Who we are
The Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative (MCHB Coop) began 24 years ago to support Edmonton’s newcomers. We have a team of 80 multilingual brokers supporting 25 cultural/language communities. The goal was to enhance the health and well-being of families, and foster their efforts at building community so they could thrive, and actively contribute to society. Our cultural brokers are from immigrant communities, and know first-hand the social, economic, and language difficulties that immigrants and refugees face. This places us in a unique position to bridge the gap between newcomer families and Canadian society.

Our work in the Early Years
Cultural brokers bridge between schools and children and families who are English Language Learners (ELL) and of immigrant or refugee background. These brokers have experiences working in early childhood settings and continue to receive training and professional development in bicultural early childhood, bilingualism, and cultural assessment. Cultural brokers in the early years provide a range of services and supports including:

- In classroom first language and culture facilitation
- Cultural bridging between home and school
- ELL parent engagement and education
- Wraparound support to newcomer families
- Cultural and first language bridging during screening

What our school partners say

* Cultural brokers strengthened school capacity to work with ELL families

“[cultural brokers have] been a great asset to the school largely because it brings a skill into the school...that the school doesn’t have. And their experience and their skills in working with us to support these families has been just a huge asset. It helps the parents then to interact with the school, which has traditionally for ELL parents often been a huge challenge.”

* Cultural brokers contributed to better home-school relationships

“It helps families to become part of the school community...it helps us to deal with issues before they become big issues in the school ...largely through failure to understand and to communicate.”

“Because [families] are so busy with their own lives going to school, dealing with all the paper, it is only really that face-to-face contact regularly in their first language that encourages them to come back...”
Our Wraparound Support for Newcomer Families during the Early Years

Since 2007, the MCHB Co-op has had a long-standing collaborative development and pursuit of an innovative model for intercultural early learning program with Edmonton Public School, primarily at Balwin School (as well as McCauley School before its closure and Carneavon).

The key components of this innovative and transformative model, include:

1. Culturally and linguistically appropriate early learning practices co-created by teachers, newcomer parents, cultural brokers and cultural communities.
2. First language and culture facilitators (FLF), who are members of the children’s cultural communities, proficient speakers of the home language, and knowledgeable about cultural practices. The FLF are more than interpreters and play a critical role in the classroom. They are facilitators of first language and intercultural learning, as well mediators of parents’ perspectives and desires for children’s learning, thereby representing an essential element of the intercultural early learning program.
3. Collaborative partnerships with families, communities, schools and the early learning & care sector.
4. Wraparound support.

Wraparound support speaks to the importance of holistic support for immigrant & refugee children and families. Children learn best when their basic needs are met and their pre-migration and post-migration realities are known and responded to. They also learn best when their parents & families are supported in providing a stable environment with language-rich and early learning opportunities. Wraparound support responds to the complex struggles newcomer families face in their settlement & integration process, such as chronic poverty, language and multiple barriers in accessing & navigating systems, and social isolation. It also recognizes the strength, resiliency and cultural wealth children, parents and families have.

To support the optimal development of younger generations of Canadians we must ensure all children participate in quality early childhood programming (Hertzman 2009). For newcomer populations, the wraparound support facilitated by cultural brokers speaks to this quality. Without it, the most vulnerable families would be unable to fully access early learning opportunities, the program would not be able to provide holistic, culturally responsive support to children and families, and the early learning team may have limited awareness of the pre-migration/post-migration realities, cultural perspries and knowledge of the families.

Educators continue to play a vital role in creating education environments that are truly equity-based. This kind of intercultural programming is possible only when teachers and other school-based service providers are closely collaborating with cultural brokers who have close relationships with families from cultural minorities. Collaboration requires time, resources, and recognition of the expertise that all team members bring. Such collaborative opportunities must be purposefully created and integrated into existing programming if they are to be sustainable and effective. Policies and structures that facilitate school-community collaboration must also be established, including strong working relationships with community agencies.