

## Early childhood education and care for Aboriginal children in Canada

Jane Preston, November 2014

This brief is drawn from the article “Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada: Issues of context” (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, Pearce, 2012). The brief explicates contextual factors that are important to quality Aboriginal early childhood education: privileging Aboriginal pedagogy; promoting Indigenous languages and culture; adequate staffing by qualified Aboriginal educators; empowerment of Aboriginal parents and communities; and in the case of kindergarten services, a full-day timetable. The author argues that strong collaborative efforts are needed by multi-level leaders to ensure that quality Aboriginal early childhood education is actualized throughout Canada.



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# Early childhood education and care for Aboriginal children in Canada <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Early childhood education refers to any programs, activities, and/or experiences intended to promote the overall health and education of children under the age of nine years (Mayfield, 2001, p. 3). With this stipulation, early childhood education encompasses a broad assortment of educational programs and services. These include, but are not limited to childcare/daycare, family resource centres, family support programs, nurseries, preschools, Head Start programs, prekindergarten programs, kindergarten, before- and after-school programs and primary grades in public school.

Quality Aboriginal early childhood education: (a) privileges Aboriginal pedagogy, (b) promotes Indigenous languages and culture, (c) is adequately staffed by qualified Aboriginal educators, (d) empowers Aboriginal parents and communities, and (e) in the case of kindergarten services, provides a full-day timetable. An overview of some of these Canadian programs is illustrated in Table 1. Each of these areas is explicated in the ensuing sections.

**Table 1. Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Programs in Canada**

Key Component	Example of Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Program	Location
<b>Aboriginal pedagogy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All following programs incorporate components of Aboriginal pedagogy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(Immersed within programs below)</li> </ul>
<b>Infusion of Aboriginal language and culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities</i></li> <li><i>Head Start on Reserves</i></li> <li>Kihew Waciston Cree Immersion School</li> <li>Confederation Park School Cree Immersion Kindergarten</li> <li>St. Frances School Nhiyawak Cree Immersion Kindergarten</li> <li>Opaskwayak School Cree Immersion Kindergarten</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Across Canada</li> <li>Across Canada</li> <li>Onion Lake, SK</li> <li>Saskatoon, SK</li> <li>Saskatoon, SK</li> <li>Opaskwayak, MB</li> </ul>
<b>Supplying qualified Aboriginal teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>First Nations Partnership Program</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meadow Lake, SK &amp; University of Victoria, BC</li> </ul>
<b>Empowering Aboriginal parents and communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program</i></li> <li><i>Brighter Futures</i></li> <li><i>Aboriginal Infant Developmental Program</i></li> <li><i>Kids First</i></li> <li><i>Aboriginal Healthy Babies, Healthy Children</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Across Canada</li> <li>Across Canada</li> <li>BC</li> <li>SK</li> <li>ON</li> </ul>
<b>Full-day Kindergarten</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compulsory</li> <li>Voluntary</li> <li>Located within all schools within city of Whitehorse</li> <li>Located within some schools throughout province/territory</li> <li>Not available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PE, NS, NB</li> <li>QC, ON, BC</li> <li>YT</li> <li>AB, SK, NT</li> <li>NL, MB, NU</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> This brief is drawn from Preston, J. P., Cottrell, M., Pelletier, T. R., Pearce, J. V. (2012). Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada: Issues of context. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 10(1), 3–18. Retrieved from <http://ecr.sagepub.com/content/10/1/3.full.pdf+html>

## Aboriginal pedagogy

In many publicly-funded educational programs (including those geared to preschool children), learning is epitomized as an experience attentive to individuality, competitiveness, objectivity, outcomes, status projection, and judgment. For the most part, education is structured via presenting curricular topics as discrete subject entities, set within distinct timeframes. Typical assessment mechanisms employed within public education include formative test-taking measures, standardized tests, written evaluations, teacher-centered feedback, and the provision of formal grades/percentages. This type of curricular delivery and assessment is ill-matched with Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning.

Aboriginal pedagogy stresses the importance of experiential learning, service learning, and out-of-school experiences. As compared to mainstream practices, sound Aboriginal pedagogy incorporates a wait time between the teacher's questions and the student's answer. Aboriginal pedagogy endorses student control over the pace of classroom conversations, and it allows students opportunities for self-determination. For many Aboriginal peoples, learning is a lived experience best absorbed through activities such as storytelling, group discussions, cooperative learning, demonstrations, role modeling, personal reflection, peer tutoring, learning circles, talking circles, and hands-on experiences. Archibald (1995) explained that Aboriginal education often encompasses the enculturation of independence, self-reliance, observation, discovery, and respect for nature. As such, educational activities are most effective when focused on pertinent life tasks, exemplified by traditional crafts and designs (art), songs and dances (music), contours of the land (social studies/geography), and legends and oral history (language arts). Infusing such natural and practical experiences in Aboriginal early childhood education creates "continuity in school and home learning environments—the essence of congruence" (Niles et al., 2007, p. 119). Although included in this literature review, we were unable to identify any one Aboriginal early childhood program solely grounded on the precepts of Aboriginal pedagogy. The programs listed within the next sections incorporate aspects of Aboriginal pedagogy.

## Aboriginal language and culture

Quality Aboriginal early childhood education emphasizes an environment where Aboriginal peoples care for and educate their children within rich linguistic and cultural surroundings (Greenwood et al., 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). This assertion is supported by research demonstrating that the preservation, revitalization, and use of Indigenous language and culture among Aboriginal early learners are linked to improved educational outcomes (Greenwood et al., 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The inclusion of local language and culture into early childhood education is also associated with the increased wellbeing of entire Aboriginal communities (Ball & Pence, 2005). For these reasons, the design of Aboriginal early childhood educational programs should foster the unique identities of Aboriginal peoples through the implementation of curricula built upon local Aboriginal cultures, languages, and knowledge.

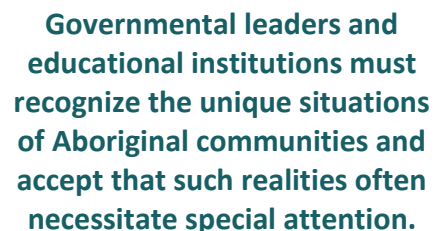
One pan-Canadian early childhood program that promotes Aboriginal language and culture is *Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities*, established by the Government of Canada in 1995. An extension of the program, *Head Start on Reserves*, was introduced in 1998. Both of these programs are federally-funded preschool programs with the objective of enhancing child development and school readiness in Aboriginal children and their families (Health Canada, 2005). These programs are designed to enroll three- to five-year-old children, from September to June, for half-day periods four days a week. The Head Start programs encapsulate six core objectives being the promotion of: (a) Indigenous culture and language, (b) school readiness, (c) child and family health, (d) child and family nutrition, (e) social

support and (f) parent involvement (Public Health Agency Canada, 2008). Barrieau and Ireland (2003) identified the positive outcomes exhibited by young Head Start children. As compared to the children who had not participated in Head Start, kindergarten teachers noticed Head Start children had increased self-esteem and independence, were better practiced in their Aboriginal language, and were more knowledgeable about health and nutrition. Furthermore, Head Start children are typically familiar with the elementary school setting, making their transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten a more comfortable, natural experience (Colbert, 1999).

In addition to the Head Start program, Aboriginal language immersion programs promote the revitalization of Indigenous language and culture. The Opaskwayak Cree Nation (Manitoba) has multiple classes of kindergarten students participating in a Cree immersion program (CBC News, 2006). The Nhiyawak Cree Immersion Kindergarten began in September 2007 at St. Frances School (Saskatoon). In particular, this early childhood program utilizes the merits of storytelling. According to Chief Joe Quewezance of the Saskatoon Tribal Council, language immersion programs not only retain and promote Aboriginal language and culture, but these programs are foundational for creating healthy, happy students (CBC News, 2007).

## Supplying qualified Aboriginal teachers

Greenwood et al., (2007) noted that the paucity of Aboriginal early childhood educators is a major challenge for Canadian schools. Factors contributing to the shortage of qualified Aboriginal early education teachers include stringent early education licensing requirements, prohibitive costs of initiating and maintaining programs, large geographical distances between postsecondary institutes and Aboriginal communities, and specialized entry requirements necessary for students pursuing postsecondary education. Governmental leaders and



**Governmental leaders and educational institutions must recognize the unique situations of Aboriginal communities and accept that such realities often necessitate special attention.**

educational institutions must recognize the unique situations of Aboriginal communities and accept that such realities often necessitate special attention. For example, within many remote Aboriginal communities, there is a chronic shortage of housing; consequently, insisting on stringent infrastructure standards for early childhood education programs is counterproductive to the existence of such services (Greenwood, 2006). In situations where infrastructure is in short supply, standardized licensing requirements for staff and building regulations need to be reviewed to better accommodate the local realities of Aboriginal peoples. In addition, although many potential Aboriginal educators have vast experience and knowledge directly applicable to the care of young children, unfortunately, many of these potential Aboriginal educators do not have the formal academic requirements necessary for acceptance into postsecondary institutions.

For some Aboriginal people who do pursue postsecondary education, the high relocation costs and the finances needed to support a dependent family while going away to school are challenging components of postsecondary success (Preston, 2008b). A major barrier for some Aboriginal people wishing to acquire postsecondary education is that English is not their first language. Thus, due to the unique situation of many Aboriginal peoples, institutions certifying early childhood educators need to acknowledge the prior learning experiences and residential realities of Aboriginal peoples.

## Empowering Aboriginal parents and communities

Research acknowledges that children are a catalytic channel for strengthening communities. As Preston (2009) indicated, by focusing on the needs of young children, social ties within a community are strengthened and community bonding is enhanced. Ball (2005) claimed that early childhood educational services should be the nucleus of Aboriginal communities. Ball concluded that by focusing efforts on mobilizing the health of early learners, a wide range of services and social supports for community members are simultaneously met. Thus, not only does Aboriginal early childhood education incorporate the development of young learners, the creation of such programs promotes the holistic wellness of entire communities.

Research has also confirmed that when Aboriginal peoples self-manage and develop their own Aboriginal-focused curricula, enrollment numbers, retention rates and overall student satisfaction within these programs increase (Holmes, 2006). To empower the autonomy and voice of Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal leaders, Elders, instructors, staff, students, and community members need to be integrally involved in the governing, planning, and decision-making structures of early childhood programs. To ensure that Aboriginal leaders are able to assume control over and be responsible for the provision of quality early childhood education, funding for early learning programs should be flexible enough to reflect diverse community needs. For example, the ecological conditions and availability of supplies, resources, and technology vary within each Aboriginal community. Consequently, governmental funding criteria and formulas must be adjusted to recognize local needs for the creation of culturally relevant early learning programs and curricular resources.

A plethora of research has confirmed the notion that parent/caregiver involvement in school has positive effects on a child's school experience, including increased academic achievement, better attendance, improved behavior, and a stronger motivation to succeed (Darch et al., 2004). With that said, it is important for education leaders to consider the context of Aboriginal families. Aboriginal parents/caregivers are often young or may be assuming parenting responsibilities as a grandparent. The Aboriginal family often encompasses input of parents, caregivers, Elders, grandparents, aunt, uncles, cousins, and/or community members. In turn, education leaders need to develop school-home strategies that are in line with the dynamics of Aboriginal families and their extended members.

Early childhood education must attend to the needs of parents and communities in additional ways. The concept of early childhood education should incorporate a focus on the development of healthy mothers, healthy families, and community wellness. Currently, there are numerous Canadian, federally-funded early childhood programs that focus on prenatal, family, and community wellness. For example, the First Nations and Inuit component of the *Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program* provides prenatal nutrition, health information and counseling for expectant First Nations and Inuit mothers, mothers of newborns, and infants up to one year of age (Andersson et al., 2003). *Brighter Futures* is a federally-funded early childhood education program that is designed to assist First Nations communities by establishing culturally-relevant programs pertaining to child development, parenting skills and community wellbeing (Preston, 2008a). Also, a number of provincially-funded early childhood programs currently exist across Canada. They include the *Aboriginal Infant Developmental Program* (British Columbia), *Kids First* (Saskatchewan), and *Aboriginal Healthy Babies, Healthy Children* (Ontario) (Preston, 2008a).

## Full-day kindergarten

Participating in full-day kindergarten<sup>2</sup> contributes to school readiness, improves academic abilities, and increases social intelligence (Cryan et al., 1992). Full-day kindergarten students benefit socially and behaviorally from increased teacher-student and peer interactions (Clark & Kirk, 2000). As compared to children in part-time kindergarten, children who participate in full-day kindergarten have advanced prerequisite skills for reading (de Costa, 2005). The five-day routine provides consistency for both the child and parent (Larson, 2003). Plucker et al.'s (2004) research highlighted that participating in full-day kindergarten decreases kindergarten repeat rates and offers a seamless transition into Grade 1. de Costa and Bell (2000) concluded that full-day kindergarten benefits children academically and socially, but, in particular, full-day kindergarten is especially advantageous for children from low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantage backgrounds.

### Implications: Early childhood education for Aboriginal peoples

Strong collaborative efforts are needed by multi-level leaders to ensure that quality Aboriginal early childhood education is actualized throughout Canada. Otherwise said, greater cooperation between federal, provincial/ territorial, local and Aboriginal organizations is paramount. Through policy, action, and ensuing conversations, bureaucratic agencies need to recognize the contextualized realities of Aboriginal communities. In order to advance the quality, capacity, and accessibility of Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada, postsecondary institutions, in conjunction with Aboriginal communities, must support the postsecondary training of future Aboriginal educators.

**The voice of Aboriginal peoples must be integrated into all discussions focused on early childhood education, because the culture of Aboriginal peoples is a key component to the future success of *their* Aboriginal early childhood education.**

Federal, provincial/territorial, and local funding must be supplied to Aboriginal students in pursuit of postsecondary education. More specifically, at a local level, school boards must assume greater responsibility for promoting early childhood education within their schools. Such commitment entails increased funding for physically incorporating and staffing early childhood education programs within schools. For reasons of consistency and community wellbeing, wherever possible, early childhood programs (dedicated to the healthy development of newborn to school age children) should be housed in schools, the heart of a community. Verified through statistical data, a growing proportion of Aboriginal school-aged students will fill the desks of Canadian schools in the years to come; thus, teachers must learn to implement Aboriginal pedagogy as they accommodate the learners' cultural needs. Furthermore, the structure of early childhood programs needs to fit the values of the community. Specifically, with regard to full-day kindergarten, although the vast majority of the full-day kindergarten research is not specifically focused upon Aboriginal children, the implications of this research have great relevance to increasing the learning outcomes for Aboriginal students, who are over-represented among children who live in poverty. As a final point, the voice of Aboriginal peoples must be integrated into all discussions focused on early childhood education, because the culture of Aboriginal peoples is a key component to the future success of *their* Aboriginal early childhood education.

<sup>2</sup> The term *full-day kindergarten* means the child attends school all day, five days a week.

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