



Early Childhood Education in First Nations Communities

Not only must we not lose another generation – we must not lose a single child to our past of oppression and inequality.¹

Early childhood education (ECE) is a vital element of lifelong learning which needs to be legislatively supported and adequately funded. The first four years of life are the most sensitive periods of brain development and the time in which foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social, and language development are solidified.

Investments in ECE generate long-term, positive returns. The benefits include: social and economic benefits, enhanced well-being, enhanced learning outcomes, poverty reduction, increased intergenerational social mobility, higher female labour market participation and gender equality, reduced costs for social services and opportunities for social and economic development. If properly supported, they are an excellent avenue to teach and reinforce First Nations languages, customs, traditions, heritage and protocols.

The Need for Services

- The “Registered Indian” population (53.2% of the total Indigenous population) is young with a median age of 25 years
- Young Indigenous women are over 4 times more likely to be teenage mothers than non-Indigenous women and Indigenous children and more than twice as likely to live in a lone-parent family as compared to non-Indigenous Canadians
- 67% (of 430) First Nations communities reported having licensed child care within their communities²
- 78% of the total proportion of children aged 0 to 5 years do not have access to licensed child care services in First Nations communities³
- ECE opportunities are critical for providing a strong foundation on which to build healthy and confident First Nations individuals that succeed in life

Program Support

Early childhood education initiatives are supported by First Nations’ inherent and treaty rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

¹ Assembly of First Nations. *It’s Our Time: A Call to Action on Education*. Ottawa: AFN. nd

² Assembly of First Nations. *AFN School Survey*. Ottawa. 2011

³ Assembly of First Nations. *AFN School Survey*. Ottawa. 2011

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Currently ECE initiatives are supported by: Health Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada. Some child care programs are provincially licensed. Sectoral support for ECE initiatives results in a jurisdictional quagmire that impedes service delivery.

Adequate support for the delivery of quality ECE programs in First Nations communities, require, at minimum, the following components:

- program design and delivery to train early childhood professionals,
- development of standards and regulations,
- funding for students to obtain early childhood credentials,
- infrastructure, operation and maintenance for the provision of licensed services in all First Nations communities,
- family and home support services,
- wages and benefit packages comparable to ECE professionals off reserve with annual cost of living increments,
- support for curriculum development which includes language and culture,
- support for integrated service delivery models i.e. schools, health, family services,
- support for the design and implementation of cultural relevant assessment tools, and
- on-going professional learning opportunities to address the unique needs of First Nations children and their families.

Models that facilitate a holistic approach to education i.e. First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (CCL, 2007) are essential. Accessible, adequately funded, culturally specific, collaborative models will obtain optimum results.

First Nations face challenges not only securing adequate support for ECE but responding to regional variations in approaches.

- Early Learning Programs - Early learning programs or educational programs for 4 year olds are being promoted and supported in several provinces. First Nations are encouraged to expand elementary programming to include early learning programs but without the provision of additional funding to do so.
- Provincially Licensed programs – Provincially licensed programs are promoted as a way to ensure high quality and provide a minimum standard. Minimum standards are not enough to guarantee the support required by all students and families i.e. academically, culturally, linguistically, special needs. Provincial involvement in federal jurisdiction complicates program delivery.

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- Education qualifications for ECE professionals vary widely, which impacts quality.

Recognition of the right of First Nations to design, develop and deliver in early childhood education, along with adequate and sustainable funding is necessary to support access by all First Nations children to linguistic and culturally relevant early childhood education programs. Access to ECE programs will help close the gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and to support success later in life.

Sources, References, and Further Readings

1. *First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, Canadian Council on Learning, 2007
2. *Code of Ethics*, College of Early Childhood Educators, Ontario, 2011
3. *Standards of Practice*, College of Early Childhood Educators, Ontario, 2011