, Ontario, the leader of the Moe the Mouse session is called an E.L.F. (Early Language Facilitator). For an early pilot project the person taking on the role of facilitator or session was referred to as a Mouse's T.A.L.E. (Traditional Aboriginal Language Experience). Currently on Vancouver Island, the term is Moe Speech-Language Assistant or champion (A. Gardner, personal communication, November 3, 2014). In practice, the children often call the session leader Moe's Mom or Auntie (or Uncle). This study uses the term facilitator for clarity.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the traditional territories of the Saanich, Songhees, Esquimalt, and Musqueam nations, on whose traditional territories this research was conducted.

HÍSW̱ḴE; Hay'sxw'qa si'em; huy ch q'u; thank you

I am grateful and honoured to have been welcomed to work on this project with the many enthusiastic participants who generously offered their time for this project and shared their stories and insights. Their partnership in this project reflects their belief in the value of offering the highest level of services to children and families.

Thank you to Corine Sagmeister for inviting me to take part in your project to explore ways to incorporate cultural teachings and values into preschool learning curricula. Without exaggeration, this research would not have happened without your extensive hard work.

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Thank you to Dr. Paola Colozzo for your patience and constant optimism during this project. I am grateful to have had you as a sounding board and reassuring voice.

Finally, thank you to Chris Kask for your patience while I pursue my future of working with people striving to overcome communication challenges.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the legacy of the elders who have guided us, to the caring community members and allies dedicating their lives to paving the way forward, and to the healthy and insightful new generation who will take us to places we have not imagined.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Early intervention and education

A child's preschool years are a time of rapid change and development, physically, intellectually, and emotionally (Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004; Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2006). Disrupted or disordered development at this early stage in life can affect a child's future outcomes. "Early investments in young children and their families can make a significant and long-term impact on children's academic success, and can reduce the need for more costly interventions later in life" (B.C. First Nations Early Childhood Development Council, 2009, p. 4. See also the Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004; Townsend & Konold, 2010). Early language development is closely linked with a child's overall development, and addressing potential communication difficulties through effective early intervention has the potential to improve language outcomes, boost literacy, and increase academic motivation (Ball, 2007; Ball, 2009; Findlay & Kohen, 2012; Townsend & Konold, 2010). Studies have shown, for example, that targeting skills in early phonological awareness can enhance literacy and academic success (Ball, 2007; Gillon, 2004; Roth, Troia, Worthington, & Handy, 2006; Townsend & Konold, 2010; Tunmer & Rohl, 1991).

Other cognitive, linguistic, and social skills developing in the preschool years include culturally attuned communicative interaction, relationship building, and the development of abstract thought and imagination. Education programs to support these other emerging skills also have a potential role to play in future academic success. For example, the "Granny and Grampa Connections Box TM" (Success By 6, 2013) offers strategies to practice intergenerational interactions. A program that targets social relationships is the Social Thinking Curriculum TM that teaches children the building blocks of social interaction (Garcia-Winner, 2007).

Early childhood is also a critical time to develop a strong and healthy identity founded on cultural and traditional heritage. However, many children from Aboriginal¹ backgrounds in Canada may not “enjoy access to education that is specifically designed for their needs, taught in their languages or that reflects their world views” (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009, p. 138; see also Adelson, 2005; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004; Jamieson & Isaac, 2007; MacMillan, et al., 2010; McIvor, 2005; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996;). Children from Aboriginal communities are often disproportionately labelled with language difficulties, possibly through over-diagnoses of linguistic variation as linguistic deficit or through using assessment materials designed for other cultural groups (Ball, 2009; Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Ball & Lewis, 2005). In terms of education, organizations such as the B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society (2003), the Canadian Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2009) and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2008) suggest that, for children from Aboriginal backgrounds, effective early education programs need clearly defined curricula that flexibly incorporate resource personnel, e.g. community elders, to transmit cultural values, practice local languages, and train visiting practitioners. These programs balance competitive, mainstream academic skills with cultural and community participation skills through a “school climate in which Aboriginal students feel welcomed and valued” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 5; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009; Gerlach, 2003).

A few such culturally relevant programs are currently available for preschool children from Aboriginal backgrounds. Some initiatives implemented in British Columbia include the

¹ Aboriginal refers to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Canadians who comprise more than 3% of the Canadian population (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). See glossary for more detail.

Aboriginal Infant Development Program and the Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program (Aboriginal Infant Development Program, 2013; Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program, 2015). Specific education programs like the "Granny and Grampa Connections Box" stimulate family discussions on cultural heritage (Success By 6, 2013). Another culturally relevant initiative is the Aboriginal Head Start Program that aims to connect children with culturally and socially relevant programs (Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia, 2012). However, programs and services like these are unequally distributed with many communities not having consistent access (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2012). The number of preschool children participating in Aboriginal specific preschool programs has risen, but more than 80% of Aboriginal children still “lacked access to early childhood programming specifically designed for their needs” (Ball, 2009; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 74). Ball (2009) further suggests, that “with increasing numbers of Indigenous children entering schools, new knowledge is needed to inform effective innovations that support their academic success while supporting Indigenous parents’ goals for their children with respect to learning Indigenous languages, English, and French” (p. 22). Such culturally safe programs are not about arbitrarily incorporating perceived cultural practices but are about practitioners developing an understanding of the history, empowerment, and values of the community members accessing services and about developing a child’s self-esteem through sharing in his or her culture (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2003; B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2007; Tunmer & Rohl, 1991).

Moe the Mouse TM is another program that aims to provide targeted early education within a culturally relevant framework. The next section of this chapter will present a brief overview of the Moe program. This will be followed by a section reviewing literature on styles

and theories of early education, including strengths-based education, the need for sensitivity to cultural variations, and the importance of relationships between parents, communities, and practitioners. A brief statement follows each of these three theories on how the Moe program might address these areas.

1.2 Moe the Mouse TM

Moe the Mouse TM was designed for the British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society to be a culturally responsive program that enhances phonological (speech sound) awareness and social language (pragmatically attuned use of language) training in a culturally relevant and uplifting environment for preschoolers from Aboriginal communities (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2005; 2006). Although presented in English, it is not necessarily tied to a particular language or alphabet and can be adapted for use in any language. For example, it can be incorporated in settings using traditional languages or immersion curricula.

Throughout the development of the program, community members and elders guided the project in choosing the animals, stories, and words to use (A. Gardner, personal communication, June 18, 2015). The structure and animals used in the program were initially based on coastal Nuu-chah-nulth cultures, but have been adapted to be culturally relevant for other communities, e.g., Algonquian communities in Central Canada. Over the course of several years, additional input came through consultation with the British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, where additional components to the program were added to address social or pragmatic language, empathy, responsibility, and family involvement.

The program centers on a small stuffed mouse, Moe, who helps a facilitator guide children through activities supporting speech, social interactions, and inclusive storytelling. A Moe the Mouse TM session often begins with children coaxing Moe out of his fabric house by

singing a song with actions. The music and actions help to include very young children and children with delays. Along with Moe, the program has at least 13 other stuffed animals who have an accompanying characteristic sound effect and gesture. The animals can be introduced using the names of the animals in English or in the local language of the setting. Children typically learn to call Moe's animal friends out of a box by saying the correct sound and making the gesture. For example, a child can call out the eagle's sound (“shshsh”) while stretching his or her arms out like wings. Tangible stuffed animals, colourful images, and gestures all help to cue a child to the various speech sounds. The program moves through a hierarchy of cueing for more challenging speech sounds. A child first learns to make the animal sounds in isolation without words. Eventually, the facilitator can direct the child to combine the animal sounds with meaningful words. For example, the child learns to say “sh” alone and then slowly says “sh” plus “oooo” to create the word “shoe.” Later, if the child has trouble with that speech sound during conversations and play, the facilitator can remind the child to use the “eagle sound.”

The program uses carefully chosen animals and activities to teach speech sounds, and also includes activities and materials to address other skills. For example, children can take Moe home for the night with a small booklet to document the experience. On this sleepover, the family is encouraged to work with the child to create a story of Moe’s visit that the child can share the next day. This stimulates storytelling skills, and vocabulary building. It also targets non-linguistic skills such as responsibility, empathy, and family involvement.

Children can also take turns being responsible for Moe during the day by carrying him in a pouch for time. This is supported by a video of a community elder discussing traditions around being responsible (A. Gardner, personal communication, June 18, 2015). Activities like these connect elders’ teachings, traditional values, and practical experience.

The Moe the Mouse TM program has a strong narrative component through incorporating storybooks and videos that describe traditional practices and concepts (MacKay, 2011). Children are encouraged to connect the animals or stories to their own experiences and to share their perspectives through interactive narratives. Through story-telling, children are exposed to both culturally specific narrative structures and to narrative skills related to future language and literacy. Incorporating traditional values and stories can be done in whatever language is used in the setting.

Through training, children learn that speech is made of discrete and manipulable sounds, i.e., they start to develop phonological awareness (through e.g., rhyming, alliteration, or word segmentation). Literacy arises from a combination of alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (Townsend & Konold, 2010). Moe the Mouse TM, while not intrinsically tied to a particular writing system, offers support for the development of phonological awareness. As mentioned above, the program specifically targets speech sounds and articulation by getting children to produce the sounds associated with each animal. These skills support the development of phonological awareness and can support future literacy instruction.

While the program can be used one-on-one, it is primarily a group program that encourages interaction and social exchange. Learning goals, such as targeting a particular speech sound, are addressed as a group without singling a child out. The group works together to learn and discuss the activities. Addressing goals as a group also provides children with opportunities to practice attention and listening comprehension as they watch peers learn and interact.

To date, there has been little research on Moe the Mouse TM. One study using the Moe the Mouse TM program alongside additional phonological awareness training showed better outcomes for the study's kindergarten students more than for Moe alone and more than the

school district's early literacy program without Moe, both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (MacKay, 2011). This supports the idea that the Moe program has a role to play in supporting the development of phonological awareness.

1.3 Early education approaches and Moe the Mouse TM

Ball and Lewis (2005) highlighted three broad areas to consider for service delivery to Aboriginal communities: (1) targeting education or therapy goals through a strengths focused perspective; (2) offering culturally relevant programs through recognizing the individual needs of the communities; and (3) supporting families' participation and goals with tools and strategies that they can use with children through building relationships as a team. These three concepts are repeated in Gerlach's emphasis on the importance of partnership with communities through a strengths-based approach, community integration, and trusting relationships (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2007). Gerlach and Zeidler presented these three ideas within the framework of respecting strengths, connecting with culturally relevant traditional supports, and building partnership relationships (2004). These three ideas provide a cyclical and overlapping foundation for supportive early education. The following sections review these three overlapping principles of effective, multi-cultural educations with a brief discussion on how Moe the Mouse TM relates to these concepts.

1.3.1 Strengths-based early education

Strengths-based approaches describe a person based on their social supports, potential growth, and compensatory capacities rather than on their deficits and labels (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012; Fenton, 2008). Ranking and labeling young children may not be seen as necessary or helpful and may run contrary to some families' values, perhaps even more so in indigenous contexts (Ball & Lewis, 2005). Instead, Ball and Lewis

suggest taking a role of partner within a community to reinforce “culturally based strengths and [build] language support capacity within the ... programs” (Ball & Lewis, 2005, p. 28). The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (2007) further notes that highlighting a child’s impairments may help with gaining funding or treatment, but can inadvertently ignore community and individual strengths: “The education and training of therapy professionals is ...[often] based on a western model of health and disability. This medical model has not typically supported a holistic approach in which a person’s emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs are satisfied” (Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004, p. 10). Likewise,

For both Aboriginal communities and the broader society, there should be a shift of focus of policy and program development from one that reacts mainly to learning deficits—the deficiency model—to one that recognizes, builds upon and celebrates strengths.

(Canadian Council on Learning, 2011, p. 37).

A Western medical model of early education is not necessarily in opposition to family or community goals, but may be only one component of holistic care that includes “spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical aspects of being” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 65; Law et al, 1998; Zhang & Bennett, 2001).

A holistic or strengths-based approach to learning considers a child’s learning and thinking styles, multiple intelligences or competencies, and social support and community strengths (Gardner, 2006; Stanciu, Orban, & Bocos, 2011). The Canadian Council on Learning 2011 report addressed the need for a holistic approach to learning that includes recognizing the importance of informal learning situations, extracurricular programs, and cultural learning in addition to formalized education (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012). Educators of diverse and inclusive classrooms are also encouraged to find

sensitive and flexible curricula to match the individualized strengths and needs of children in ways that the standardized models do not always address (Burchfield, 1996). The rationale is that children have different ways of knowing (“multiple intelligences”) and can approach learning and expression from a variety of angles, modalities, and explorations (Burchfield, 1996; Gardner, 1983).

Examples of inclusive, strengths-focused models of early education and preschool curricula are the Project Approach (Harte, 2010) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Katz & Chard, 1989). The Project Approach program targets learning goals through following a child’s individual interests or chosen topics within a collaborative and negotiated investigation of topics that are important to the students (Burchfield, 1996; Harte, 2010; Katz & Chard, 1989). The UDL, presented by the Council for Exceptional Children (Harte, 2010; Rose, 2001), relies on proactively including all of the individual needs of the entire group of children involved. It aims to meet a child’s individual learning styles and engage children by building on their own interests through providing multiple opportunities for children to interact with the learning goals (Harte, 2010; Rose, 2001). Both of these models engage the child through providing multiple methods and opportunities for children to explore learning goals. These child-centred learning models are reminiscent of the effective educational strategies used historically by traditional cultures and can be adapted in a strengths-based approach to therapy (Bandura, 1971; Bruyere, 1983; Lafrance & Collines, 2003; Morrissette, 1994).

Contextually effective, strengths-based therapies often use a child's social network in both individualized and collaborative approaches to education, with the perspective that an individual’s behaviours arise from reciprocal, complex interactions with the physical and social environment. Within a social learning framework, children learn from more skilled adult models,

but pay particular attention to attending and imitating peers who share variables such as age or gender (Bandura, 1971; Hartup & Lougee, 1975; Lloyd & Fernyhough, 1999; Lougee, Grueneich, & Hartup, 1977; Schunk, 1987).

Turning to Moe the Mouse TM, this program was designed to build on a child's strengths. For example, the program is typically conducted in a peer group, giving the support of an inclusive learning environment to those children needing special attention, who can learn new skills alongside their peers. Through incorporating multiple modalities for learning (sounds, gestures, actions, tangible animals, photos, and stories), this approach allows a child to learn through their personal strengths (whether auditory, visual or motor). The multiple modality approach, along with community and peer group inclusion, highlights the strengths and supports that each child brings to the program and builds on these strengths to help them develop.

1.3.2 Culturally relevant early education

In describing a strengths-based approach, the importance of the child's social network for learning was highlighted. Further to this principle, incorporating traditional teaching methods, cultural practices, and traditional languages may enhance a child's self-identity through validating and legitimizing a community's world-view and learning styles (Agbo, 2004). "Researchers have observed that many Aboriginal students prefer co-operative rather [than] competitive learning, and that many learn through imitation, observation, and trial and error rather than direct instruction," a sentiment that likely applies to children from many backgrounds (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 6). Research on culturally relevant educational programs has the potential to raise the capacity of facilitators involved in early language development and to set children on the path towards a strong sense of cultural identity, successful communication, and academic literacy (Ball, 2009).

Healthy community engagement grows from strong connections and a sense of meaningful belonging within the wider community (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012). “The better those connections [to family, school, and community], the tighter the webs of influence and the harder it is for youth to ‘fall through the cracks’” (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012, p. 7). Programs that include and celebrate ceremonies, heritage, and language affirm a child's identity and lead to better outcomes for academic success and speech-language (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011; Findlay & Kohen, 2012; Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004; Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012; Louis & Taylor, 2001).

Supporting a child’s cultural identity through traditional language learning is one major aspect of cultural relevance, although how this might be best accomplished is debated (Ball & Lewis, 2005). Agbo presents two contrastive views on incorporating traditional languages in schools (Agbo, 2004). In his study, some community elders viewed the need for literacy (in the dominant language) and numerical skills as paramount in schools; traditional language and values could be left to a child’s family instead of being taught in schools. “Children already speak the language in the community and need to acquire proficiency in English for them to survive outside the community” (Agbo, 2004, p. 14). However, other community elders in that study suggested that schools can teach important skills needed in the modern world while still incorporating traditional language. In addition, most community members discussed the role that the school can play in being a meeting place to transmit traditional learning through welcoming elders, holding cultural fairs, and sharing experiences. Schools could become “a means of cultural preservation” (Agbo, 2004, p. 16). While community members may vary on the amount of emphasis that traditional languages should have in schools, they “would like to see the core curriculum ... be one that will equip the students with the ability to think and speak, first as First

Nations children, and secondly, as mainstream Canadians” (Agbo, 2004, p. 19; Ball & Lewis, 2005; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Practitioners can work with families to help children balance between success in mainstream culture and a self-identified community loyalty, possibly through identifying successful role models or through strengthening community connections and relationships (Morrissette, 1994).

Overall, traditional language education is a key but threatened component of cultural identity and intergenerational continuity (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2007; Canadian Council on Learning, 2011; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2008). A strong identification with community and traditions connects the past, present, and future of a community and offers a shared identity that helps an individual face a changing world (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Loss of language and a subsequent loss of culture can threaten the unity and continuity of a community, but inversely, community-led efforts to preserve linguistic heritage are possibly associated with improved community outcomes, such as increased self-determination and possibly, lower youth suicide rates (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Eni & Phillips-Beck, 2011; Findlay & Kohen, 2012; Gunn, 2011; Hallet, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007).

Canadian governmental education boards, in consultation with Aboriginal governance, such as the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council and First Nations Education Steering Committee, now recognize traditional language and culturally relevant courses for academic credit, echoing the United Nations Permanent Forum advice for policies makers to work towards “raising the prestige of Indigenous languages by promoting the use of Indigenous languages in public administration and academic institutions” (Assembly of First Nations, 2015; Eni &

Phillips-Beck, 2011; First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2015; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2008, p. 2). Encouraging bilingualism may lead to better school performance for children, and the use of a community's traditional language alongside English or French can support bi-cultural children (Agbo, 2004; Cummins, 1979; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009; Grosjean, 2009; Landry, Allard, & Deveau, 2009; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2008). In addition to supporting bilingual programs, preservation and revitalization of Aboriginal languages increases the opportunities for research into the rich diversity of Canadian languages. This can reveal dialectal influences on Aboriginal children's English and help distinguish between language differences and language delays (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008).

For the Moe program, cultural sensitivity and relevance were intended to be core components. Community involvement is encouraged to bring local stories and ways of learning into the program. The program was designed for facilitators to actively connect with the child's larger social network and include community members and traditional activities. For example, facilitators are encouraged to seek out elders and community storytellers who can share knowledge and stories with the children.

In addition, the animals have been chosen to be local animals that children see and hear about in local stories and the program has begun to adapt kits with slightly different animals for other communities across Canada. Without being tied to a particular language or alphabet, the sounds associated with each of the animals allow the program to work in immersion environments where children can learn the names of the animals, sing the songs, or hear the stories in the local traditional language. The co-operative learning environment that Moe sessions create reflects the Canadian Council on Learning's description of cultural preferences

for imitation, observation, and trial-and-error (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). It also supports Ball's (2009) view that culturally relevant educational programs help facilitators guide children towards a strong sense of cultural identity through successful communication.

1.3.3 Relationships-based education

Further to cultural relevance in education, relationship-building and co-operation with families and communities is paramount for effective education programs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Law et al., 1998). This is particularly important when building a cross-cultural team through developing a trusting relationship within a context of historical misunderstandings or conflict:

Given the chronically subjugated status of Aboriginal peoples and the long history of 'epistemic violence'... directed against their traditional knowledge forms, it should come as no great surprise that they often show themselves to be mistrustful and less than welcoming of whatever appears next in the long train of government initiatives, all of which are alleged, in their turn, to be just what the doctor ordered.

(Chandler & Lalonde, 2008, p. 245).

Successful interactions within a community require practitioners to seek a trusting relationship over time through understanding common ground but also through appreciating differences between cultures (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2007; Hanna & Rodger, 2002).

The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society early education guide suggests that ideal therapy supports families and their strengths through connecting with existing or local service providers (Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004). The belief is that parental involvement in the classroom environment benefits children and "enhances the effectiveness of education for children with disabilities" (Harte, 2010, p. 21).

Active parental involvement in decision-making brings children closer to their teachers. Aboriginal parents who are engaged in their children's schools grow in confidence, which has a positive impact on their children's learning. Harmful stereotypes about Aboriginal students and families fall away as teachers collaborate with parents. Local Aboriginal communities grow in self-respect and acquire genuine political influence as they take greater responsibility for their schools.

(Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 78)

When considering shared traits across cultures, parents may share many of the same goals and values. This shared value system can be a starting point for creating a collaborative dialogue between families and professionals. For example, a survey of Aboriginal mothers from remote communities and non-Aboriginal mothers from an urban community showed both similarities and differences (Jonk, 2009). One similarity was views on family literacy activities like daily reading where rates are comparable between off-reserve First Nations families and the national average (Canadian Council on Learning, 2011). Thus, developing a healthy and reciprocal understanding of shared goals and values reminds practitioners of the self-determination potential inherent within communities.

While acknowledging shared traits is one side of building relationships, understanding differences is the other side of that foundation. Flexibility in supporting child development includes tempering preconceived agendas when establishing connections within a community and recognizing traditional knowledge (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). As noted by Gerlach and Zeidler (2004):

Therapists need to be aware, sensitive to and have knowledge of culture and cultural issues. Cultural differences influence families' participation in early intervention therapy.

Cultural competency prompts therapists to question their assumptions and to translate knowledge about culture into the therapy process (p. 21).

Building a relationship involves learning about the challenges communities have faced, such as the intergenerational impact of the residential school system on playful learning strategies, literacy support, or feelings of parental inadequacy (Ball & Lewis, 2005; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Gerlach, 2003; Neault et al., 2012). “Young parents who were not raised by their own parents, and older parents who experienced poor modelling or abuse from teachers and attendants at residential schools, may require specialized support to learn how to engage in spontaneous, nurturing language-mediated interchanges with their children” (Ball, 2009, p. 24; Moxley-Haegert & Serbin, 1983). In addition, understanding the individual needs of families from Aboriginal backgrounds and “greater attention to parental engagement should... [build] support among parents” and help practitioners approach service delivery from a flexible perspective (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 6).

No matter what the cultural background, children, families, and communities are not a homogeneous group. Individual families can have unique or varying goals, structures, and connections with their communities (Agbo, 2004; Hanna & Rodger, 2002; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Communities may also vary on issues such as the emphasis placed on active speaking versus quiet observation, or competitive learning versus co-operative learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; 2011; Chapman, 2000). Practitioners may incorrectly assume that observed variations from what they understand as typical child development and behaviour are deficits, whereas communities may regard their children with special needs as inherently worthy and playing an important role in the community (Gerlach, 2003; Groce, 1993;

Hoff, 2006; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, McCubbin, & Kaston, 1993; Zhang & Bennett, 2001).

Reciprocal collaboration with families and communities is necessary when implementing policies, developing programs, or determining procedures (Gerlach, 2003; Hanna & Rodger, 2002). Understanding the needs of the child, the family, and the community means listening to and understanding the wide spectrum of goals and values that may differ from a western family model and this can lead to programs that encourage more parental and community involvement (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2007; Ball, 2009; Ball & Lewis, 2005; Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004). Trusting that Aboriginal communities have the capacity to build on their own strengths is an important shift from a view that these communities need rescuing by external force (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012; Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). “When parents feel supported in their role, they tend to be more positive and responsive in their caregiving” (Ball & Elliot, 2005, p. 41). Encouraging competence addresses feelings “of inferiority and struggling as parents” (Ball & Elliot, 2005; Fiske, 1996; Morrisette, 1994, p. 384). Consulting with communities on goals and preferred methods establishes a relationship of respect that builds on community strengths, acknowledges that families are the experts on their children, and promotes a community’s self-determination (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012; Gerlach & Zeidler, 2004; Kowalsky, Verhoef, Wilfreda, & Rutherford, 1996).

For the Moe the Mouse TM program, establishing respectful and supportive relationships is an underlying principle (A. Gardner, personal communication, December 16, 2013). The sessions are safe places where parents and other community members can connect and learn from the facilitator and each other. Parents and other family members may actively participate or watch activities from the side. To achieve a family-centred approach to service delivery, the

facilitator can model strategies for effectively supporting a child's language development and work with the families on ways to practice these supportive strategies beyond the sessions (A. Gardner, personal communication, June 18, 2015; Moxley-Haegert & Serbin, 1983).

1.4 Researcher bias

1.4.1 Experience with Aboriginal Canada

An introduction of the researcher views and biases reflects the collaborative nature of this qualitative research where participants and researcher share subjective views through discussion. The following sections outline my biases and experiences to lay a foundation for the descriptive analysis of the focus group discussions used in this research.

As a researcher, I had originally viewed the First Nations of Canada as a single, homogeneous group. Working on this project with Aboriginal programs that served people living outside of reserves revealed the diversity among the many cultures in Canada. For example, one local urban Aboriginal Head Start program that I interacted with included children of First Nations and Métis background whose families came from all over Canada.

My previous exposure to Aboriginal issues included learning about the residential school system in secondary school, watching news broadcasts of government protests, and meeting people from various Aboriginal communities living in my home town. This very much reflects the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People's findings on the limited understanding most non-Aboriginal Canadians have of Aboriginal life and history (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). As an undergraduate student, my interests were in learning non-Canadian foreign languages, despite the University offering courses in language revitalization, Indigenous languages, and the linguistics of British Columbian language families (e.g., Wakashan, Salish, Dene).

Visiting museums, I had seen artwork and governmental displays describing the cultures and languages of the Aboriginal people, but the nuances and distinctions between the Nations was not often at the forefront of these displays. Growing up with the cultures of the Pacific Northwest, I paid little attention to these art forms. After returning to Canada from living abroad, my perspective had shifted on local Aboriginal cultures. I began to notice and cherish the rainforest climate with its unique plants and began to notice Form Line art, totem poles, and traditional music with fresh eyes and ears.

I also began to become aware of the cultural differences between members of various First Nations, and the subtle adjustments that people made to adapt to people from different communities. I was surprised by how little I knew about the names of and distinctions between the various nations in Canada. For example, the linguistic connections between the Musqueam of mainland British Columbia and the Cowichan of Vancouver Island are closer to each other than both are to the Saanich of southern Vancouver Island (Thom, 2009). The local Native Friendship Centre that I partnered with is not on reserve and caters to people from various Aboriginal communities throughout Canada and an increasing number of international immigrant families. The relaxed yet very professional atmosphere of the Centre struck me as a successful example of the way community facilities can serve more than just Aboriginal communities.

My first month of my first semester in the Master of Science (MSc) program in speech-language pathology (SLP) at the University of British Columbia was an overwhelming barrage of various languages, faculties, and cultures. One group at my international graduate residence had started a weekly discussion group on issues related to social justice around the world and I was invited to hear discussions on Aboriginal issues in Canada that were planned to correspond with the University's Truth and Reconciliation Programs (Enns, 2009; Miller, 2012; Truth and

Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These weekly dialogues included a screening of the four-part documentary, *8th Fire* (2012). This thought provoking and encouraging documentary presented the problems and the history of Canada's Aboriginal people as relevant for all Canadians today. Residents from various countries discussed the themes from this documentary from their varied perspectives. For example, one resident from India explained that governmental groups moving into Southern India are taking over land without respect to the Indigenous populations. The government reportedly justifies this process by saying they can just apologize for it in sixty years, like Australia and Canada have. I began to seek out more and more ways to gain exposure to Aboriginal Canadian cultures.

1.4.2 Experience with Moe the Mouse TM

From the onset, I had approached this research with the assumption that the Moe the Mouse TM program was a useful and positive tool to use in settings that served children from Aboriginal backgrounds. I had learned about Moe the Mouse TM in several contexts. As a Master of Science (MSc) student in speech-language pathology (SLP), the first exposure to the Moe the Mouse TM program was at the School of Audiology and Speech Sciences (SASS). The school has a course on service delivery to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities (AUDI 540) aimed to encourage students, many of them from non-Aboriginal heritage like myself, to personally connect with and learn about the diverse Aboriginal cultures across Canada.

I continued to pursue my interest in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues by seeking out a thesis that aimed both to immerse me in an issue relevant to a local community but also aimed to help a self-initiated project within the community. This thesis study arose from collaboration between a community coordinator with a local Native Friendship Centre and my thesis supervisor as a way to explore responses to the newly introduced Moe the MouseTM program. I

met with the community coordinator at a local Native Friendship Centre who wanted to study how various professions and support workers view the Moe the Mouse™ program; this spurred me to start a qualitative study on perspectives about Moe from infant development, health, preschool, and daycare workers.

To this end, I attended a 6-hour workshop at the Native Friendship Centre to gain additional familiarity with the Moe the Mouse™ program. Participants at the workshop were from a variety of professions such as early childhood education, infant development and speech-language pathology. The workshop encouraged people to incorporate Moe into a variety of preschool activities to support varied goals. The workshop allowed me to meet many of the people who would later become the participants in this thesis project. The workshop was a shared experience that set a foundation for the future focus group discussions I would have with the participants.

Shortly after this thesis study began (two months after the 6-hour workshop), all SLP students and Audiology students from the SASS received a 3.5-hour workshop on Moe the Mouse™ from one of the authors of the program. This was additional exposure to the Moe program for me and was a chance to meet one of the creators of the program.

Five months after the research project began, I had personal experience using Moe the Mouse™ in a clinical practicum. This was a way to creatively adapt the skills learned in the Moe the Mouse™ training and to reflect on my own hands-on experiences with the program in relation to this thesis project. Moe the Mouse was used daily with children from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds. While training with one of the authors of the Moe program, I discussed with her some of the issues facing the program, such as how to encourage child care

professionals to keep using the program and how the program's facilitator can build community relationships. These questions informed my questions and perspectives during the research study.

Inspired by the community's research interests in the Moe the Mouse TM program, this study began with the intention of listening to the reactions and thoughts of practitioners who use or support the Moe the Mouse TM program. A review of the literature on early education of preschoolers with Aboriginal heritage provided a general background for the study questions. Previous research on the Moe the Mouse TM program was very minimal. Discussions in this study explored thoughts on traditional teachings within curriculum and the roles that early childhood practitioners have in supporting language development. The eventual research questions for the study grew out of qualitative research methodology discussed below.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Qualitative research

To explore the thoughts and experiences of people using the Moe the Mouse TM program, an open-ended and exploratory research design seemed to be more useful than a confirmatory or deductive design (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Trochim, 2006). This involved approaching and presenting the participants' perspectives from two viewpoints. The first is that knowledge and perspectives can arise from within a particular context and setting. The other is that perspectives can be understood from within the subjective and unique perceptions of the people involved, including the researcher. Research is coloured by a researcher's bias, and a robust research design accounts for and incorporates this bias. Contextual and subjective findings from each participant and from the researcher can combine a collection of multiple, unique fragments into a single qualitative research framework.

An exploratory research can fit a variety of qualitative designs. For example, ethnographic research explores perspectives through the lens of a broad social community, phenomenological research through ordinary life perspectives, and narrative research through constructed storytelling (Creswell, 2003; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). “Qualitative research interviews aim to elicit participants' views of their lives, as portrayed in their stories, and so gain access to their experiences, feelings, and social worlds” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 727).

Qualitative research allows an exploration and comparison of what was expected prior to beginning of this study and what later emerged as points of interest. In contrast to quantitative research, the qualitative research question starts off broadly and becomes more focused as the data are analyzed (Fossey et al., 2002). It presents subjective perspectives as a constructed and shared venture discovered through discussion (Fossey et al., 2002). Group discussions are a strategy used in qualitative research as a way “to collect data from multiple individuals simultaneously” (Onquegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009, p. 2). Focus groups allow people with shared concern to build on each other’s ideas, and working as a group helps “aid recall and elaboration” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 727).

The validity of qualitative research using focus group discussions relies on how adequately the researcher’s observations reflect what participants discussed and how authentically the study reveals the participants’ thoughts. “The qualitative study of themes gives more weight to the voices and experiences of the individual consumer or patient than to the expert observer or medical researcher” (Luborsky, 1994, p. 190). Qualitative research aims to authentically portray participants’ perspectives, to fit the findings to the data and the context, to

reveal transparent data collection, and to show equality between researched and researcher (Creswell, 1998; Fossey et al., 2002).

Emerging themes or research findings are presented as credibly arising from participants' actual utterances through a presentation of quotations and descriptions of the contextual settings that participants spoke from (Creswell, 1998; Trochim, 2006). Explaining the context and possible assumptions can help others transfer the findings from this research to other settings (Trochim, 2006).

1.5.2 Research questions

For the current study, the specific research questions changed over time, but, as noted above, they broadly sought to explore the reflections of practitioners who use Moe the Mouse TM and their thoughts on the cultural relevance of the program. This study used focus group discussions as a way to explore and discover emergent themes through discussing the broad topic areas of “reactions to the Moe the Mouse TM program” or “traditional teachings in the classroom.” These two broad concepts led to formulation of the proposed research questions as:

(1) What are the perspectives of practitioners concerning the Moe the Mouse TM speech and language enhancement program in Aboriginal communities? (2) What are practitioners' perspectives on the Moe the Mouse TM speech and language enhancement program's cultural suitability for Aboriginal communities?

Chapter 2: Methods

The topics of the Moe the Mouse TM program, preschool language development, and traditional teachings were explored qualitatively with 16 people who work with children from Aboriginal backgrounds. A series of four focus groups provided an opportunity for practitioners from a variety of backgrounds to share and discuss experiences and thoughts on topics such as early education and cultural relevance in relation to the Moe the Mouse TM program. Further description of the participants and procedures are presented in the subsequent sections.

2.1 Participants

Throughout this study, the student researcher supervising the interview discussions is referred to as the *researcher*. For the sixteen people or informants who took the time to share the experience during the discussions, this study used the term *participant*. A community coordinator for this research project also participated in two of the interviews. She and two others who took part in the third focus group interview also shared in the fourth focus group interview.

2.1.1 Recruitment and participant backgrounds

The community coordinator for this project worked at a local Native Friendship Centre and recruited participants from a variety of programs on site, such as the infant development program and supported child development program. Preliminary meetings were scheduled with workers from a variety of programs to discuss taking part in a focus group discussion. The community coordinator from a local Native Friendship Centre gathered participants from among the other workers on site who had used or supported the use of Moe the Mouse TM in their work and/or who had attended a recent day-long workshop on the Moe program. Having a community coordinator identify potential participants who had shared or similar experiences with Moe the

Mouse TM resulted in homogeneity, a desirable method for this study that required a degree of uniformity in participant selection.

Working with a community coordinator from the Friendship Centre helped establish relationships between myself and participants. Not being from an Aboriginal community, I was concerned that participants would not be comfortable sharing their thoughts or in being part of university research. Having the support of someone who worked closely with many of the participants helped forge the relationships, and attending the day-long Moe the Mouse TM workshop with many of the participants helped build familiarity. For example, before the study began, I went with the community coordinator to one of the local reserves to be introduced and to share the scope of the project. The community coordinator, on behalf of the local Native Friendship Centre, contacted the reserve for permission to hold discussions with staff from the local daycare. We had a preliminary visit at the daycare to discuss protocols for conducting research at the centre. Workers at the daycare expressed interest in participating in the research and the staff signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study.² Team managers organized staff meetings at the Friendship Centre and invited workers from a variety of programs there to participate in recorded focus groups.

The first of three initial focus groups included a group of five participants; another group included six participants; and a third session was intended to be a focus group but became a one-on-one interview due to varied circumstances on site.

Participants (self-identified as being of Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal ancestry) came from a variety of backgrounds, including a local Native Friendship Centre and Aboriginal

² All participants were given a letter outlining the project and all participants signed a consent form to participate in the project. The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Board (BREB) reviewed and approved this study and the accompanying consent documentation.

communities in southern British Columbia. The Friendship Centre offers community support services to Aboriginal people living in urban communities, for the First Nations communities nearby, and to Aboriginal people from across Canada. The Centre provides support for employment services, social programs, and child and youth programs. Specific programs for preschool children include the Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP), Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program (ASCDP), and the Aboriginal Early Education and Nutrition Program (AEENP). The preschool programs have recently had increasing enrolment of children from non-Aboriginal backgrounds where English is not the first language. The 16 participants thus came from:

- Aboriginal infant development programs (AIDP)
- Aboriginal early education and nutrition programs (AEENP)
- Aboriginal parenting (AP)
- Aboriginal supported child development programs (ASCDP)
- Community action program for children (CAPC)
- Early childhood education (ECE)
- Speech-language pathology (SLP)

To maintain anonymity throughout this study, participants were not simultaneously described by their profession, location, or ethnicity when discussing quotes or results.

Most of the people participating in the focus groups had attended a one-day Moe the Mouse TM workshop together with me and all of the participants had either used Moe in practice as a facilitator or supported the program's use in their own work. The workshop on Moe the Mouse TM encouraged participants to explore and discuss ways to incorporate community elders and families, as well as learn ways to support developing speech sounds, vocabulary, social-

pragmatic language, responsibility, and cultural identity. The participants had been using Moe the Mouse TM for no more than a month at the time of the first three discussion groups. They varied in experiences with parenting, working with Aboriginal communities, and supporting childhood development.

A final focus group was held again at the Friendship Centre with three of the same people from a previous group and four new participants who worked with infants and preschoolers. The participants had worked with Moe the Mouse TM for nearly half a year at the time of this last focus group and were transitioning to having a new facilitator take over the program. Details on the focus group procedures are provided in the next section.

2.2 Data collection

Semi-structured discussions made up the bulk of the data collected for this study. Four focus group interviews were conducted and audio-recorded between January and July 2014. The first three focus groups took place shortly after a Moe the Mouse TM workshop at a Native Friendship Centre. The final focus group took place nearly six months after the workshop.

In the focus groups, open-ended questions and guiding interview questions (Appendix A) guided the conversations around topics of the Moe the Mouse TM program, preschool language development, traditional culture, and cultural identity. The researcher allowed the discussions to develop naturally but gently directed the group to discuss the research topics by following an interview guide (Appendix A). These questions addressed practitioners' roles in language development, the role of culture in the classroom, and specific questions about the Moe the Mouse TM program. The participants were encouraged to discuss topics in their own way with limited guiding by the interviewer and were encouraged to elaborate on topics they brought up. These questions were introduced flexibly and not always in the same order, depending on the

natural flow of the interviews. The interviewer asked guiding questions when the topic seemed to fit into the flow of the conversation.

2.3 Data analysis

2.3.1 Transcription and coding

The focus group discussions were audio-recorded³ and the digital recordings of responses were coded for anonymity. These transcripts of the recorded discussions were organized with line numbers and participant codes. Rather than relying too heavily on the written transcripts when interpreting utterance data, I attempted to continue to refer back to the audio-recording as a way to stay closer to the participants' intended meanings (Luborsky, 1994).

The transcripts were written in plain English with markers for pauses, descriptions of emotional responses, and occasional notations of non-verbal communication. Speakers used a variety of filler-words (e.g., "um) and disfluencies (e.g., false starts). These natural disfluencies, when written in a transcript, can be disconcerting or discouraging for the speaker reading the transcript. The quotations selected for use in the thesis used ellipses (. . .) to smooth out the disfluencies and maintain the intended message. For coding, a flexible applied thematic analysis approach was used.

The four transcripts were each reviewed twice to find key word or utterance codes. This allowed a comparison between the researcher's own interpretations from two passes. The two summary passes allowed comparison of the number of utterances deemed important. The two comparisons were similar (86% agreement); where the number of utterances differed, the extra entries were highlighted on the utterance list.

³ A Sony ® IC UX533 voice recorder was used.

A thematic analysis of the data meant that utterances were constantly compared with other utterances to discover themes of importance, repetition, or salience. These were overt expressions of personal and cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs, marked in some way as important, such as through explicit phrases such as “what I think is important is...” or if they strongly affected the course of the following discussions (Luborsky, 1994). Utterances were assigned specific codes based on a preliminary interpretation of the intended meaning. Once the researcher gained familiarity with all of the participants’ responses, these utterances and their codes were grouped and re-grouped to search for recurring abstract categories that would be authentic representations of participants’ main themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Themes were iteratively reviewed and renamed into comprehensive groupings. The cyclical analysis of the interview recordings meant that categories and groupings evolved. Sorting the utterances into groups revealed new levels of connections and relationships between the data. Some categories grew to include large numbers of utterances.

Broad topics within the focus group discussions provided a framework to encourage shared exploration of themes important to the participants. Some of the broader topics could have become themes or abstract concepts of importance. In addition, a theme might arise that crossed over multiple topics or various aspects of the research question.

2.3.2 Initial analysis

In this qualitative research, themes were expected to evolve and influence each other over the course of the project. The first analysis of the data occurred during the interview discussions. The researcher periodically consulted the list of interview guide questions during the interviews, but let the conversation flow as naturally as possible (Appendix A). At times, the researcher asked for clarification or confirmation as a way of early analysis. Following the advice of the

thesis committee, the researcher approached the focus groups with the intention of saying as little as possible in order to allow participants to share, and attempted to limit the amount of influence on the responses by making questions as open as possible.

The method of assigning responses to categories or themes was an evolving process that combined the researcher's personal experiences and biases with the participants' narrative responses. This process included thinking of possible preliminary themes that emerged during the group discussions. The interpretations of the intended meanings grew out of experiences and assumptions that the participants and researcher shared. As the interview conversations developed, the research question and researcher's bias evolved.

2.3.3 Comment sorting

The transcribed responses were coded into brief summaries. To find themes, Luborsky (1994) stated that the researcher must summarize a participant's phrase or utterance with a short word or phrase. After the utterance summaries were complete, each of the phrases or summaries that were collected as data were sorted and compared with other quotes to compare or contrast the interpretations. The meanings assigned to each phrase continually adjusted as the data were sorted. Research bias, impossible to eliminate, remained transparent and incorporated throughout the project through ongoing reflection and memo-ing (Carlson, 2010; Creswell, 1998). In addition, the transcripts were sifted for negative examples – utterances that refuted interpretations or summaries.

The summaries were grouped into broad categories. These categories reflected the concepts that the participants and researcher addressed through their conversations. While many of the emergent themes reflected the overt topics brought through the guiding interview questions, others were brought in and cultivated by the participants themselves.

Groupings of abstract constructs evolved into patterned themes. The groupings increased to encompass increasingly greater numbers of key phrase summaries. Responses were checked for number of responses from each participant and for those that occurred frequently both from an individual participant and across participants. This helped temper situations where one participant repeatedly discussed an issue that no other participant did and helped emphasize where one participant replied sparingly but emphatically. Common or repeated points of interest, along with points that participants highlighted themselves as important began to solidify into common thematic categories. As the participants' responses were sifted, checked, and rechecked; emerging themes changed or evolved. Tracking and explaining these changes over time was aimed at raising the level of dependability of the research findings (Trochim, 2006).

These codes of "important moments" began to lump together into broader categories for analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Luborsky, 1994). These categories of coded abstract concepts were termed "themes." Using the broad discussion topics to discover these emergent themes led to an exploration and subsequent presentation of the participants' perspectives (Luborsky, 1994). These emergent themes illuminate the broad research questions and topics. A discussion topic may ultimately become a theme with participants, or a theme may cross many discussion topics. It is through a repeated and cyclical grouping and regrouping of codes and groupings of codes that a theme emerges. This sifting or "sampling in qualitative research continues until themes emerging from the research are fully developed ... and further sampling is redundant" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 726). Once the research question solidifies from the data, the emerging themes can then be presented alongside the researcher's assumptions and biases, as well as established literature on the topics (Fossey et al., 2002).

I had entered the discussions with broad topic categories in mind and participants responded to those topics both individually and collectively. Broadly, the discussions addressed the two topics of participants' reactions to Moe the Mouse TM and their thoughts on cultural relevance. However, some themes arose from the discussions that were not otherwise addressed in the broader topics. The emergent themes of supporting identity and team building revealed two key points of interest to the participants.

2.3.1 Partner review

The final emergent themes and results of the analysis were thoroughly mixed into a unified narrative. Rather than attempt to confirm or speak on behalf of participants, the community coordinator for this project reviewed the emergent themes and quotations to provide a critical perspective on the results and conclusions. Commenting on specific quotes and their relation to particular participants was not deemed feasible or illustrative. Instead, this review confirmed whether the findings were respectful, useful, and representative.

Chapter 3: Results

The following section presents the emergent themes that arose from an iterative, or cyclical, analysis of participant responses (Fossey et al., 2002). A review of the interview settings and the interactions is followed by representative quotes that present an overview of the findings. This is followed by a discussion concerning the meaning or importance of these quotations and how they relate to the themes presented.

I began the project with the expectation that discussions would revolve around the effectiveness of the Moe the Mouse TM program. However, the focus groups were held only shortly after Moe the Mouse TM was introduced. Many of the participants had not had enough experience with the program to comment on its role in phonological awareness and early literacy. Most of the participants discussed the impact that Moe had on cultural identity and community relationships. However, the participants primarily used the topic of the Moe the Mouse TM program to share about the unique challenges faced by people offering services to Aboriginal communities through the themes of supporting a child's self-identity and creating a supportive team within the community, the two overarching themes. These are presented below with various supporting sub-themes.

3.1 Identity support: “That’s part of who they are”

For the first theme, identity support, participants discussed the importance of supporting a child's developing language while helping the child build a strong sense of cultural identity that would support them for school and beyond. Supporting a child's developing identity can involve many factors.

The idea of linking language support with identity support was shared by many participants. They expressed that it was important to use culturally relevant materials to create a supportive setting. “The more we can incorporate any kind of Native cultural aspects into teaching Native or Aboriginal kids, the better, because they can be more self-identified” (FG1, line 410). With such a short time to prepare children to enter school, participants felt a pressing need to build up the children’s self-identity. “Our goal here is to ... make sure these kids walk in with healthy self-esteem to start with, because too soon after they get into school it gets beaten down” (FG1, line 249). “Getting them involved with their culture or finding out what their culture is, and really just helping them ... to feel like everybody else, to feel equal, well rounded” (FG3, line 1107).

Moe can be used to incorporate whatever language the children in the group speak. A number of communities and languages, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, were represented at the local Native Friendship Centre. One participant listed a number of the languages spoken within the preschool and explained that, “we try to incorporate some of those words into the day... that's part of who they are” (FG1, line 449). This inclusive environment was summed up by one participant: “They all want to come because they know that... how they are is not going to be a difference... it's not going to matter that they don't speak hardly any English” (FG4, line 917). One participant remembered that a “little girl last year was encouraging it and [saying] ‘Fantastic... it doesn't matter that... English isn't your first [language]... you have this rich culture from your parents somewhere’” (FG4, line 909). Supporting a child’s home or community language helps children know that “we all come maybe from different places but we can all be proud of who we are and where we come from... to help them build on who they are” (FG1, line 454).

All of the participants were sensitive to creating safe environments to support the traditional cultures of their children in any of their programs, including Moe the Mouse TM. “We're all trying to figure out how we can increase that connection [of]... the children to their cultures” (FG3, line 196). “I like that we use a lot of culturally competent tools... and often those kind of things start a conversation” (FG3, line 259). Participants mentioned that they use the Moe the Mouse TM program alongside a variety of books and curriculum ideas, such as the Seeds of Empathy TM program, Granny and Grampa Connections Box TM, and others (Gordon, 1996; Success By 6, 2013; Wood & Wood, 2002). “It's just meant to help them talk about and learn and explore their own cultures” (FG3, line 141).

Moe the Mouse TM can provide some support to teaching and use of traditional Aboriginal languages with animals and activities reflective of the local community. When discussing culturally relevant material, participants linked the use of local animals in the Moe kit to traditional stories about animals, one participant mentioned that “it is local animals, too, as well, which is big I think” (FG1, line 432). Another participant commented that “older people talk about the animal kingdom, how that supports our, our way of life and our connection to the land and the animals, the environment; it teaches about support and spirituality” (FG4, line 546).

Some of the participants explained that different sites have people who can teach traditional languages. In one setting “the staff... say the traditional name for [the animal] and all the kids do” (FG4, line 338). The importance of offering a place outside of the home where children hear traditional languages and hear about traditional culture was important to one participant who explained that children “speak it at home, but they don't hear it outside of the home and so kids get self-conscious at a really young age” (FG1, line 445).

A strong sense of belonging and cultural identity was seen as helping prepare children to succeed in mainstream schools. “I’m thinking and wanting to turn my gaze to those Aboriginal kids who have succeeded... I would love to think now, how and why were those kids considered successful” (FG3, line 1043). “When you enter into public school it’s all pushed aside, you don’t learn about Native stuff” (FG1, line 414). “A good sense of belonging outside of the school will make them strong enough to be in the school and be different” (FG3, line 1065).

This need to create a strong cultural identity also extended to beyond the school years. Participants worked hard on “not letting [children] fall through the cracks, feeling like an individual, like they’re worth something, having self-worth” (FG3, line 1122). One participant commented that “they... don’t have a sense of who the hell they are because they’ve never had... a community to call their home... that’s when sometimes the mainstream system can suck them up and spit them back out” (FG3, line 1093). This linked this need for cultural identity to future health: “if you have that kind of base of identity within your culture and within your family setting... When kids run into trouble is when they don’t have that” (FG3, line 1090).

Two sub-themes brought up by the participants concerning the development of self-image and identity involved effectively connecting with children through engaging and playful activities and through flexibly and inclusively adapting the programs to support any age-group, language, or culture. The following sections review participants’ comments on supporting a child’s developing self-image through these sub-themes of playful engagement and inclusive flexibility.

3.1.1 Playful engagement: “They really don’t make a peep. Until Moe comes out”

One recurring sub-theme that participants brought up was the importance of engaging children when supporting their developing identity. Enjoyable programs can support the developing cultural identity. One participant remembered that during one Moe session the children “were telling us, ‘Oh, we used paddles in canoes... That's what happened on Tribal Journeys.’ And like, they were all pretty knowledgeable” (FG4, line 441). As children engaged and shared their experiences of participating in community events like Tribal Journeys, they were making sense of their role in the community and cultivating a sense of cultural identity.

Motivating children to explore curricula for language development and cultural traditions grows from giving children a voice to express themselves and engaging them through appealing activities. One person commented that “we know that kids engage when they're having fun, so we know that that's going to have an impact. And they do have fun!” (FG3, line 286). Moe the Mouse TM activities were reported to engage the children and provide opportunities to work on therapy goals through play without the children realizing it was work. “It's done in such a subtle way they don't know that you're pointing out that they can't say something” (FG1, line 78). “Kids are pretty receptive to it. It's... animated and there's songs;... at the same time it's teaching them” (FG1 line 14). “It made it fun and they... don't know the purpose of it” (FG1, line 36). The children learned the program quickly and one participant noted that “if you don't do the routine, the kids will notice” (FG4, line 174).

Many of the participants noted that children often responded better when a Moe facilitator asked children to do something using Moe, rather than when the adult asked himself or herself. For example, “the kids will always listen to Moe versus an adult... if Moe asks them to do something they'll do it, whereas if I ask them to do something they won't” (FG4, line 27).

The enthusiasm that children showed with Moe and the other animals in the program extended to children who were typically quiet or shy. “You get children who are very shy around strangers... and they really don't make a peep, until Moe comes out” (FG3, line 428). “They'll say their names, they'll talk, they'll sing the songs, talk to Moe and all of that... because it brings out the shy kids” (FG4, line 91). One participant felt that the special connection that children had with Moe might allow the program to be used in addressing a variety of communication needs. “He can almost be like a guide and a counsellor for these kids... because I mean they tell him things, right?” (FG4, line 577).

Many participants commented how delays in early language acquisition lead to increased frustration as children struggle to connect through language. “It's important for kids to be able to speak, to communicate so they're not frustrated” (FG1, line 16). “There's a lot of screaming that goes on, when you don't have speech... That's frustrating” (FG1, line 163). Addressing these language needs early with an effective and engaging program was something participants felt was important. They endeavored to “offer the children the best language skills that they can get and as early in life as possible” (FG2, line 207).

Participants suggested using the Moe program to address specific needs in a playful, engaging way. For example, visiting speech-language pathologists (SLP) could suggest that Moe the Mouse TM facilitators use specific animals and their sounds to target specific goals that children could work on throughout the day with Moe. “[The SLP] would be like, ‘This kid needs to work on this sound’” (FG4, line 688). Children “would get whatever the sound the animal made... And so they would be having to do that sound over and over and over” (FG4 line 689). The children would work with that particular animal and sound throughout the day. For example,

one child would practice the sounds “as they're sitting around, eating their snacks or something” (FG4, line 718).

The typical Moe the Mouse TM routine of calling on the various animals using different sounds directly targets speech sounds and articulation. However, the children’s enthusiastic responses and the activities during Moe sessions bring out other aspects of language, like creative narratives and opportunities to practice social (pragmatic) language. “Moe brings a certain creativity, because I've heard some... elaborate stories... on those animals and where they're going and where they've come [from]” (FG3, line 463). “It's not only speech related... it's shared meaning.. it's attachment” (FG3, line 569). “It's taught a lot of empathy, too, because they, at least downstairs, they help out the new kids” (FG4, line 692). The children bonded over learning the program and they continued to work together through various activities done with the Moe the Mouse TM program. One participant noted “it was really neat to see how much they cooperated and how much they enjoyed it” (FG1, line 39). These opportunities may lay the groundwork for discovering empathy and co-operation, and shape the children’s identity.

3.1.2 Inclusive flexibility: “The whole thing about Moe is it's an indirect program”

A second sub-theme related to supporting a child’s identity was in approaching education programs or curricula with inclusive flexibility. With the Moe the Mouse TM program, targeting a specific sound was easily done within an inclusive setting that does not isolate or single out a child. Participants expressed how important it is to avoid singling children out in preschool groups “because kids can develop complexes really fast and they become shy and just become introverted” (FG1, line 209). Building on a child’s strengths in a supportive and inclusive environment may gently shape a child’s developing sense of confidence and abilities. To support a healthy self-image and identity, the Moe program allows for group activities that present

opportunities for education and learning “without singling out children who might specifically have challenges, because it's so inclusive of everybody” (FG3, line 88). “It includes everybody, it doesn't segregate the children out and kind of identify them and say: You're the one with the speech problem” (FG1, line 93).

One participant noted that offering speech or language practice in an inclusive way was easy with the Moe the Mouse TM program and that it was “a way for teachers to learn other ways to teach with being inclusive and interacting with all the kids” (FG1, line 206). Inclusive groups also allow for children to watch each other learn. One participant mentioned how children learn better from peer models who are only slightly more advanced: “The kids want to do what the other kids are doing... Even [if] they don't want to do what the adults are doing, they want to do what their peers are doing” (FG4, line 1098).

Supporting a child's developing identity can require materials that are flexible enough to meet the varied needs of community groups and home visits. The wide variety of families and wide range of settings meant that participants had to be creative and flexible, adapting programs like Moe to meet their needs. “I do books and creatives when I go out, so, I can see Moe being my little friend that I bring” (FG4, line 570). Many of the participants worked primarily through home and community visits. Some of these visits required travel to more remote areas and lightweight or adaptable materials were an asset. Adaptable materials like the Moe program TM were important, because the participants worked with groups of varying ages and attention spans. “You can adapt that program to all ages. It can be more sophisticated for the... 4, 5, 6 year olds and, and then you can adapt it for the younger set, the 2, 3 year olds” (FG3, line 564).

Supporting a child's cultural identity may require practitioners to be flexible in adapting programs or agendas to a community's needs or schedule. Participants noted the importance of

adapting to the needs and goals of the families and communities they visit, especially when there was a cultural difference between facilitator and community. “Children will be away for certain amounts of time and maybe not be in the Centre” (FG2, line 256). “We... are able to kind of take that into account that maybe we won't see that child, really two or three months if they have a family member in the Big House” (FG3, line 270). Participants discussed a need for flexibility for the variable needs of individual families. “[The professionals don't always] say something... that the family can relate to or... is necessary for them to get something out of the interaction” (FG3, line 380). Other participants also discussed the need for an adaptive approach to assessment and treatment as a way to flexibly support the child’s specific needs. “You need to get into their space, their preschool, their home, and find out how they're communicating and how they're relating to the world” (FG3, line 367). Moe the Mouse TM met the needs of one of the facilitators to find a natural way to conduct an assessment and offer interventions. “Sometimes the setting can be a bit clinical and it's just really an inorganic way to do things... [Moe] just seems like a really natural way of working on those things” (FG3, line 84). According to another participant, the Moe program’s approach met the need for flexibility: “I think the whole thing about Moe is it's an indirect program, it's not ‘Come in. I've got this agenda, tell me what the problem is, this is how you're going to fix it, I want you to do this and this and this’” (FG3, line 423).

3.2 Building the team: “We've all contributed to the curriculum”

In addition to building up a child’s identity with engaging, inclusive, and culturally flexible programs, participants discussed the vital role of a strong, supportive team. A child’s team was described as including professionals, specialists, elders, community members, and family. A visiting facilitator was seen as someone who collaborates with teachers and specialists

to develop individualized and effective supports. Elders and other community members were seen to play an important role in connecting curriculum to practical cultural learning. Parents were also described as the key members of the child's team, with a successful program working to support and encourage the parents' strengths and role. The following sections outline participants' comments on the Moe the Mouse TM facilitator, elders, non-Aboriginal helpers, and family. Their comments outline the important role these members play in a child's development.

3.2.1 Moe the Mouse TM facilitator: "We go in and mentor people to use it."

The Moe facilitator is someone who brings Moe to the child's team. One participant described two possible options for training facilitators. Practitioners from a variety of professions can take training on using Moe the Mouse TM, becoming Moe facilitators when taking the program to their settings. A second option is to have a trained Moe facilitator travel from site to site running a Moe the Mouse TM session across many locations, returning regularly. One participant had seen it used both ways and commented "there's two different approaches to it, right? Just have people do it in their own setting or you have somebody come in. And then there's definitely value in both" (FG4, line 144).

From a policy perspective, raising the capacity of local workers and communities to use Moe on their own seemed an efficient use of resources. One person recalled that in their experiences with Moe, they would "go in and mentor people to use it, but then eventually fade out and have people pick it up... and be able to do it on their own" (FG4, line 136).

A contrasting method is to have a facilitator periodically visit, bringing fresh energy and consistency into each centre. Participants explained how "it gets the kids excited that somebody else is coming in to do it. It's not their teacher that they see all the time" (FG4, line 722). This additional member of the child's team brings new energy to a session. Collaboration between

visiting facilitators, site staff, and program directors has the potential to ensure the Moe program adapts to each site's needs and goals. This was reflected in one participant's comment on how everyone involved in the team helped shape the Moe the Mouse TM program, saying "we've all contributed to the curriculum" (FG4, line 874). Instead of taking the Moe facilitator's visit as an opportunity for a break, site staff were drawn in to the Moe session. One participant commented, "I like how you pull in those teachers sometimes, that just think of you as just going in to replace their time and they're kind of doing something else" (FG4, line 1115). Other professionals or teachers from various sites learn from watching facilitators use the program, too. One participant complimented another participant who had been facilitating a Moe session, saying that the facilitator "developed a relationship with the teacher[s] ...[and] often [told] them what you were going to do... you inform[ed] them what you're doing" (FG4, line 1056). The visiting facilitator can help site staff with tips on using Moe throughout the day and can empathize with uncertainty with using the program, like remembering all of the correct animal sounds. One facilitator mentioned, "when I started I just took a little cheat sheet" (FG4, line 468). This cheat sheet could be passed around for other staff to use. "The staff down here, they asked for a... copy of the sounds... so that they could start using them... and they did for a while" (FG4, line 709). Once everyone was comfortable with the animal sounds, "there's not really...a bad way to do Moe... You definitely have to get his sounds right, but... there's no right way of doing it or wrong way of doing it" (FG4, line 580).

A visiting facilitator also provides a consistent face as children move from setting to setting, or even home to home. "We're able to go to the next foster home and be like, 'well actually, this... is the child's history, this is how we've been dealing with it, this is ... their

culture, their traditions” (FG3, line 1130). “We would do Moe in the house and then they’ll see it at [School]... so that helps the transition to school” (FG4, line 1001).

Having a competent and collaborative visiting facilitator was something all of the participants agreed on. One participant mentioned that it helped the program to “really grow like a plant. So I would recommend always having that person go out and do it” (FG4, line 133).

3.2.2 Non-Aboriginal helpers: “Oh, she’s doing our thing”

A few of the participants mentioned personal challenges facing non-Aboriginal workers in building relationships and supportive teams. One challenge was not understanding cultural protocols or having the time needed to know community members. “I feel my own nervousness about not knowing the culture and the, the proper etiquette. I would feel like I would like to shadow someone for a while and see how... interactions took place” (FG2, line 168).

While this sentiment was echoed by a few of the non-Aboriginal participants, one participant explained that a non-Aboriginal visitor has an important role to play as an “ally” or helper:

I hope that when I go to other functions... and I learn the cultural competencies and the protocols about acknowledging... the elders and certain things that are done the right way, then those children see, “Oh, [the visitor] is our helper and she’s doing those things.” That is how I show my support to that child, in terms of their culture.
(FG3, line 1070)

Through allowing children to discover their cultural role as a host and teacher to a guest, a child learns cultural pride, again strengthening their sense of belonging and identity. As mentioned in the previous section on flexibly accommodating a program to meet the individual

needs of a community, this supportive role of a non-Aboriginal ally is closely tied with supporting a child's identity.

3.2.3 Welcoming elders: “It... keeps the balance of everything”

Community elders were seen to be another vital part of the child's team, with the culturally sensitive nature of the Moe the Mouse TM program welcoming the support of visiting elders. Their visits were seen as valuable learning opportunities for the children. One person mentioned, “We really try to instill that in the children. That respect [for] the elders...what that looks like” (FG1, line 319). Participants spoke repeatedly of the importance of learning through doing and through examples and connected this thought to how having elders around created opportunities for real-life learning that was difficult to teach otherwise. This was the case with learning how to act around elders where one participant said that the children “are watching a lot more than what they are actually even talking about” (FG1, line 340). Another person mentioned how teaching the subtleties of social behaviour is challenging and requires active modelling. “It's more... important that [the children are] around your culture and your behaviour and your attitude and how you view the world without saying, ‘This is how I view the world’” (FG1, line 359).

One participant hoped to find new ways of connecting visiting elders with the Moe kit animals:

A lot of elders do have those stories for story time... they had each of the individual animals and all of them had a story behind them... If we've got the person facilitating the Moe the Mouse and then an elder to possibly tell a story or two about some of the animals that are present... that could be a way to link the two. (FG1, line 461)

For many participants, settings where elders visit regularly are a new and welcome experience. Even if a visiting elder is present for a short time or for a meal, participants recognized the contribution that visit had on teaching the children who observe. “It does teach patience. That's one of the hugest ones. It's probably one of the hardest attributes to develop over, over your life for most people... When an elder comes in you just slow down and relax, you ask them what they need” (FG1, line 345). “It's just those little things that will teach them that this is how we treat our elders” (FG1, line 335).

All the participants agree that visiting elders enhanced the program for the children, but one person mentioned that for the elders, “it makes them feel valued and then they enjoy coming here and [it] just kind of keeps the balance of everything” (FG1, line 398).

3.2.4 Parental encouragement: “Help bring those teachings back”

Participants noted that a child’s development team is rooted in the supportive relationships between the team members, with parents playing the key role in the child’s education. “We have the privilege of being able to relationship build with a lot of families... I think that's a very, I guess, Aboriginal way of being, to be able to take the time, relationship build and get to know the family” (FG3, line 218). One participant said that “you have to trust the process... the process being that parents do know their kids... and they do have an idea” (FG3, line 442). A participant commented that most parents want “to do a good job raising their children” (FG1, line 237) and want to “do things in the best interest of [the] children” (FG3, line 133).

Moe sessions became safe places for parents to discover new ways of interaction. “It's kind of like just a safe atmosphere where they can just do stuff and test thing out with their kids, and try different things” (FG1, line 184). This supportive team can also include younger siblings

or other family members. “It can be with the siblings as well, so they can also participate when they're younger” (FG4, line 617). In many settings, parents may be sitting to the side with younger siblings, and “even though they're not participating, they're still at least, somewhat absorbing it” (FG3, line 542). One participant in this study explained that the preschool environment can be “completely inviting to parents to be able to come and sit down and join [them] and watch” (FG2, line 196). The interactive nature of the Moe program can draw people in from the side lines. One facilitator mentioned, “When I bring out Moe and use Moe with the group of parents all of a sudden everybody's saying the sound. Even the adults!” (FG3, line 102).

A concern for several of the participants was that some parents may not realize the importance of playful learning. “Some people are afraid to play with their kids” (FG1, line 293). One participant said that Moe the Mouse TM “seems like a really gentle way of introducing speech sounds with the play element and the sort of imaginary element which I really appreciate” (FG3, line 81). Building a trusting relationship with parents during Moe sessions allowed for modelling opportunities for the ways play supports language. One facilitator explained that she “tried to get everyone involved, too, so everyone can be silly together... If everyone's silly then you don't feel like anyone's watching you be silly” (FG4, line 492).

A related concern specific to Aboriginal communities was that historical trauma had taken away opportunities for parents to see playful learning modelled. “A lot of Aboriginal people weren't raised in their own culture...no traditional teachings” (FG1, line 239). Settings where parents are welcomed to watch or participate in programs provides opportunities for them to see and practice different ways of supportive parenting, addressing a historical loss of intergenerational support for parents.

A lot of the people from one generation to the next - there's a break in that kind of learning. And that's something that has been done historically with our culture where the grandparents did the hands-on... teach[ing] and with the upbringing of the children... in partnership with the parents...Something like this is going to... reintroduce that part of the culture back to the parents, I think, because you can't use something if you don't know how... That's a really big piece in the learning is to have that emotional competency, that playful side, to let it shine. (FG4, line 308).

Moe facilitator modelling is for parents as well as children. Creating a strong team and partnering with families and communities is a way to reciprocally create a supportive learning environment. “Modelling [is] not just for the children a lot of the times, it's for the parents” (FG1, line 131).

And a lot of it is for the parents...because a lot of our parents don't necessarily, they didn't get that growing up a lot of them... because that's the stuff that when they're home they can work with the children. (FG1, line 121)

Participants shared that they were working to create a “safe atmosphere where [parents] can just do stuff and test things out with their kids and try different things” (FG1, line 184). One participant hoped that inclusive environments where elders are welcomed to visit would create additional opportunities to reintroduce supportive parenting.

My mom taught me how to parent that way... we did a lot of legends and myths. Teaching that way to my kids in order to mould their character with discipline with respect and truth, all those other great values that we wanted to instill in them. (FG4, line 549)

Facilitators can “ask the elders that are here and the people who do have traditional teachings... help bring those teachings back” (FG1, line 241).

3.3 Summary of findings

In discussing a child’s identity and building a supportive team, participants highlighted aspects of the Moe the Mouse TM program that help practitioners meet their goals “to help them build on who they are” (FG1, line 454) and to “get everyone involved” (FG4, line 492). To help support a child’s developing identity, participants discussed the importance of supporting language and increasing cultural connections in order to steer children towards a healthy sense of self-esteem and cultural identity. Additionally, they discussed how programs that engage children and adapt to their varied needs will help practitioners build on skills that will shape the child’s sense of self. Practitioners saw all of the members of the child’s community as having a role to play in supporting the child’s development. Ideally, sessions would welcome elders, parents, and other community members. Moe sessions provide a setting for everyone to participate, embracing children of varied abilities and ages, as well as the various members of the child’s community. Participants expressed the need to account for a child’s development and cultural identity from a holistic and cooperative point of view, something that the Moe the Mouse TM program was seen to accomplish.

Chapter 4: Discussion

This qualitative analysis of focus group discussions originally set out to explore participants' opinions and thoughts about how Moe the Mouse TM would fit early education goals and its cultural relevance. Throughout the discussions participants noted two important themes: (a) Moe the Mouse TM as a support for developing a child's identity through its flexible, engaging and inclusive activities, and (b) Moe the Mouse TM as a vehicle for creating a strong, supportive team that includes people such as a Moe the Mouse TM facilitator, elders, non-Aboriginal helpers, and families. These themes meshed with the concepts outlined in the introduction concerning strengths-based, culturally relevant, and relationship-based approaches to early childhood education.

Within the framework of supporting a child's identity, participants discussed the importance of playfully engaging and flexibly inclusive education, something that participants suggested was met in use of the Moe the Mouse TM program. These ideas fit with the concepts of strength-based education that take into account cultural variation and building self-esteem. Underlying all of the participants' responses was the need for a cohesive and collaborative care team that utilizes all of the members' strengths. Crucial members of the child's team were considered to include elders, family, practitioners, and even non-Aboriginal helpers who support cultural connections. Listening to the participants and exploring the themes they discussed shaped this thesis. The following sections contextualize Moe the Mouse TM within the themes of identity support and team while building on the theories from the literature on strengths-based, culturally relevant, and relationship focused early childhood education programs.

4.1 Supporting identity through flexible and engaging programs

Concerning Moe the Mouse TM as supporting identity (section 1.3), participants reported how it builds on community and individual strengths, incorporates culturally relevant material, and is relationship-based. Strengths-based education approaches a child's learning from a holistic perspective and takes into account various styles, multiple intelligences, and social support systems (Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*, 2006). As an engaging education program, Moe the Mouse TM can draw in children through fun activities and creates opportunities where a child can succeed. Participants also commented on the program integrating culturally relevant themes reflecting the idea that these aspects are “an integral part of the curriculum, not just ... a special time or day” or only “one aspect of the program or curriculum” (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2003, p. 2). The need for flexibility in both choosing education materials and in meeting the needs of communities was seen as requiring professionals to be inclusive and adaptable. Participants' comments on empathetically getting into the child's space resonate with Harte's (2010) perspective that professionals need to provide real-life learning and discovery play projects that can be used in natural situations for both intervention and assessment.

Providing situations where children learn to build relationships is a strengths-based approach that can help children develop empathy and co-operation, and shapes their growing sense of capacity and abilities. Inclusive, group-based learning programs support a child's developing identity without segregation that may lead to children developing complexes or becoming too shy. This relational-based learning is present in Moe the Mouse TM sessions where children requiring extra attention or targeted therapy are included in group sessions that target goals without isolating a child. Group activities also allow for relationship based programs where

peers learn from each other, reflecting one participant's comment that children learn best from watching each other learn.

A strength-based approach includes drawing on the social and cultural background of the child's community. Supporting identity is intimately connected to culture: "Many elders believed that the disintegration of traditional beliefs causes lack of identity and self-esteem in young people. Therefore, in order for children to develop self-esteem, they need to identify themselves with traditional values of First Nations" (Agbo, 2004, p. 11). Educational materials that incorporate traditional art, themes, and methods support and validate the group's cultural identity. Programs like Moe the Mouse TM that use culturally relevant materials and incorporate traditional themes and methods have the potential to assist practitioners in celebrating their children's cultural heritage.

Many aspects of cultural interaction are learned through example and are challenging to teach explicitly (Ball, 2009). Participants shared how they can support such cultural learning through modelling and interaction during the Moe program. Setting the stage for cultural learning requires diverse opportunities for interaction with a range of community members and practitioners around as examples. Because not all parents have had access to role models in their own lives, Moe was seen as providing opportunities for that cultural learning. Family and community members could be drawn into the Moe the Mouse TM activities with the children or observe Moe facilitators modelling ways to support a child's development. In a way, the facilitator was seen as taking on some of the roles that older family members may have played as intergenerational role models by traditionally passing on playful learning and supportive teaching. Incorporating traditional culture into curricula was seen as vital to these children's health and success.

4.2 Building a strong team

Strength-based and culturally relevant education involves a team. Successful and supportive teams build on members' strengths, are culturally relevant, and continually work on relationship building. The importance of family and elders was discussed above related to identity development and Moe the Mouse TM. Further discussion on team development is elaborated here.

In terms of team development, Moe facilitators were seen as people who could work with teachers to help create a learning community that is comfortable with visiting professionals and parents, consistent with Harte's (2010) recommendations for an open and welcoming learning environment. Participants discussed that successful preschool learning programs necessarily require a connection with a child's family, resonating with the perspective: "The home is the child's first classroom; parents and other family members are a child's first teachers" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 80).

Participants noted the importance of modeling playful learning and supportive teaching for parents who may not have learned these ways to support a child's development. This reflects Ball's comment that parents lacking intergenerational role models may require opportunities to learn "spontaneous, nurturing language-mediated interchanges with their children" (Ball, 2009, p. 24). Participants also commented on how settings can involve multiple community members of different ages and skills through creating a setting where elders are welcomed and families are engaged. This addresses another of Ball's findings that "programs that involve the community are also more likely to be well used and sustainable" particularly for people coming from cultures that have been disrupted or displaced (Ball, 2009, p. 35).

A child's team can include people from varied backgrounds. Programs that are open to non-Aboriginal adults and children, are a way to "inspire pride in the children; to see information about their culture passed on to people from different backgrounds" (B.C. Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2003, p. 2) Understanding that each member of the support system around the child brings knowledge and experience allows both practitioners and family members to build on each other's strengths in providing supportive care for the child.

The themes of supporting a child's developing identity and building the capacity of all the members of a child's team resonate with previous research on adapted education for children from Aboriginal communities. These themes and ideas shaped the course of this thesis and my thoughts on service delivery to children from Aboriginal communities. Participants repeatedly mentioned that Moe the Mouse TM addresses these themes and can be incorporated into curricula to supportive culturally relevant programs.

4.3 Researcher changes

Alternating between a line-by-line analysis during coding and a broad, gestalt or hunch based analysis allowed for an expansive exploration. Viewing the participants' data from this dynamic and subjective perspective caused this thesis to be an ever-evolving reflection of the discussions I had with the participants. The topics that I brought in stimulated conversation on themes I had not anticipated. The unexpected direction of the conversations was a welcome opportunity for participants to share ideas that they felt were important points.

The responses and emergent themes from this thesis directed the course of my research. As I reviewed literature on service delivery to Aboriginal communities, the participants' voices influenced my perspective on the underlying principles of the literature and brought the abstract theories to life for me.

Looking back to my thoughts and feelings at the beginning of the project, I feel the enthusiastic desire to learn has given way to a more sober perspective on the complex and diverse reality for Aboriginal communities in Canada. As with all early notions about unfamiliar cultures, I tended to view Aboriginal cultures as a single, uniform group outside of the dominant Canadian culture. The more I have learned about the many different languages, cultures, and histories, the more I see how vast and rich the communities are.

4.4 Limitations and directions for future research

In this study, the commitment that the participants showed for serving the families in their communities resulted in an open and insightful look at the importance of supporting early childhood development. While it is possible that many of the participants viewed my presence with discomfort or were reserved in their answers, many of the responses were frank and showed vulnerability, reflecting the dedication participants showed to providing service to the children and families and their relative comfort in the focus groups. It appeared that any hesitation to speak in front of me was overshadowed by the participant's interest in developing a program that would help the children and families that they worked.

While the participants shared similar experiences with the Moe the Mouse TM workshops and worked with preschool children, they each brought their own personal perspectives and cultural backgrounds to the discussion. Specific perspectives and opinions were shaped by the social dynamics of the focus groups that were not a part of the single one-on-one interview. However, the broad range of personalities and interaction styles across all of the focus groups suggest that the participant from the interview contributed meaningfully to the overall discussion of service delivery to preschool children.

Many of the themes and recommendations that arose regarding programs that are culturally relevant and adaptive are ideas that likely apply to children (and adults) outside of Aboriginal communities as well. Any person can benefit from programs that focus on strengths instead of deficits; holistic learning opportunities; cooperative hands-on learning; multi-cultural and multi-lingual diversity and celebration; community consultation and control; and relationship building. It may be that as Aboriginal programs develop effective and adaptable programs to match individual needs, there will be a need for educators and service providers to share these techniques with other communities and groups, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. This has already begun to happen with the local Native Friendship Centre preschool becoming a safe place for parents from other communities to send their children even with limited English proficiency. One participant described the Centre as a place where “there is a whole array of people... [It] doesn’t matter that... English isn’t your first [language]... Everybody’s coming” (FG4, line 901). Community with a broad range of cultural and linguistic representation will require education programs like Moe the Mouse TM that easily adapt to any language, attention span, or group size.

The findings that arose from the social interaction in these particular focus groups emerged within a specific context. The conclusions and interpretations of this study are intended to represent only the worldviews of the researcher and participants. They are not intended to represent the official views of the institutions and communities visited or of other personnel associated with those locations or the Moe the Mouse TM program itself. Instead, the views and interpretations are intended to provide a narrative description of the potential perspectives concerning service delivery to preschoolers from Aboriginal communities. They suggest the need for further discussions and continued relationship-building between all professionals, families,

and communities involved in providing healthy and effective education. While these themes are not necessarily replicable in future interviews, this discovery of ideas and personal truths can engage future readers and researchers to continue to relate these findings to future knowledge.

As communities develop their own best strategies and strengths, ensuring that this knowledge is open and available between communities and cultures is important. Future research can begin to look at programs like Moe the Mouse TM using baseline studies or quantitative analyses. Research findings can be made accessible to the communities and individuals beyond the academic journals (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). Successful programs and curricula can be adapted and tried in new groups with culturally relevant modifications, and the results openly shared across communities.

Cultural identity and continuity are vital to a strong and healthy community. Practitioners working to provide service to children from Aboriginal backgrounds can approach their work with the perspective that supporting a child's identity has important ramifications, both for helping to preserve tradition but also for raising children to be confident innovators and community leaders. Socially inclusive and cooperative programs, like Moe the Mouse TM, have an important role to play in aiding the families, professionals and community members striving to improve the language and lives of children.

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Appendix

Appendix A Interview Guide

Guiding questions for interview and focus-group discussions

Research Question: How do practitioners feel Moe the Mouse TM addresses early childhood language development as well as incorporating traditional teachings and culture?

Interview Guide:

- 1) What is most important to you in preschool language teaching?
 - a. What is your understanding of phonological awareness? Literacy?
 - b. What is the practitioner's role in language development?
 - c. How can practitioners advocate for language development?
 - d. How can we assess language and monitor progress?
- 2) How do you feel traditional teachings can be brought into the classroom?
 - a. How do culture and language affect identity?
 - b. How can practitioners adopt a traditional style or approach?
 - c. What are culturally appropriate materials?
 - d. Is there a place in the classroom for code-switching?
 - e. How should practitioners approach dialect (differences vs. Disorder)?
 - f. How can the community be involved in preschool learning?
 - g. Does teaching about one culture neglect others?
- 3) Program fidelity, perspectives on Moe
 - a. How can training be encouraged and maintained over time?
 - b. What are your expectations about what the Moe the Mouse program offers?
 - c. Have your perspectives changed following the training?
 - d. Who is Moe the Mouse designed for?
 - e. What is your role with Moe the Mouse?
 - f. What questions or concerns do you still have about the Moe the Mouse program?