

Children Are a Gift to Us: Aboriginal-Specific Early Childhood Programs and Services in Canada

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This article examines the intents and rationales of Aboriginal early childhood programs and services in Canada. Specifically, it explores the political and policy contexts in which they were developed, the historic and colonial narratives to which they responded, and the economic and community needs to which they were addressed. The article spans several decades of program development and ends with a discussion of the most recent Canadian initiatives (and subsequent tensions) focused on an integrated or single-window Early Learning Child Care initiative. In conclusions and recommendations, the article reviews and advocates ideologies that are shifting to a broader recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing and being as integral to any programs or services in Canada for Aboriginal children and families that seek to enhance their health and well-being.

Introduction

I use the term *Aboriginal* here to encompass First Nations, Inuit, Metis, and non-Status Indian peoples. *First Nations* refers to communities and/or individuals who reside on a reserve.

Formalized early childhood programs and services are relatively new in Aboriginal communities. In the past decade, Aboriginal peoples have witnessed the development of programs and services intended to address their children's needs. These intents and rationales for the most part mirror those of the broader Canadian society. Needs related to employment and education were the primary rationale used for the initial establishment of early childhood programs and services for Aboriginal peoples. Related arguments about equity of service access for Aboriginal communities (as compared with that enjoyed by the broader Canadian society) were used as rationales for the development of programs and services. More recently, these arguments have begun to shift in attention, focusing now on children's health and well-being, particularly in the area of brain development in young children (Hertzman, 2004; Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Shonoff & Phillips, 2000). Similarly, discussions focused on children's identity, embedded in contexts of Indigenous knowledges, are beginning to gain recognition and importance. These rationales have resulted both in the refocusing and transformation of many existing programs and the establishment of additional programs and services as they strive to achieve and maintain positive health and well-being in young children.

We are once again on the verge of change, particularly as the knowledges of Aboriginal communities and individuals come to the fore. With experience gained from implementation of formalized early childhood programs and services, Aboriginal parents, Elders, community members, caregivers, and scholars are beginning to articulate their ways of knowing and being (from which stem the care, education, and well-being of children) in the arena of early childhood. Program frameworks, the principles of which call for the inclusion of culture and language and that recognize the importance of holism and interconnectedness of all beings are now in evidence and provide one step toward realizing programs and services that are derived from and controlled by Aboriginal peoples (Ball, 2004; McShane & Hastings, 2004; McIvor, 2005).

By examining the intent and rationales of these programs and services in the light of the political and policy contexts in which they were developed, the purpose of this article is to explore the development of significant Aboriginal-specific early childhood programs and services in Canada. Although some of the ideas in this article have been presented in other venues (i.e., *A Report of The Assembly of First Nations Early Childhood Development National Discussion*, 2004; *BC First Nations Children: Our Families, Our Communities, Our Future*, Greenwood, 2003; *Whispered Gently Through Time First Nations Quality Child Care: A National Study; An Overview of the Development of Aboriginal Early Childhood Services in Canada*, Greenwood, 2001), they are more critically explained herein and offer new and updated perspectives on Aboriginal-specific early childhood in Canada.

The Need for Aboriginal-Specific Early Childhood Programs and Services

We must know where we have been to know where we are going.

Initiatives and reports before the establishment of Aboriginal-specific programs and services in the mid 1990s identify and focus on the need to develop such services. Specific Aboriginal early childhood programs and services were virtually nonexistent in the 1960s and 1970s. Those services that did exist were sporadic and inadequately funded and as a result were often short-lived. There were two exceptions to this trend in the 1960s. One was the Canada/Ontario Agreement Respecting Welfare Programs for Indians (1995). This agreement not only ensured Indian parents residing on-reserve access to parental subsidies, but also gave credence to Indian communities' expression about the need for on-reserve child care services. The second exception was the Hawthorne Report (1966-1967), a government enquiry focusing on the socialization of Indian children and their preparation for integration into provincial education systems. The Hawthorne Report brought the needs of these preschool children into public view and pointed to the inequity of service availability and accessibility between Indians living on reserve and the rest of Canada.

Establishing the need for early childhood services on reserve continued into and through the 1970s. In the 1980s, Aboriginal peoples began articulating their own reasons for wanting early childhood services in their communities. In 1986, the Native Women's Association of Canada made public the need for Aboriginal child care in their presentation to the House of Commons. In the presentation, they stated,

The reason why child care is so important is because of the nature of our families, of the social and economic conditions of our men and women. Our children require child care so that we can break the cycle of poverty, we can break the cycle of alcoholism, but most important so we can pass on our culture, values and language. Without child care services designed by us for our children, in which Elders tell our children their history and assist in the teaching of our children their traditional languages and values, we will only continue to suffer racism, assimilation, and language loss. Our children will be more alienated as they grow up and the cycles of poverty, of violence and of abuse will continue. (p. 7)

In addition to articulating the *real* need for child care services in Aboriginal communities, the Native Women's Association described a holistic, contextual rationale for early childhood services that went far beyond an argument of equity. Despite this rationale, however the argument for equity with the broader society began to shift to one of linkages between employment, education, and child care, an argument premised on and reflective of the broader Canadian society. This was no surprise given the demographic shift of women (particularly mothers) who were leaving their homes and joining the workforce.

Also in the late 1980s, the Child Care Initiatives Fund (CCIF, 1988) was initiated. This was a seven-year contributions program designed to encourage and evaluate child care innovations and to enhance the quality of child care in Canada. Although the CCIF had Aboriginal child care as one of its priorities, the fund was not designed to support the establishment or delivery of child care services. It provided, however, an opportunity for Aboriginal groups to access funds for a variety of projects including national child care inquiries, regional and community-based needs assessments, development of formal training programs, program support materials, culture and language curriculum, and a wide range of service models. The Government of Canada (1994) stated of the program,

CCIF funding has enabled some (Aboriginal) communities to test and develop community and culturally appropriate standards for child day care services. Other projects have shown how language and culture are not only critical elements of Aboriginal child care programs, but also a means of reviving and retaining language and culture in communities. Most significantly, these initiatives have shown how child day care can play a role in achieving community wellness. (p. 1)

Despite these activities, most Aboriginal communities did not reap the benefits of the limited funding available, nor was federal funding allocated for the development of Aboriginal child care services. However, one of the most significant benefits of the Child Care Initiatives Fund (CCIF) was the opportunities it provided for Aboriginal peoples to identify the

nature and purpose of child care services in their communities. Specifically, the CCIF supported the creation of Aboriginal-specific documents and research projects. Aboriginal people had the opportunity to write about themselves, their communities, and their vision for their children and their children's child care. Similarly, it formed the basis of arguments for the development of Aboriginal-specific early childhood services in years to come.

Akin to the on-reserve experience, little focus or attention was given to the unique needs of Aboriginal children and families residing in off-reserve communities. In some cases, it was assumed that these children and families once off reserve would simply use the programs and services of the broader Canadian society. No comprehensive studies were undertaken to ascertain the child care needs of these families for their children until 1988 when the Native Council of Canada (1990) undertook such a study. This is one of the first reports to highlight the early childhood needs of Status and non-Status Aboriginal peoples residing in off-reserve settings. This report states,

Culturally relevant child day care is crucial for the preservation of First Nations' children's languages, traditions and identity. Child day care can be a vehicle through which cultures can be retained and transmitted from generation to generation.

This enquiry also fed a rationale of need for child day care services by tying this need to economic and educational advancement, a rationale not unlike that of the broader Canadian society. Yet despite the varied rationales and arguments used to attain early childhood programs and services, Aboriginal organizations and individuals continued to argue for services that met the unique needs of their peoples.

As the seeds of need sown in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s took root, Aboriginal-specific early childhood services began to emerge in the 1990s. Children's rights were also being addressed during the early 1990s. Following Canada's hosting of the 1990 World Summit for Children, the Government of Canada initiated a five-year National Plan of Action entitled *Brighter Futures* (this information is taken from the discussion guide developed for "A Dialogue on Canada's National Plan of Action for Children," 2004). This initiative, announced by the federal government in 1992, comprised two components: one designed for First Nations children and families residing on reserve, the other the Community Action Plan for Children (CAPC) designed for Aboriginal children and families living off reserve or outside Inuit communities. These five-year initiatives sought to employ a community-determined approach to supporting the well-being of Aboriginal children and families living on and off reserve. The primary focus was on the developmental needs of children and youth between the ages of 0 and 23 years of age in the areas of: (a) community mental health, (b) childhood injury prevention programs, (c) healthy babies programs, (d) parenting skills and (e) solvent abuse. *Brighter Futures* and CAPC

provided, and continue to provide, opportunities for communities to begin to address some of the complexities of caring for their children in a more holistic way.

Emergence of Aboriginal Specific Early Childhood Programs and Services

In 1993, the Liberal government's commitment to creating new child day care spaces in Canada made no mention of on-reserve child day care, although a promise was included for an Aboriginal early intervention program. The following year, Minister Axworthy's Social Security Discussion Paper (1994) restated the federal government's child care commitment, including First Nations and Inuit communities. Out of these federal government commitments emerged the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (1994) and the Aboriginal Head Start initiative (1994). In 1994, then, Aboriginal-specific early childhood programs and services became a reality in Canada.

The First Nations Inuit Child Care Initiative announced in 1994 had a mandate to create 6,000 new child care spaces in First Nations and Inuit communities. The initiative came with a fiscal commitment of \$72 million in the first three developmental years and \$36 million ongoing thereafter. In the First Nations/Inuit Child Care Program and Funding Framework (1995), the Joint First Nations/Inuit/Federal Child Care Working Group identified principles similar to those described in the Assembly of First Nations' (1995) *National Overview of First Nations Child Care in Canada* to guide the development of child care services in First Nations communities. The guiding principles for the initiative included the following concepts. First, the initiatives had to be First Nations- and Inuit-directed and controlled. Second, they needed to be community-based, holistic, and focused on child development. Third, there had to be quality of service inclusive of child-staff ratios, standards, regulations and licensing, training, environments, administration, funding, programming, and family and community involvement. Fourth and fifth, the initiatives had to be inclusive, comprehensive, flexible, and accessible. Finally, the initiatives were to be accountable and affordable (Joint First Nations/Inuit/Federal Child Care Working Group, 1995).

Later in the same year, Health Minister Dianne Marleau announced the Aboriginal Head Start initiative. This \$83.7 million, four-year early intervention initiative fulfilled the federal government's commitment for an early intervention program that would serve Aboriginal parents and children living in urban and large northern communities. The program is guided by six specific program components: (a) language and culture, (b) parental and community involvement, (c) health promotion, (d) social support, (e) education, and (f), nutrition. In 2004, this program served 3,900 children in 126 urban and northern communities (www.phac-afpc.gc.ca/dca-dea/programs-mes/ahs_overview_e.html#top4).

In 1995, as implementation of the First Nations Inuit Child Care Initiative and Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Program began, the Assembly of First Nations (1995) produced a document entitled *National Overview of First Nations Child Care in Canada*. This document identified five critical components of First Nations child care services

- 1) the preservation of language and culture,
- 2) parental and community participation,
- 3) local jurisdiction and control,
- 4) quality management and human resources and
- 5) adequate fiscal resources.

These five critical components are understood as embedded in a view of child care as a cultural issue, namely, that "First Nations child care must be addressed culturally and holistically. Child care must encompass First Nations values and traditions ... child care programs [must] be placed within the culture of the First Nations communities" (pp. 14-17).

Although the First Nations Inuit Child Care Initiative and Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Initiative began to address the needs of children and families in Aboriginal communities, the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) reaffirmed the need for specific Aboriginal child care services, stating that child care is viewed as a means of reinforcing Aboriginal identity, instilling values, attitudes, and behaviors that give expression to Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal people wish to

prepare their children for stronger academic performance, but their concerns go beyond a singular focus on cognitive development. They recognize the need of families for support and respite while they struggle with personal and economic problems. They want to see early identification of children with special needs and provision of appropriate care and parent education in the community. They see high quality child care as a necessary service for parents undertaking training or gaining a foothold in the work force. (p. 449)

In 1997, the Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve program was announced. This program, modeled after the Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Initiative (1995), was to support First Nations children and families living on reserve. The primary goal of the on-reserve Head Start program is to demonstrate that locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies can provide First Nations preschool children with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning, and opportunities to develop fully and successfully. This on-reserve program also employs the six program components of the Urban and Northern Initiative. In 2000-2001, 6,500 children in 168 Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve projects composed of over 300 communities were served.

As these new early childhood initiatives came into being, Aboriginal communities across the country began to implement services with little time for planning and preparation. Similarly, few research studies or inquiries documented First Nations' community voices in defining and

articulating a vision for the quality care of their children. In 1998, a national study entitled *Whispered Gently Time, First Nations Quality Child Care: A National Study* (Greenwood & Shawana, 1999) was undertaken. The primary goals of the study were to examine implementation models for the development of First Nations quality child care programs and to develop options for First Nations jurisdiction in child care. The study found that a First Nations quality child care program at a minimum must ensure six concepts and components. These ensure that a child care program must:

- 1) provide safe, loving and nurturing care for children,
- 2) meet the needs of the children families and communities,
- 3) facilitate the passing on of the culture and language from generation to generation,
- 4) provide children with opportunities to learn their culture and language so they are instilled with a sense of pride about who they are,
- 5) foster all aspects of children's growth and development and
- 6) give children opportunities to learn and develop school readiness skills. (p. 2)

Participants in this study also spoke of the role of child care in their communities. Formalized child care services were foreign and new to many communities. Participants maintained that child care services should not reflect policies of assimilation, as such policies were understood as being similar to the residential school experience. For this reason, study participants were clear in their desire for First Nations to have control over the development and delivery of child care services in their communities.

Opportunities and Growth, Integration, and Coordination

In the late 1990s and into 2000, along with the recognition of and significant increase in the attention given Canadian children, including Aboriginal children, there is also an apparent shift in government arguments and rationales used to justify the need for early childhood programs and services. Arguments that focused on the need for equity and employment support are shifting to arguments in favor of children's overall well-being, of their healthy growth and development. For example, some child development experts argue that loving care, social interaction, and stimulating environments are important for promoting all aspects of brain development. Mustard (1999) and Hertzman (1999) write that the development of the brain determines the child's capacity for the rest of a lifetime. Multiple brain paths permit flexible thinking and problem-solving. These arguments are also beginning to acknowledge more holistic approaches to child care and to take into account the contexts of families and communities as evidenced in the design of programs such as the Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve Program and early childhood initiatives resulting from government commitments and subsequent investments in early 2000.

As rationales shifted, so did the direction of social policy shift to one of integration and coordination of programs and services for young Aboriginal children. In January 1997, the federal, provincial, and territorial governments agreed to work together toward the well-being of Canada's children. In December the same year, the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal agreed to undertake the development of a National Children's Agenda. The foundation for the National Children's Agenda is a framework identifying the following intents.

- 1) to develop long term goals and a plan for achieving positive outcomes for young Canadians,
- 2) to establish common federal/provincial/territorial priorities for action; and
- 3) to provide a basis for coordinated and integrated efforts and partnerships among many sectors which share responsibility for policies, programs and services for children and youth. (National Children's Agenda Task Group, 1997, p. 2)

It is interesting to note that documents supporting and articulating the agenda made little reference to Aboriginal children although the agenda would affect the children's lives significantly. Specifically, the Children's Agenda framework made one reference to Aboriginal children, that is,

Children have a special place in Aboriginal cultures and are the hope for a strong future for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Aboriginal children should grow up in an atmosphere that respects their unique history, recognizes their identity and values and enables them to draw on the inherent strengths of Aboriginal communities and traditions. (p. 7)

The Early Childhood Development Agreement was established by the First Ministers in September 2000. The federal government announced \$2.2 billion over five years for early childhood development programs in the provinces and territories. The agreement provided the provincial and territorial governments with funding for use in four broad themes:

- 1) to promote healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy,
- 2) to improve parenting and family supports,
- 3) to strengthen early childhood development, learning and care, and
- 4) to strengthen community supports.

Specifically, the investments were intended to result in better access to services, including prenatal classes and screening, preschool programs and child care, and parental information. How these services are to be delivered in future is now under review by the federal government and by Aboriginal peoples.

As part of the Early Childhood Development Agreement, the First Ministers also agreed to work with Aboriginal peoples to find practical solutions to address the developmental needs of Aboriginal children. This strategy included several new federal early childhood development investments for Aboriginal children (Government of Canada, October 2002). These investments were consistent with commitments outlined in the January 2001 Speech from the Throne wherein the government articulated a commitment to work with First Nations to improve and expand the early

childhood development programs and services available in First Nations communities. The Speech from the Throne also committed to expand significantly the Aboriginal Head Start program and to reduce the incidence of fetal alcohol syndrome in newborn babies. These commitments were reiterated in the 2002 Speech from the Throne along with a new commitment to support the special learning needs of First Nations children. These recent Speeches from the Throne, more than at any time in the past, recognize the unique needs of First Nations and Aboriginal children in Canada.

"Single-Window Approach" in Early Childhood Development

Another key feature of the 2002 budget was a commitment to support the development of a single-window approach to early childhood development programming for Aboriginal children. The overall goal of this approach is to ensure better integration and coordination between federal early childhood development programs for young Aboriginal children and their families. The federal government's emphasis on a single-window approach also fulfills the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal's (1997) commitment to reduce overlap and duplication among programs and services. The single-window approach has six specific objectives:

- 1) an integrated system at the community level,
- 2) community-based decision-making,
- 3) flexibility and responsiveness to diverse needs
- 4) improved outcomes and accountability,
- 5) reduced administrative burden on communities, and
- 6) a foundation for other programs. (Health Canada Coordinating Committee on Children, November 2002)

In July 2002, the Cabinet authorized Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), Health Canada (HC), and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to implement jointly the federal Aboriginal Early Childhood Development strategy. Under this authorization, there was a commitment to return to cabinet by March 2004 in order to propose options for a coordinated approach to early childhood development programming (Government of Canada, October 2002). In preparation for their return and report to Cabinet, the three federal ministries of HRDC, HC, and INAC have collaboratively undertaken several initiatives, including an environmental scan led by HRDC. This was designed to:

- 1) provide information on existing programming,
- 2) identify best practices in ECD,
- 3) verify capacity at the community, regional and national levels, and
- 4) share innovative approaches to integration and coordination.

Whereas HRDC was responsible for, and thus undertook, an environmental scan, INAC took the lead in the implementation of early childhood development pilot sites. These pilot sites focused on three areas.

- 1) community planning at the community and aggregate level where the goal is to provide information on joint planning a priority setting,
- 2) testing evaluation tools within 4 sites of varying early childhood development programs and communities in order to ascertain the feasibility of establishing common measurable outcomes across for a range of programs and services, and
- 3) assessing the viability coordination and collaboration between departments and other partners at the regional level. (Government of Canada, October 2002)

In addition to the environmental scan and the pilot projects, HC and INAC also undertook a National Dialogue designed to engage people who are involved and interested in early childhood development activities. These dialogues were an effort to gather feedback and information about the development and improvement of the federal early childhood development delivery system. This National Dialogue comprised two parts:

- 1) a dialogue with individuals and groups across Canada, and
- 2) comment from constituents of the five national Aboriginal organizations. (Government of Canada, October 2002)

A final federal government commitment still underway is an Aboriginal Children's Survey (ACS). This survey is intended to address the data gaps that exist for Aboriginal children. Statistics Canada through Social Development Canada continues to work on a national survey of young Aboriginal children that parallels the Early Childhood component of the NLSCY and includes additional questions that are culturally specific. The primary objective of the ACS is to produce quantitative data on health, social, and economic characteristics of Aboriginal children under the age of 6 living on and off reserves.

In response to the federal government's current activities and policy move to ensure integration and coordination of early childhood development programming for Aboriginal children through a single-window approach, a handful of documents have been written by Aboriginal individuals and organizations exploring various aspects of the construct of integration. In September 2001, the Assembly of First Nations commissioned a document entitled *Early Childhood Development and First Nations Children*. The document examines early childhood development and First Nations in the context of poverty, recent research on brain development, and healthy pregnancy and birth. McDonald (2001) also discusses the development of early childhood programs and services for First Nations children historically and in the contemporary context, leading to considerations for future policy development focused on child care and the early childhood development for First Nations communities. Although her paper does not focus specifically on integration, she offers a list of considerations to be taken into account in creating, sustaining, and providing technical support for child care and early childhood development programs, the list is directly applicable to the current context of federal integration of early childhood programs and services for First Nations children. MacDonald suggests:

1. Stable and adequate funding that is fair and equitably distributed is required for the long term.
2. Licensing and monitoring of day care, child care and Head Start facilities must be within the jurisdiction of First Nations in order to respect self-government and self-sufficiency parameters of First Nations.
3. First Nation specific training must be developed and delivered to ensure there are sufficient child care providers who are able to meet the needs of First Nation children and their parents. Culturally specific curricula are also required.
4. Resources are required for the development of proper facilities that also includes operation and maintenance costs for sustainability purposes. There is a severe lack of capital facilities.
5. Funding must be flexible and meet the diverse needs of regions and First Nation communities that are diverse and changing.
6. Resources are also required to meet the requirements of special needs children above that of regular child care spaces. (p. 35)

Noonan and Associates' (March, 2002), in the paper *Policy Considerations for the Proposed Integration of Children's Services for First Nations*, offer considerations and recommendations for the development of an internal AFN policy framework and structures in preparation for the federal government's shift in policy focusing more on integration. The paper offers considerations in seven broad theme areas including inclusion of First Nations as policymakers, provincial territorial and federal relations, potential issues and constraints to service integration, potential benefits to leaving funding agreements and management of child care services as they are, resources for administration of programs and services accountability and ongoing research requirements. The Noonan & Associates report also offers five areas in which policy development issues may emerge for early childhood services. These are existing agreements, policymaking principles, implementation considerations supported by research, structural considerations, and service delivery considerations for off-reserve First Nations members.

Morgan and McGettigan's (1999) examination of opportunities for program integration in First Nations communities is embedded in a vision of self-governance. They reveal common challenges and issues that communities must address in the integration of four individual programs: health, education, child care, and social services. These challenges include such areas as jurisdiction, conflicting laws, accountability and liability, funding, regulations and policy, capacity building, and standards.

Spigelman et al.'s (1998) *Putting it all Together: An Approach for Integrated Planning in First Nations Communities* identifies fragmentation in planning and program delivery and outlines an integrated planning process characterized by a holistic approach for integration of early childhood programs

and services based on traditional First Nations culture. This approach is designed to enable varying programs to work together and be more effective. Spigelman et al. offer a “Holistic Planning Wheel” that draws on traditional First Nation’s values, coupling these with modern planning principles.

Taken together, these documents highlight many significant considerations for exploring the construct of integration relative to early childhood programs and services for Aboriginal children. The emphasis lies in recognizing:

1. First Nations child care programs as an integral function of self-government and self-sufficiency;
2. the need for sustained and adequate resources inclusive of capital development and administrative support;
3. First Nations cultures and values will define child care curricula and evaluation, and accountability criteria;
4. three levels of government—First Nations, provincial, and federal governments, where appropriate, will collaboratively develop policies reporting practices, and data management systems;
5. flexibility in order to honour and preserve diversity between First Nations communities and a broad range of community needs and processes, and above all;
6. integration of services must enhance not diminish existing programs and be truly effective in creating effective infrastructures and processes for communication, administration, and evaluation. (Greenwood & De Leeuw, 2004)

Early Childhood Development and Early Learning and Child Care Meet

At the same time as First Nations and Inuit Early Childhood Development dialogues were being undertaken, the federal, provincial, and territorial (FPT) governments identified early learning and child care (ELCC) as a shared priority. This was evidenced in the agreed-on shared objectives and principles in the Multilateral Framework for Early Learning and Child Care (2003). Under the Multilateral Framework, the Government of Canada is transferring \$1.05 billion over five years, and provincial and territorial governments have begun to make new investments to improve the availability and affordability of quality early learning and child care for children under age 6.

The October 5, 2004 Speech from the Throne confirmed the Government of Canada’s commitment to work with provinces and territories on the development of a national vision to guide the development of Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC). The development of the ELCC was, however, based on the four principles of quality, universally inclusive, accessible, and developmental (QUAD). In moving forward, the Government of Canada is seeking agreement on an approach that focuses on

results, builds on best practices, and reports to Canadians on progress. As such, stronger accountability is a key element of a new agreement.

At their November 2, 2004 meeting, FPT Ministers responsible for Social Services recognized the critical need to engage Inuit leadership in discussions about ELCC implementation. Together, Health Canada (HC), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), and Social Development Canada (SDC) were to lead an engagement strategy on Aboriginal ELCC. Aboriginal organizations were asked to consider how the QUAD principles would be contextualized in Aboriginal communities.

In early 2005 and subsequently to the early childhood single-window discussion that First Nations and Inuit communities had started in 2000, discussions became emeshed with the new Federal Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) including its QUAD principles. National Aboriginal groups were asked to consult with their constituents about integration of First Nations and Inuit early childhood programs and services and the interface of ELCC's QUAD principles in a single-window approach to Aboriginal early childhood service delivery. The outcomes of these constituent discussions are four national reports.

1. *The Native Women's Association of Canada Discussion Paper: Early Learning and Childcare* (April 29, 2005);
2. *Aboriginal Engagement Strategy Inuit Early Learning and Child Care Discussion Paper Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami* (April 30, 2005);
3. *Early Learning and Child Care for First Nations Assembly of First Nations* (April 2005);
4. *Congress of Aboriginal Peoples Building a National Aboriginal Early Learning and Childcare System* (April 2000).

On May 31, 2005, INAC was announced as the lead federal department in the development of a single-window ELCC transition plan. The development of this new program involves merging four federally funded programs: the First Nations Inuit Child Care Program (FNICCI), the Aboriginal Head Start Program On-Reserve (AHSOR), the Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Program (AHSUN), that is, Inuit communities located north of the 60th parallel and the INAC-funded day cares in Alberta and Ontario. How this merging will be undertaken is the task of five federal ministries: HC, HRSDC, HDC, PHAC, and INAC. In their considerations, the four federal ministries are joined by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), and the National Aboriginal Head Start Council (NAHSC). Together all are charged with working collaboratively to develop an ELCC transition plan.

With the election of a new federal government, movement in the design and implementation of a single-window approach to the delivery of Aboriginal early childhood services has slowed considerably as the transition from a Liberal to a Progressive Conservative government oc-

curs. Despite this change, the need for early childhood services built on a foundation of Aboriginal ways of knowing and being continues to be of primary importance in a context of change and policy directions born outside an Aboriginal knowledge base.

Indigenous Knowledges and Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs and Services
As social policy specific to Aboriginal early childhood moves toward integration and coordination of service delivery using a single-window approach, so are the ideologies shifting to a broader recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing and being as foundational to any programs or services for Aboriginal children and families. Current publicly funded Aboriginal early childhood programs and initiatives are guided by a variety of principles that seek to ensure that programs are culturally appropriate and community-based (Joint First Nations Inuit Federal Childcare Working Group, 1995). It is of fundamental importance to Aboriginal communities that initiatives and programs, including those pertaining to children, reflect Aboriginal world views including our values, beliefs, and ways of being (Henderson, 2000; Little Bear, 2000; Seattle, 1854). Aboriginal world view and its integration into programs and services affecting our children is inherent in children's health and well-being. As Kawagley (1995) stated,

The identification of certain core values and principles that are essential to the well-being of [Aboriginal societies] is of central concern, and also the determination of how to make these values and principles an indelible part of [new early childhood programs] that can serve to revive and reorient Aboriginal peoples to a more harmonious and sustainable life in a rapidly changing world. (p. 6)

This recognition of the central import of Aboriginal ways of knowing and being are embedded in a unique social, political, and historical context into which Aboriginal children are born. In Canada, Aboriginal children are born into a colonial legacy: low socioeconomic status (Kendall, 2001), intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schooling (Morrisette, 1994), high rates of substance abuse (Jacobs & Gill, 2002), increased incidents of interaction with the criminal justice system (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; McDonald, 2001; BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2002), and extensive loss of language and culture (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Vol. 1) are just some of the indicators supporting the need for early childhood programs specific to Aboriginal children's growth and development, that is, growth and development that fosters and promotes cultural strength, congruence and identity. Such development is at the heart of addressing the health and well-being of Aboriginal children. Chandler and Lalonde's (1998) work establishes a sense of cultural continuity in Aboriginal peoples and communities, builds resilience, and results in reduced negative health outcomes including youth suicide. The right to cultural continuity affirmed in the Canadian Constitution states that First Nations children

have a right to live proudly as a "First Nations person on their ancestral lands [and] First Nations children have a right to learn, maintain and preserve their respective language(s) and cultures." The rights affirmed in the Canadian Constitution parallel those found in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child where "traditional cultural values are highlighted as essential for the protection and harmonious development of children" as well Article 15 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that states,

Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State ... [and] all Indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their own education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural; methods of teaching and learning.

Given the need to improve the health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and the need for holistic health strategies to meet this need, it is logical to include the care and education of Aboriginal children in considerations of Aboriginal health, and in particular discussion of the interface of Aboriginal identity and early childhood programs. This emphasis on the relationship between children's identity development and their overall health and well-being is evident in Indigenous groups around the world. One such early childhood program is the *Kohanga Reo* (language nest) programs in New Zealand. These programs are inclusive of family and community and are reflected in all levels of program policy: they are designed, delivered, and built on the values and ways of the family and community; they foster children's identity as inherent and integral to their healthy growth and development.

Reflections and Conclusions

There continues to be no specific national policy that is developed solely for Aboriginal children and families. Despite this void, Aboriginal early childhood continues to grow. From the first traces of Aboriginal-specific early child care and education articulated in Canada in the early 1960s and 1970s, through to the holistic and culturally specific vision expressed in the 1980s by the Native Women's Association of Canada, the issue of how to support Aboriginal communities and families in their efforts to provide quality, Indigenous-driven, and culturally meaningful early childhood services remains. As the field of Aboriginal early childhood care and education continues to mature, the impetus for including Aboriginal peoples in all stages of planning and development expands. Most recommendations about Aboriginal early childhood care and development attest to the imperative of the programs and policies coming from a place of Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. In 1995, for example, the Assembly of First Nations confirmed that child care programs and initiatives had to be First Nations- and Inuit-directed and controlled; that they need to be community-based, holistic, and focused on child development; and that the initiatives must be inclusive, comprehensive, flexible, and accessible.

Self-determination unquestionably also plays a part in the development of successful Aboriginal early childhood care and development initiatives, as evidenced in Morgan and McGettigan's (1999) research that links Indigenous self-determination to the successful provision of Aboriginal early childhood care and education. Finally, and the direction in which this article ends, Aboriginal early childhood development programming and policy must be anchored in Aboriginal ways of knowing and being: in order to close the circle around Aboriginal children's care and development in Canada, all levels of government must in good faith begin to act on the recommendations that Aboriginal peoples have been articulating for over 50 years for the care and education of their children.

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