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The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Aboriginal early
childhood development
and care

Family policies for
how we live now

Reframing the
child care conversation
in Canada

Moving Beyond Baby Steps



**Building a child care
plan for today's families**



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KAREN ISAAC AND KATHLEEN JAMIESON

A Good Path Forward

Understanding and promoting Aboriginal early childhood development and care

Introduction

The historical context for national policies concerning the care of young Aboriginal children needs to be of paramount consideration in the formulation of any plan or vision that aspires to include the future care and well-being of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children. Furthermore, the right of Aboriginal peoples to be the decision makers in matters that affect their children must be both acknowledged and reflected.

The unique status and rights that Aboriginal peoples have in Canada under the Constitution and through treaties is also continually being strengthened through evolving jurisprudence that support the legal right of Aboriginal peoples to land, self-government and to be considered autonomous in all matters that directly affect them. The acknowledgment of this distinct status is of critical importance in the consideration of matters that affect Aboriginal children.

However, the historical contexts that have shaped ideas about the care of children today and that shape Aboriginal Early Childhood Development and Care (ECDC) policy and practice on the one hand and mainstream child care policy, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on the other, are fundamentally different.

While not claiming to speak for all Aboriginal¹ peoples in BC on the issues we raise, the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (BCACCS) has a 20-year history of providing culturally informed research, teaching resources, and training for Aboriginal Early Childhood Educators (ECEs).

We also advocate for families and children on how to access services and programs based on children's history, language and culture. The children and families that attend the two Head Start programs established and administered by BCACCS in the downtown eastside of Vancouver help to keep us aware on a daily basis of the struggles of the many Aboriginal families living in poverty to survive with dignity in urban areas; they trust us with their hopes and dreams and that we work for a better future for all our children.

With this in mind, this paper assesses the ways in which the three key principles and components of the *Vision* for early childhood education and care described in the background paper prepared for the Child Care 2020 Conference (November 2014) can be improved to better reflect the reality and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples for early childhood development and care (ECDC) for Aboriginal children in BC.

Historical Context: ECEC and Aboriginal ECDC

ECEC theory and practice evolved from the need for accessible and affordable child care services for the increasing number of women with young children entering the workforce in the last decades of the 20th century. More recently, the education of young children has emerged as an explicit goal of ECEC, hence the evolution of the name from *child care* to *early childhood education and care* (ECEC). The general public is supportive of ECEC and has pushed Governments to provide a national childcare program so far with no success.

Governments have, however, funded Aboriginal ECDC policies and programs although these were not designed to reflect Aboriginal tradition or ways of caring for children.

Aboriginal ECDC policies first emerged in Canada in the early 1990s in response in part to the findings of the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1996 about the destructive impacts of colonialism on Aboriginal families and communities, the extreme

poverty of Aboriginal peoples across Canada and the gap between the well-being of Aboriginal peoples and other citizens of Canada²

These ECDC policy and programs were also a response to the positive results of U.S. programs for marginalized children such as Head Start and to numerous epidemiological studies arguing that effective health promotion policies needed to focus on the social determinants of health rather than on an individual's responsibility for their own well-being.

A patchwork of Aboriginal ECDC funded programs with a combined focus on children, families and communities have emerged since 1995 that have now been adapted by Aboriginal communities in BC to combine child care with developmental, health and well-being programs for children and their families.

Government agencies still circumscribe what degree of variation is permissible, however. For example, in programs such as the federal First Nations and Inuit Childcare Initiative (FNICCI), there is a requirement that the participants be employed or in a training program.

The centre-based Aboriginal ECDC and other aligned programs that emerged in B.C. were not based on an Aboriginal tradition or concept and so were viewed by some in Aboriginal communities as assimilative. Given the long history of Aboriginal children being forcibly removed from their families and communities to residential schools and the current high numbers of Aboriginal children being taken into government care, it is no wonder that some poverty-stricken families may be ambivalent about ECDC and see it as another type of policing over children and their families.

Complicating the matter further is that traditional Euro-Canadian views of Aboriginal women's role enforced for more than a century through the Indian Act and the residential schools have served to devalue the care of children, mainly done by women, in some eyes. Although the role of Aboriginal ECEs in a community is complex and

The intergenerational impacts of residential schools on children families and communities continue to cast a long shadow over policies and approaches for the education and care of young Aboriginal children.

vital to the well-being of young children the work is not valued to the degree that it should be.

For many First Nations and Métis people in BC, the intergenerational impacts of residential schools on children families and communities continue to cast a long shadow over policies and approaches for the education and care of young Aboriginal children. Memories of the ill treatment endured by Aboriginal children for more than a century in residential schools (until the last such school closed in 1996) under the guise of education but assimilative in intent are still raw. The damage caused to Aboriginal children and families is very real, multigenerational and ongoing.

The June 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schools provides six years of evidence for the report's conclusion that successive Canadian governments followed a deliberate policy of cultural genocide.³

Today, the process of removing Aboriginal children from the care of their families in large numbers seems to be continuing in another form. A June 2015 joint report of the BC Representative for Children and Youth and the Provincial Health Officer found that Aboriginal children in BC are 12 times more likely to be taken into care than other children.⁴

The ongoing gap in community well-being between First Nation communities and non-Aboriginal communities in Canada is explored in research conducted by the Department of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs (AANDC).

The research shows that between 1981 and 2011 the gap in social and economic well-being between Aboriginals and other Canadians has not decreased overall and that the gap in educational achievement may have increased. It also shows a large amount of variability in well-being scores for First Nations communities.⁵

Aboriginal peoples in BC, therefore, continue to strongly advocate for educational and care policies or approaches grounded in Aboriginal tradition and current realities, designed by Aboriginal peoples to protect and preserve Aboriginal cultures, and controlled by Aboriginal peoples.

The *Vision's* principles

In the context of this historical understanding, we will now assess the ways in which the *Vision* for early childhood education and care does — or does not — meet and reflect the reality and aspirations of early childhood development and care for Aboriginal children in BC.

First, BCACCS considers that the three key principles in the *Vision* of Universality, High Quality and Comprehensiveness as guiding principles for a child care agenda will likely work well for most of mainstream Canadian society.

However, all three principles and their components tend to blur or ignore the separate identity, rights of Indigenous peoples, their separate history and separate constitutional status as Aboriginal peoples, and their different child care, education, and development requirements.

We would argue for a broadening of the *Vision*, and for a fourth principle that fits with an Aboriginal development and child care principle that explicitly recognizes the need to counter the impacts of colonialism and the intergenerational trauma of residential schools, and the different and often dire circumstances of most young Aboriginal families.

Another factor to take into account is that although Aboriginal ECDC as a concept and the related programs developed by governments are not based on an Aboriginal worldview or traditions, many communities now see the value of high quality ECDC programs. However, these programs and services need to be better supported, to incorporate local knowledge on child rearing, and better supported financially to improve quality and to gain a broad-based degree of acceptance.

Universality

We agree with the *Vision* that ECEC is a public good and a human right and that young children are citizens in their own right and that both ECEC and ECDC need to be voluntary and accessible to all those who need and want it and that these services should have sustainable public funding. We also value the support and aspirations of child care advocates who desire a universally accessible program.

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However, the idea that a policy will be “universal” in its application rings some alarm bells. The special status and rights that Aboriginal peoples in Canada have under the Canadian Constitution and international human and Indigenous rights treaties assure Aboriginal peoples of their right to be different.

High quality

What “Quality” consists of in any context is culturally determined. Through a community consultation process BCACCS has determined that high quality in a BC Aboriginal ECDC context means that, at a minimum, programs for Aboriginal children must be culturally appropriate, reinforce pride in identity, be spiritually enriching, be grounded in an Aboriginal world-view, values, ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of caring for young children.

The *Vision* paper states that “Integrating child care and early childhood education as “strong and equal partners” is desirable from a quality perspective” and that “integration across multiple domains including financing, training, pedagogy, and governance makes the system stronger.” However, the BCACCS community-based research on the elements of high quality in AECD indicates that an integration of pedagogy and governance, training and financing that would include Aboriginal ECDC would not be likely to foster high quality ECDC for Aboriginal children and their families.

Comprehensiveness

We agree that ECEC services (and ECDC services) need to be flexible to support the different needs of all children and families and that policies and practices should reflect that reality.

We are wary of standardized training programs for early childhood educators that are based on non-First Nations values and ignore the past and current realities. Thus, the *Vision* emphasis on integration of ECE training would not be a positive step forward.

An Indigenous perspective on policies, principles and practices that contribute to Aboriginal child well-being is one that focuses on those policies that ensure that Aboriginal children and families will flourish wherever they live.

Summary

We do not suggest that there is some kind of pan-Indigenous/Canadian Aboriginal understanding or approach to ECDC, but we do propose here that the three *Vision* principles be balanced with another principle that explicitly recognizes our different history as Aboriginal peoples in Canada, our different worldview, our desire for autonomy in how we care for our children, the diversity of Aboriginal children, families and communities and the special status of Aboriginal peoples under the Canadian Constitution.

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KATHLEEN JAMIESON has worked with BCACCS since 2002 as a research consultant analyzing policies and programs for Aboriginal early childhood development and care (ECDC), assisting with community development initiatives, and conducting evaluations and needs assessments for Aboriginal ECDC programs.

ENDNOTES

1 "Aboriginal" is used here as it is in the Canadian Constitution to refer to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.

2 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). *Final Report*.

3 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). *Summary Report*.

4 Office of the Representative of Children and Youth and the Provincial Health Officer (2015). *Growing up in B.C. - 2015*.

5 Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2015). *The Community Well-Being Index: Report on Trends in First Nations Communities, 1981-2011*. <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1345816651029/1345816742083>.