

An environmental scan of public policy and programs for young Aboriginal children in BC: A cold wind blows ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full text (pdf) ^[2]

Summary

This 2014 Environmental Scan updates the 2007 BCACCS Environmental Scan: Winds of Change. The purpose of the Scan is, as in 2007, to describe, clarify, and put in political context the patchwork of federal and provincial Aboriginal early childhood development and care (Aboriginal ECDC) policies and programs specifically designed by the federal and BC provincial governments to close the "gap in life chances" between Aboriginal children and other children in BC.

This Scan is primarily intended to be a tool that will encourage debate about Aboriginal ECDC and be of planning assistance to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities in BC. Like the earlier Scan, it may also be of interest to a wider audience of policy makers, advocates, funders, scholars, students, and members of the general public.

The three key questions that the Scan attempts to answer are:

1. What actions are our federal and BC provincial governments taking to address the glaring inequality between young Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal children in BC today?
2. How are the impacts of the current public investments in Aboriginal ECDC reported on, monitored, and evaluated?
3. What are the contexts that shape current ECDC government policies and programs for Aboriginal children in BC?

To answer these questions, the Scan reviews public policies and programs specifically designed for Aboriginal preschool children ages 2½-6 that support early learning, enhance and protect their culture, identity, and well-being, and contribute to ensuring that they achieve their full potential as future citizens and leaders.

While ensuring a better future for Aboriginal children also means that the health and wellbeing of their families and communities must be vastly improved, the objective in this Scan is to put a spotlight on policies and programs that put young Aboriginal children at the centre. This objective presents some data collection challenges as the Committee that monitors countries' compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) noted in 2012 in its report on Canada. The CRC Committee recommended that Canada implement a child specific approach to budget planning because the lack of such an approach in Canada made it "practically impossible to identify, monitor, report, and evaluate the impact of investments in children." The CRC Committee has also strongly criticized Canada for its treatment of Aboriginal children.

This Scan provides an overview of the federal government's Aboriginal early childhood development (Aboriginal ECD) policies and the programs that were first established between 1994 and 2005 to "close the gap in life chances" between Aboriginal and other children in Canada. At that time, the scientific evidence that ECD was an effective means for addressing inequality in early childhood had been accumulating for almost three decades.

However, more recent international studies about the impact of ECD in marginalized populations have shown that it is high quality programs, which have a strong focus on early learning and development that are most effective in combatting inequality in early childhood. Indeed, longitudinal studies of high quality programs that have tracked child participants into adulthood show that the long-term benefits for vulnerable child participants can persist throughout their lives and that the benefits to society as a whole are substantial.

BCACCS community-based research has determined - through a community consultation process - that "high quality" in a BC Aboriginal ECDC context means that programs for Aboriginal children must be culturally appropriate, reinforce pride in identity, be grounded in an Aboriginal world view and spirituality, and include Aboriginal knowledge, values, ways of being and ways of caring for young children. Research shows Aboriginal ECDC needs to have sustainable funding, structural supports, and a strong focus on early learning and care to be successful.

Today, in 2014, Aboriginal ECDC programs continue to receive federal government funding but funding levels have been mostly static for several years. Moreover, the research provided here indicates that the current federal government is uninterested in expanding access to Aboriginal ECDC programs or in ensuring the level of quality that leads to successful outcomes.

This laissez-faire approach is facilitated by the ECD and the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) agreements that were negotiated by the

provinces and territories with the federal Liberal government prior to the 2006 federal election. These negotiated agreements do not require provincial and territorial governments to specify in any detail, in their financial reports to the federal government, how the funding is spent. Instead, program content, delivery, and funding is described as being accountable to the citizens of the province or territory. In BC, detailed information that would indicate what the ECD/ELCC funding is spent on is sparse or unavailable.

The information and analysis provided in this Scan is drawn from a wide variety of sources: government documents, parliamentary proceedings, communications and interviews with government officials, academic journal articles, BCACCS research reports, focus groups, and discussions related to Indigenous child early learning and well-being conducted by BCACCS between 2011 and 2014.

The picture that emerges, based on the accumulation of evidence presented throughout this report, is one marked by a decline of political will and support at the federal level for Aboriginal ECDC. At the provincial level, this picture is marked by frequent changes in direction and senior management in the lead Ministry for Aboriginal ECDC, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), a lack of meaningful consultation with Aboriginal community and service providers, a lack of accountability for Aboriginal ECDC funding, and an overall ambivalence regarding community consultation on Aboriginal ECDC.

There does not appear to be any measurement of outcomes or an impact assessment of investments in Aboriginal ECDC programs federally or provincially. Federally, there are occasional program evaluations and administrative reports from projects but there has not, to our knowledge, ever been an impact assessment that might show the effectiveness of Aboriginal ECDC programs.

Hope for less fragmentation of scarce Aboriginal ECDC resources, greater transparency, accountability, and more attention to Aboriginal ECDC outcomes in BC now lies with the BC Early Years Strategy (EYS) announced in 2013 and the Provincial Office of the Early Years (OEY) established in March 2014. The EYS is linked to Premier Clark's Families First election promises and is a response to community concerns about the need for increased coordination, accountability and transparency of all BC ECD policies and programs.

The EYS appears to be a step forward in that it promises better coordination of services. However, prior consultation with First Nations and other Aboriginal communities did not, to our knowledge, occur in the development of the EYS or for a new funding program launched in 2014, called Aboriginal Service Innovations - Early Years (ASI-EY). Neither is there a mechanism that allows First Nations and other Aboriginal groups to have input on EYS or on how Aboriginal ECD policies, programs and services can be improved.

In adopting such an approach, the Province disregards the guiding principles of the Child, Family and Community Services Act, which requires that Aboriginal cultural differences be respected and states among other things that, "aboriginal people should be involved in the planning and delivery of services to aboriginal children and their families." The promise of better coordination should come with a commitment to these guiding principles.

The context for all MCFD services is that MCFD, the lead BC Ministry for Aboriginal ECD as well as the new Early Years Strategy, has focused primarily on their child welfare/protection service. This service, which has a well-documented over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in its care, has been the focus of two public inquiries in the last two decades. The judges involved in the inquiries and also, more recently, the BC Advocate for Children and Youth, have described the Ministry as being in a continuing state of crisis.

The October 2013 establishment of the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) and the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of federal ECD programs for BC First Nations on reserve to FNHA is a hopeful development. The transfer will be complete on December 1, 2014. FNHA has informed BCACCS that it expects that the transfer will ensure more culturally enriched ECD programs and lead to major improvements in the health and well-being of First Nations children, families, and communities in BC. FNHA has also indicated that First Nations communities will have flexibility in deciding priorities for ECD programs.

The transfer of federal Aboriginal ECD programs to the BC FNHA has raised expectations of better outcomes for young children living on reserve in BC. However, the decline of federal interest in Aboriginal ECDC, together with a weak provincial commitment to Aboriginal ECDC policy and programs, and the continuing high child and family poverty rates in BC mean that the current policy environment for ensuring effective and responsive Aboriginal ECDC and programs for the majority of Aboriginal children in BC is a chilly one indeed

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