

Indigenous languages must be nurtured in early childhood education settings ^[1]

'Language nests' create fluent speakers and help Indigenous languages stay alive

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EXCERPTS

Indigenous Peoples have a troubled relationship with the systems that have been imposed by settler colonial populations.

The imposition of education through the residential school system was devastating to Indigenous Peoples, with the legacy living on in Canada's child welfare system.

Part of ending this cycle of the removal of children means providing culturally relevant and quality child care.

Quality, affordable, accessible and culturally relevant publicly funded child care would provide Indigenous families with additional supports while parents advance their own education and obtain meaningful employment.

An innovative way to support Indigenous people's language revitalization movement would be through early learning and child-care programs.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 12th call to action directly addresses the need for relevant early learning and child care programs for Indigenous children. The right to have language-based education programs for Indigenous children is also protected in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Article 14, Section 3.

It is important to view early learning and child care programs as a significant part of a child's education and integral to their development.

A responsibility of government

The federal government is responsible for maintaining a working relationship with Indigenous people in Canada. The federal government is required to fund on-reserve projects, initiatives and services, as many on-reserve families lack licensed child care.

Indigenous children experience a gap in access to culturally relevant early childhood education programs off-reserve as well.

The UN declaration on Indigenous people and the TRC's 12th call to action mandate the expansion of Indigenous early child-care education programs as a responsibility of the federal, provincial and territorial governments wherever there is an Indigenous population in need of child care.

Indigenous languages in Canada have been endangered for decades. Residential schools prevented students from speaking their native language, and Statistics Canada reported there were 25 Indigenous languages in Canada with fewer than 500 fluent speakers in 2011.

It is important to give children the opportunity to learn another language while in early learning and child-care programming. This is especially important for Indigenous children, as many of their families and those in their community had their languages and cultural practices suppressed by the government and the education system.

A sense of belonging, cultural identity

Incorporating Indigenous language programming within a child-care setting and funding the creation of new programs is an act of reconciliation, offering both children and their families the opportunity to heal.

Language gives speakers knowledge about their culture, which helps children to develop a sense of belonging through their cultural identity.

Children who learn a second language develop better problem-solving skills and better critical thinking skills.

The most important way to keep a language alive is by teaching younger generations.

Language nests

In response to aging populations of language speakers, Indigenous Peoples in different parts of the world developed "language nests" as their response to the crisis.

Language nests are child-care programs where children are exposed to an Indigenous language extensively to create a new generation of fluent speakers to keep the language alive. Language nests also encourage children's parents to learn the language and use it at home.

There are Indigenous language nests around the world and they have been very effective in helping Indigenous Peoples maintain their languages.

In New Zealand in 1982, they started Te Kohanga Reo, a child-care program geared toward teaching children the Maori language. This program was extremely successful and today there are more than 460 programs in New Zealand.

In 1984, Hawaiians began their process of opening up language nests, with the first Punana Leo in Kekaha, Kaua'i. This program increased the number of speakers under 18 from about 50 in 1982 to over 10,000 today, says the B.C.-based First Peoples' Cultural Council.

Immersion programming

In Canada, there are numerous examples of Indigenous communities implementing full immersion language programming. British Columbia, Ontario and Mohawk communities within Canada have been very active in developing and providing immersive language-based early childhood education.

While there are Indigenous-led child-care centres and licensed early learning and child-care programs in Manitoba both on and off reserve,

there are no fully funded language-specific programs modelled on the language nests.

Encouraging the federal government to begin offering education incentives to support Indigenous people to work in early childhood education would be a step in the right direction.

Offering language-based programs at colleges and universities for free in order to further equip the Indigenous population with the tools they need to run language-based, culturally relevant early learning and child-care programs would be an act of reconciliation.

Providing adequate funding for communities both on and off reserve to manage Indigenous language-based early learning and child-care programming is important as well.

These steps, along with increasing the number of publicly funded child-care spaces to meet the significant demand for child care, would help revitalize Indigenous languages and be a meaningful step toward reconciliation.

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