Promoting educational equity for Indigenous children in Canada through quality early childhood programs

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“We will raise a generation of First Nations, Inuit and Metis children and youth who do not have to recover from their childhoods.”

*Many hands, one dream (Blackstock, Bruyere & Moreau, 2005)*
Demographic cascade / Educational stalemate

First Nations, Metis & Inuit children only 5% of population now, but …
Over twice the birth rate compared to non-Indigenous pop. (S Can, 2006).
e.g., 20% of children entering schools in Saskatchewan

Over twice the number failing out or leaving school before attaining high school diploma (Inuit 3.6 times) (Canada Council on Learning, 2007).
Unique features of Indigenous children’s experiences

Cultural & linguistic diversity (Norris, 2008)
50% rural or remote (Statistics Canada, 2006)
More live with / interact weekly with grandparent(s) (Statistics Canada, 2006)
Participation in cultural ceremonies (First Nations Centre, 2005)
Socialization: “Grow up” rather than “raised up” (Heath, 1989)
“According to tradition, children are gifts from the spirit world. They carry within them the gifts that manifest themselves as they become teachers, mothers, hunters, councilors, artisans, and visionaries.”

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996.
Indicators of equity gaps

Half of Indigenous children live below the poverty line: 41-52% (Statistics Canada, 2006)
33% of First Nations and Metis families live in sub-standard, overcrowded houses (CMHC, 2004).

Health, development, learning problems reflect cumulative effects of poverty (CICH, 2000)

CIHI (2004) reported higher rates of:
- Premature birth
- Infant mortality
- Tuberculosis
- Hospitalization for acute lung infections
- Accidental injury
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

First Nations & Regional Health Survey (1999/2002) reported higher rates of:
• Discrete & concurrent disabilities esp. FAS, hearing loss, attention and learning disorders

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (2005) reported higher rates of
• Child welfare apprehension
• Foster home placements

Several investigators reported high rates of
• Nutritional inadequacy prenatally and in children
• Food and water contamination
Quality early childhood development programs: A powerful equalizer (WHO 2007)

Quality early childhood development (ECD) programs help lay the foundation for educational engagement, learning success, and retention.

- Most Indigenous parents are first or second generation survivors of Indian Residential Schools
- 35% Indigenous children live in single parent households (compared to 17% of non-Indigenous children)
- 7 times more Indigenous mothers are adolescents
- 40-50% of Indigenous children live in rural/remote areas

Holistic, community-fitting, culturally congruent ECD programs support:
- nutrition
- health
- language development
- cognitive stimulation
- early identification and intervention
- parents’ involvement in their child’s learning journey.

Under 20% of Indigenous children have access to any early childhood care or development program (ACS, 2008; Leitch, 2008)
4 policy areas to reduce equity gaps

1 Structural reform
   Poverty, housing conditions, sanitation, transportation

2 Educational institutional reform
   Recruit & retain Indigenous teachers
   Pre-service preparation of teachers to serve Indigenous children
   School reform: pedagogical approaches, curriculum content, extra curricular activities, opportunities for parents’ involvement

3 Early childhood health, nutrition, early intervention services, especially on-reserve and in Inuit Nunaat

4 Provision of quality, culturally relevant, community controlled early childhood development (ECD) programs
Strengthening Indigenous capacity to deliver ECD

** Expanding quality, culturally based ECD programs requires sustained investment in innovative, accredited training of Indigenous ECD practitioners!!
Evolution of First Nations Partnerships Program

1989: Meadow Lake Tribal Council proposed partnership with U. Victoria to innovate an ECD training program:

- Focused on care and development of 0 - 6 yr olds
- Incorporated Cree and Dene cultures, languages, traditions & ideas about children
- University accredited
- Career laddered
- Prepared community members to work in Indigenous & non-Indigenous settings
A ‘Generative Curriculum Model’

Lectures, readings, activities & practicum experiences engaged Indigenous learners in every course with:

- University generated curricula, representing ‘mainstream’ research, theory, & practice approaches
- Community-generated curriculum, embodying local & cultural knowledge, values, & practice approaches
“Being in this program is like having the best of both worlds. We love to learn about what researchers have found out about child development and such from our textbooks, and we love to learn more about our own culture and how we can use it to help the children of our community.”

Lois Andrews, Lil’wat Nation
10 partnerships over 20 years . . .

151 First Nations students from 57 on-reserve communities completed course work & practica for ECE credential

Determinants of program success shown in evaluation research on 7 programs:

(Ball & Pence, 2000):
Educational Outcomes

- 70-100% who enter the program completed 1 year full-time university accredited education leading to a Certificate as an Early Childhood Educator
- 40-70% students completed two years leading to a university Diploma in Child and Youth Care
- 11% of graduates continue to study for university degree
From training to work

• 95% graduates remained in their own communities
• 65% graduates introduced **new** programs for children and families
• 13% graduates joined the staff of existing services
Expanded capacity to operate quality ECD programs from birth to 8 yrs

Follow-up research found that First Nations Partnership Program graduates FNPP grads were providing:

• Centre-based early learning programs (e.g., AHS)
• Non-formal community programs (e.g., parent support drop in, Indigenous language clubs, story-times, toy lending)
• Home visiting programs including:
  Parent education
  Early language facilitation
  Early literacy (e.g., Aboriginal HIPPY)
  Aboriginal infant development programs
  Aboriginal Supported Child Development programs
• After-school care programs
• After-school culture clubs
• Assisting speech-language therapists, community health, etc.
• Home-school family outreach

Most graduates could describe 3 or more culturally specific components of their practice.

In a study of culture in early learning, parents and practitioners stated that programs are ‘Indigenous’ if the staff are Indigenous (Ball, 2005).
Integrated & intersectoral ECD programs are highly congruent with Indigenous emphasis on holism.
Aboriginal Head Start: A holistic approach

AHS-OR (Health Canada): 6,500 Indigenous children on reserves
AHS-UNC (PHAC): 4,500 Indigenous children
< 10% of age-eligible children
Equity through ECD: Investment priorities

1. Community-based, accredited training for Indigenous ECD practitioners & leadership development, incorporating Indigenous knowledge.

2. Expand access to holistic, locally fitting ECD programs like AHS, from 0 – 8 years.

3. Support transitions to school & early experiences of success
   - Learning support after school
   - Facilitated, school & community-based homeworks clubs
   - English as a Second Dialect
   - Indigenous language clubs
   - Flexible parent involvement

4. Fund longitudinal and comparative research on innovative Indigenous ECD programs especially AHS
Find out more
www.ecdip.org & www.fnpp.org