



EQUITY AND THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL READINESS: COMMUNITY REPORT

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Early Childhood Collaborative Research Centre at Mount Saint Vincent University is in Kjiptuktuk (Halifax), part of Mi'kma'ki, on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq Nation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our gratitude to our participants for trusting us with your stories and lived experiences. Your dedication to creating equitable and nurturing environments for young children is a constant source of inspiration.

As we reflect on this work, we also recognize the broader context in which it takes place. We are privileged to do our research in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded ancestral territory which remains the homeland of the Mi'kmaq Nation.

We also respectfully honour the histories, contributions, and enduring legacies of African Nova Scotian communities, who have been a part of this land for over 400 years.

Finally, we acknowledge the enrichments gained through our newcomer communities who have brought vibrant traditions, language, and culture to our shared province.

We share this report to amplify voices and *bolster* collaboration to support equitable change in our communities. In the words of scholar and activist bell hooks: *"Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion"* (hooks, 2018 p 215).



OUR TEAM

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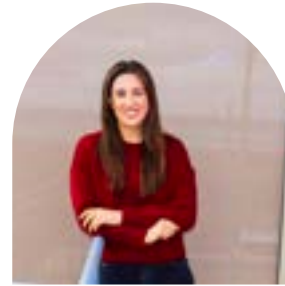


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Background to this project

The province of Nova Scotia offers an ideal setting for research on child development and school transitions with rich cultural and linguistic diversity, investment in early childhood education, and regular collection of data to measure child development at school entry. For example, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a teacher-completed tool that explores developmental expectations at school entry according to five domains.



Physical Health & Well-being



Social Competence



Emotional Maturity



Language & Cognitive Development



Communications Skills & General Knowledge

This internationally used tool demonstrates patterns of child development and predictors for later health, education, and social outcomes. It can also serve as an important tool for communities to inform intervention in the early years. However, recent research has also highlighted the importance of understanding the potential bias in the tool, as a result of teachers' perception of their own and their students' identity (Spadafora et al., 2024).

This research aims to build on this critical examination of the concept of child development by exploring educator and community expert perspectives on equity-deserving groups in Nova Scotia.

Guiding research questions

- How do community experts understand expectations of child development and school transitions for newcomer and African Nova Scotian children?"
 - How does systemic/individual bias and racism influence expectations?
 - How do community priorities for children influence expectations?
 - How do systems support children and families across school transitions?

What we did

Intake meeting and oral consent	Fall 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The goal was to record oral consent and learn about the roles, knowledge, and experiences of participants.
Focus Group 1	Nov 2024 - Jan 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The goal was to learn how participants perceived children's transitions into school and the influences on developmental expectations from their equity lens. Participants also shared their perspectives on how the developmental expectations are defined and assessed as part of the Early Development Instrument.
Focus group 2	May - June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The goal was to share back preliminary findings with participants to discuss and refine the key ideas about their perspectives on child development and transitions into school from their equity lens.

*** All the focus group meetings were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.*

Who was involved

Supporting newcomer children:

- A total of 7 participants (all identified as women) who support newcomer children.
- Majority (n=6) were newcomers themselves who have been living in Canada between 3–30 years.
- Participants had multiple roles, including program coordinator, ECE supervisor, faculty member, director, school settlement support staff.

Supporting African Nova Scotian (ANS) children:

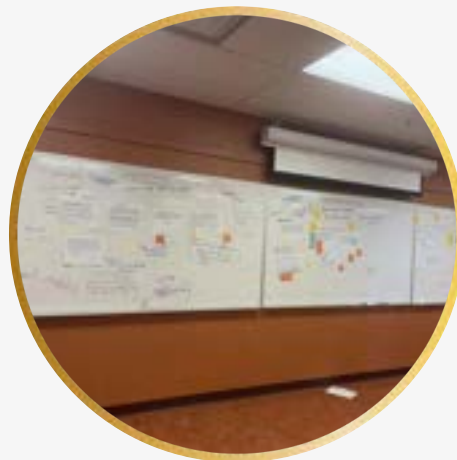
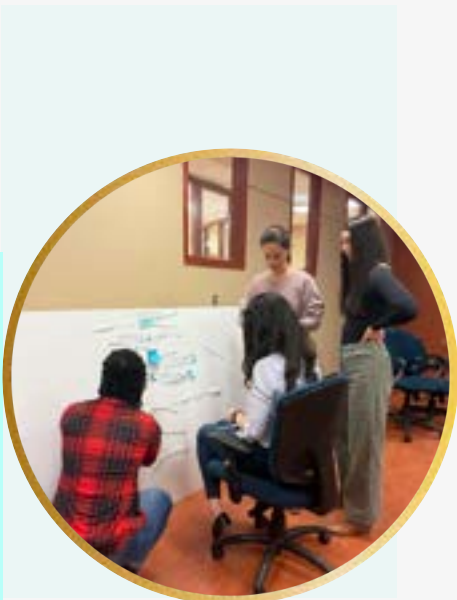
- A total of 7 participants (majority identified as women n=6) who work to support Black and African Nova Scotia educators, families, and children.
- Participants had multiple roles, including college instructors, program directors, inclusion coordinators, and social workers.

Grade Primary teachers

- Recruitment of teachers is currently ongoing.

How we approached the data

- All the focus group conversations were transcribed verbatim so that we could stay focused on participants' stories and experiences.
- We approached our understanding of the data through the following research question:
 - *How do community experts understand expectations of child development and school transitions for newcomer and African Nova Scotian children?"*
- We used a process called reflexive thematic analysis through the following steps:
 - Familiarized ourselves with the data by reading the written transcripts and listening to the focus groups.
 - Applied labels to excerpts of the written transcripts based on key ideas and concepts.
 - Continually defined and refined ideas through connections in response to our research question.
 - Developed initial themes for feedback from participants at the second focus group.
 - Engaged participants in a discussion about the themes and continued to refine to reflect the results shared in this report.

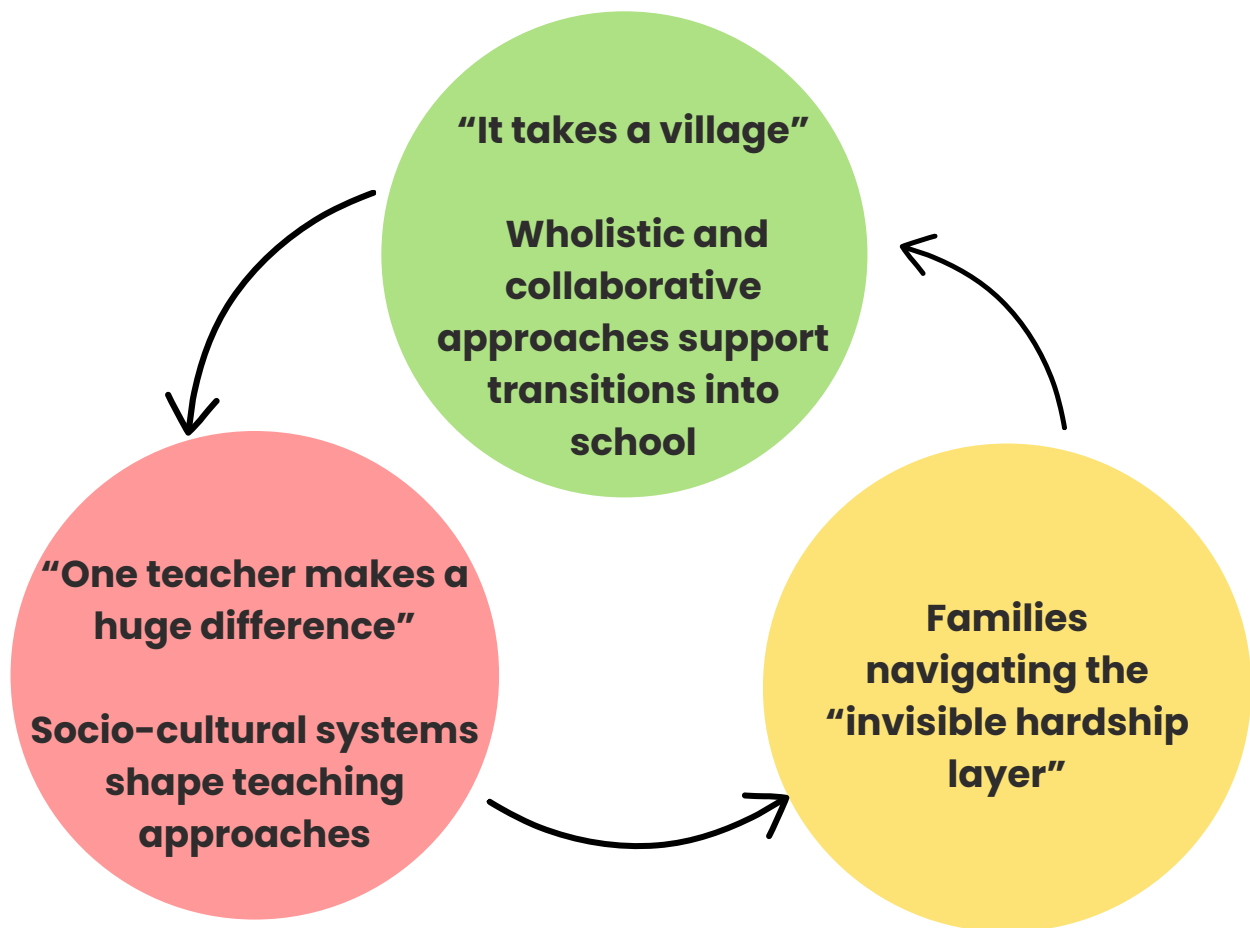


What we heard from participants

Three themes were identified across the conversations with the two expert group from equity deserving communities. These themes highlighted the factors influencing expectations of child development and school transitions for newcomer and African Nova Scotian children, including:

- How systemic/individual bias and racism influence expectations
- How community priorities for children influence expectations
- How systems support children and families across school transitions

Our themes



“It takes a village”: Wholistic and collaborative approaches support transitions into school

- Participants talked about the crucial role every person (“the village”) plays within an interconnected network to support children and their families with the transition into school. This includes: teacher/educators, family resource centres, schools, child care programs, settlement organizations, other families, and community professionals.
- **Resources, relationships and trust** were identified as important contributions to a wholistic and collaborative transition.

A participant from the newcomer group shared their priority for building trust:

“... we are building a relation with the parents, it's something that we are working together back and forth. And it's so important when they trust us from the beginning... just to build this trust and have that relation, it takes time, but it works very well... and it helps the child development and the family understanding as well.”

Resources

The building blocks that enable support, including people, organizations, and programs.



Form through continued communication across the various networks to learn how to best support the family and child.

Trust

Builds over time and ensures families feel safe and supported through a strong working relationship.

“It takes a village”: Wholistic and collaborative approaches support transitions into school

One participant from the newcomer group shared their positive experience in having accessible resources:

“We have a Family Resource Center connected with us, so it enhances us [the child care centre]. It gives us tools and resources within our community that can directly impact the entire family.

And that’s a key component because it helped develop some parenting skills... It helps (families) develop skills that they feel they’re lacking. They can build on (their skills) from the centre, so that’s a good resource for parents. So not just the kids are getting the education or the support at the daycare level, but also, the parents are getting support along with the kids.”

From the ANS group a participant shared a concern of the village working together while another participant from the newcomer group shared the relevance of a collaborative team

“so, if it takes a village, how come only half of the village is working to keep (child) where she needs to be?”

“We should build close relationships with children and families. When a student has someone he can trust, and talk to about everything, it helps to avoid a lot of stress, solve many issues”

Resources

The building blocks that enable support, including people, organizations, and programs.



Relationships

Form through continued communication across the various networks to learn how to best support the family and child.

Trust

Builds over time and ensures families feel safe and supported through a strong working relationship.

“It takes a village”: Wholistic and collaborative approaches support transitions into school

- Participants provided examples where weak communication deterred relationship building and influenced trust as a result of:
 - Lack of resource support in classrooms;
 - Lack of educator knowledge on how to support culturally diverse families;
 - Language barriers.
- A lack of connection amongst individuals within the support network was perceived to limit a collaborative approach to support child development. This was described as sometimes occurring through a loss of trust as a result of racism and discrimination.

The experiences of newcomer mothers were also shared:

“A mother went to her child's parent-teacher and she was waiting, and she could hear the teacher. She [the teacher] was just talking to another teacher.

[The teacher said] “So, look at my line up, I don't know how I'm gonna understand them [referring to newcomer parents in the line].

[The mother then said]: I heard your conversation, you know...I've been here 14 years. I came before I turned 18. I know the language. I know the culture, but I know that you prejudged me...”

An ANS participant also described what they did when supports failed to meet the community's needs:

“So, it's the point where we're just going to have to do it on our own. Again, we always support our own children in our own communities... we always have to be 150% better.”

A strong, interconnected support network (the village) provides a wholistic and collaborative approach to children and families when they are available resources, an openness to build relationships to build trust.

Families Navigating the “Invisible Hardship Layer”

- Participants spoke of the “invisible hardship layer” through the pressures experienced by equity-deserving communities, families, and children.
- Participants discussed: **who can see the layers, the power and influence of the school, and the additional mental load.**

The ANS group described their experiences in navigating systems that overlook the barriers faced by equity-deserving communities.

“I call it the invisible hardship layer because it's not talked about, but we talk about it and you talk about it for the rest of your life because you cannot change your skin colour, you can only be – you can only be positively present wherever you're at.”

1. Who can see the layers?

- Participants talked about equity-deserving families as often the only ones who are really aware of these hardships because they are pervasive in their lives. There was felt to be a lack of understanding by those who do not experience these hardship layers.
- This lack of understanding by people and systems (including schools) was described as influencing authentic supports provided for children.



Families Navigating the “Invisible Hardship Layer”



A participant from the ANS group shared that
“When kids enter primary school, a skill that they should have... is that they got to have ‘the talk’. So based on whatever culture they come from, ‘the talk’ is very important so that they know who they are, where they come from, and how they identify...”

I know I give ‘the talk’ before my kids go to school because it's very important they know who they are, and where they come from, and to be proud of who they are, and that they're beautiful”

Another participant from the ANS group said:

So, I had an extra added layer of pressure as a Black person. So the freedom of just being free authentically, because if you're free authentically, that means you know who you can talk to, you know where you have to be and you feel safe all the time regardless of who's taking care of you and that's I think it is hard on children because they have those talks before they get to the centre or before they go to school ... And then it's – it's added pressure also for families.

Families Navigating the “Invisible Hardship Layer”

2. The Additional Mental Load

- Participants often feel unsupported by broader systems and burdened with extra mental load when supporting families.
- Participants shared that Black families use “the talk” to prepare and protect their children against the realities of Anti-Black racism.
- Participants noted that equity-deserving families face a heavy mental load due to the many decisions required to support their children through school and community transitions.

One participant from the newcomer group spoke to the additional mental load that their child had taken on when adjusting to a new culture and language:

“When we moved to Canada, I had a three year old son who couldn't start school yet... He didn't have any English language. He was brand new to Canada. He didn't have any experience. Everything was new to us and even for him... He learned about the rules... How to interact with other kids. He got used to the weather conditions, how to get out, how to dress up for going outside if it's cold, if it's warm, all those stuff.”

The newcomer group spoke about the many decisions families have to make to support their children:

“Before they are getting here (Canada), it takes some time. So in in an ideal situation, yes, you have a home base, you have security, you have a routine. It's not always the case for families.”

- The quotes highlight the complex decision-making equity-deserving communities face, shaping their everyday experiences.
- They show how societal perceptions and systemic inequities affect how children navigate the world and how families must continually assess the safety and inclusivity of their environments.
- This layer remains invisible to those without the context, awareness, or lived experience of minority groups' daily realities.

Families Navigating the “Invisible Hardship Layer”

3. Power and Influence of the school

- Participants talked about the powerful role that schools play in shaping how children perceive themselves and others while providing opportunities to enhance their social and emotional skills.
- For equity deserving groups, especially, schools were described as having an impact on children’s sense of identity and cultural pride.
 - Participants provided examples of existing resources such as Africentric early childhood cohort, settlement agencies, and school settlement support workers.
 - These programs were felt to help students by connecting with their heritage, building peer networks, and cultivating a strong sense of self.
- Participants also spoke about the continued impact of negative assumptions and stereotypes about their communities that can be reinforced within school settings. Examples of exclusion and discrimination were shared to demonstrate how equity-deserving communities need to constantly respond to this influence.

One participant from the ANS group said:

“They’re [Black children] completely broken. And it just kills me because it’s like this thing where they come home and you bandage them up and you put them out there again...

...So, if parents, when we talk about that burden on parents, when we talk about the burden on Black educators who understand how much... We have to bandage them up after we put them into places where they’re not valued, they’re not seen for who they are.

...I mean it is almost on purpose, being chipped away at...There’s added rocks placed in our – on our backs. Rocks of worry and concern because we know. Because we’ve been that child.”

Families Navigating the “Invisible Hardship Layer”

An emphasis was put on schools which can also “chip away” at self-image and that among the Black community, parents “have to bandage” their children “to instill self-confidence and cultural proudness.”

In relation to schools and this theme, more participants from ANS group shared:

“the school plays an essential role in interactions between the children because they are the place facilitating interactions.”

Another ANS participant explained her experiences navigating systems as a parent: *“I had refused to allow anybody to push me away... As a parent, I had to be that advocate for my children.”*



“One teacher makes a huge difference” Socio-cultural systems Shape Teaching Approaches

- Participants emphasized the vital role of educators in supporting children from equity-deserving groups during transitions into and within education settings, due to their daily interactions with them.
- A teacher’s identity, experiences, and cultural understanding were felt to shape their approach to supporting children.
- This theme includes the importance of **teachers’/educators’ identity and their cross-cultural understanding** when providing support to children from equity-deserving groups.

1. Teacher Identity: The importance of Cultural Representation

- Participants emphasized that a teacher’s personal identity, cultural background, and lived experiences form how they understand and respond to the needs of the children in their care.
- These aspects of identity including race, language, values, and family traditions influence teaching approaches and affect how teachers interpret children’s behaviors, communicate with families, and create inclusive learning environments.
- When educators are familiar with aspects of a child’s cultural background, it better positions them to offer meaningful support.



“One teacher makes a huge difference” Socio-cultural systems Shape Teaching Approaches

In relation to this theme, one participant from the newcomer group said:

“... [teachers] should be made aware of the different cultures, and there should be some training given to them so that they are aware that, you know, children come from different backgrounds and they have their own, you know, own cultures and at least becoming aware will make a differences” in order to better assist and equip students.”

A participant from the newcomer group discussed:

“Sometimes when the teacher has some ideas about the background and culture, it can change the whole picture of the way that they are seeing things and their understanding.” This awareness helps teachers to better support all children in their classrooms.”

A newcomer participant explained how having teachers that reflect their students identity, supported the child’s adjustment into a new culture:

“I think one example would be coming from one child from my own country and you can imagine, this kind of a feeling of safe and secure when you find somebody who looks like your aunt or mom or speak the same language of your country, then yeah, it’s kind of a setting, the tone of like “oh, I think I feel safe. At least I can say something. I can communicate with this person, right?”



“One teacher makes a huge difference” Socio-cultural systems Shape Teaching Approaches

A common topic in the newcomer group discussed that:

“Sometimes when the teacher has some ideas about the background and culture, it can change the whole picture of the way that they are seeing things and their understanding.” This awareness helps teachers to better support all children in their classrooms.”

Newcomer participants shared the outcome of taking an extra step as an educator:

“I actually went and had a meeting with the primary staff and I actually sat down with them and I actually made physical portfolios of each child and I had a meeting with them and showed the development of that child and where they were at so that they could see, “oh, that’s where the child is now I know where to go”... Now I know that doesn’t happen all the time, but it really helped that transition because when I had the next group the following year, those primary teachers came down to me and said, “Oh my gosh, thank you so much for that.”

- While culture, policies, and curriculum influence teaching, teachers may be able to make meaningful, equity-focused decisions in their classrooms.
- Teachers’ compassion and identity *can* drive them to learn about classroom diversity, helping children feel a sense of belonging and security when they see themselves reflected.



"One teacher makes a huge difference"

Socio-cultural systems Shape Teaching Approaches

1. Teacher Identity: The importance of Cultural Representation

- Representation was highlighted as an essential component of children's sense of belonging and emotional safety.
 - When children see aspects of their identity reflected in their daily environments, they are more likely to feel seen, heard, and confident in expressing themselves.
- Without representation, children may struggle to find trusted adults who truly understand their lived experiences, making it harder for them to trust them and fully engage with them.
 - Representation offers an opportunity to build relationships, foster trust, and ensure every child feels valued in their learning environment.

A community expert from the ANS group said:

"Representation within the centers and the schools are key because when that child is getting ready to speak up, who do they speak up to?"

2. Cross Cultural Understanding

- Children need support from educators who understand how to support their unique needs. Sometimes representation is not present at the educator level, but cultural competency can be integrated into training for all educators to gain necessary skills.
- Participants shared that training or understanding is not always present at the educator level, meaning children are left misunderstood or not receiving adequate support needed to thrive in the learning environment.

“One teacher makes a huge difference” Socio-cultural systems Shape Teaching Approaches

In relation to the importance of cross-cultural understanding, a participant from the newcomer group said:

“So, I think cultural competency should be in schools. You know, they don't have to be multicultural or diverse staff, but at least cultural awareness some kind of training should be there for the teachers as well because they have that ability to communicate with the children.”

In relation to the importance of cross-cultural understanding of children's behaviour, one participant from the newcomer group shared:

“Even, you know, cultural communication, say, looking directly in the eyes that is, in some cultures disrespect. So, children turn their face. So what do you say? She is shy. No, she is not a shy child. She does not shy away from the answer. She is expressing herself the way she learned or the way he learned.”

- Cross-cultural understanding is key to building inclusive and supportive learning environments where all children feel valued.
- Culturally aware educators better recognize diverse student needs, but this understanding is not consistent or widespread.
- This gap may stem from socio-cultural systems—like curricula, teacher training, and dominant norms—that often overlook equity-deserving groups. Bridging it requires critically examining these systems and committing to cultural learning and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

- The discussed themes all carry complex layers that intertwine to create the systems in which children are embedded in and must learn to navigate.
- When systems work together using culturally competent approaches that are family focused, children are more likely to receive support that suits their needs.
- Although it is important to understand this village, children's wholistic development cannot truly be supported without acknowledging other societal factors like the "invisible hardship layer" and authority figures that impacts children's experiences.

