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A LITERATURE REVIEW OF INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Introduction

This literature review was prepared by First Peoples Group for the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators, as part of the Reconciliation Action Planning process.

It discusses the journey and evolution of Indigenous early childhood education (ECE), across Canada and with a specific focus on Ontario, highlighting report recommendations, research and current successful Indigenous ECE initiatives and early childhood educator training programs.

What the literature has reinforced is that Indigenous peoples require self-determination and control over the education of their children. This means that ECE programs on and off-reserve/territory are equitably funded and supported, and offer culturally appropriate curriculum with educators whose practice is grounded in cultural humility and best practices for supporting Indigenous children in ECE.

Indigenous Early Childhood Education Pre-Colonization

Indigenous peoples all across the globe have unique epistemologies, bodies of knowledge and pedagogies, informed by thousands of years of intimate connection with the land. In many Indigenous cultures, children are revered as sacred as, because of their young age, they hold a strong connection to the spirit realm as they have only been on earth for a short period of time. Furthermore, childhood is a critical time when knowledge absorption is at its peak and when new neural pathways are influenced and formed based on a child's experiences. What a child experiences in their early education is absolutely critical to their development and has great influence on their trajectory.

Traditionally, Indigenous children were raised with help from their extended families, all taking on a role and responsibility in their upbringing, and had very little interference from adults. A child's natural gifts are identified at a young age by their communities, and intentionally nurtured, influencing their natural place in the family and community and their evolution into their trust self. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.416-417). Elders, in particular, played an important role in bridging generational gaps of Indigenous knowledge, culture and language (Halseth and Greenwood, p.16).

In traditional Indigenous life, children were always included in the daily life and work of families and communities, empowered with responsibilities, and seen as equal to any other member of a family unit. In this way, children acquired land-based knowledge and skills experientially, through observation, play, and every day activities on the land and in the home. A child's knowledge and fluency of the metaphysical realm, such as dreams, visions and legends, was also supported and developed at a young age and seen as of equal importance to practical skills of everyday life (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p. 417).

The practice of the oral tradition of storytelling was commonplace, and through this method of cultural preservation and knowledge keeping children learned about their family history, culture and important life wisdom. In many First Nations communities in Ontario, cradle boards were used to keep babies safe and comfortable while their parents worked, and often these boards were propped up so they could be immersed in whatever activity was taking place, and learn through observation.

The Impact of Colonization on Indigenous Child Development

In examining the current landscape of Indigenous early childhood education, we must remember the truths of Indigenous children, many who are now grown adults, who have endured a difficult journey to survive and arrive in the present. Research shows that early childhood education, childcare, and culture and language are all factors that bear influence on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous children (Halseth and Greenwood, p.5). The legacy of trauma inflicted by Residential Schools affected not only how survivors parented, but resulted in generations of children growing up with fragmented or lost culture and language.

In this section we will reflect on the assimilative tactics that targeted children, in particular, in an attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples in Canada. Additionally, we must understand not only how these systems affected children, their families and communities directly, but also how this legacy continues to affect Indigenous trust and perceptions of the early childhood education system.

Referred to as the “centrepiece of the assimilation strategy” by the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.172), the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities over the history of the Indian Residential School system had an enormous systemic impact. This state-funded, church-operated system sought to christianize and assimilate Indigenous peoples into the Canadian body politic, ultimately, in order to eliminate the “Indian problem”, a federal responsibility that posed obstacles to the expansion and agenda of the Canadian state. To achieve this, the Government of Canada targeted generations of children, disconnecting them in early years of critical childhood development from the love and knowledge of their families, communities, nations and land, severely disrupting their oneness with culture and language.

In Residential Schools, priests and nuns worked to systematically condemn and dissolve Indigeneity in children. Children faced psychological repercussions and physical violence for speaking their mother tongue, and were forbidden of all cultural expression, including traditional clothing and hairstyles. Daily experiences at Residential School reinforced Western ideologies as superior, and created associations between abuse, violence and pain, shame, and children's’ Indigenous ways of life. The wellbeing of families continues to be affected intergenerationally by the legacy of Residential Schools.

In 2016, it was reported that 76.1% of on-reserve children under 11 had a family member with direct experience of Residential Schools, 58.9% being grandparents, and 17.2% being a parent or caregiver. (Halseth and Greenwood, p.16)

The Sixties Scoop era was an extension of Canada's assimilation agenda between 1960 and 1990. This systemic movement saw the non-consensual removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities at birth, and their adoption into western families across Canada and the United States, with the justification being that it was more convenient to rehome Indigenous children than it was to fix systemic issues around poverty and socio-economic barriers. This phenomena had a similar impact on Indigenous child development and education, as it separated children from their families who were then raised not knowing their language, culture or traditions. The estimated number of apprehended children through the Sixties Scoop was over 11,000 (Sinclair and Dainard).

The Residential School system and Sixties Scoop created a myriad of social determinants of education, including high rates of poverty in Indigenous communities. High rates of poverty can have negative impacts on educational experiences within the home, as parents of households living in poverty may struggle to afford the experiences, materials and services required for enhanced education. Poverty can also significantly impact mental health, which may affect parenting style and quality of interactions with children. In 2015, 30.4% of all Indigenous children (37.9% of First Nations, 21.5% of Métis and 20.3% of Inuit children) were living in low income households compared to 16.1% of non-Indigenous children. (Halseth and Greenwood, p.14-15).

Despite historic and contemporary challenges, First Nations, Métis and Inuit are actively revitalizing their Indigenous Knowledge systems and early childhood education to instill Indigenous languages, culture, and values in children. In doing so, they are also healing and improving the health and wellness of current and future generations of Indigenous children (Halseth and Greenwood, p.6). This educational renaissance is happening both through traditional cultural curriculum on-reserve and in provincial and territorial school systems. Indigenous peoples are resilient, strong and perseverant. Generations of children are once again being raised connected to who they are and the gap in knowledge is slowly closing.

"Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being. [First Nation] culture and values have a unique place in the history of mankind. The [First Nation] child who learns about his heritage will be proud of it. The lessons he learns in school, his whole school experience, should reinforce and contribute to the image he has of himself as [a First Nation]." - National Indian Brotherhood 9

Academic Research Concerning Indigenous Pedagogy

Through First Peoples Group's research, several pieces of academic literature were reviewed that demonstrate the effectiveness and value of Indigenous pedagogies.

According to Halseth and Greenwood, in their report "Indigenous early childhood development in Canada: Current state of knowledge and future directions", early childhood education and development programs that support Indigenous children's social, physical, emotional, and mental, and cognitive skills are key to closing the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada and providing them with a strong foundation for success and less chance of experiencing various social determinants of health that are often present in Indigenous communities (p.8).

Their report further discusses how Indigenous early childhood education must be grounded in Indigenous values and principles and centre Indigenous approaches to positive child development, such as the use of storytelling, and hands on, experiential education (p.36 -37) Such programs must also be holistic of emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physical needs of Indigenous children. Further, programs must be distinctions-based, to address the uniqueness of the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and nations, and must address the various barriers that Indigenous children and their families face (p.35). Indigenous ECE programs have the potential to support positive home environments, strengthen positive parent-child relationships, enhance parents' knowledge about child development and parenting skills, challenges stereotypes and stigmas about Indigenous parenting and fosters a culture of non-judgment for circumstances beyond a parent's control (p.35-36).

Indigenous ECE programs have an important role in promoting growth, self-esteem, resilience and health in Indigenous children. Key factors in achieving these outcomes include connecting children to the land, their spirituality, traditional diet, activities, and Indigenous languages. Helping to strengthen a child's relationship with their family and community supports transfer of Indigenous culture, knowledge, values and beliefs. Research shows that the strength of one's connection to their culture is correlated to self-esteem, academic success, resiliency, substance-abuse prevention, and healing (p.36).

In “Supporting Young Indigenous Children’s Language Development in Canada: A Review of Research on Needs and Promising Practices”, Ball reviews what is known about the language development needs and language development intervention programs of Indigenous children. Her research illuminated that major gap in and subsequent need for such research in this area. The discussion underscored the foundation that early childhood language proficiency provides children in all other developmental areas, and language as a portal to participating in one's community and learning cultural knowledge about the land embedded in the language. Further, it primes children for success in later school years and in life (p.22).

Ball discusses several reasons why a better understanding of early childhood language proficiency is so important, including: the steady population growth of Indigenous peoples in Canada and subsequent increase in Indigenous children entering schools and early childhood education programs; the foundational role of early language development and proficiency in a child’s overall development and success in school and life; the importance of Indigenous language proficiency and fluency in the comprehension of cultural (especially land-based) knowledge, and its role in strengthening identity and place in family, community, nation and creation; the steady decline in Indigenous children learning their Indigenous language, and the socio-economic barriers that many Indigenous parents face and how these can impact a child’s access to educational resources and programs (p.21-25).

The paper illuminated the disproportionate rates of speech-related issues among Indigenous children in early learning and child care centres. Two studies cited in the paper found that speech-language deficits and delays were the leading type of developmental delays among Indigenous children in the early childhood education and care centres that the studies examined (p.28).

Interestingly, this paper discusses that more research is needed to better understand how Indigenous children’s perceived speech-language problems are in fact due to a difference in linguistic norms in Indigenous families and communities, and that these key differences are not appropriately recognized by researchers, educators and speech pathologists (p.30).

Furthermore, programs that place a high value on verbal communication, explanation and oral participation may be marginalizing to children who come from home families and cultures which place a greater focus on listening, observation and experiential learning (p.31). This is important to note, as these forms of learning are certainly centred in Indigenous pedagogies, as discussed in section on Indigenous education pre-colonization.

On the contrary, a special consideration is that Indigenous children whose first language is their Indigenous language, may need special support at school if the language of instruction is not in their Indigenous language (p.31).

In an article titled “Social determinants of health and the future wellbeing of Aboriginal children in Canada”, Greenwood and Leeuw discuss the link between language and cultural revitalization and health. They discuss how learning environments that foster and promote Indigenous culture and citizenship can lessen health disparities resulting from the impacts of colonialism and may lead to self-determination, a distal determinant of Indigenous children’s health (Greenwood and de Leeuw, p.383).

The Journey Toward Indigenous Control of Indigenous Education

Over the decades, Indigenous peoples, organizations and communities have advocated for control over their children' s education, especially post-Residential Schools era. The 1972 National Indian Brotherhood policy paper, “Indian Control of Indian Education”, called on the federal government to relinquish control of Indigenous education to First Nation bands. This paper emphasized that only Indigenous people can develop an educational philosophy suitable for Indigenous children that is both contemporary and founded in Indigenous values (National Indian Brotherhood, p.6).

In 1991, The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was formed to examine the relationship between Indigenous peoples, Canadian society and the Canadian government, and to make related recommendations for various sectors of society, including Indigenous education. In 1996, the resulting five-volume report was published.

The RCAP emphasized the need for early childhood educational programs for Indigenous children. It recommended that all levels of government support an early childhood education funding strategy that expands early childhood education services to all Indigenous children regardless of place of residence, ensures parental involvement and Indigenous control over educational program administration and design, and centres a holistic approach to physical, social, intellectual and spiritual development. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.422-423) Further, the RCAP recommended that curricula center Indigenous cultures and realities in all grade levels of elementary schools that are operating under Indigenous control, off and on reserve, and in provincial or territorial systems. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.431).

In 1995, the First Nations / Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) was announced. The initiative’s goal was to create 6000 new child care spaces on reserve and in the territories that offered quality, affordable and culturally appropriate child care services to Indigenous children. From 2016-2017, the FNICCI received 16 million to support capital projects (Employment and Social Development Canada).

Aboriginal Head Start

In 1993, the Liberal Plan for Canada committed to the development of an Aboriginal Head Start program in Canada for Indigenous children ages 0-6, to be run by local Indigenous organizations and governments (The Liberal Party of Canada). A team consisting of First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and representatives from the National Association of Friendship Centres, was formed to conduct research that would inform the program's needs (Freedman).

This process determined that an existing Head Start model in the United States would be an effective base, on which a cultural and language component would be added - something essential for Indigenous children in Canada, especially following the Residential School era (Freedman). As such, the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) Program was born, and its structure developed six pillars to offer holistic programming: Culture and Language, Education, Health Promotion, Nutrition, Social Support, and Parental and Family Involvement.

In 1995, the Aboriginal Head Start for Urban and Northern Communities Program (AHSUNC) pilot officially kicked off. By 1998, it expanded to serve First Nations children on-reserve, with the Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve program (AHSOR). Throughout the 2000s, AHS sites were established all over Canada. As of 2022, the AHSUNC enrolled approximately 3% of the 150,000 Indigenous children aged 0 to 6 years living off-reserve and off-territory in Canada (Office of Audit and Evaluation and Public Health Agency of Canada).

Today, Ontario has a total of 14 AHS sites (Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association), and has the greatest number of sites located in large urban centres of any province or territory (Office of Audit and Evaluation and Public Health Agency of Canada 10). AHS sites in Ontario are supported by the Aboriginal Head Start Association of Ontario, which develops training and resources for the site network (p.10).

AHS in Ontario:

- the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre Aboriginal Head Start,
- the Zaagi-idiwin Aboriginal Head Start (Fort Frances),
- the Niwasa Kendasswin Teg (Hamilton)
- the Anishnaabe-Kweg Aboriginal Head Start (Kenora),
- the Waweniwin Learning Centre Aboriginal Head Start (Moosonee),
- the Waabinong Head Start Family Resource Centre (Sault St. Marie),
- the Waninawkang (Sioux Lookout),
- Shkoday Abinojiiwak Obimiwedoon Aboriginal Head Start (Thunder Bay),
- the Epnigishmok Aboriginal Head Start (West Toronto),
- the Kiiwednong Aboriginal Head Start (North Toronto),
- the Shaawnong Aboriginal Head Start (South Toronto), and
- the Waabanong Aboriginal Head Start (East Toronto)

The site network also includes the Makonsag and Sivummut in Ottawa (Public Health Agency of Canada, p.10), which serves the highest Inuit population in Ontario (Statistics Canada and About Canadian Inuit, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami), and the highest urban Inuit population in Canada (City of Ottawa, p.15), with programming that includes Inuit cultural and traditional activities (Health Agency of Canada, p.10).

The Kiiwednong AHS in North York, Toronto has exemplified the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (RCAP) recommendation of involving parents in their child's education, through the development of a Four Directions Council. This council allows parents to support program management and have agency in the planning, development and delivery of their child's early learning. This approach honours parents' roles as educators. Some parents who have been involved in the council go on to being active members of similar councils within the Toronto District School Board, where they continue to advocate for their child's unique education needs (Office of Audit and Evaluation and Public Health Agency of Canada, p.37).

"When I arrived here I was a disabled single Métis mom with no family. The program literally saved our lives…It reduced my social isolation and I developed a sense of family and community. I got stronger and started sharing my cultural teachings. I became the Family Networker for a while. A cultural teacher and now an Elder. I teach all over the planet and know I am valued and loved by my community."
(Office of Audit and Evaluation and Public Health Agency of Canada) - AHSUNC Parent

Legislation and Government Frameworks

Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action #10 called for the development of Indigenous education legislation that respects and honours Treaty rights, ensures parental and community responsibility, control and accountability on par with provincial school systems, culturally appropriate curricula, sufficient funding, and an improvement of education attainment levels and success rates among Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p.2).

In 2014, Bill C-33, the 'First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act', was tabled but did not pass legislation. The primary reason for this was that the Act would require First Nations to align any new and existing on-reserve educational institutions with provincial and federal regulations, which govern all practical elements of a school system.

The Best Start report titled "A Sense of Belonging: Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families" discusses how non-Indigenous educators can embody cultural humility to be mindful of the power and privilege they hold, as well as the attitudes and biases they may have. The resources provides five case scenarios involving complex situations with Indigenous families and children in this context (Fearn, p.37-59).

Regarding Indigenous curriculum, the report encourages educators to use a nation-based approach that honours the unique culture and traditions of an Indigenous community or district, rather than a pan-Indigenous approach that assumes all Indigenous cultures are the same. Educators can better understand their students' cultures by asking parents and guardians what community and nation they belong to and inviting families of children to share their culture if they so desire. Building relationships with Indigenous families takes time, but results in trust (Fearn, p.40).

Indigenous Early Childhood Education in Ontario

Literature strongly suggests that Indigenous kindergartens and nursery schools should, similarly to grade schools, be considered priority programs and receive funding from the federal government. (National Indian Brotherhood, p.11). This is echoed in the TRC Call to Action #12 which calls for all levels of government, in collaboration with Indigenous governments, to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p.2).

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has also called for greater attention to and support for early learning and childcare, making the case that Indigenous children have a greater need for such programming than any other group in Canada. In their 2010 report titled "Best Practices in Aboriginal ECD/ELCD Programming" they discuss a myriad of reasons that this need is more critical in Indigenous communities, including, the multi-generational experiences and impacts of the Residential School system, and Indian Act gender-based policies, the disproportionate rates of poverty, health challenges, incarceration, young parents, and children in care in Indigenous communities, and the higher population of children in Indigenous communities versus non-Indigenous communities. (Native Women's Association of Canada, p.5-8).

Notably, the NWAC report discusses the high rates of children being categorized as special needs in Ontario. They highlighted that a 2003-2004 study done on children in Sioux Lookout communities in grades 1, 3, 5 and 7 found that more than 86% were at least two grade levels behind when tested for literacy and numeracy, which would classify them as special needs students under Ontario's education system (p.7)

Research shows that children who attend early childhood education and care for at least two years perform on average better than others at age 15 in mathematics, reading, and science, as per the Programme for International Student Assessment from 2015 (Council of Ministers of Education, p.3).

Over the decades, Ontario has emerged as a leader across Canada in early childhood education and services. Unlike some provinces, in Ontario children can attend a play-based full day kindergarten program at 4 and 5 years of age. (Council of Ministers of Education).

Ontario's vision for early childhood education, as described in the Ontario Early Years Policy Framework, is as follows: "Ontario's children and families are well supported by a system of responsive, high-quality, accessible, and increasingly integrated early years programs and services that contribute to healthy child development today and a stronger future tomorrow" (Government of Ontario, p.2)

In 2014, Ontario published its Pedagogy for Early Learning, titled "How Does Learning Happen?", which emphasizes the importance of strengthening cultural competency of early childhood educators and provides educators with a case scenario involving the integration of Indigenous Knowledge to practice (How Does Learning Happen?, Government of Ontario, 18). According to the Transitions in Canada From Early Childhood and Care to Primary Education report, published in 2021, Ontario is on par with the national average of children who participate in early childhood learning one year before the official primary enrollment age (Council of Ministers of Education, p.19).

Ontario also supports and monitors transitions into primary and grade 1, through surveying parents of Kindergarten students during school registration, in order to collect information about children's participation in childcare and early years programs prior to school entry (for example, their type of childcare arrangement, and early learning programs) (Council of Ministers of Education, p.21)

"How Does Learning Happen?" marked a milestone in the introduction of Indigenous Knowledge and pedagogy into mainstream Ontario early childhood education. It recognizes four main foundations in early learning: Belonging, Well-Being, Engagement and Expression; in many ways these pillars also reflect common signatures in many Indigenous pedagogies. For instance, the foundation of "expression" and fostering communication and expression in all forms values the learning of Indigenous language(s) and cultural traditions as an essential part of strengthening a child's identity and wellbeing. Responsiveness to a child's communication, whatever the form, "wires" the child's brain for learning (How Does Learning Happen?, Government of Ontario, p.41-42).

In particular, the pedagogy recognizes that children come from unique families and communities each with their own social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and that all children should feel a sense of belonging in their ECE programming (How Does Learning Happen?, Government of Ontario, p. 6-18). It suggests that learning programs aim to reflect a child's unique cultural and linguistic background whenever possible and that educators work to weave elements from a child's culture and language into programs, to foster this sense of belonging.

Furthermore, pedagogy encourages educators to help protect a child's first language and/or traditional language and culture, by incorporating books and signage written in the home languages of children into learning spaces, and extending invitations to children's family members to share culture and traditions in programming (How Does Learning Happen?, Government of Ontario, p.42).

While honoring Indigenous peoples and their cultures in ECE Programming is essential, Dr. Fikile Nxumalo cautions that educators ought to be mindful not to position Indigenous and black peoples as "others" and Canadian white settler populations as the norm. They also pointed out that ECE educational programming that focuses on Indigenous peoples must make the distinction that Indigenous peoples are not simply a different ethnic/cultural group in Canada, but that they also have rights and sovereignty within this country (Pacini-Ketchabaw).

In 2020, the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) released a Practice Guideline on Diversity and Culture for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) in Ontario. Such Practice Guidelines support the Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) of RECEs required in maintaining their registration (Council of Ministers of Education, p.26). The Guideline on Diversity and Culture in particular supports educators in strengthening their cultural competency and cultural humility, especially as it relates to diversity of Indigenous peoples and their cultures, and encouraging educators to reflect on how their biases may impact approaches to teaching, and fostering and leading classroom environments that embed cultural diversity (College of Early Childhood Educators, p.7). RECEs must complete a self-assessment, develop an individual learning plan, and maintain a record of their professional learning activities on a cyclical basis (Council of Ministers of Education).

The CECE's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* echoes Ontario's Pedagogy for Learning by stating that RECEs must respect each child's "uniqueness, dignity and potential", and must respect and nurture a child's first and/or traditional language and culture, and demonstrate a commitment to learning about and addressing Indigenous children' s rights and needs (p.9).

"Today we are another step closer to the long-standing goal of First Nations control of First Nations education. This new approach means First Nations have the ability to implement their own models of education. It means a shift from proposal-based funding toward predictable and sustained funding so First Nations can plan and build quality education systems that reflect their needs and their vision of holistic, lifelong learning. This is a significant step toward closing the gap in education outcomes for First Nations children and students."
Former National Chief Perry Bellegarde, Assembly of First Nations

First Nations Schools On-Reserve

By 2012, there were 515 on-reserve schools run by First Nations, attended by 64% of the total First Nations school-aged population in the country. Most of these schools offer curriculum that includes language and culture, and many are run by First Nations administration and have First Nations teachers (AFN).

Historically, compared to off-reserve schools, on-reserve schools received disproportionate education funding from the federal government, despite it being the responsibility of the federal government to provide education funding for all status First Nations children, regardless of whether they live on or off reserve lands (National Indian Brotherhood, p.3).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Calls to Action #8 and #9, respectively, called for the Government of Canada to end discrepancies in federal education funding between First Nations on and off-reserve and to report annually on differences in funding between the two education systems (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p.2).

Today, steps are being made to close the funding gap. In April 2019, a new policy and funding approach was co-developed between the Assembly of First Nations and the federal government to support Indigenous students from Kindergarten through grade 12 through a more predictable core funding comparable to provincially-run schools, a full time kindergarten for children ages 5 and 6, and $1,500 per student per year to support language and cultural programming (Government of Canada and AFN announce new policy and funding approach, Government of Canada).

One example of a successful on-reserve early childhood education program is the Everlasting Tree School In Six Nations of the Grand River. This program was formed in 2010 by a group of community members who came together over a passion for ensuring their children's early childhood education was centred around learning Kanyen'keha (the Mohawk language) and culture. The school, inspired by the Waldorf Educational structure and a decade of research on alternative models of education, provides children with an immersive learning environment that is holistic, and experiential. (Our History, Everlasting Tree School).

Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework

The Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) Framework, published in 2018, was co-developed by the Government of Canada and Indigenous peoples, through national and regional engagements. The Framework serves as a guide for communities, program administrators, service providers, policy-makers and governments toward a shared vision of high quality, culturally-oriented early learning and child care for all Indigenous children. Through the engagements, a set of shared principles for Indigenous ELCC were derived, as well as distinctions-based ELCC frameworks for First Nations, Métis and Inuit. The principles speak to the importance of grounding Indigenous ELCC program content and delivery in Indigenous Knowledges, languages and cultures, Indigenous self-determination and control over Indigenous education, accessible, quality programs and services that are culturally appropriate, and taking an inclusive, transparent, child and family-centred approach that is flexible and adaptable based on the needs of a child, family or community. (Government of Canada et al., p.6)

Language as the Heart of Early Learning

Throughout the literature, First Peoples Group found that the importance of ensuring Indigenous language is a part of early childhood education was a common thread, from early childhood education programs to grade schools.

Advocates for early Indigenous childhood education have long recognized that teaching children, and especially pre-school and primary aged children, their Indigenous language(s), as well as teaching curriculum in their Indigenous languages, is of utmost importance (National Indian Brotherhood, p.15). Ideally, English and French languages should only be introduced after a child develops a strong foundation of their own language (p.15). The impact of culturally inappropriate education, including programs that over-value and overly centre English and monolingualism, is a concern that has been voiced by Indigenous parents, leaders, and Elders (Ball, p.28).

The RCAP similarly recommended that all educational systems, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, consider Indigenous language education a priority, and take steps in supporting existing local language preservation efforts. Related actions include implementing first or second Indigenous language classes and immersion programs where there is a desire, recognition of Indigenous language proficiency as a second-language academic credit, whether it is learned through the classroom or from instruction outside of the school, the involvement of Elders and fluent speakers in programs to enhance and foster Indigenous language acquisition and fluency, the development of Indigenous language instruction materials, and encouraging learners to pursue language teaching and study as a career path (The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.435).

A major critique of Bill C-33 is that it would require classroom instruction to be delivered in either the English or French language, with the option of an Indigenous language being taught as a second language (Legislative Summary of Bill C-33, Government of Canada, p.12).

The Indigenous Languages Act was successfully legislated in 2019. This act, though less focused on general education, was a step in formalizing the establishment of federal support and promotion of the efforts of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen their Indigenous languages.

Ontario Provincial Schools

In 2016, approximately 31% of First Nations students attended an off-reserve provincial school and 5% attended either a private or federal school (Assembly of First Nations).

Recommendations in the literature call for provincial and territorial schools to embed Indigenous knowledge, culture and language instruction into the curriculum, to ensure that Indigenous children have access to culturally appropriate education regardless of their place of residence.

The RCAP recommended that all schools serving Indigenous children adopt policies that welcome the involvement and teachings of Indigenous parents, Elders, and families in school activities, in the classroom, and through various advisory or parents committees (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.439).

The RCAP also recommended that provincial and territorial ministries require school boards serving Indigenous students to implement a comprehensive Indigenous strategy, developed with Indigenous parents, Elders and educators. This strategy should aim to increase the number of Indigenous teachers, administrative and leadership professionals, support workers, counsellors, community liaison workers, psychologists and speech therapists. It should also strive to incorporate Indigenous Knowledge in all subject areas, classes that challenge racism, stereotypes, prejudice and biases, teachings from Indigenous Elders, Indigenous language classes, and mechanisms that ensure family and community involvement (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, p.441-442).

Indigenous Early Childhood Education Training

In the literature there was an emphasis on the development of specialized teacher and counsellor training programs for Indigenous educators, in partnership with First Nations and leaders of Indigenous Provincial and Territorial Organizations. While non-Indigenous teachers are not frowned upon, it is most ideal for First Nations children to be taught by Indigenous teachers who have an intimate knowledge of Indigenous language, culture, tradition and psychology (National Indian Brotherhood, p.18).

The RCAP recommended that teacher education programs, in collaboration with Indigenous organizations and government funding agencies, develop career paths from paraprofessional training to professional certification in education careers that prepare Indigenous students in all roles required to operate Indigenous education systems (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 463). The RCAP also recommended that all levels of government work to expand such teacher education programs to be delivered within Indigenous communities, to increase the volume of Indigenous teachers (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples p.462).

The RCAP also recommended that teacher education programs offer courses on teaching Indigenous students, addressing Indigenous education issues, and the delivery of Indigenous subject matter to all students. Such Indigenous-centred components must be developed in collaboration with Indigenous organizations or community representatives.

Indigenous Institutes with ECE Programs in Ontario

In Ontario, nine publicly assisted Indigenous Institutes are recognized under the Indigenous Institutes Act, 2017 as Indigenous-governed, community-mandated postsecondary providers (Government of Ontario, 2017; Government of Ontario, 2019). These institutes frequently deliver ECE credentials through formal partnerships with Ontario colleges, embedding Indigenous languages, land-based learning, and community engagement within provincially recognized curricula (Government of Ontario, 2019; Government of Ontario – ECE Grants, n.d.).

First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) offers a two-year Ontario College Diploma in Early Childhood Education in partnership with Canadore College, with virtual delivery and 550 hours of field placement. The program positions culture, language, and family engagement as integral to early years pedagogy and practice (FNTI, n.d.).

Kenjgewin Teg delivers Early Childhood Education – Anishinaabemowin (ECEA), an Ontario College Diploma offered with Canadore College. The credential explicitly integrates Anishinaabemowin language learning and land-based pedagogy across four semesters, aligning with provincial ECE outcomes while centring Anishinaabe teachings (Kenjgewin Teg, 2025).

Seven Generations Education Institute (SGEI) offers ECE diploma programming (often evenings/weekends or site-specific deliveries), developing competencies to design developmentally appropriate, culturally grounded programs for children up to age 12 and emphasizing family and community partnership during field placements (Seven Generations Education Institute, n.d.).

Six Nations Polytechnic (SNP) provides an ECE diploma program (delivered with a public college partner) that includes 600+ hours of fieldwork, connecting students to school board and community settings while embedding Haudenosaunee knowledge and community priorities (Six Nations Polytechnic, n.d.).

Province-level program listings and funding mechanisms (e.g., the Qualifications Upgrade site) document partnership pathways across multiple Indigenous Institutes—including FNTI, Oshki-Pimache-O-Win: The Wenjack Education Institute, Seven Generations, Kenjgewin Teg, the Anishinabek Educational Institute, and SNP—paired with colleges such as Canadore, St. Clair, and Niagara. These sources corroborate that the dominant model is Indigenous-led delivery and college-conferred credential, with localized cultural and language content (Government of Ontario – ECE Grants, n.d.).

Collectively, the literature shows a consistent curricular through-line: alignment to Ontario's ECE standards and explicit Indigenous language, cultural, and land-based components, delivered in community and often with flexible formats (evening/weekend, virtual, or cohort-based) to meet learner and community needs (FNTI, n.d.; Kenjgewin Teg, 2025; Seven Generations Education Institute, n.d.; Six Nations Polytechnic, n.d.).

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