Abstract

This paper will problematize conventional “school-readiness” discourse as evidenced in Supported Child Development Program (henceforth SCDP) assessment practices with young children with special needs from a postmodern theoretical stance. The prevailing school-readiness discourse proposes a maturational perspective as means for determining whether young children have the requisite physical, cognitive, and affective attributes needed for a successful school career. Young children with special needs undergo standardized assessments of their knowledge and abilities and are subsequently prescribed early intervention activities designed to ameliorate/reduce variances from normal developmental trajectories. These activities are widely used in early childhood classrooms so children will become ready for Kindergarten at age 5.

Using standardized assessment with young children who have special needs can be problematic for a variety of reasons. The desire to prepare young children for mandated school, at a distant, future point based on results derived from standardized assessment tools serves to constrain them, and closes the door on opportunities for making their ways of knowing visible to others. SCDP Consultants and early childhood educators must recognize the influence they have for either encouraging or marginalizing the learning of young children with special needs. Raising awareness of children’s rights, inclusive practices, and assessment tactics that support learning through a strength-based orientation is crucial if children with special needs are to feel they are competent, contributing members of the classroom and larger society. Authentic assessment strategies, a useful pedagogical framework, and suggestions for conducting ethical assessment that open the window for viewing children’s capabilities through a new lens are considered.

Keywords: Supported Child Development Program, child-with-special needs, early intervention, normalization, standardized assessment
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This capstone project will problematize conventional “school-readiness” discourse as evidenced in Supported Child Development Program (SCDP) assessment practices with young children with special needs from a postmodern theoretical stance. Using the metaphors of an *open window* or a *closed door* in relation to young children’s readiness to transition from preschools/childcare programs to kindergarten, I will consider how conventional forms of child assessment, firmly rooted in dominant school-readiness discourses, limit opportunities for children with special needs to make their knowledge and abilities visible to others. I will contemplate how assessment practices through SCDP are restricted through prevailing views of “normalization” and “developmentality” discourses, and I will argue that when readiness activities are only enacted with the expressed goal to prepare children for an inevitable transition to kindergarten at five-years-old, then a particular image of young children becomes legitimized through the term, “child with special needs.” I will bring forth counter discourses and meanings to these latter terms and will also shed light on innovative assessment practices which make young children’s learning visible to others – essentially allowing one to look at their knowledge and abilities through an open window.

**Key Terms**

For this project, I will define key words pertinent to my topic as formulated by early childhood education scholars. The *Supported Child Development Program* (SCDP) in British Columbia, Canada is a community-based, government-funded program that assists families with children who have special needs to access community-based child care. The heart of SCDP is the philosophy of inclusion. It means all children have the right to participate in a full range of early childhood education opportunities with their peers (SCDP, 2014). The term *child with special needs* is a classification system of children that views them as having deficits in their
developmental or learning trajectories when compared with other children their same age (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). This is the predominant term used to classify children with diverse abilities in most North American countries. Early intervention pertains to therapeutic services for children who are deemed to have special needs from birth to school age (Cook, Klein, & Chen, 2012). Standardized assessment concerns the measurement of young children’s knowledge, skills, and behaviours that are administered and scored in a consistent manner with results compared to the performance of a standard group (Cook et al., 2012). Normalization is the capacity to “. . . identify, measure, instill, and regulate everyday conduct and habits under the guidance of others” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 17). The dominant construct of school-readiness proposes a maturational perspective of young children’s skills and abilities to learn. This view suggests that young children’s growth and development are time-bound and biologically determined (Winter & Kelly, 2008). This perspective locates deficits or delays in social, emotional, physical, and/or cognitive skills within the child and suggests their development is “at-risk” for not meeting the demands of the mandated school experience (Cook et al., 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

My examination of conventional school-readiness discourses is based in a postmodern worldview. Postmodernism is a more recent tradition, which serves to disrupt the idea of universalism and linear progress. At the heart of postmodernism is “. . . an acceptance of the pluralistic character of social experiences, identities and standards of truth, moral rightness and beauty” (Seidman, 1998; as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 61). It obscures common boundaries, disrupts social order, and questions the taken-for-granted notions of modern day thinking (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

The theorists who will guide my investigation include Michel Foucault (1972, 1980, 1991) and Emmanuel Levinas (1987). I will use their theories to discuss the importance of
reconsidering what becoming readied for school means. These theorists also allow me to critically reflect on my own pedagogical practices with children who have special needs in their early childhood classrooms.

I will engage with Foucault’s (1972, 1980, 1991) work to examine the relationship between power and knowledge in the creation of conventional school-readiness discourse. I will also discuss Foucault’s “regimes of truth” and “discourse theory”, connecting them also to his notion of “governmentality” (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1991) and assessment practices administered through early intervention programs such as SCDP.

I will draw from Levinas’ (1987) work to introduce the idea of the Other and the Same, and discuss normalization and assimilation as resulting from dominant views of school-readiness. I will use Levinas’ work on ethics to frame early childhood special education from a child-rights perspective.

**Rationale**

During my undergraduate studies in Child and Youth Care, I was encouraged to challenge the modernist discourses that constitute early childhood education (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 1). According to Dahlberg & Moss (2005), modernist discourses are composed of “... a continuity in thinking about and working with children which is inscribed with instrumental rationality, scientific knowledge and technical practice” (p. 58). The modernist idea of prevention through the discourse of child-development causes me to think critically about young children, their abilities, and their futures, and whether it is fair to burden today’s children with the uncertain hopes and dreams of a global society at some distant point in time (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

I have noticed through my SCDP work that many early childhood educators and early intervention professionals (SCDP Consultants, special needs educators) apply tenets from
conventional child development theories to (perhaps unknowingly) privilege the idea of uniformity, among their students. Children who do not fit with normal, standardized child development trajectories risk becoming marginalized and/or Othered in the early childhood classroom (see also Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 77) and sometimes within their own family (see, for example, Gardiner & Kozmitski, 2008). I am troubled by this practice of marginalization, feeling it runs counter to my belief in inclusive education and strength-based pedagogical practice, and I want to bring awareness to what I see as socially unjust, taken-for-granted practices that are perpetuated through dominant views of school-readiness and its associated activities.

Additionally, I have detected relentless pressure on teachers to produce young students who are ready to attend kindergarten at five-years-old. I feel that by imagining the child in a particular way at age-five causes the early childhood teaching experience to become less about appreciating how children make meaning from their world at-present and more about preparing them to become firstly, productive students, and secondly, productive citizens at particular points of time along the life journey (Moss & Petrie, 2002). This is problematic to me, because with rapid advancements in technology and the emergence of a global economy, there is great uncertainty about which particular skills and attributes tomorrow’s children will need. Adopting the “child-as-future” stance essentially closes the door for understanding how children’s unique experiences contribute to the way they make meaning of the world at-present (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This is especially true for young children who require additional support to participate in early childhood classrooms, because their educational curricula is often inscribed with technologies of normalization through the interweaving of developmental psychology, efficiency, and behaviourism (Fendler, 2001).
Further, I am concerned that young children are often required to learn or develop skills that are irrelevant to their interests or mismatched to their abilities (Elkind, 2001). The privileging of young children’s cognitive skills development as the primary focus for readying them for kindergarten limits opportunities for honouring the multiple languages through which children express their knowledge (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993; Elkind, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2005). This view perpetuates the idea of every child needing the same set of knowledge, skills, and expertise in order for them to be successful students in a publically funded, mandated school system. It is not reasonable to expect young children (particularly young children with special needs) to achieve prescribed academic outcomes when they are generally not consulted in the development of curriculum, in the assessment of their knowledge, and in the politics that shape the culture of their own classrooms and beyond (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

It is my belief that spaces for public education (including early childhood education) should serve all children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Canada in 1991, assures that all children have the right to access services like education and health care, and to have “their personalities, abilities and talents” develop to their fullest potential (UNICEF, 2014). Additionally, they have the right to achieve their rights in an “accessible and active manner” (UNICEF, 2014). Educators and administrators must be committed to adapt curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to accommodate all children (Nicholson, Grant-Groves, Bauer, & Woolley, 2014). A child-rights perspective views inclusive education as the right (vs. need) of all children who live in Canada. It moves the onus for readiness from the child and colocates it within the systems and programs responsible for children’s education.
Purpose

The purpose of this project is to draw practical implications from contemporary critical theories and apply them to the practices of educating and assessing young children who require additional supports in relation to school-readiness discourse. I hope this project will unmask and challenge the inextricable link between dominant understandings of school-readiness and standardized assessment practices that shape the work of SCDP. I also hope to share my conclusions from this project with my colleagues in order for them to reconsider school-readiness from an ethics and child-rights perspective. This project will include a presentation designed to offer insights from this project to my SCDP colleagues through a professional development workshop (see Appendix B).

Summary

In Chapter One, I explained the purpose of my project and its rationale and introduced the theoretical framework that grounds my thinking as I approach the topic of school-readiness. In the next chapter, I will explain the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in my quest to reconsider the notion of school-readiness through my work in the SCDP. The literature review will provide a framework for problematizing the difficulties associated with the dominant views of school-readiness, and for (re)considering what the term school-readiness means. In Chapter Three, I will draw implications from the theory and the literature in order to narrate an alternative school-readiness discourse/practice that situates the child with special needs as a competent, capable, and contributing citizen at-present (Delrio, 2012; Phillips, 2010). Chapter Four will include my reflections and a discussion outlining my project’s recommendations for future research/practice.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As discussed in Chapter One, in the SCDP, standardized technologies of assessment (checklists, questionnaires, and developmental assessments) are used to evaluate children’s adherence to or variance from developmentally expected norm. Results indicate the need for remedial intervention activities. In this chapter, the postmodern theoretical perspectives of Foucault (1972, 1980, 1991) and Levinas (1987) that frame this project afford opportunities to reconsider and problematize some of the constructs of the dominant school-readiness paradigm, such as normalization and developmentalism, through an ethics and child-rights lens. Through this lens, I contemplate how the term school-readiness has been historically constructed and consider the integral role this view plays in shaping my work with young children.

Postmodernist Thinkers – Foucault and Levinas

Postmodernity blurs boundaries, disrupts hierarchies, and questions the modern foundations on which traditional thinking has been built (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Seidman, 2013). Postmodernism has recently been included in early childhood education theory as a critical lens through which social justice issues (e.g., race, gender, ability) are deliberated (see Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012; Mac Naughton, 2005; Rinaldi, 2006). With these postmodern principles in mind, I now consider the theoretical underpinnings of Michel Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas to ground my research problem.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the current era (Mac Naughton, 2005). His work has challenged collective ideas about policing, schooling, welfare organizations, gay-rights and the care of the mentally ill (Foucault, 1980). Much of his work explores relationships between knowledge, truth, and power, and the effects of these relationships on individuals and their institutions (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980). Foucault
disputes the established ways of understanding the human experience and the assumption that knowledge is free of, and distinct from, politics (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980). He posits that people have many stories about themselves and about the cultures and societies in which they live. He asserts that the politics of our time influence which of these stories are told, and who will hear them (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Individuals whose stories are not heard become marginalized by society. The sharing of these stories then becomes a political act (Moss & Petrie, 2002).

Foucault’s (1972) notion of discourse is of importance to this discussion about school-readiness because traditional views of school-readiness, as understood through the discourse of child-development, suggests children progress through predefined stages of development until such time that they are deemed ready to enter school (Gesell Institute for Child Development, n.d.). Foucault (1972) sees discourse theory as the framework for thinking and writing that imparts commonplace language for conceptualizing, examining, and discussing topics. This routine language then becomes the means for decision-making in different societies in different times (Mac Naughton, 2005). For Foucault (1980), truths establish categories of power that are highly political and contestable. He believes we can’t strip truth of its politics, since truth itself is a political fabrication that privileges some, while oppressing others. The postmodern educator who recognises this is able to challenge the two most common beliefs about knowledge and truth that have dominated Western thinking since the late 1600’s to mid-1700’s; namely, that there is an objective truth about the social world, and the possibility of establishing a single, universally applicable truth about the human experience (Mac Naughton, 2005).

Foucault also coined the concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991, p. 87) as a particular way of understanding how populations are administered within the prevalent discourses of the state. He claims that the techniques, policies and procedures created by the state
are designed to govern the conduct of individuals and populations at every level—not just at the administrative or political level (Foucault, 1980, 1991). Additionally, he views institutions, such as sites for early childhood education, as means for preserving power relations so only a certain number of people are advantaged (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

Young children with special needs are taught from a very young age to govern themselves through self-improvement, conduct, and demonstration of knowledge/skills in ways that are easily recognized as normative (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In her critique of “developmentality” in early childhood (alluding to Foucault’s idea of governmentality), Fendler (2001) states, “Educating the whole child means not only the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects, but the child’s innermost desires” (p. 121). The concern is when education is designed to produce a universalized human subject who comes to know themselves only through the application of specific knowledge and skill benchmarks, as found in paradigms that privilege development as precursor to learning, they become subjectified (Fendler, 2001). This privileged and dominant developmentality discourse may perpetuate persistent governmental policies which seem to view children with special needs as having more difficulty integrating into the larger society (Fendler, 2001).

Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas is best known for his work on ethics and his philosophy of the “Other” (Levinas, 1987, p. 39). He challenges the idea of prescribed and assessable relationships, the norm of autonomy, the freedom of the self-sufficient subject, and conceptualizing knowledge (Levinas, 1987). Central to his philosophy is a questioning of what knowledge is and what it does, who it benefits and who it relegates (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). He asserts that the desire to become an autonomous and rational subject is achieved through tactics of assimilation (Levinas, 1987). These tactics apply abstract, universal systems of truth to make the Other (person) into
the *Same* (as me). This desire to *Other* comes from wanting to banish uncertainty in favour of order and predictability (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Through this, the *Other* becomes an integral part of the world as understood through dominant way(s) of knowing, and therefore, the *Same*’s personal autonomy and independence are preserved (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). The idea of *Othering* “… involves making sense of perceptions through applying to them the knower’s prefabricated system of understandings, concepts and categories” (Levinas, 1989; as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 77). This, though, may come at the expense of the *Other’s* rights to freedom of thought and expression.

Time, an integral piece of the school-readiness puzzle, as typically conceived in maturational/developmental theory, does not constitute the achievement of a child in isolation, but is contingent on the relationship between the child and other people in his/her life (Levinas, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). It is unjust to pick arbitrary points of time along the life continuum to measure knowledge and skills against pre-determined, standardized results derived from populations that may have little relevance to the child’s local/contextual experiences or worldview (Mac Naughton, 2005) and then use this information to deem them either ready, or not, for school entry. In SCDP, the use of standardized, norm-referenced, assessment technologies causes me to reflect on how these assessment technologies may be tactics of assimilation that serve to make the *Other* into the *Same* (Levinas, 1987).

Foucault discusses the relationships between truth, power, and knowledge as related to the dominant school-readiness discourse, Levinas advocates for discourse from an ethical and child-rights perspective, and the literature illuminates what it means for children to become ready for school and to critically examine these ideas.
School-readiness – What Does This Term Mean?

In North America from the turn of the 20th century to the present time, there has been a great deal of enthusiasm for studying children’s development and learning, and particularly, determining when children are ready for mandated school entry (Carr, 2003; Nicholson et al., 2014). Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) was the first Director of the Child Study Center at Yale University and is considered the father of child development in the United States (Yale School of Medicine, 2014). He is best known for his studies of normal child development and for developing assessment tools that establish and measure normal child development trajectories (Yale School of Medicine, 2014). It is largely due to Gesell’s maturational/developmental theory that the term school-readiness was coined (Gesell Institute of Child Development, n.d.). He established normative trends for the development of: motor skills; adaptive (cognitive) skills; language skills; and personal/social skills (Gesell Institute of Child Development, n.d.). Children’s abilities in these areas of development are most often measured using standardized, norm-referenced child development assessment tools (Bagnato, 2005) and the performance associated with these developmental domains are viewed by many as the foundational skills which signal children’s academic-readiness to begin mandated school (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004).

However, in his discussion of advocacy in early childhood education, Drummond (2012) asserts 16 other outcomes besides academic-readiness or the ability to pass a knowledge test for entry into elementary school. Drummond (2012) asserts his 16 outcomes (see Appendix A for this list) are highly relational in nature, flexible, yet objective1 in terms of assessment, and desirable in terms of ethics. He maintains that traditional views of school-readiness help to feed a

1 Drummond (2012) argues that these outcomes are objective because they are measurable.
competitive, capitalistic, globalized economic system at the expense of ethics and children’s rights. He and others (see Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, et al., 2007; Moss & Petrie, 2002) contend that children’s success at school is generally correlated with seatwork, testing, verbal learning in English, and acquiescence to authority that is expected of good, well-behaved employees. The not-ready child is seen as in need of remediation, and the act of readying is accomplished (in part) through centralized systems like early childhood education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Drummond, 2012; Rinaldi, 2006). Wesley and Buysse (2003), in their study examining beliefs and perceptions of school-readiness among parents and professionals working with young children, found participants spoke of pressure placed upon children, teachers, and families for children to perform in kindergarten. As well, they found there was inconsistency in determining eligibility for kindergarten through chronological age and performance on a set of required entry skills (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). In an effort to understand the readiness of student cohorts entering kindergarten, Brandt and Grace (2005) developed, tested, and validated two quantitative school-readiness instruments: *Schools Ready for Children*, and *Children Ready for School*. However, these researchers expressed concern that the *Children Ready for School* instrument was seen by users as a tool to determine eligibility for kindergarten, rather than as a tool to understand skill performance. They found that using this instrument for this purpose was inappropriate and ran counter to their intended purpose and fundamental beliefs (Brandt & Grace, 2005).

Postmodern views disrupt regimes of truth that serve to maintain dominant discourses such as school-readiness. Gore (1998, as cited in Mac Naughton, 2005) identifies eight “micropractices of power” (pp. 30-31) to analyze how daily practices, like the language we use to describe people and their activities, produce rules that both organize and guide individual and collective behaviour. The micropractice of “normalization” compares, invokes, or requires
conformity to a standard that expresses particular truths about the developing child (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 31). This is particularly problematic when considering the child with special needs because of the dominant discourse’s desire to bring order and certainty to children’s developmental trajectories (Mac Naughton, 2005), and to make the Other into the Same (Levinas, 1987). Fendler (2001) describes the historical shift assigned to the terms normal and normalization. After 1800, normal came to represent the central term that was in opposition to pathological. Therefore, anything that could not be specifically defined as normal/average was then regarded as pathological/below-average. Normal, thus, became limited to the characteristics of the average, but the possibilities for being not-normal were boundless! (Fendler, 2001). For children with special needs who are viewed through a discourse of developmentality (Fendler, 2001, p. 124), which is shrouded in languages of developmentally-appropriate-practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 1), and developmental psychology (Gesell Institute of Child Development, n.d.), this is particularly distressing. The assessment of abilities through standardized, norm-referenced child development assessment tools privilege normal development as desirable, and departures from widely understood norms are seen as atypical, or even deviant (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Fendler, 2001). As Fendler (2001) states, “Today, the term ‘normal’ pertains to a specific set of qualities that have been rationalized by statistical and scientific justifications” (p. 128). Any qualities other than those specified are assumed to be atypical, and therefore suggest the need for remediation (Fendler, 2001). This is problematic from a child-rights perspective because the image of young children as in-need of remediation becomes legitimized through the term child with special needs.

On-the-one-hand, the dominant discourse of school-readiness, conceptualized as academic readiness, provides a straightforward framework for understanding its components. On-the-other-hand, the complexities and tensions associated with lived experiences, such as the
pressures all stakeholders sense in discussions of school-readiness, the ways in which to measure school-readiness attributes, and the politics of language used to ascribe features of school-readiness, are multifaceted and even confusing.

When considering the child whose experiences and developmental trajectories do not align with expected developmental norms, Nicholson and colleagues (2014) aver: “We need to insert new questions into our discourse on readiness, inquiries that allow for ... making visible the complexities of sociocultural differences too often concealed and tidied up within bell curve distributions” (p. 2).

Some of these questions have already been pondered by one of the pedagogical founders of the Municipal Preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, Loris Malaguzzi, and his colleagues (Gardner, 2012). These preschools, since the end of World War II, have established an educational community that involves young children, their educators, their families, and communities directly in the education of each child’s intellectual, emotional, social, and moral potentials through careful cultivation and guidance (Gardner, 2012). They espouse progressive, postmodern philosophies and practices that deal with the inherent problems found in most tertiary educational systems in a serious and imaginative way (Gardner, 2012). Malaguzzi avows having children with diverse abilities in their municipal preschools provides opportunities for teachers to embrace, not ignore, or neutralize, differences among children (Soncini, 2012). His notions that ethically encountering all children as rights-bearing citizens at-present (Delrio, 2012; Phillips, 2010), and that including children with diverse abilities in their preschools stimulates educators to think more ethically about pedagogical decisions, are but a couple of examples of his legacies (Soncini, 2012). This complex discourse inspires me to now contemplate a government program and government-created document intended to support learning for pre-kindergarten aged children in BC in the next chapter.
Summary

This chapter presents a review of studies and literature pertaining to aspects of school-readiness. The postmodern theoretical underpinnings of my project examined the relevance of the philosophies of Foucault (1980) and Levinas (1987) to the ethical issues inherent in the dominant school-readiness discourse. I contemplated the dominant and more contemporary views of school-readiness, which suggest that the messiness of the human experience makes the term school-readiness difficult to ascertain. I alluded to an alternative approach to early education in Reggio Emilia, Italy, which is concerned with cultivating children’s intellectual, emotional, social, and moral potentials through imaginative and meaningful practices grounded in a rights-based, democratic perspective about education and participation.

In the next chapter, I explore the ways I can (a) support the creation of learning experiences for young children with special needs that release them from the constraints imposed by the dominant school-readiness discourse, (b) consider incorporating the philosophy embedded in the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (BC Ministry of Education, 2008) into practices of SCDP Consultants, and (c) propose the use of authentic assessment tactics as means for ethically evaluating the ways young children with special needs make meaning. In doing this, I hope to narrate an alternative school-readiness discourse that situates the child with special needs as a competent and capable, citizen at-present (Delrio, 2012; Phillips, 2010).

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2 The term “authentic assessment” is employed herein to suggest an alternative approach to discovering the ways young children make meaning from their world. From a postmodern framework, it is important to remember that authentic assessment practices should be approached cautiously. The desire to know the Other (Levinas, 1987) is strong, and even authentic assessments run the risk of becoming new “truths” about the Other.
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I explore the ways I can support the design of learning experiences and assessment practices that make possible counter-discourses and alternative practices to the traditional, constraining school-readiness discourses. I will connect the tenets underlying the theories reviewed in the previous chapter to my practice as an SCDP Consultant. I want to bring awareness of ethical pedagogical approaches and authentic assessment strategies that consult parents and children directly about their ways of knowing and narrate an alternate school-readiness discourse that constructs the child with special needs as a competent, capable, and powerful citizen at-present (Delrio, 2012; Phillips, 2010). Additionally, I will consider how SCDP Consultants can share discoveries about children’s ways of knowing derived through authentic assessment strategies and the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (BC Ministry of Education, 2008) with families/caregivers.

This chapter also includes information that accompanies a full day professional development workshop for SCDP Consultants (Appendix B) which I have developed. The workshop invites SCDP Consultants to (a) contest the dominant view of school-readiness in their work, (b) consider how governmentality and discourse influence the decisions that are made both in the SCDP office and in community-based child care settings, and (c) consider experimenting with ethical assessment tactics as means for better appreciating how young children with special needs’ ways of knowing can be made visible to others.

In doing this, I hope to open the window for SCDP Consultants to ponder how dominant views of school-readiness constrain possibilities for the child with special needs, and in turn, to reconsider their own day-to-day work practices from an ethical, child-rights perspective.
Reconsidering the Image of the Child with Special Needs: The Image of the Other

In BC the majority of young children requiring early developmental intervention are referred to early intervention programs (such as SCDP), which are funded through government contracts. The SCDP “... is intended for children who require extra support to be included in a child care setting because they have a developmental delay or disability in physical, cognitive, communicative or social/emotional/behavioural areas” (SCDP, 2014, p. 1). SCDP Consultants offer planning, assessment, training, resources and hands-on support to successfully include children who require additional assistance in community-based child care settings (SCDP, 2014). After my review of the available web-based and printed materials about this program (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014; SCDP, 2014), it becomes evident that the description of the program mandate and the activities the program offers are inscribed with the language of developmental psychology. There is no mention of discrete school-readiness skills as particular goals for the SCDP.

However, the underlying assumption in SCDP’s Framework of Professional Practice (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014) and web-based materials (SCDP, 2014, www.scdp.bc.ca) maintains the notion of typical development as a precursor to children’s normative learning experiences. The wide application of these views in community-based child care contexts through SCDP practices upholds the dominant view of school-readiness. Since SCDP Consultant activities largely focus on assessment of young children who have special needs in order to support their participation in community-based child care programs, this perception of typical development as a precursor to normative learning and the ensuing assessment of children’s learning through the lens of developmentality (Fendler, 2001) constrain the visibility and appreciation of young children’s ways of knowing. From a Foucaultian perspective, Fendler (2001) argues that when the sole focus of early childhood education is on...
the remediation of skills or abilities found to be lacking in comparison to peer cohorts, intervention activities become solely focused on the self-governing effects of developmental discourse in curricular decisions.

A 2008 document titled the *BC Early Learning Framework* (hereafter referred to as the Framework), was created jointly by the BC Ministries of Education, Children and Family Development, and Health, to outline the principles and key learning areas for children up to five-years-old who attend a variety of for-profit, not-for-profit, private, and government-funded early childhood education centers in BC (BC Ministry of Education, 2008).

The Framework is intended to guide those with a vested interest in early childhood education toward the provision of rich early learning experiences for young children (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). This Framework is “. . . designed to help adults support and strengthen children’s individual, social, cultural, and linguistic identities, and their respect and appreciation for other people’s identities” (BC Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1). The Framework offers conceptualizations of early learning as strength-based, holistic, and situated *in praesenti*. This means that children and their efforts/accomplishments are valued through an image of the capable child who contributes to their own and others’ learning at-present *and* in the future, while recognizing that not all children have access to the same opportunities to develop their potential (BC Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4). The image of the capable child is important to this discussion, because “Our construction of childhood and the images of the child represent ethical and political choices, made within a larger framework of ideas, values, and rationalities” (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 52). Remarkably, no information from this Framework has found its way into SCDP service provision documents, despite the fact that the early learning programs and adults for whom the Framework was written are the very same early learning programs and adults that SCDP programs in BC provide services to!
This image of children as capable and full of potential found in the Framework contrasts sharply with the dominant image of children with special needs as needing education or remediation of developmental deficits as found in programs like SCDP. The Framework causes the reader to reflexively and critically reflect upon their pedagogical practice, including the ethical assessment of young children’s learning and development (Ministry of Education, 2008), and by extension, their readiness for school.

The pedagogical approach in the Framework, along with scholarly literature describing the pedagogical principles of the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Rinaldi, 2006; Rinaldi, 2012; Soncini, 2012), as well as the tenets of postmodernism (Foucault, 1980; Levinas, 1987), cause me to reflect upon the language I have been using to describe differences between children, such as the universally understood term, child with special needs. When this particular term is ascribed to the child who has a physical, developmental, or learning disability through programs like SCDP, it conjures up images of children as weak, vulnerable, and non-normative. I argue for choosing the image of the child found in the Framework – the child who is viewed as “capable and full of potential” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1). This image constructs the child firstly as a human being, a social actor, who is not defined by their disability, but rather has differing rights because of their disability (Soncini, 2012). When children are viewed from a rights perspective, there is greater opportunity to think critically about how we ensure their full access to participation in the early childhood classroom (Soncini, 2012). Therefore, reconsidering the image of the child with special needs and reconstructing the term to the child with special rights, as they have done in Reggio Emilia, becomes an act of political activism (Foucault, 1980). While the terms child with special needs and child with special rights are used interchangeably in the literature (Soncini, 2012), in the interest of inserting critical reflection in
my own texts, henceforth, I will refer to children who access services from the SCDP (or other early intervention programs) as children with special rights.

Of importance, the image of the child as rich, capable, competent, and full of potential is the foundation on which the Framework is built. It is both early childhood educators and SCDP Consultant’s responsibility then, to create classroom cultures that construct children with special rights and their activities using strength-based language. This language constructs images of children that open a space for diversity and the plurality of human experience. Language used to describe young children with special rights, becoming truly interested in the totality of their learning experiences across contexts, and the associated pedagogical activities and assessment practices selected to support children’s knowledge/abilities can become ethical acts of political activism on the part of the SCDP Consultant (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Foucault, 1980). Depending on the path taken, the language, and associated pedagogical activities, the assessment practices chosen have the potential to either maintain the status quo or disrupt the dominant discourse of school-readiness (Moss & Petrie, 2002).

**Ethical Assessment Practices: Making Children’s Knowledge Visible**

While early childhood education and early intervention professionals may find traditional, standardized assessment measures are less time consuming to administer and yield psychometrically valid and reliable results, they do not formulate a holistic and representative view of the child's unique strengths and capabilities in addition to his/her needs (Bagnato, 2005; Nicholson et al., 2014). They also do not take contexts into account (including the environment in which the assessment occurs), or involve families in the assessment process in meaningful ways (Mac Naughton, 2005; Rinaldi, 2012). In my view, this approach to assessing young children’s ways of knowing closes the door to understanding the complexities of their unique lives, experiences, and ways of expression. The standardized approach to assessment privileges
the idea of sameness and marginalizes those whose skills or abilities do not adhere to the norm. When reflecting on Levinas’ (1987) philosophy about the desire to control the Other, and to make the Other (person) into the Same (as me) in order for me to know them, standardized assessment practices and ensuing discrete skill intervention activities carried out in early childhood classrooms become problematic from an ethical perspective. These intervention activities often become the predominant focus for the adults who are involved in the child’s life. Additionally, the constant assessment of whether the child with special rights acquires prescribed skills or not, becomes the main adult concern for the preparation of the child for kindergarten. As Nicholson and her colleagues (2014) passionately argue,

> Discourse on readiness should reflect a value for the comprehensive story of who children are — including their unique life stories and the spectrum of rich individual and group differences that influence the beliefs, values and developmental goals that impact their life trajectories instead of being limited to objectifying labels, rankings, and classifications. (p. 3)

With this in mind, Bagnato (2005), as well as Neisworth and Bagnato (2004), suggest making space for authentic assessment in early intervention/learning programs. Authentic assessment captures genuine portraits of the naturally occurring competencies of young children with special rights in their everyday settings and routines (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Authentic tactics of assessment include pedagogical documentations of children’s experiences/work (Forman & Fyfe, 2012; Rinaldi, 2012); photographs and video recordings of learning or other aspects of importance to children (Clark, 2001; Forman, 2002); learning stories (Carr, Lee, & Jones, 2004); and curriculum-based assessments (Bagnato, 2005). Learning stories and pedagogical documentations often incorporate photos, video recordings, and work samples and are meant to make children’s learning visible so that educators and children can revisit and
collaboratively interpret the learning processes (Carr et al., 2004; Forman & Fyfe, 2012; Rinaldi, 2012). These documentations are also meant to be “formative” means for assessment (Fyfe, 2012, p. 274), whereas assessments that are informed by traditional developmental psychology worldviews tend to be viewed as evaluative or corrective. Authentic tactics of assessment aim to invite the learner and other interested parties, such as parents and educators, to participate in the learning/assessment process in order to formulate a deeper appreciation of the child’s learning processes in-context (Fyfe, 2012). Used flexibly and in non-prescriptive ways, authentic assessment techniques offer strength-based alternatives to their standardized, deficit-based counterparts. Using authentic assessment techniques, early childhood educators and SCDP Consultants make it possible for children to demonstrate their knowledge, creativity of thought, and emerging theories, through an exchange and multiplicity of ideas (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Fraser, 2012; Rinaldi, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

Wiliam (2011) insists that the conventional understanding of assessment as a determinant of children’s learning requires reconsideration. He maintains that the preposition of be juxtaposed with the preposition for, and assessment then becomes a determinant for supporting children’s learning. He argues that a slight prepositional change such as this can make a big difference in how we estimate the worth of a child, triggering the reconstruction of school-readiness discourse from a strength-based perspective (Wiliam, 2011). This reconstruction of school-readiness discourse happens when we approach assessment as means for ethically discovering and making visible children’s ways of knowing, rather than identifying what children are not doing through narrow views of a predetermined developmental trajectory.

**Listening as an Act of Political Activism**

Rinaldi (2012) suggests that how children express their theories of the world to others reveals how they think, question, and interpret reality and provides insights into their
relationships with reality and with people. Adults who work with young children with special
dependent on adults who work with young children with special
can have to listen very closely to hear not only the expressed meanings that children make
but also the implied meanings as communicated through a plethora of spoken and non-spoken
languages and symbols (Forman & Fyfe, 2012, p. 257). Authentic assessment practices become
linked to children’s learning through this plethora of different modalities and languages (Rinaldi,
2012; Vygotsky, 1978) and can be understood through a “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi, 2012,
p. 233). This form of listening is an ethical way of encountering the Other (Levinas, 1987). It is
an attitude for life, and it means taking responsibility for what we are sharing with others, and
with ourselves (Rinaldi, 2012).

Employing a pedagogy of listening, alongside authentic assessment practices, serves to
open the window for appreciating, over the course of time, how children’s unique lives and
experiences contribute to their and our theories about the world. Levinas (1987) contends that it
takes time to encounter the Other. Each encounter with the Other allows opportunities for mutual
renewal and surprise. Borrowing from Levinas’ conceptualization of the Other, I believe we
have an ethical obligation in SCDP to use the time we have with young children with special
rights to invite discovery of who they are as people and to make their ways of knowing visible to
others without the befuddling pressures associated with dominant, school-readiness discourses.
Young children learn in dynamic ways, and it is up to the adults charged with working with them
to find the connections children make to the world as encountered through their learning contexts
(Vygotsky, 1978). Listening deeply to children is not easy and requires a great deal of patience,
practice, and time on the part of the adult. However, listening is crucial if we are to truly
encounter children as legitimate members of our society, be curious about their many languages
of expression, and if we are to provide meaningful follow-up questions/activities to scaffold their
learning over time (Forman & Fyfe, 2012).
Looking at Young Children through the Open Window

For the past two-and-a-half years, my understanding of ethical assessment practices has unfolded through my research. With the support of a very open-minded supervisor and interested families, I have had the chance to play with alternative, authentic assessment practices in my own work as an SCDP Consultant. In addition to collecting information about children and families in the required ways of the agency I work for, I employ a pedagogy of listening as I work with young children with special rights. I take photographs of children and collect notes about their experiences as they engage in their everyday learning activities in early childhood classroom settings and home environments. I take time at the end of my consultation visits to reflect on these photos and notes and document my reflections in “vignettes” (Fraser, 2012, p. 172), or as learning stories (Carr, 2003). I share my notes with the child’s parent(s)/caregiver and invite their perspective on the child’s ways of knowing. I also share the photos with the child directly and invite them to describe their experience in the photo either through spoken language or through symbolic play. In cases where young children with special rights have particular concerns related to functional, everyday participatory skills (e.g., learning to get dressed or becoming toilet trained, engaging with other children/adults, participating in classroom or home daily routines), I employ the curriculum-based assessment tool titled the Assessment Evaluation and Programming System for Infants and Young Children (2nd edition) (Bricker, Pretti-Frontczak, Johnson, & Straka, 2002) (hereafter referred to as AEPS-2). The AEPS-2 clearly outlines the progression of specific skills that comprise meaningful tasks and provides a framework for enhancing the child’s participation in activities of daily living across contexts.

What I have enjoyed about incorporating a pedagogy of listening and authentic assessment practices in my work as a SCDP Consultant is that all the information gathered gives value and significance to the child’s unique experiences and ways of knowing at-present. It is
valid and reliable information, because I collaborate directly with the child, their parent, and educator to ensure my assessment information directly reflects the perceptions of those involved in the child’s discoveries. This informative assessment facilitates meaningful dialogue with children and their parents/caregivers. After gathering this information, I apply it to the four broad areas of learning found in the Framework (i.e. Well-being and Belonging; Exploration and Creativity; Languages and Literacies, and; Social Responsibility and Diversity) (BC Ministry of Education, 2008) and consider how the child’s discoveries interrelate with the reflective questions posed under these four areas of learning. All of this information (photos, samples of artwork, transcription records, observational notes, documented reflections, AEPS-2 summary sheets, consultation suggestions, family goals and priorities, Framework areas of learning) about the child’s experiences is collected and collated into a booklet format, which I share through regularly scheduled meetings. I also present the booklet in its entirety to the child and his/her family at the time they are discharged from the SCDP. Many parents/caregivers have commented to me that this booklet serves dual purposes: as a meaningful memento of their involvement with SCDP; and as a record for how their child learned to construct meaning in and from the world during their early childhood years. I feel proud to present this booklet to families, because I know that my involvement has afforded an understanding of the child’s unique journey, that the information contained in it is strength-based, inclusive and family-centered, and that I am practicing towards an ethical, child-rights stance. The contents of the booklet challenge the conventional discourse of school-readiness by involving children and interested adults directly in the child’s learning. It celebrates the child’s unique ways of knowing. In addition, by the time I have completed my service with families, I sense they have a clearer understanding of their child’s unique abilities, ways of knowing, and interests, and that they are in a better position to advocate for their child’s special rights as they transition to Kindergarten.
Professional Development Workshop

Title: “Reconsidering ‘School-readiness:’ Open Window or Closed Door?”

Appendix B includes a PowerPoint presentation suitable for a full-day professional development workshop for SCDP Consultants. This workshop consists of current research outlining traditional and postmodern views of school-readiness, includes strategies and activities that raise the awareness of assessment practices that marginalize or broaden understandings of young children with special rights who access services from SCDP program. It is designed to invite SCDP staff to discover children’s diverse ways of knowing through authentic assessment strategies while concurrently promoting their participation in community-based child care settings.

In Part One of the workshop, the theoretical stance and guiding theorists for this project are introduced. The open window/closed door metaphor is presented.

Part Two of the workshop examines the language used to describe young children with special rights and the associated images that are created through this language. Participants are invited to consider how particular languages and images legitimize dominant views of school-readiness discourses (e.g., normalization and developmentality), and will problematize these images and language from an ethical and child-rights perspective.

Part Three of the workshop invites participants to examine the tactics of assessment used in SCDP. Standardized assessment and authentic assessment tactics are presented and the “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 233) is introduced as the means for appreciating, over the course of time, how children’s unique lives and experiences contribute to their, and to our own, theories about the world.

Part Four of the workshop presents the BC Early Learning Framework as the government’s pedagogical proposal for supporting early learning in community-based child care
settings. The Framework is presented as a potential pedagogical foundation through which SCDP can support early learning activities in community-based child care settings and other life-space contexts. Examples of authentic assessments I have completed with children through my work activities will be shared (with consent from families).

The workshop concludes with a reconnection to the open window/closed door metaphor and participants are asked to reconsider their earlier definitions of school-readiness.

**Summary**

In this chapter I connected the postmodern theories and the scholarly literature reviewed in Chapter Two to my practice as a SCDP Consultant. I brought awareness to pedagogical strategies that invite children and families to be active participants in interpreting their learning experiences. I have narrated an alternate school-readiness discourse that situates the child with special rights, who accesses services from the SCDP, as a competent, capable, and contributing citizen at-present (Delrio, 2012; Phillips, 2010). I considered how language and images of young children, as found in the Framework (BC Ministry of Education, 2008), can be incorporated into the day-to-day activities of SCDP Consultants. I have proposed how authentic assessment tactics can be employed through SCDP activities as means for ethically discovering the ways of knowing for children with special rights. Finally, this chapter described a workshop that invites SCDP Consultants to reconsider dominant school-readiness discourses and assessment activities from a postmodern perspective. In Chapter Four, I present my reflections on this project, future research directions, and recommendations.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I return to the concerns that compelled me to embark on this project; namely, that early intervention practices, when enacted with the narrow focus of preparing children with special needs for an inevitable transition to kindergarten at five-years-of-age, legitimate a particular image of young children through the discourses of normalization and developmentality as constituted in, and inextricably linked to, dominant views of school-readiness. These concerns are connected with standardized, norm-referenced child assessment practices that are commonly used in the SCDP program. I present how my understanding of these concerns and my ability to respond to them has deepened and broadened through this project, and I offer some reflections and consider future directions.

Restrictive Discourses and Assessment Practices: Closing the Door

Through my research, I learned that the philosophical underpinnings of standardized, norm-referenced assessment practices positions young children as passive recipients of evaluative practices that lead to descriptions of them as in-need of remediation and conjure up images of weakness and difference. These assessment practices limit opportunities for discovering how children with special rights make meaning from the world. Standardized assessment tools identify young children’s skills and abilities through narrow measures of typical development and often result in recommendations for early intervention activities that are exclusively designed to ameliorate developmental delays. The goal of learning, then, becomes improving the child’s deficient skills/abilities by the time they transition to kindergarten, otherwise their success in the mandated school system is deemed at-risk for failure. This practice of teaching children discrete skills as means for improving developmental delays identified through standardized assessment tools limits other opportunities for young children with special rights to share the ways they make meaning from their world. I maintain that their access to an
inclusive early learning environment is compromised when adult attention only focuses on ameliorating disabilities/differences. As well, if we only focus our efforts on understanding children’s knowledge and skills through particular, privileged domains of development (e.g., academic readiness as assessed through the cognitive domain), the child with special rights may never have opportunities make their ways of knowing visible. Their desire to learn about what is interesting to them becomes marginalized and their stories become silenced. This is problematic from ethical and child-rights perspectives because the goal of intervention then becomes about making the Other into the Same, rather than inviting and supporting the discovery of children’s theories about the world. Additionally, the child with special rights learns that the only way they are understood is through lenses of normality and developmentality.

Further, as I have argued, through supporting community-based child care centers that make pedagogical decisions based on a maturational/developmental lens, SCDP, by extension, is complicit in perpetuating narrow views of school-readiness. If the mandate of SCDP is to support the inclusion of young children with special rights in community-based child care settings, then I emphatically suggest that SCDP offices reconsider how the underlying values of inclusion, strength-based, and family-centered practice are indeed practiced in the day-to-day Consultants’ activities.

**Opening the Window: Reconstructing Language and Images**

Through employing critical theories that attend to discourse and its politics, I illustrated how language used to describe young children can either construct images of inadequacy (as in the term, child with special needs) or capability (as in the term, child with special rights). Additionally, reconsidering assessment practices for supporting learning rather than of learning is very powerful. Particular images of children become legitimized through the language used to describe them. Since I choose to practice from a stance that embraces the plurality of the human
experience, I am proposing to use the term child with special rights and employing assessment practices for supporting young children’s learning. Additionally, I introduced the *16 Outcomes for Education* as listed by Tom Drummond (2012) (see Appendix A) as a means for narrating new meanings for the term *school-readiness*.

**Opening the Window: Ethical Forms of Evaluation**

Through my research, I discovered that competing constructs of school-readiness prevent singular understanding. Because of this, alternative assessment approaches that employ multiple strategies for making children’s discoveries visible to others are important to this discussion about school-readiness. Using the languages of photography and video-recording of children’s learning experiences, obtaining samples of their drawings and communications, creating learning stories that reflect the ways of knowing for children with special rights, finding ways to support diverse abilities, and using curriculum-based assessment tools that link functional skills with purposeful activities of daily living, are all means for ethically encountering the young child involved with SCDP services. Consulting with children and families directly about the discoveries elicited from these authentic assessments *opens the window* to collectively viewing the child as a unique social actor. It also positions families in a more strategic position to advocate for their child’s right to be a valued member of an inclusive educational context as they approach the transition to kindergarten. This approach to early childhood education permits the sharing of authentic information about the child with special rights with interested stakeholders.

**Project Limitations**

While this project has proposed a number of pedagogical and child assessment practices, it is not meant to suggest that these are the only practices that are needed to support the reconstruction of traditional school-readiness discourses. I have shared a limited number of authentic assessment practices that I have employed with the permission and support of my
direct supervisor through my own SCDP practice. However, these authentic assessment practices may help other SCDP Consultants consider children’s rights while they are supporting the children they work with. Furthermore, due to the small scope and the financial and time limitations of this project, factors such as the availability and cost of technology (i.e., cameras, video cameras, computers, printers) and the realities of large SCDP Consultant caseloads and funder program outcome-reporting mandates have not been considered in this discussion.

**Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Through my investigation into the government created and funded SCDP and the *BC Early Learning Framework* initiatives, I have detected incongruities between SCDP philosophy and the *Framework* philosophy. Firstly, the *Framework* document and the philosophy on which this document was built have not found their way into either the work of the SCDP or most of the community-based child care settings in my community. I am left wondering why programs like SCDP and projects like the *Framework*, both initiatives of and sponsored by the same provincial government ministries, are so philosophically different. While SCDP policy, language, and practice aligns more with developmental psychology, the principles of the *Framework* are aligned with more critical approaches to early childhood and with some of the tenets of postmodernism (e.g., no two children are the same; differences in individual social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic characteristics enrich their own and others’ early learning opportunities) (BC Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2). Were SCDP policy makers unaware of the introduction of the *Framework* and not consulted about the implication for SCDP policy and practice? Further, if SCDPs are charged with supporting the very community-based early childhood education programs the *Framework* is intended to provide pedagogical guidance to, why would there not have been closer consultation between policy makers when the *Framework* was initially launched in 2008? A review of how government-backed projects like the
Framework are introduced and supported so there is consistency between the philosophies of existing programs like SCDP and these new initiatives is suggested.

Moreover, incongruities between program values of inclusion, strength-based and family-centered practice and standardized assessment practices in SCDP is significant and carries serious consequences for the future, suggesting a critical need for further examination into how SCDP is required to report child outcomes to funders. In order to enhance SCDP Consultant understanding and engagement of authentic assessment practices as means for reconstructing inequitable, school-readiness discourses, I recommend an organized, intentional, re-launch of the BC Early Learning Framework for early childhood educators and SCDP Consultants in my community and ongoing, multi-session workshops for Consultants to formally learn: (a) how the Framework can be incorporated into SCDP practice, (b) how to employ authentic assessment with young children and their families as well as educators, (c) how to incorporate a pedagogy of listening through SCDP practice, and (d) to question, using critical reflection, the assumptions about school-readiness (and other constraining discourses) that are present in current prevailing SCDP practices.

These recommendations aim to rework the traditional views of school-readiness to a framework that embraces children’s rights to education through ethical adult encounters and encourages platforms to permit the sharing of diverse knowledge, abilities, and experiences with others. Essentially, they are intended to open the window to new discoveries.

**Final Thoughts**

My passion for working with young children who have special rights and their families comes from a desire to live in a world that is free from oppression and celebrates the plurality of the human experience. I am deeply concerned that our early childhood education institutions are perpetually underfunded, under-resourced, and view young children through the narrow, yet
traditionally dominant, lens of child development. Also, I am troubled by the pressures of prevailing neoliberal capitalist order, which insist that our future workforce be inscribed with the predominating values and politics of present time. I truly believe that the rapid advancements we are experiencing globally at-present prevents us from predicting which skills and abilities today’s young children will need twenty years down the road. I worry that citizens with special rights will continue to have their ways of knowing marginalized if we don’t learn how to embrace diversity and use authentic tactics that assist with making their ways of knowing visible to others. I hope the minds of politicians, business people, educational administrators, and early childhood educators become less focused on the creation of the future workforce, and instead, focus more on how to ethically encounter the Other, as a person first, who by virtue of being born, has legitimate rights for full membership in society.

1 Endnote

When I was young, I grew up in a very old farm house which had only solid exterior doors. My parents taught me that I was not allowed to open the door if I heard someone knocking on the other side, especially if my parents were not home or around, because if I did, harm could come to me. Because these doors were solid (no windows in them), I could never see who or what was on the other side unless I had my parent’s permission. Even to this day, I feel nervous about opening doors to people for fear of potential harm coming to me. Windows, however, were different. I was permitted to look outside through the windows. I could see the weather, and the beauty of the neighborhood. I could make decisions about whether I would stay inside, or go outside to play, based on the assessment I made about the weather, or who was outside, as I looked through the window. On sunny days, I was allowed to open the windows to let the fresh air from outside into the house. I loved to feel and smell the fresh air as it filled the room. For me, closed doors came to represent constraint. Open windows came to represent freedom, or possibility. This is what the metaphors of an open window or a closed door mean to me.
References


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Appendix A


16 Outcomes for Early Education

When children leave early childhood to enter common school they can

- Participate as a member of an interdependent community
- Care for themselves, the others, and the community
- Treat others with love and compassion
- Cooperate with other children to accomplish group goals
- Celebrate group accomplishment
- Laugh and play with a tangible sense of joy
- Express many human emotions in language and art
- Be inquisitive
- Initiate new ideas and invent solutions to problems
- Stick at difficult tasks or come back to them later in order to succeed
- Run, hit, catch, throw, kick and tumble
- Sing and dance with exuberance
- Paint, draw, sculpt, and construct objects of beauty
- Care for common spaces and materials toward cleanliness and order
- Greet guests with courtesy and charm
- Act in stewardship for the environment and one's own health and well-being

These sixteen outcomes could define the common intentions we have for provisions for spaces for children to grow in a community of parents, extended families, educators and staff — no matter what setting, at home or school. A focus on 16 Capabilities challenges us to evolve spaces toward a common possibility to enable a spectrum of capabilities grow in diverse places with diverse participants and diverse cultures.
Welcome to the presentation titled, Reconsidering school-readiness: Open window or closed door? This presentation is part of my Master of Education capstone project. It is intended to provide information to Consultants working in the Supported Child Development program in BC.
Preamble

• Your (re)-Introduction to Kari Penner

• What has led me to this point . . .
  • My work/life experience(s)
  • My educational journey

• I will explain to participants about who I am and a bit about my education and experience
• How my education has shaped my ways of knowing about young children with diverse abilities
• How I hope to use my research to inform my practice
• How I hope my research might also inform my colleague’s practice
Metaphor – Open Window/Closed Door

- Do we look at children with special needs through an open window or closed door?
- The decisions we make about how we construct the image of the child who accesses our services will influence how we view them and provide our services.
- We can choose to look through an open window or a closed door – the decision is ultimately yours!

- This presentation will problematize conventional “school readiness” discourse as evidenced in Supported Child Development Program assessment practices with young children with special needs from a postmodern theoretical stance.
- Using the metaphors of an ‘open window’ or a ‘closed door’ in relation to young children’s readiness to transition from preschools/daycare programs to kindergarten, I will consider how the use of conventional forms of child assessment, firmly rooted in dominant school readiness discourses, limit opportunities for children with special needs to make their knowledge and abilities visible to others.
My Hope for this Presentation

- To share findings from postmodern literature about “school readiness”
- To introduce SCD Consultants to postmodernism
- To insert an ethical, critical, reflective lens to our practice
- To invite SCD Consultants to connect learning, assessment our beliefs about school readiness

My hopes for this presentation are as follows:
- To share findings from my in-depth examination of current scholarly literature about “school readiness”
- To introduce SCD Consultants to postmodernism as another theoretical lens through which to look at our work with young children
- To insert a critical, reflective lens through which to consider our work with young children
- To invite SCD Consultants to consider the connection between learning, assessment, and school readiness discourses
Individual Activity (15 minutes):
What does the term “school readiness” mean to you?

Instruction:

- Using the materials provided (e.g. pens, crayons, markers, play dough, children’s cameras), please document what you believe “school readiness” is and use the materials to either write down, draw, or depict what this term means to you.
- You may get up and move around.
- You may collaborate with your neighbors.
- You may use the cameras to take photos.

Plan:

- Participants engage in a process of pedagogical discovery throughout this workshop.
- Participants record their learning, based on their personal theories of school readiness.
- Participants will consider “school readiness” from a critical, reflective, and ethical standpoint.
- Participants are introduced to new ideas and spaces are opened for them to raise new questions and doubts.
Overview

Part 1: Examining “School Readiness”
✓ What is school readiness anyway?
A review of the literature

Part 2: Languages and Images – Who is “the child” we work with?
✓ Examining language used to describe young children who receive SCD services
✓ Connecting images to practice – are we congruent?

Now that you have constructed your theory of school readiness, I invite you to hold on to this idea as we move through the presentation materials.

In Part 1,

○ I will introduce you to the particular theoretical stance I have taken to complete this project as well as introduce you to the theorists who guide my thinking.
○ I will also introduce and define key terms used throughout the presentation.
○ I will explain how the metaphor of an “open window” or “closed door” relates to my discussion.

In Part 2,

○ I will invite us to reconsider these descriptors and images through a child rights perspective and supported through application of my particular theoretical stance.
○ I will then discuss/problematize how particular images of children inform our practice.
Overview

Part 3: Assessment Practices and School Readiness as Inextricably Linked

✓ Problematizing standardized assessment practices in SCD
✓ Reconsidering child assessment through a child rights, strength-based, lens

Part 4: Linking Authentic Assessment and Pedagogical Practices in SCD

✓ Authentic assessment practices/pedagogy of listening as the foundation for making ways of knowing visible to others

- In Part 3,
  - I will share information from the literature regarding the use of standardized assessment tools with young children and problematize standardized assessment practices in SCD through a child rights, strength-based lens.
  - I will also introduce you to the literature about strength-based authentic assessment practices.

- In Part 4,
  - I will introduce you to the *BC Early Learning Framework*,
  - I will present some suggestions for sharing the information we learn from the young children we work alongside to their families and other interested stakeholders.
Examing School Readiness

Part 1

So, without further ado, I will now start with part 1 – examining school readiness.
My philosophy of early childhood education tends to align with what is called a “postmodern” worldview.

Postmodernism is a more recent theoretical tradition (1970’s to present time). What means to have this worldview is that we try to embrace the plurality of the human experience, and that there are many ways in which to view our diverse experiences.

In the tenets of this newer tradition, there is not just one right way to experience early childhood education, from the perspective of the young child or of the educator. By extension, there is not just one way to experience our work as SCD Consultants.

Theoretical Stance/Guiding Theorists

- Michel Foucault
  (1926-1984)
- Emmanuel Levinas
  (1906-1995)
Michel Foucault

- Michel Foucault is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the current era (Mac Naughton, 2005).
- His work has challenged collective ideas about policing, schooling, welfare organizations, gay rights and the care of the mentally-ill (Foucault, 1980).
- Much of his work explores relationships between knowledge, truth, and power and the effects of these relationships on individuals and their institutions (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980).
- Foucault is known for challenging the assumption that knowledge is free of, and distinct from, politics (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Foucault, 1972).
- Foucault’s (1972) notion of “discourse” is of importance to discuss in relation to school readiness.
- The discourse of developmentalism suggests children progress through predefined stages of development until such time that they are deemed “ready” to enter school (Gesell Institute for Child Development, n.d.).
- These discourses operate through what Foucault (1980) calls “regimes of truth.”
- For Foucault (1980), truths establish categories of power and because of this, become highly political and contestable.
- Foucault also coined the concept of “governmentality” (Foucault, 1991, p. 87) as a particular way of understanding how populations are administered within the prevalent discourses of the state. He claims that the techniques, policies and procedures created by the state are designed to govern the conduct of both individuals and populations at every level - not just at the administrative or political level (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1991).
Emmanuel Levinas

- Emmanuel Levinas is best known for his work on ethics and his philosophy of the “Other” (Levinas, 1987).
- He challenges the idea of prescribed and assessable relationships, the norm of autonomy, the freedom of the self-sufficient subject, and conceptualizing knowledge (Levinas, 1987).
- Central to his philosophy is a questioning of what knowledge is and what it does, who it benefits and who it relegates (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).
- He asserts that the pervasive desire to become an autonomous and rational subject is achieved through tactics of assimilation.
- These tactics of assimilation apply abstract, universal systems of truth to make the Other (person) into the Same (as me).
- This desire to Other comes from wanting to banish uncertainty in favour of order and predictability (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).
- In SCD, the technologies of standardized, norm referenced assessments (checklists, questionnaires) that presuppose evaluative certainty of children’s adherence to or variance from developmentally expected norms are one example of the way school readiness discourse (shrouded in the mask of developmentally appropriate practice) are used to normalize the educated subject in discourse (Mac Naughton, 2005).
What is “School Readiness”? A Look at the Research

- There has been a great deal of interest in describing school readiness since the turn of the 20th century
- Gesell – established normative child development trajectories (Gesell, nd)
- Coined the term, “school readiness”
- Developmental domains (motor skills, adaptive skills, language skills, personal/social skills)
- Children’s abilities were measured through standardized, norm referenced child development assessment “tools”
- Performance in these domains are still viewed as the foundational skills that signal children’s academic readiness for mandated school (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004)

• In North America from the turn of the 20th century to present time, there has been a great deal of enthusiasm for studying children’s development and learning, and in particular, determining when children are ready for mandated school entry (Carr, 2003; Nicholson et al., 2014).
• Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) was the first Director of the Child Study Center at Yale University and is considered the “father of child development in the United States” (Yale School of Medicine, 2014). He is best known for his studies of “normal” child development and for developing assessment tools that determine and measuring normal child development trajectories (Yale School of Medicine, 2014).
• It is largely due to Gesell’s maturational/developmental theory that the term school readiness was coined (Gesell Institute of Child Development, n.d.).
• Gesell established normative trends for the following areas of development: motor skills; adaptive (cognitive) skills; language skills, and; personal/social skills (Gesell Institute of Child Development, n.d.).
• Children’s abilities within these areas of development are most often measured using standardized, norm-referenced child development assessment tools (Bagnato, 2005) and the performance (or lack thereof) associated with these developmental domains are viewed by many as the foundational skills which signal children’s academic readiness to begin mandated school (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004).
What is “School Readiness”? A Look at the Research

- There are alternative views of school readiness which disrupt the maturational/developmental construct Gesell proposed.
- Drummond (2012) proposes 16 outcomes for early childhood education that highlight other important qualities aside from academic readiness.

- However, alternative views of school readiness disrupt the maturational/developmental theoretical construct.
- They highlight other important qualities in children besides academic readiness or the ability to pass a knowledge test for entry into elementary school.
What is “School Readiness”? A Look at the Research


16 Outcomes for Early Education
When children leave early childhood to enter common school they can

- Participate as a member of an interdependent community
- Care for themselves, the others, and the community
- Treat others with love and compassion
- Cooperate with other children to accomplish group goals
- Celebrate group accomplishments
- Laugh and play with a tangible sense of joy
- Express many human emotions in language and act
- Be inquisitive
- Initiate new ideas and invent solutions to problems
- Stick at difficult tasks or come back to them later in order to succeed
- Run, hit, catch, throw, kick, and tumble
- Sing and dance with abandon
- Paint, draw, sculpt, and construct objects of beauty
- Care for common spaces and materials toward cleanliness and order
- Grow grains with courtesy and charm
- Act in stewardship for the environment and one’s own health and well-being

- His sixteen outcomes as seen on this slide are highly relational in nature, flexible yet objective/measureable in terms of assessment, and desirable in terms of social justice (Drummond, 2012).

- Drummond stresses traditional views that establish children as ready or not ready to become members of the larger society through their acquisition of individualistic skills that permit them to fill jobs at some future point of time helps to feed a competitive, capitalistic economic system at the expense of social justice.

- He, and others (see Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Moss & Petrie, 2002) contend children’s success at school is generally correlated with seatwork, testing, verbal learning in English, and acquiescence to authority that is expected of good, well-behaved employees. The not-ready child (and their families) are seen as in-need of remediation, and the act of readying is accomplished (in part) through centralized systems like early childhood education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Drummond, 2012; Rinaldi, 2006).
What is “School Readiness”? A Look at the Research

- Wesley & Buysse (2003) – study re: beliefs and perceptions of school readiness among professionals working with young children
- Findings: tensions and conflicting views and personal philosophies
- Findings: pressure placed on children, teachers, and families for children to perform well in kindergarten

- Brandt & Grace (2005) – developed, field tested and validated quantitative school readiness instruments to measure cohort improvement over time and inform curriculum planning
- The tool became used for an unintended purpose of determining eligibility for kindergarten which went against their beliefs and the purpose for the instrument.

Similar sentiments were shared by Wesley and Buysse (2003) in their study which examined beliefs and perceptions of school readiness among parents and professionals working with young children.

They found participants reported tensions and conflicting views of school readiness, personal philosophies of education, and the expectations set forth by the governing state mandates.

In an effort to understand the readiness of student cohorts entering kindergarten, another study by Brandt and Grace (2005) used a social constructivist epistemology to develop, field test, and validate two quantitative school readiness instruments: *Schools Ready for Children*, and *Children Ready for School*.

Their intent was to create measurement instruments to track cohort group improvement over time and to inform curriculum planning.

However, these researchers expressed concern that the *Children Ready for School* instrument was seen by users as a tool to determine eligibility for Kindergarten.
What is “School Readiness”? A Look at the Research

- Postmodern views disrupt traditional views
- Gore: “8 micropractices of power”
- Micropractice of “normalization”
- Normalization serves to compare, invoke, require or conform to a standard that expresses particular truths about the developing child (Mac Naughton, 2005)
- This is particularly problematic when considering the child with special needs because of the desire to bring order and certainty to children’s developmental trajectories (Mac Naughton, 2005), and to make the Other into the Same (Levinas, 1987).
- Historical shift in meaning (Fendler, 2001)
- The term “child with special needs” becomes legitimized

- Gore (1998, as cited in Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 30-31) identifies eight “micropractices of power”
- These practices of power bring regimes of truth to life in specific fields of work such as early childhood education (Mac Naughton, 2005).
- Of added importance to this discussion of school readiness is the micropractice of “normalization” (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 31).
- This practice serves to compare, invoke, require or conform to a standard that expresses particular truths about the developing child (Mac Naughton, 2005).
- This is particularly problematic when considering the child with special needs because of the dominant discourse’s desire to bring order and certainty to children’s developmental trajectories (Mac Naughton, 2005), and to make the Other into the Same (Levinas, 1987).
- In her discussion of normality, Fendler (2001) describes the historical shift assigned to the terms “normal” and “normalization.”
- After 1800, the term normal came to represent the central term that was in opposition to “pathological”.
- Therefore, anything that could not be specifically defined as normal (or average) was then regarded as pathological or not-normal (Fendler, 2001).
- Normal, thus, became limited to the characteristics of the average, but the possibilities for being not-normal (or atypical) were boundless! (Fendler, 2001).
- The assessment of abilities through standardized, norm referenced development assessment tools privileges normal development as desirable, and all departures from widely understood norms are seen as atypical, or even deviant (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Fendler, 2001).
- This is problematic from a social justice perspective because the image of young children as in-need of help or remediation becomes legitimized through the term, “child with special needs.”
Individual Activity (15 minutes):
How do we begin to ask ourselves questions about the “taken for granted” developmental theories?

Instruction:

- Using the materials provided (e.g. pens, crayons, markers, play dough, children’s cameras), please document some of the activities you plan when working with the child who has special needs.
- You may write down words, draw, or depict what this term means to you.
- You may get up and move around.
- You may collaborate with your neighbors.
- You may use the cameras to take photos.

Plan:

- Participants engage in a process of pedagogical discovery throughout this workshop.
- Participants record their learning, based on their personal theories of school readiness.
- Participants will consider developmental theories from a critical, reflective, and ethical standpoint.
- Participants are introduced to new ideas and spaces are opened for them to raise new questions and doubts.
Part 1 Summary

• Competing constructs of school readiness prevent singular understandings
• Is it academic readiness? Or more like Tom Drummond’s ideas? Or something else?
• Confusing and complex!

• It seems clear from the literature that there are competing constructs of school readiness which prevent singular understanding.
• On the one hand, the dominant discourse of school readiness, conceptualized as academic readiness, provides a straightforward framework for understanding its components.
• On the other hand, the complexities and tensions associated with the real-lived experiences (such as the pressures all stakeholders sense in discussions of school readiness, the ways in which to measure school readiness attributes, the politics of language used to ascribe features of school readiness) are multifaceted and even confusing.
• This is especially true when considering the child whose experiences and developmental trajectories do not align with expected developmental norms.
• With this in mind, I will further consider some of these complexities as I contemplate how language used to describe children conjures up particular images of them and suggest that these images influence our work through SCD in the next section.
Language & Images: Who is the child I work with?

Part 2

So now we shift gears a bit, and consider the language and images of the child we work with. Who is the child we work with?
These words are often associated with children who have special needs and are used to describe particular aspects of their development.

These words come from a traditional view of children, with their origins in modernist thinking.

Some of these words can be traced back to the time of Enlightenment (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).
Words Often Associated with Young Children with Diverse Abilities in Reggio Emilia, Italy

- Special rights
- Capable
- Competent
- Rich
- Citizens
- At-promise
- Unique
- Diverse
- Contributory
- Participatory

Edwards, Gandini & Ferman, 2012

- These words are often associated with children who have special needs and are used to describe particular aspects of their development.
- These words come from a postmodern view of children, with their origins in postmodernist and social constructivist thinking.
Large Group Discussion (15 minutes):
Comparing Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In North America . . .</th>
<th>In Reggio Emilia, Italy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“in need of . . .”</td>
<td>Special rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“vulnerable”</td>
<td>Capable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“at-risk for . . .”</td>
<td>Competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“special needs”</td>
<td>Rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“delayed”</td>
<td>At-promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“disabled”</td>
<td>Unique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“normal”</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“atypical”</td>
<td>Contributory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“poor”</td>
<td>Participatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“developmentally appropriate”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Large Group Discussion:
Comparing language and constructing images of the child with special needs

Instruction

- Participants are invited to compare the descriptors in both columns and discuss how these images either constrain or empower children through the images we have of them.
- Using the sheets of paper I have prepared in advance outlining both of these lists, participants will be asked to select which terms from these lists they feel most comfortable using to describe the children they work with.
- They will be asked to consider other terms that could be added to both lists, and will be asked to write them down on their paper.
- This paper will be added to their pedagogical documentation.
- I will speak about Foucault and the notion of discourse, and how this language and associated images become constituted through languages of discourses. When we hear these terms, we think we know what they mean, but they are actually not defined anywhere. They are “regimes of truth” about the human experience.

Plan:

- Participants engage in a process of pedagogical discovery throughout this workshop.
- Participants record their learning, based on their personal theories of school readiness.
- Participants will consider these images from a critical, reflective, and ethical standpoint.
- Participants are introduced to new ideas and spaces are opened for them to raise new questions and doubts.
A Word About “Needs” and “Rights”

- Traditional and contemporary images of young children, and the language used to describe children contrast sharply with one another depending on the discourses.

- Postmodernism has caused me to reflect upon the language I use to describe the children I work with.

- The universally understood term “child with special needs” when ascribed to the child who has a physical, developmental, or learning disability conjures up images of children as weak, vulnerable and non-normative.

- The image of children as capable and contributor found in the comparison slide contrast sharply with the traditional images of children (especially children with special needs) as needing education or remediation of developmental deficits as found in programs like SCD.

- The literature describing the principles of the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Rinaldi, 2006; Rinaldi, 2012; Soncini, 2012), as well as the tenets of postmodernism as understood through Foucault (1980) and Levinas (1987) have caused me to reflect upon the language I have selected to describe differences between children, such as the universally understood term ‘child with special needs.’

- Like educators from Reggio Emilia, I believe that all children have exceptionalities and “special needs.”

- When this particular term is ascribed to the child who has a physical, developmental, or learning disability through programs like SCD, it conjures up images of children as weak, vulnerable, and non-normative.
A Word About “Needs” and “Rights”

• I argue for choosing an image that views children who are capable and contributory regardless of their perceived abilities.

• I believe all children have exceptionalities and “special needs.”

• But I believe the children we work with have differing “rights” because of their diverse abilities.

• Borrowing from Reggio Emilia, I prefer the term “child with special rights” when referring to the children who access our SCD services.

• I argue for choosing the image of the child who is capable and contributory.

• This image constructs the child firstly as a human being, a social actor – who is not defined by their disability – but who has differing rights because of their disability (Soncini, 2012).

• When children are viewed from a rights perspective, there is greater opportunity to think critically about how we ensure their full access to participation in the early childhood classroom (Soncini, 2012).

• Therefore, reconsidering the image of the ‘child with special needs’ and reconstructing the term to the ‘child with special rights,’ as they have done in Reggio Emilia, becomes an act of political activism (Foucault, 1980).

• While the terms “child with special needs” and “child with special rights” are used interchangeably in the literature (Soncini, 2012), in the interest of inserting critical reflection in my own texts, henceforth I will refer to children who access services from the SCDP (or other early intervention programs) as children with special rights.
Examining Language/Descriptors: Can we truly know the child?

- Levinas (1987) suggests that we cannot know other people because we are not them
- Resist the idea of making the Other into the Same
- Foucault (1980) - the politics of our time influence whose stories are told, and whose are marginalized
- We cannot possibly know the child with special rights if their ways of knowing are marginalized through tactics of evaluation like standardized assessment practices

- When reflecting on Levinas’ (1987) philosophy about the desire to control the Other, and to make the Other (person) into the Same (as me) in order for me to “know” them, standardized assessment practices and prescribed discrete-skill “intervention” activities carried out in early childhood classrooms become problematic from a social justice perspective.
- These intervention activities often become the predominant focus for the adults who are involved in the child’s life.
- Additionally, the constant assessment of whether the child with special needs acquires these prescribed skills or not, becomes the main adult concern for “preparing” the child for Kindergarten.
- When reflecting on Foucault’s (1980) philosophy about governmentality and discourse, we see that there is an inherent desire to understand the child through a particular lens – the lens of developmental psychology.
- If we remember that Foucault believes there are many ways through which to understand the human experience, then we see how normalizing development through standardized forms of assessment is unjust.
Reconsidering the desire to “Understand” the *Other*

- So – if we can’t truly know the child, how do we claim to understand them?
- According to Levinas, we can’t – consider other ways we can conceptualize our discoveries with them
- We can work towards having ethical encounters with the *Other*, as a way of learning more about them
- Each time we meet, there are opportunities for learning new things about each other
- And, there are opportunities to make knowledge visible to others by exploring the connections young children make to their world

- For Levinas, understanding the *Other* would suggest that we truly know them, and that we can never really know them because we are not them.
- So then, if we can’t truly “know” or understand the view of another person, how can we conceptualize our work with them?
- Levinas (1987) suggests we consider our interactions with the Other as an encounter.
- Levinas (1987) contends that it takes time to encounter the *Other*. Each encounter with the *Other* allows opportunities for mutual renewal and surprise.
- I believe we have an ethical obligation in SCD to use the time we have with young children with special rights to make their learning visible to others without the pressures associated with dominant, befuddling, school readiness discourses. Young children learn in dynamic ways, and it is up to the adults charged with working with them to find the connections children make to the world as encountered through their learning contexts
Part 2 Summary

- The words we use to describe the children we work with can either elicit images of concern or possibility.
- If we are concerned about practicing from an ethical location, we consider that we cannot truly know and/or understand the *Other*.
- *We resist the discourses which serve to marginalize whose stories are told and whose are not.*
- Instead, we can view our time with the *Other* as an opportunity for ethical encounters – the opportunity to experience new learning and connections.

- In summary, the words we use to describe the children we work with can either elicit images more associated with concern or more associated with possibility.
- If we believe in ethical practice, we consider that we cannot truly know and/or understand the *Other*.
- Instead, we resist the discourses that restrict or marginalize whose stories are told, and whose are not.
- We can view our time with the *Other* as opportunities for ethical encounters which provide opportunities to experience new learning and connections together.
So now that we have covered the image of the child, and have possibly decided on the image we prefer, I will now turn to how assessment practices are shaped through school readiness discourses.
While early childhood education professionals may find traditional, standardized assessment measures take less time to administer and yield psychometrically valid and reliable results, they do not formulate a holistic and representative view of the child's ways of knowing (Bagnato, 2005; Nicholson et al., 2014).

Standardized Assessment: What is it Anyway?

- In SCDP, the most commonly used standardized assessments are:
  - Ages and Stages Questionnaire
  - Ages and Stages Social/Emotional Questionnaire
  - Battelle Developmental Inventory

- There has been discussion about the introduction of a new standardized measure called the Developmental Assessment of Young Children, 2nd ed (DAYC-2)

- We are surrounded by other interventionists (IDP, SLP, OT, PT) and diagnostic professionals (e.g psychologists, BCAAN) who use a barrage of standardized assessment to measure performance in developmental domains specific to their area(s) of concern.

- They measure performance in developmental domains and compare the results against a normative sample (usually from the eastern part of the US where many of these tools are developed)

- They are usually timely to administer and yield psychometrically valid and reliable results
Standardized Assessment: What’s the Problem?

- However, they don’t usually take the child’s context into account (including the testing environment itself).
- Nor do they usually involve families in meaningful ways.
- These assessment methods “close the door” to discovering the complexities of children’s unique lives, experiences, and ways of expression.
- They privilege the idea of sameness and marginalize the skills or abilities that do not adhere to the norm.

- They also do not take contexts into account (including the environment in which the assessment occurs), or involve families in the assessment process in meaningful ways (Mac Naughton, 2005; Rinaldi, 2012).
- In my view, this approach to assessing young children’s knowledge and skills essentially close the door to discovering the complexities of children’s unique lives, experiences, and ways of expression. This standardized approach to assessment privileges the idea of “sameness” and marginalizes those whose skills or abilities do not adhere to the norm.
- When reflecting on Levinas’ (1987) philosophy about the desire to control the Other, and to make the Other (person) into the Same (as me) in order for me to “know” them, standardized assessment practices and prescribed discrete-skill “intervention” activities carried out in early childhood classrooms become problematic from a social justice perspective.
- These intervention activities often become the predominant focus for the adults who are involved in the child’s life. Additionally, the constant assessment of whether the child with special needs acquires these prescribed skills or not, becomes the main adult concern for “preparing” the child for Kindergarten.
Standardized Assessment: Linking to School Readiness Discourses

- Standardized assessments are a tool employed to control the Other, and to make the Other more like the Same through the associated “intervention” activities.
- These intervention activities become the predominant focus for the adults who are involved in the child’s life.
- The constant adult assessment of whether the child acquires these prescribed skills or not becomes the main adult concern for “preparing” the child “to become” ready for kindergarten.

- When reflecting on Levinas’ (1987) philosophy about the desire to control the Other, and to make the Other (person) into the Same (as me) in order for me to “know” them, standardized assessment practices and prescribed discrete-skill “intervention” activities carried out in early childhood classrooms become problematic from a social justice perspective.
- These intervention activities often become the predominant focus for the adults who are involved in the child’s life.
- The discourses at work are normalization (bringing performance more in-line with the normative samples from the standardized assessment tool) and developmentality (“developmentally appropriate” activities carried out to remediate deficits in particular developmental domains)
- Additionally, the constant assessment of whether the child with special needs acquires these prescribed skills or not, becomes the main adult concern for “preparing” the child for Kindergarten.
Standardized Assessment: A Question of Social Justice and Ethics

As Nicholson and colleagues (2014) passionately argue:

Discourse on readiness should reflect a value for the comprehensive story of who children are — including their unique life stories and the spectrum of rich individual and group differences that influence the beliefs, values, and developmental goals that impact their life trajectories instead of being limited to objectifying labels, rankings, and classifications (p. 3)

- We need to question ourselves when we are doing things “to” others in order to find out how different they might be when compared with normative samples or our own expectations of children’s development.
- Children have a right to be celebrated for who they are right now, at-present. Their skills are not deviant or deficient — they are diverse.
- Children also have a right to be meaningful participants in the assessment of their knowledge and abilities. They (and their families) must be involved in assessment activities in meaningful ways.
- I argue that we cannot say that we are a strength-based, family-centered program when we use assessments to make the Other more like the Same.
- This, to me, is unethical.
“Authentic” Assessment Alternatives

- Authentic assessment captures genuine portraits of the naturally occurring competencies of children in their everyday settings and routines.
- Tactics (a few examples):
  - Learning stories detailing children’s experiences and work
  - Photographs taken during learning activities
  - Video recordings taken during learning activities
  - Work samples
  - Curriculum Based Assessments (CBA)
- These tactics make children’s learning visible to others so educators, consultants and children/families can revisit the learning experience and collaboratively interpret the learning processes.
- Whereas standardized assessment are viewed as evaluative or corrective, learning stories (Carr, Lee, & Jones, 2004) support the learner to participate in the learning and evaluative process to help them construct/reconstruct their theories of the world.

- With this in mind, Bagnato (2005), as well as Neisworth and Bagnato (2004), suggest that “authentic assessment” may have a place in early intervention and early learning programs.
- Authentic assessment captures genuine portraits of the naturally occurring competencies of young children with special rights in their everyday settings and routines (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004).
- Authentic tactics of assessment include pedagogical discoveries of children’s experiences/work (Forman & Fyfe, 2012; Rinaldi, 2012); photographs and video recordings of learning or other aspects of importance to children (Clark, 2001); learning stories (Carr, Lee, & Jones, 2004); and curriculum based assessments (CBA) (Bagnato, 2005).
- These discoveries are also meant to be “formative” means for assessment (Fyfe, 2012, p. 274).
“Authentic” Assessment Alternatives

- CBA measures (e.g., the *Assessment Evaluation and Programming System for Infants and Children, 2nd ed*), (Bricker, Pretti-Frontczak, Johnson, & Straka, 2002). (commonly referred to as AEPS-2 have been used by some SCD Consultants)

- Offers a framework to establish children’s functional abilities, and emerging skills in context

- Measures progress over time

- Involves children and families in meaningful ways

- CBA measures are comprised of functional and meaningful skills that can be used to establish children’s strengths and emerging skills, individualize intervention efforts, and measure progress (either at the individual or group level) over time, and involve families in meaningful ways (Bagnato, 2005).

- Used flexibly in non-prescriptive ways, these authentic assessment techniques offer strength-based alternatives to their standardized, deficit-based counterparts.
“Authentic” Assessment Alternatives

- Using these techniques permits children to demonstrate knowledge, creativity of thought, emerging theories through an exchange of ideas
- Assessment then becomes a determinant for learning – not of learning
- The juxtaposition of the word for with of is important in the reconstruction of school readiness discourses from a strength-based orientation
- When possible, these authentic assessment tactics are employed in a variety of the child’s familiar life-space contexts
- This way learning is seen as something that takes place everywhere – not just at “school”

- Using authentic assessment techniques, educators (and by extension, SCD Consultants) make it possible for children to demonstrate their knowledge, creativity of thought, and emerging theories, through an exchange and multiplicity of ideas (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Fraser, 2012; Rinaldi, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).
- Further, William (2011) insists that the conventional understanding of assessment as a determinant of children’s learning requires reconsideration. He maintains that the preposition of be juxtaposed with the preposition for, and assessment then becomes a determinant for supporting children’s learning. He argues that a slight prepositional change such as this can make a big difference in how we estimate the worth of a child triggering the reconstruction of school readiness discourse from a strength-based perspective (William, 2011).
- With this in mind, I argue authentic assessment tactics, used to plan for young children’s learning, should be employed in several of the child’s familiar life-space contexts.
- This way, we recognize that learning is not just something that takes place “at school” – and honour the notion of learning, which happens elsewhere, has relevance for the child’s ways of knowing in the world.
Listening as an Act of Political Activism: The Pedagogy of Listening

- The term, “Pedagogy of Listening” was coined in the municipal preschool programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy
- How children express their theories of the world reveals how they think, question, interpret reality and provides insights into their relationship with reality and people
- Adults who work with children hear understood meanings and the implied meanings of children’s words as communicated through a plethora of spoken and non-spoken languages and symbols
- Authentic assessment practices become linked to children’s learning through these different modalities and languages and are understood through a pedagogy of listening

- Rinaldi (2012) suggests that how children express their theories of the world to others reveals how they think, question, interpret reality and provides insights into their relationships with reality and with people.
- Adults who work with young children (including children with special rights) may have to listen very attentively to hear not only the understood meanings but also the implied meanings of children’s words as communicated through a plethora of spoken and non-spoken languages and symbols (Forman & Fyfe, 2012, p. 257).
- Authentic assessment practices become linked to children’s learning through this plethora of different modalities and languages (Rinaldi, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978) and are understood through a “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi, 2012).
Listening as an Act of Political Activism: The Pedagogy of Listening

- This form of listening is an ethical way of encountering the Other.

- This way of “understanding means being able to develop an interpretive theory, a narrative that gives meaning to the world” (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 234) and for valuing those who offer the information (Rinaldi, 2012).

- Essentially, employing a pedagogy of listening alongside authentic assessment practices serves to open the window for appreciating over time, how children’s unique lives and experiences contribute to their theories of the world. Levinas (1987) contends that it takes time to encounter the Other.

- Each encounter with the Other allows opportunities for mutual renewal and surprise. For Levinas, understanding the Other would suggest that we truly know them, and that we can never really know them because we are not them.

- I believe we have an ethical obligation in SCD to use the time we have with young children with special rights to make their learning visible to others without the pressures associated with dominant, befuddling, school readiness discourses.

- Young children learn in dynamic ways, and it is up to the adults charged with working with them to find the connections children make to the world as encountered through their learning contexts (Vygotsky, 1978).
Listening as an Act of Political Activism: The Pedagogy of Listening

- Listening deeply to truly hear the Other is not easy.
- It requires a great deal of patience, practice, and time on the part of the adult.
- It is crucial though if we want to encounter children ethically.

- Listening deeply to children is not easy and requires a great deal of patience, practice, and time on the part of the adult.
- However, listening is crucial if we are to truly encounter what young children are saying and be curious about their many languages of expression, and if we are to provide meaningful follow-up questions/activities to scaffold their learning over time (Forman & Fyfe, 2012).
**Individual Activity (15 minutes):**
1) **How do you discover who children are and what they know?**
2) **What goes into this process of discovery?**

**Instruction:**

- Using the materials provided (e.g. pens, crayons, markers, play dough, children’s cameras), please document some of the activities you plan when working with the child who has special needs.
- You may write down words, draw, or depict what this term means to you.
- You may get up and move around.
- You may collaborate with your neighbors.
- You may use the cameras to take photos.

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**Individual Activity**

How do you discover who children are and what they know?

**Plan:**

- Participants engage in a process of pedagogical discovery throughout this workshop.
- Participants record their learning, based on their personal theories of school readiness.
- Participants will consider children’s ways of knowing from a critical, reflective, and ethical standpoint.
- Participants are introduced to new ideas and spaces are opened for them to raise new questions and doubts.
Part 3 Summary

- So, standardized forms of assessment might be relatively easy to do and to score, but they are not the best way to understand the capabilities of the young child.

- Instead, alternative authentic forms of assessment such as learning stories, photographs, video recordings, work samples, and curriculum-based assessments support the learner (and other interested parties such as parents and educators) to participate in the learning/assessment process in looking at his or her own learning in order to construct/reconstruct ways of knowing (Fyfe, 2012).

- When paired with a pedagogy of listening, authentic assessment practices become ethical means for encountering the child who accesses our service.

- Our desire is not to make them become more like a normative sample, or to align with our perceptions of child development trajectories, but to truly discover who they are, what they can do, across time, and in multiple contexts.

- This is strength-based and family-centered assessment practice.

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- Our desire is not to make children become more like a normative sample, or to align with our perceptions of child development trajectories, but to truly discover who they are, what they can do, across time, and in multiple contexts.
- This is strength-based and family-centered practice.
Now that we have considered how particular assessment choices are enacted in Supported Child Development programs and how assessment practices are inextricably linked to discourses constituting school readiness, I will introduce you to a framework for linking authentic assessment practices to young children’s learning.
• Before I discuss the ways authentic assessment practices can be linked to SCD practice, it is important to introduce you to a government initiative (if you haven’t heard of it before), created in 2008, that could have huge implications for the provision of SCD services in our communities.

• In 2008 a document titled the BC Early Learning Framework (herein referred to as the Framework), was created jointly by the BC Ministries of Education, Child and Family Development, and Health, to outline the principles and key learning areas for children up to five years of age who attend a variety of for-profit, not-for-profit, private, and government funded early childhood education centers in BC (BC Ministry of Education, 2008).

• The Framework is intended to guide those with a vested interest in early childhood education about the provision of rich early learning experiences for young children (BC Ministry of Education, 2008).

• The Framework links to the Primary Program: A Framework for Teaching which is the guiding document used by the Ministry of Education for primary school.
Introducing: The BC Early Learning Framework

- Designed to “help adults support and strengthen children’s individual, social, cultural, and linguistic identities and their respect and appreciation for other people’s identities” (Ministry of Education, p. 3)
- Philosophically rooted in a postmodern worldview
- Offers conceptualizations of learning as strength-based, holistic, and situated at-present

• This Framework is “designed to help adults support and strengthen children’s individual, social, cultural, and linguistic identities, and their respect and appreciation for other people’s identities” (BC Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1).
• It is philosophically rooted in a postmodern worldview
• The Framework offers conceptualizations of early learning as strength-based, holistic, and situated at-present
Introducing:
The BC Early Learning Framework

- Image of the capable child who contributes to their own and other’s learning now and in the future while recognizing that not all children have access to the same opportunities to develop their potential
- Interestingly, no information from the Framework has found its way into SCD service provision documents
- We work with the same adults and programs for whom the Framework was developed!

- This means that children and their efforts/accomplishments are valued through an image of the capable child who contributes to their own and others’ learning at-present and in the future, while recognizing that not all children have access to the same opportunities to develop their potential (BC Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4).
- The image of the capable child is important to this discussion because “(o)ur construction of childhood and the images of the child represent ethical and political choices, made within a larger framework of ideas, values, and rationalities” (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 52).
- This image may inspire adults to consider those aspects of early childhood education which constrain young children’s learning opportunities, and may present a catalyst for political activism/reform.
- Remarkably, no information from this Framework has found its way into SCD service provision documents, despite the fact that the early learning programs and adults for whom the Framework was written are the very same early learning programs and adults that SCD programs provide services to!
Connecting SCD to the *BC Early Learning Framework*

Four areas of learning:
1) Well-being and Belonging
2) Exploration and Creativity
3) Languages and Literacies
4) Social Responsibility and Diversity

- The *Framework* has 4 broad areas of learning. These areas are called: Well-being and Belonging; Exploration and Creativity; Languages and Literacies, and; Social Responsibility and Diversity (BC Ministry of Education, 2008)
- Each of these areas of learning contain reflective questions designed to help early childhood educators (or SCD Consultants) design learning experiences which support these areas of learning.
Group Activity (30 minutes):
Examining the *BC Early Learning Framework*

Instruction:

- Review the provided copies of the *Framework* document
- This is a comprehensive document which will require far more time to review than what we have time for in this session, however,
- Have a look under the learning area, “Well-being and Belonging”
- Notice the learning goals, and questions to consider
- How might you use this document to guide your encounters with young children who have special rights?

Group Activity
How do you discover who children are and what they know?

Plan:
- Participants engage in a process of pedagogical discovery throughout this workshop.
- Participants record their learning, based on their personal theories of school readiness.
- Participants will examine the *BC Early Learning Framework* from a critical, reflective, and ethical standpoint.
- Participants are introduced to new ideas and spaces are opened for them to raise new questions and doubts.
Sharing Information: Validating Children’s Knowledge/Abilities

- Consider some ways you might use the “areas of learning” from the Framework to make children’s ways of knowing visible to others
- Some examples of my own work
  - Photographs
  - Learning stories
  - Art/work samples
  - AEPS-2
- Validate this information during future meetings with children and the adults who are important to them

- So now that you have been briefly introduced to the Framework and it’s areas of learning, and have had a chance to quickly review some of the learning goals and reflective questions, consider ways you might be able to help the child make their learning visible to others
- [I will share some examples of work that I’ve done with children I’ve worked with in SCD (permission granted from their families) to demonstrate how I have connected their learning to the areas of the Framework.]
- Examples that I have to share are photographs, learning stories, art/work samples.
- I compile this information through my consultation visits. I consult with parents or educators during follow up visits to get their perspective of the child’s learning.
- I also show the photos to the child. Sometimes they are able to provide me with their insights into the photos.
BC Early Learning Framework
Online Training Modules

- The BC Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, has created two documents for early child educators:
  - *BC Early Learning Framework*; and
  - *Understanding the British Columbia Early Learning Framework: From Theory to Practice*.
- 6 Online training modules are available at no cost at [http://www.learnnowbc.ca/educators/EarlyLearningCentre/EarlyLearningFramework/default.aspx](http://www.learnnowbc.ca/educators/EarlyLearningCentre/EarlyLearningFramework/default.aspx)
  - Modules are 45 to 60 minutes each
  - Can count toward professional development hours.

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  - Modules are 45 to 60 minutes each
  - They can count toward professional development hours.
  - I highly encourage you to do the modules and become comfortable with the Framework.
  - It is a framework for conducting ethical, authentic assessments that support young children’s ways of knowing.
Part 4 Summary

- In this section, you were briefly introduced to the BC Early Learning Framework and one of its areas of learning.
- We examined the document together, and I invite you to take more time to look over the document and complete the online modules available to you at no cost.
- Remember that completion of these modules can count towards professional development hours.
- I shared some examples of pedagogical documentation from my own work with young children to hopefully inspire you to think about how you might use authentic assessment tactics with the children you work with.
- This is an ethical, and socially-just form of assessment that aligns with a strength-based and family-centered approach.
Conclusions

There is much more to talk about with respect to using the *Early Learning Framework* in our SCD work, but I’m hoping there will be time to further examine the *Framework* and how it might support the work we do with young children who have special rights.
Conclusions: Open Windows or Closed Doors?

- Language used to describe children is powerful
- Language creates images, and images influence how we work with them
- Standardized assessment closes doors for supporting young children’s natural curiosity
- Authentic assessment opens the window for supporting children’s natural curiosity
- We can provide valid information through photographs, work samples, learning stories, etc.
- We can include parents in the assessment process so they can see what their child’s interests are as they learn about the world

- The language we use to describe young children with special rights is powerful
- This language creates the images we have of children, and these images influence the ways we talk about them, and work with them
- Standardized assessment practices tend to close the door for supporting children’s desire to be naturally curious about their world.
  - Instead, we claim to know them through their deficits and work to remediate these deficits through prescribed and often non-contextual intervention activities
- Authentic assessment opens the window for having ethical encounters with young children that support their learning.
  - We can use photographs, work samples, learning stories, curriculum based assessments, etc. to make learning visible over time.
  - Also, we can consult directly with the people closest to the child, and the child themselves about the learning.
Final Activity (15 minutes):
What does the term “school readiness” mean to you?

- Find the first exercise you completed today
- Review what you discovered
- On a separate sheet, document what the term “school readiness” means to you now
- Compile all your discoveries and staple them together
- You have completed a learning story detailing your own learning today. Congratulations!

Individual Activity

What Does School Readiness Mean – a review?

Plan:

- Participants engage in a process of pedagogical discovery throughout this workshop.
- Participants record their learning, based on their personal theories of school readiness.
- Participants will consider this term from a critical, reflective, and ethical standpoint.
- Participants are introduced to new ideas and spaces are opened for them to raise new questions and doubts.
Final Thoughts

• Assessment practices used in SCD are tied to the discourse of school readiness.
• When we use standardized assessment tactics, school readiness becomes about remediating deficits.
• But when authentic assessment tactics are used, all children are seen as ready for school – right from birth, and regardless of ability.

• I think the real question is not whether children are ready for school, but whether schools, and the political systems that create them, are ready for children.
References


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References


