

March 17, 2024

Dear Lisa Johnson

My name is Fiona Moola and I am an Associate Professor in the School of Early Childhood Studies at the Toronto Metropolitan University. Thank you for welcoming me into your classroom space on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024 in order to conduct a teaching assessment of your class – Field Education 3 – Winter term. The particular class which I assessed was on “Family Engagement”.

You began the class with “housekeeping”, including a midterm examination recap. In your introduction and ice breaker activity with the class, I appreciated your acknowledgment of Ramadan and the experience of ECS students who are currently fasting. For me, this was such a culturally sensitive gesture to make to the Muslim students in the class.

You began lecture on Family Engagement by honoring and recognizing the diversity that exists within families. For instance, you named and engaged with the experiences of families facing childhood disability, as well as racialized families as well. This honouring of diversity was really important for me. You posed a question to the class and then invited students, in small groups, to reflect on the question and to share their response. Your speech in class was well modulated and extremely clear. You had a lot of movement in the space, and I think students appreciated your willingness to reach them through constant movement in the space.

From this classroom activity, I was really able to notice a few discernable elements of your teaching praxis. You are such a warm and friendly person. You adopted a kind, warm, and caring continence with your students that you maintained for the duration of the class. I was able to consistently feel this and I think the breadth of the discussion you can generate with your students is in part related to the warmth that you generate with them. You deepened engagement with the activity by asking further questions to the students, taking time and space for the engagement - effectively summarizing what students said, and connecting this to other, larger concepts, either raised in class previously or those that exist in the literature. You also promoted a lot of student reflexivity by asking students to consider “why am I having this reaction during my placement?” and letting them know that it is OK to honour and feel their struggles. For me, this really humanized the placement process.

I really appreciated your discussion with students about strength-based pedagogy that facilitates belonging. We have such a long history of villainizing families, especially those that we do not understand through a Euro-centric lens. It was helpful for you to discuss the importance of honouring the strengths, resources, and knowledge that families already bring to their

experiences in early learning and the importance of never engaging with this from a pathologizing or a deficit lens. I loved the discussion on belonging.

When you asked students to reflect on their engagement with families, I was really touched by the depth of their responses. For instance, I learned that ECS students struggle to connect with families when they are rushed during pick up and drop off. I learned that apps, such as “Hey Mama Connect”, can help parents to feel connected to their children during the day – but can also hinder relational processes such as well, if some children are not represented as often as other children. I also learned about the importance of non-verbal interactions with families. There was a fascinating discussion about actually having to sometimes limit engagement with families if the program is attachment- based and designed to foster attachment between a child and a parent facing difficult circumstances. It was fascinating to listen to placement experiences from hospital, where family engagement is even more drawn out, if a child is hospitalized or part of a treatment program; here, time and space with families is drawn out and amplified. There was an equally intriguing discussion about perceived maternal judgment that placement students have encountered, where mothers feel judged for their competence in caring. I also learned about ECS student placements where families dismissed or ignored potential disability diagnosis. This discussion was so rich and engaging. Toward the end of the discussion, it was wonderful to hear you talk about the ways in which early learning systems are embedded in colonization and patriarchy. Thank you for raising these systemic issues.

By way of enhanced teaching in the future, please consider connecting discussions on childhood disability to ECS undergrad courses in the School, like Children with Disabilities, as well as Inclusion. As well, perhaps in the future, you could integrate the Hey Mama app to open a discussion on how technology impacts family engagement. Finally, how are you conceptualizing the concept of belonging, theoretically?

Although my next month is very packed with the end of term, I would be happy to meet with you to discuss this review. Do not hesitate to email me if you need further clarification. I wish you continued success in your academic ventures at the Toronto Metropolitan University.

Thank you

Sincerely

Fiona Moola, MSc., PhD, RP (Q)

Dear Dr. Moola,

Thank you for sharing your assessment of my teaching.

I am deeply grateful for your thoughtful and attentive feedback on my practice.

I am also grateful for the suggestions that you shared and will take them to heart to work on.

I love the idea of exploring the Hi Mama app in class to work with and think about its purposes, possibilities, and limitations.

Regarding your direction to make connections to other courses in the ECS undergrad, that is something that I continue to work on. Though I have not taught those courses, I know that I can ask students about what they have learned and how they draw on those courses in their placement experiences. Thank you for the reminder and direction to make these connections.

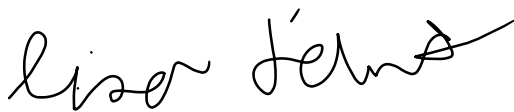
Regarding your question about how I am framing the concept of belonging theoretically, I am referring to the definition of belonging as stated in *How Does Learning Happen* on page 7 and expanded on in pages 24 - 48.

" Belonging refers to a sense of connectedness to others, an individual's experiences of being valued, of forming relationships with others and making contributions as part of a group, a community, the natural world." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 7)

I am also thinking with the reconceptualist scholarship by Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Allan Pence (2007) in their book, *Beyond quality in Early Childhood Education: Languages of Evaluation*. Their work is highly influenced by the educational orientations and approaches in Reggio Emilia that foreground children's agency as citizens and active contributors to their worlds specifically in public spaces in general society. I feel it is important to emphasize this aspect of belonging because it is often overshadowed by the emphasis on representation. While I agree that representation in children's spaces is extremely important and necessary, I am also concerned that when children's contributions to their worlds are not taken seriously then the representation risks becoming tokenistic.

Thank you again for your generous comments and assessment.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Johnston', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lisa Johnston, MA, RECE