

# Collaborative Action Research in a Northern Early Childhood Educator Program: Professional Learning of Instructors and Interns

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Article abstract

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## COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH IN A NORTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR PROGRAM: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OF INSTRUCTORS AND INTERNS

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### ABSTRACT

*This collaborative action research, carried out by early childhood education interns, with the support of their instructor and two university researchers, shows the empowerment of postsecondary students that occurs when they are responsible for designing and implementing research projects tailored to their placement contexts. The early childhood educator interns took up a stance as reflective practitioners who developed professional skills and knowledge in an area that was meaningful to them—teaching young children their Indigenous language. The interns shared responsibility for their learning with their instructor, who was also conducting research into her practice, gathering data to identify the impact of her new teaching approach on interns' learning. The simultaneous use of collaborative action research methods at the instructor and intern levels provides research-based information for the larger professional field. Additionally, the college instructor and the student interns are positioned as research-practitioners who use action research to support their professional growth.*

**KEY WORDS:** Collaborative action research in postsecondary programs; Early childhood education; Indigenous language teaching; Reflective practice

### INTRODUCTION

In this study we make a case for the use of action research as a valuable methodology for improving practice in a professional Certificate and Diploma program. The action research was carried out by post-secondary instructors and their students. Post-secondary instructors of these Certificate and Diploma programs conducted action research for the purpose of determining the contributions of incorporating action research as an

assignment or learning experience in the courses taught to Certificate and Diploma students, referred to as interns. These instructors make contributions to the field of adult education within their field and social location. While post-secondary instructors carried out action research to explore their students' learning, the interns in their classes were given assignments that involved action research in their field placements, and developed research questions related to identified issues or concerns in the professional contexts of their field as well as social location. These interns actively contributed to the program development from their field engagement and through small-scale initiatives to apply theoretical perspectives to support the action research. Both the instructors and the interns, also referred to as the research practitioners, assess the efficacy of the initiatives through systematic data collection and guided analysis of the data in terms of the research questions. Post-secondary instructors who gather information about their interns' learning can assess the efficacy of the action research approach taken up in their courses to improve their own instruction.

To make our case that action research plays an important role in the professional development of both instructors and interns of these two programs, we draw on collaborative action research involving an Indigenous instructor and her interns in an early childhood educator Diploma and Certificate program. The research takes place in a northern college of the area known as Denedeh/Northwest Territories. We report on participating interns' use of playful activities for teaching Tłıchǰ in their early childhood field placements and their reflections in a focus group on useful principles and practices for teaching Indigenous language in early learning contexts in the first year of their program. Two of the 12 interns expressed interest in co-authoring this paper with their Language and Literacy instructor and two university researchers.

Our research explored issues that have surfaced from colonizing practices of Canadian governments and the marginalization of Indigenous languages and cultures across the country over many decades. For thousands of years, Indigenous children learned their community's language and culture through everyday social interactions with family and community members. It was expected that the Indigenous language would be the language of home and community (McIvor, 2020). Yet the natural intergenerational flow of language transmission was disrupted by multiple colonizing policies and practices, with the most damaging being the forced attendance of Indigenous children at residential schools. Away from their family and community for months at a time, Indigenous children learned English at the expense of the Indigenous language they were punished for speaking. Children were rewarded for adopting dominant cultural values and punished for using their own languages, with the resulting devastating loss of pride in their Indigenous identities (Battiste, 2008; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Our action research aimed to support Indigenous language revitalization, which we understand as generational continuity of Indigenous languages (Rorick, 2019; Todal, 2018). We believe that language revitalization is essential to reversing the enormous language loss that has resulted from the colonizing policies and practices that have been carried out for many generations.

Our action research is driven by two main questions:

1. What principles of young children's language learning are reflected in early childhood educator (ECE) interns' descriptions of their and the children's learning experiences in their field placements, the challenges they faced and modifications they made to their language activities?
2. In written reflections, how do two interns, who are co-authors of this paper, and their instructor describe their learning and the impact on their identities through participating in the collaborative action research project?

We begin this paper with observations of Indigenous language learning dynamics and teaching practices in classrooms at Aboriginal Head Start programs, present our findings, and then discuss them in the context of the data.

### **INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EARLY LEARNING CONTEXTS**

Ideally, Indigenous language initiatives in classrooms would take an immersive approach, where instruction is completely or primarily in the community's Indigenous language and the curriculum is land-based, taking up traditional cultural practices of the community (McCarty et al., 2021; Todal, 2018). The reality in some Indigenous communities where colonialist practices and policies have had a devastating impact is that there are few fluent speakers of their ancestral language(s) who are able to provide immersion instruction (Rosborough et al., 2017). As a result, children's parents are often not sufficiently fluent to support their children's Indigenous language learning after they leave the classroom. Children do not have the needed ongoing exposure, nor do they have meaningful opportunities to use the language(s) in real-life contexts outside the classroom (Hinton et al., 2018; McIvor, 2020; Rorick, 2019; Rosborough et al., 2017).

Accompanying the school-based language revitalization initiatives is a need to provide opportunities to develop adult fluency throughout the community, so that children have adults modelling the language in everyday life (Hermes et al., 2012; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Rorick, 2019). Intergenerational language teaching approaches, including initiatives that involve the whole school and/or the community, are recommended to strengthen Indigenous languages (Our Languages, 2020). The Master-Apprentice Program (MAP), "is a way of learning Indigenous Language where a fluent speaker of the language (a mentor) teaches a committed language learner (an apprentice) through immersion." (Government of Northwest Territories, n.d., para, 1). The goal of the program is to have non-speakers increase their comprehension and speaking abilities, in their chosen language (the program offers 8 Indigenous language options) through their daily life routines. The pair must spend 7-10 hours/week engaged in language learning and being immersed in the language. Participants must submit regular logs that demonstrate their learning. Annually new applications are reviewed by the Department of Education. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) has invested in Indigenous culture and language for many years and to prevent it from being lost, it must become an integral part of the learning and culture at school (Dene Kede, 1993).

In 1993, the GNWT implemented the *Dene Kede* (1993) curriculum in schools across the NWT. This curriculum has been mandatory and is meant to be taught along-side the territorial school curriculum. This curriculum includes NWT culture, language and the Dene perspective on education. It encourages children to understand their identity as individuals and as part of a community. Most recently the GNWT has also implemented the Our Languages curriculum into Indigenous language classes across the NWT. The government recognizes the important role language plays in developing identity, pride, and community. “This new curriculum is built in the premise that *our languages* can survive and even thrive when schools and communities join together to make language learning a priority” (GNWT, 2020, p. 2). This curriculum is competency based and provides Indigenous language instructors with curricular outcomes, instructional strategies, and assessment tools to encourage language growth across NWT classrooms. The *Our Languages* (2020) curriculum aligns with the already existing *Dene Kede* (1993) and *Inuuqatigiit* (1996) curricula.

### **SUGGESTED APPROACHES FOR TEACHING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES**

Research shows that children’s language learning is enhanced when teachers use the Indigenous language wherever possible throughout the day (Todal, 2018). Additionally, it is helpful to have concrete objects and pictures for reference when speaking the Indigenous language, so translations are not necessary. Children are able to connect the Indigenous concept to the object or picture directly, without the interference of the dominant language.

Intentionally using Indigenous words and phrases while engaging children in traditional cultural practices is important. In their collaborative action research, early childhood educators working in an Aboriginal Head Start program in northern Ontario (Peterson et al., 2018) initiated Anishinaabeq cultural practices on the land and at centres in their classrooms, using Anishinaabemowin words that they had learned from their families or through attending language classes for adults. The early childhood educators found that children, aged 2 to 5 years old developed understanding of the Anishinaabemowin words as they heard the language many times in various contexts. They demonstrated understanding through picking up or pointing to objects that the early childhood educators named, but they did not use the language in their interactions with peers or the early childhood educator.

### **COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH**

Collaborative action research aligns with Indigenous research in bringing together research practitioners and university researchers to address issues significant to the research practitioner (Hare, 2021). Because the research is conducted with research practitioners, power relations are equalized, enhancing the potential of bringing about transformative change (Kozak & Schnellert, 2023; Ledwith & Springett, 2014). Teachers take action to make positive change in their classroom contexts (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008).

Professional learning and knowledge co-creation are well-documented outcomes of collaborative action research (e.g., Burke & Chaseling, 2022; Buckley-Marudas et al., 2021). Gruver and Bowers (2020) argue that “one reason for the effectiveness of action research is the deep reflection it promotes as teachers examine their own practice” (p. 12). Elementary teachers engaged in action research have examined the effectiveness of their instruction and/or assessment practices for reading (Burke & Chaseling, 2022), music (Laidlaw, 2022), mathematics (Gruver & Bowers, 2020), and other subject matter across the elementary grades. Similarly, action research has supported secondary teachers’ learning of how best to teach high-school subject areas, such as mathematics (Kajander et al., 2021), science, and language and literature using creative pedagogies via, for instance, narratives or the use of podcasts (Buckley-Marudas et al., 2021) or other new literacy devices.

Over roughly two generations, action research has also been promoted in teacher education (Black, 2021) or postgraduate programs (Ponte et al., 2004), which has played an important role in students’ professional development (Holter & Frabutt, 2012; Perrett, 2003). In one teacher education program, the aim was to assess the impact of an initiative that placed teacher candidates in peer-oriented triads focused on their professional learning during their practicum. Researchers found that this initiative successfully addressed issues of isolation and anxieties stemming from feeling judged in practicum (Ho Younghusband & Koehn, 2022). Action research has also afforded teacher candidates the opportunities to develop critical thinking, research, and independent leadership skills within their school community (Hagevik et al., 2012; Otto et al., 2009). Black (2021) adds that action research develops teacher candidates’ reflective practice. Such research speaks to the call for researchers to explore action research in teacher education programs (Davis et al., 2018; Ulvik & Riese, 2016). This paper builds on this call by exploring action research in early childhood education programs at the college level.

The action research reported in this paper is part of the Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play) Partnership Project. The methodology employed fits within the practical action research mode (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1982), as the instructor and the student interns of a northern college take the lead in designing and assessing the effectiveness of new practices, with guidance and input from university researchers.

#### **CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS**

##### **Early Learning and Child Care Program of Aurora College**

In Denendeh/Northwest Territories, nine Indigenous languages, including Tłıchǰ, the language that participating ECE intern research practitioners learned and taught in their field placement, have official language status (Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2018).

For over thirty years, Aurora College has prepared student interns to become early childhood educators of children from birth to 11 years old through a part-time distance education Certificate in Early Childhood Development. In 2015, an in-person program leading to an ELCC Certificate (one-year program) was instituted followed in 2018 with an

ELCC Diploma Certificate (two-year program). Through competency-based assessment student interns learn to develop a play-based curriculum, and gain knowledge and skills to adapt programs for the Indigenous languages, cultures, and traditions of the northern communities in which they work.

We are two of the Diploma interns and an instructor from the ELCC program, as well as two university researchers in the NOW Play partnership project. Erica McDonald is the daughter of Tim and Alma McDonald, the granddaughter of Joseph and Ethel McDonald; and Boniface and Adeline Trippe-de-Roche. She is a member of the K'ai Taile Dene from the Athabasca region of Northern Alberta. She has been an educator for over 20 years and most recently joined the Aurora College as an instructor in the Early Learning and Childcare Program.

Charlene Simpson is a Tłichǫ diploma graduate of the Early Learning and Child Care program, from Whati Northwest Territories. She is a mother of two amazing children and has worked at a daycare center in Whati for a number of years. She finds working with children very rewarding, especially when it comes to teaching them Indigenous language(s) and culture(s). She is currently learning Tłichǫ herself by taking Tłichǫ language classes. Her goal is to learn as much as possible to be able pass on the knowledge she gains about her language and culture to her children and her future students. She plans to return to Whati, her home community, to continue learning and growing as an Indigenous educator.

Sarah McGregor is a diploma graduate of the Early Learning and Child Care Program at Aurora College. She was born and raised in Yellowknife, NT. She has over 10 years of experience working in the early childhood profession and she has recently traveled to Sweden to learn more about early childhood education from another perspective with funding from the North2North exchange program. Living in the north, she has participated in several Indigenous cultural and language activities around the city to incorporate in her future work.

Shelley Stagg Peterson is a former rural Alberta elementary teacher and now university professor who is the project director of the NOW Play project. A settler woman with family roots in the Netherlands, Scotland and Ireland, she grew up in small towns and on a farm in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Nazila Eisazadeh is a registered early childhood educator in Ontario and the current postdoctoral fellow on the NOW Play project. She was born in Tabriz, Iran and arrived in Canada as an Azeri-Iranian refugee during the Iran-Iraq war. As part of her role as a post-doctoral fellow, she has taken a number of Indigenous language classes, particularly to learn Ojibwe, one of the languages connected to the land she now lives and works. From these classes, she has learned a number of phrases and practices; one being how to engage in traditional greetings. As the project progresses, she is excited and keen to learn more.

**Action Research Activities**

The two university researchers visited the interns and their language and literacy instructor at Aurora College every six to eight weeks to discuss the progress of their action research. The instructor’s action research centered on first year certificate interns’ development of play-based activities to support young children’s Tłichǫ language learning. With the goal of examining helpful instructional supports for interns’ learning, she worked with university researchers to plan and then co-teach activities, such as a role play, where the instructor and university researchers played the role of young children engaged in the language-learning activities. Interns had initially included a large amount of print in their resources and the role play showed them how difficult it would be for 2-4-year-old children to engage with the print. During another university researcher visit, a language and literacy class involved the collaborative development, by interns, the instructor and the university researchers, of an observation guide that interns then used during their first field placements. Interns implemented their activities with small groups of children and documented observations of one child as they participated in the intern’s language activities. When they returned to campus following their placements, interns engaged in reflective conversation with peers, the instructor and the university researchers to assess the appropriateness of their activities and talk about how they revised their activities based on their observations. Table 1 shows the overall participant demographic information of the student interns at Aurora College who had been participating in the NOW Play project at the time of this study.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

	<b>First Year Cohort</b>	<b>Second Year Cohort</b>
Use Number of interns	16 interns	8 interns
Gender	15 females 1 male	8 females
Ethnicity	10 Indigenous interns 6 non-Indigenous interns	4 Indigenous 4 non-Indigenous
Indigenous Language Speakers	1 fluent speaker 9 with exposure to language	1 fluent speaker 3 with exposure to language
Certificate Completion	12 interns	6 potential Diploma grads

Over the summer between their first and second years of the program, the two interns who are co-authors of this paper worked with the other authors of this paper to analyze their



observations of the children in their placements, as documented on the collaboratively-created template. The two interns identified patterns in the types of intern talk and actions that seemed to foster children's engagement in the activities, their comprehension and retention of the Tłichq language, and their ability to say the Tłichq words. Based on what they were finding in their analysis, the interns modified the observation document that was used to record what interns observed in children's learning. They also collaboratively created, with the instructor and the university researchers, an analysis framework for mapping the alignment of their language activities to the outcomes of the *Our Languages Curriculum and Program of Study* (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2020).

When interns returned for the second-year diploma program, the two interns who had worked with the university researchers and instructor over the summer did a presentation to their peers on the analysis process and the new observation document. The university researchers and instructor supported the interns in developing the presentation.

As a group, the interns used the *Our Languages* document to support the revision of previous activities and sometimes development of new activities if interns found their activities did not produce the results they had expected. Students used *Our Languages* (Government of Northwest Territories, 2020) to focus on outcomes they wanted to meet with their activities.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The university team has received ethics approval from their university and the participating post-secondary institution, as well as a research license from the Aurora Research Institute of the Northwest Territories to conduct the collaborative action research activities and gather data through focus groups and interns' and the instructor's written reflections. The two university researchers have academic expertise and school-based teaching experiences in the fields of language and literacy education and play-based pedagogy.

In June of the interns' first year of their ELCC program, the 12 early childhood educator intern participants responded to five questions/invitations to share their stories in three semi-structured focus group discussions conducted at the College. The focus group protocol, developed by the two university researchers and the language and literacy instructor, is as follows:

1. We are interested in stories of what happened when you used your resource with the child(ren).
2. Which activities or part of an activity did the child(ren) find most enjoyable? Please tell a story of children doing the activity with you in terms of their engagement.
3. What words or expressions have the child(ren) learned from using the resource? Please tell a story where the child(ren) showed that they had learned a word or some words in terms of speaking the words, comprehending the words, and retaining the words.
4. What have you learned about teaching Indigenous languages to young children during these 6 weeks when using the resource you developed and implemented?

5. What were some of the challenges you experienced when using the resource you developed with the children? Did you change any of the activities because of these challenges so that they worked better for the child(ren)? Please tell us about how you changed an activity and why you changed it.
6. The three focus groups, with 12 participants in total, ranged from approximately 49 minutes to one hour and 10 minutes in length. The focus group responses were audio-recorded using iPads and uploaded to a secure platform called SharePoint to store the data. The audio-recordings were later transcribed by the two interns who are co-authors of this paper. These transcripts were then analyzed inductively (Patton, 2015) by university researchers to generate codes and themes relating to the research questions of (1) What principles of young children's language learning are reflected in early childhood educator (ECE) interns' descriptions of their and the children's learning experiences in their field placements, the challenges they faced and modifications they made to their language activities? (2) In written reflections, how do two interns who are co-authors of this paper and their instructor describe their learning and the impact on their identities through participating in the collaborative action research project?
7. In written reflections, how do two interns who are co-authors of this paper and their instructor describe their learning as part of the collaborative action research project?

Codes were created representing the recurring topics across the three focus group discussions, which were then shared and reviewed by the two intern coauthors as a form of member-checking. Upon completion of this report, findings were shared with all participating interns to provide them with the opportunity to provide feedback or any additional reflections that may have been missed. A summary of the findings was also sent to administrators of the ELCC program and the college.

#### **ECE INTERNS' LEARNING FROM THEIR ACTION RESEARCH**

In their focus group conversations in June of their Certificate year, ECE interns identified language learning principles and practices that supported children's and their own Tłich̓ language learning in their early learning field placements. In this section of the paper, we describe four principles and practices that interns identified as important to improve their teaching of Indigenous languages: (1) use the language multiple times in each day in context; (2) find developmentally appropriate and interesting ways to invite and engage children; (3) early childhood educators must use multiple approaches to learn the Indigenous language, themselves.

#### **PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR TEACHING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES (IN CERTIFICATE YEAR)**

##### **Use the Language Multiple Times in Each Day in Context**

Interns agreed that there should be "repetition all throughout the day" as it is "easier for children to learn when they have the repetition every day." Participating interns gave examples of how they "sang the same song over and over and over again so the children started to recognize and understand it." They incorporated Tłich̓ language into routines,

such as circle time, where one intern sang, “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” using Tłichq words for the body parts.

Interns said they looked for opportunities to use the language throughout the day. Finding opportunities to use the language in everyday interactions was particularly supportive of children’s language learning. One intern used the Indigenous language when asking children to do everyday things, like giving something to someone else or accepting something from someone. Another intern integrated the Tłichq words she was teaching (counting to 10) at every opportunity. She invited children to count to three in Tłichq in their gym class: “We’d say ɬè, nàke, tai and then they would kick the ball.” Children counted rocks and ants in the playground as well as counted the number of children who lined up to go to the bathroom.

### **Find Developmentally Appropriate Ways to Invite and Engage Children**

One intern, who spoke fluent Dene Kede, taught her own children her language before the children learned English. She described how she used similar teaching methods at home and in her field placement, giving this example:

I made a memory game. The first time I did it, I kind of just sat on the carpet and I was playing the memory game. They came to me because they were very interested. And then after that we got into a group and I said each animal because it was a memory game of animals. It was just the first day that they struggled, after the second day, they were able to mimic the words. And by the second week, all the kids caught on . . . It was like, ‘I’m going to play this. And if anyone comes, then they’ll come.’

Interns also talked about finding ways for children to be physically active while learning the language. They explained that young children “are very energetic and need to move around a lot.” One intern gave the example of adding physical movement to activities using paper materials, such as a colour wheel, by inviting children to say the colour in Tłichq and then find an object of that colour in the room. No longer were individual children repeating the Tłichq word for the colour on which the spinner landed when it was their turn.

Interns recommended using multi-sensory activities and incorporating singing whenever possible. In agreement with Mizener (2008), one intern explained that her singing activity was successful “because music and language together helps the child’s development of the brain so he can retain it in his mind when he hears the music.” Another intern recalled how she encouraged children to repeat the words for days of the week as she pointed to the calendar. The children looked confused, so she started singing the words for days of the week and found that children could accompany her more readily. Other interns gave examples of children drawing pictures and making concrete objects of the concepts they were learning in Tłichq. After observing that the children could not read the words, interns replaced these materials with pictures, wordless picture books and concrete objects to represent the Tłichq words they taught. Another intern used coloured bean bags instead of

a colour wheel she had created “because they are more sensory where little kids and babies can touch and play with it, rather than just looking at the colour.”

With the goal of helping children to feel successful from the beginning of their Tłichq language-learning experiences, interns explained that it is important to design language learning activities that are developmentally appropriate and reflect children’s interests. Before their field placement, interns created activities with many new words for children to learn. Observing that children were feeling overwhelmed, the interns scaled back the number of new words they introduced. Once children showed that they had learned a few new words, interns introduced additional words.

The interns used their observations of children’s interest (e.g., Lego, songs, and even emoji’s) to implement successful language activities. Interns described instances of children’s success that aligned with their interest and were taught in developmentally appropriate ways:

- One child spontaneously started counting Lego pieces in Tłichq.
- Children independently held up popsicle sticks, each with an emoji showing a particular emotion, as they sang, “If you’re happy and you know it” in Tłichq, and then substituted the word for *happy* with other emotions.

Interns also observed that children were more successful at learning language when language activities included something familiar, such as singing Tłichq words to a familiar melody like *You are My Sunshine*.

### **Educators Need to Use Multiple Approaches to Learn the Language**

One intern explained that she not only needed to learn the Tłichq language, but also had “to love the language” so that she would be able to instill that love in the children she taught. All interns highlighted the need to learn the Indigenous language well. One intern said she wanted to be “more confident with the language because I feel like if I said it the wrong way, I might disrespect the language.”

Interns talked about the challenges of learning sufficient Tłichq words to be able to teach children. They advised that educators “should be more prepared with the knowledge of the language first, because you can only teach what you know.” One intern said, “I wish I had known some action words because I only learned the body parts”. This limited her teaching, as she could not teach actions that legs, arms, etc. could do. Another intern expressed a wish that she could “add more words to my knowledge” because she had to sing some words in English in the song that she taught children.

Interns recommended seeking out fluent speakers whenever possible, in order to “learn very well what [they were] going to say.” They wanted to be able to answer children’s questions and not be tied to a script. Additionally, they used language apps on their cell phones that translated English to Tłichq, so they could be reminded of pronunciations of words and could look up words as needed. Strategies for preparing to teach Tłichq words

were detailed by one intern: “We kind of just practiced it before we went in, and a lot of us wrote out the syllables so we could say it a little bit easier and feel a bit more confident.”

### **SECOND YEAR ACTION RESEARCH ACTIVITIES: MODIFICATIONS BASED ON FIRST-YEAR LEARNINGS**

The interns drew on what they had learned from their first-year placement experiences and their group data analysis of their activities to adapt the language-learning activities for their second-year placements. Interns were guided by the principles they had learned, such as choosing a few words at a time and the need for repetition in context.

Interns’ modifications included changing the content to reflect the interests of an older age group in the second-year placement (e.g., changing from colour words to words expressing emotions and changing from words describing the weather to words describing northern animals). Interns working with special needs students in their second-year placement changed the play format from a BINGO game when working with a whole class to one-on-one teaching of seasonal words in the special needs placement. Another intern used concrete dots on dice to encourage younger children to count in the Indigenous language in their second-year placement, whereas she used written word cards to teach the number words to older children in her first-year placement.

Interns observed that children were more successful in learning the words beyond the classroom setting. For example, in a kindergarten class, the second author observed one boy ask to take the Go Łiwe game home to show his family. His mom said, at the parent-teacher night, that her son had been using the words all around the house and was showing the cards to his siblings and parents. Additionally, the third author of this paper observed that children expressed their emotions in Tłichq̓ to their peers and teachers in one context where there was a dispute in the classroom.

### **INTERNS’ AND INSTRUCTOR’S REFLECTIONS ON ACTION RESEARCH**

The three authors who are ECE interns and an instructor in the Aurora College Early Learning and Child Care program wrote their reflections on how their participation in the collaborative action research had an impact on their identities and their teaching practice.

The second author, an intern, has become more focused on learning her language, Tłichq̓. She started taking evening classes during the week, and had conversations with the elders in her family when she needed clarification on the pronunciation of words. What she learned, she passed on to her colleagues and the students she worked with. She came to recognize the difference she could make as an Indigenous early childhood educator and is dedicated to learning and passing on her language. Based on her research, she can teach her language, using the need for repetition, consistency, and most importantly, making the learning fun and engaging. She will bring her language and all she has learned about teaching language to the daycare in her community, Whati, where she will be working in the upcoming year.

Having been born and raised in the north, the third author of this paper has always had a special interest in Indigenous language and culture because she has seen firsthand the

challenges the north faces in the revitalization of languages and culture and that is why she has taken such interest in this project. She would like to be a part of the solution by including Indigenous language and culture into learning environments throughout her career. She has taken with her that even though, as early childhood educators, we are not always writing things down, we are always observing the children in our care and modifying our plans and activities to enhance how children in our environment learn best. She has discovered that although children do not always necessarily speak the language, it is important to consistently expose them to the language in the environment. She also noticed that exposure to text, regardless of reading ability, is important for children to build connections and be able to start comprehending the language being learned. She has learned that children have a willingness to learn new languages, as long as the educator is providing learning opportunities for the children. Indigenous children especially seem to take pride in learning their Indigenous language.

As an instructor in early childhood education, the first author has learned that research is not easy, but she was excited to learn alongside her students and saw immediately how research practices can help students be accountable to their learning and that of children in their care. Successful research results depend on buy-in and ongoing and consistent practice and collaboration from research practitioners, research participants, and peers. Throughout this process it has validated for her that educators are natural researchers who are, generally, already using observations and reflective practice to guide their teaching and use best practices to meet the needs of their students. She is guiding the student interns to ensure they recognize the importance of documenting their observations and analyzing the data to further develop their teaching strategies.

Through the research process she observed that it encourages early childhood educators to use best practices because they are always analyzing what did and did not work and making modifications to get the desired results from their students. She states that it is important that the area of research be relevant to early childhood educators for them to see their own growth and change (or children's growth and change) through the data and results. Obtaining consent seems to always be the biggest hurdle, something that interns are trying to solve and find ways to make it easier for future research practitioners.

Overall, the first author has learned that student interns are capable researchers. With guidance, positive reinforcement, and support with idea development, resource building, and analysis, all interns can comprehend, plan, and develop thoughtful research questions and data collection, and draw thoughtful conclusions from their research. She is also hopeful that student interns see the value of their research and carry these practices into their future careers and work with children.

#### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

In their first-year placement, interns modified the activities they had planned in class to be developmentally appropriate for the children in their specific field placements. Interns talked about reducing the number of new words they introduced in Tłichǰ and replacing paper materials with concrete objects that children could touch and manipulate. They

replaced activities involving print with drawing and painting activities. Further reflections in a second focus group following the field placement served to deepen interns' learning and inform the instructor's practice as she carries out her own reflections on her practice, which is in line with Gruver and Bowers' (2020) notion that "one reason for the effectiveness of action research is the deep reflection it promotes as teachers examine their own practice" (p.12). As they drew on their analyses and reflections in their first year of action research, the interns modified the activities and then implemented the revised activities in their second-year field placement. The action research spiral is evident in their research process (Cain & Harris, 2013; Gruver & Bowers, 2020).

The collaborative action research carried out by early childhood education interns shows the empowerment of postsecondary students that occurs when they are responsible for designing and implementing research projects tailored to their placement contexts. The student interns took up a stance as reflective practitioners who developed professional skills and knowledge in an area that was meaningful to them. They shared responsibility for their learning with their instructor, who was also conducting research into her practice, gathering data to identify the impact of her new teaching approach on interns' learning. As Ledwith and Springett (2014) explain, the collaborative action research has "equalized power relations" between interns and their instructor, and for many interns, has been transformational, as they gained a renewed and strengthened sense of pride in their Indigenous identity.

The simultaneous use of collaborative action research methods at the instructor and intern levels provides research-based information for the larger professional field. Additionally, the college instructor and the student interns are positioned as research-practitioners who use action research to support their professional growth. Action research has been a valuable research methodology for the first author, an instructor, and her interns in a northern Canadian college. An important implication of our research is that action research is a legitimate and valuable research approach for instructors of professional programs.

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