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Jane P Preston, Michael Cottrell, Terrance R Pelletier and Joseph V Pearce

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# Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada: Issues of context

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## Abstract

Herein we provide a literature synthesis pertaining to the state of Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada. We identify key features of quality Aboriginal early childhood programs. The background and significance of early childhood education for Aboriginal peoples is explicated. Cultural compatibility theory is employed as the philosophical basis to conceptualize quality Aboriginal early childhood education. Based on this theoretical premise, we suggest Aboriginal early childhood programs should incorporate Aboriginal pedagogy, be infused with Aboriginal language and culture, be adequately staffed by qualified Aboriginal educators, be structured to empower Aboriginal communities and incorporate full-day kindergarten. Prominent Aboriginal early childhood programs are featured within the article.

## Keywords

Aboriginal peoples; early childhood education; cultural compatibility theory

This article stems from a larger research initiative, conducted on behalf of the Saskatchewan<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education (Canada), where we examined strategies that supported increased educational outcomes for Aboriginal students enrolled in two provincial school divisions (see Cottrell et al., 2009). Through that project, it became evident that while many Saskatchewan schools were

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committing significant resources to addressing the Aboriginal education gap,<sup>2</sup> there was a strong sense among some educational stakeholders that a critical part of the solution lay outside the purview of K-12 education, namely, within early pre-school years.<sup>3</sup> This realization led us to explore the large body of literature that highlights the remarkable influence that quality early childhood education has on child development. Consequently, this article is a literature review of early childhood education for Aboriginal peoples living in Canada.

The purpose of this article is to provide background information pertaining to Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada and to identify key characteristics of quality Aboriginal early childhood education. A number of quality early childhood education programs are specifically featured. Our review of the literature involved the interrogation of over 100 written sources, including monographs, academic journals, federal and provincial/territorial educational policy documents, Internet sources newspapers, magazines and periodicals. We collected and synthesized these data for the benefit of other researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, caregivers and community members interested in the development and/or evaluation of programs in the area of Aboriginal early childhood education.

Because government-sponsored programs and researchers utilize a variety of terms when describing early childhood education, it is helpful to clarify this linguistic diversity. Related references to early childhood education include *early learning programs* (Preston, 2008a), *early childhood care and education* (Prochner and Howe, 2000), *early childhood education and care* (Friendly, 2009; Gordon and Browne, 2008), *early childhood development* (Greenwood et al., 2007), *early childhood intervention* (Niles et al., 2007) and *early childhood services* (Penn, 2000). Unless otherwise stated, we render these terms as synonymous; however, the term we most frequently encountered within the literature and the one predominantly employed throughout this paper is *early childhood education*. 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). Early childhood education encompasses a broad assortment of educational programs and services. These include, but are not limited to, prenatal care, childcare/daycare, family resource centers, family support programs, nurseries, preschools, Head Start programs, prekindergarten programs, kindergarten and primary grades in public school. The aim of these programs is to promote the overall healthy development of children and their families, enrich early learning experiences and increase the prospect of Aboriginal peoples achieving parity in education.

Before discussing the intricacies of Aboriginal early childhood education, the term *Aboriginal* also needs explication. Statistics Canada (2007) stipulates, 'There is no single or "correct" definition of Aboriginal populations. The choice of a definition depends on the purpose for which the information is being used' (§ 20). In particular, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada<sup>4</sup> (INAC) defines Aboriginal peoples as, 'The descendants of the original inhabitants of North America' (§ 3). The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people – Indians, Métis and Inuit (INAC, 2009). These three expressions, in turn, also need clarification in order to understand the Canadian meaning of Aboriginal. Due to some offensive connotations pertaining to the word, *Indian*, in the 1970s Canadian leaders began to substitute *First Nation* for Indian. Historically, Métis referred to the children of French fur traders and Cree First Nations people (who lived within the Prairie Provinces) and the English/Scottish fur traders and Dene First Nations people (who lived within northern Canadian regions). Today, Métis is used broadly to describe people with both First Nations and European ancestry (INAC, 2004b). Within Canada, Inuit people are Aboriginal peoples living in the northern regions of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Northern Quebec and Northern Labrador (INAC, 2009). A final aspect to this discussion is the somewhat uncommon usage of the term *Indigenous* by Canadian leaders. As INAC (2004a) explains, 'The

term [Indigenous] is rarely used in the Department, and when it is used, it usually refers to Aboriginal people internationally' (¶ 2).

In what follows, we address the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds that dictate the critical importance of early childhood initiatives for Canadian Aboriginal peoples. We suggest that the cultural competency model is an appropriate philosophical basis for Aboriginal early childhood education. Using this paradigm as our frame of reference, we identify some of the key characteristics of effective Aboriginal early childhood education and highlight a number of Aboriginal early childhood educational programs currently in place within Canada.

## **Providing background: The need for Aboriginal early childhood education**

Learning begins at birth, and all aspects of a child's healthy development are directly dependent upon that child being immersed within a nurturing environment from early days of life. Restated from a neurological perspective, early childhood experiences have a decisive impact on the architecture of the brain (Levitt, 2008; Tarlov, 2008). Research on various aspects of early childhood education provides compelling empirical evidence that quality early childhood education has a positive, longitudinal impact on a child's academic and social prospects (Barnett, 1998; Karoly et al., 1998; Landry, 2008; Niles et al., 2006, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2001). When children are nurtured within a stimulating environment, they are more likely, for example, to develop an extensive range of positive personal, social and intellectual traits including self-confidence, mental health, motivation to learn and the ability to control aggression, solve conflict in nonviolent ways and develop and sustain friendships (Tarlov, 2008). Furthermore, young children immersed in dynamic, motivational and supportive environments are more likely to graduate from high school and are more prone to develop successful parenting skills (Tarlov, 2008). Additional studies highlight a variety of unanticipated advantages of early childhood education. Adult benefits associated with early childhood education include decreased involvement in criminal activities, higher incomes and longer adult marriages (Schweinhart, 1994). For these myriad reasons, expending time, energy and resources on promoting educational environments for babies, toddlers and young children is a sound way to help ensure the future well-being of young learners.

While the provision of quality early childhood education is an important consideration for all children, it is especially critical for Aboriginal populations, namely, because Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing and youngest ethno-cultural group in Canada. Between 1996 and 2006, the First Nations and Inuit populations grew 29 percent and 26 percent respectively, compared to an 8 percent increase among non-Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2008). The median age for Canadian Aboriginal peoples is 26.5 years, as compared to 39.7 years of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2009). Within Canada, approximately 20 percent of the Aboriginal population is under the age of 10, as compared to 11 percent of the non-Aboriginal population of the same age (Libin, 2008).

Regional demographics further accentuate the significance of these young Aboriginal profiles. In Saskatchewan, for example, the median age of Aboriginal peoples is 21.7 years, while the median age of Saskatchewan's non-Aboriginal population is 41.4 years (Statistics Canada, 2009). In Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Aboriginal peoples constitute the fastest growing segment of the school age populations; therefore, it is not surprising that in these Prairie Provinces one in eight students under the age of four is Aboriginal (Richards, 2008). If the growth rate of the Aboriginal populations remains in line with census statistics, within 25 years, half of Saskatchewan's population will be Aboriginal (Libin, 2008). Understandably, this burgeoning young Aboriginal populace creates an increased need for early learning programs and services.

Not only do current and future Aboriginal populations represent the largest clientele in need of early childhood services, because of issues of inequality and disadvantage, Aboriginal people have, for a long time, overrepresented a need for such services. Since the signing of Canada's historical treaties, Aboriginal peoples have experienced a host of assimilative and discriminatory policies, which have had devastating effects upon them. Many Aboriginal populations experience widespread unemployment, pervasive poverty, high rates of teen pregnancy, high rates of suicide and poor health conditions (Canadian Population Health Initiative, 2004). Campaign 2000 (2006) indicated that one out of every four children in First Nations communities lives in poverty. Forty percent of off-reserve children experience substandard living conditions, a number six times greater than that of non-Aboriginal children (UNICEF Canada, 2009). Provincial statistics further highlight the severity of such Aboriginal disadvantages. In Saskatchewan, 45 percent of Aboriginal children live in poverty (Gingrich and Douglas, 2009), and, in the city of Winnipeg (Manitoba), Aboriginal poverty is 2.3 times higher than non-Aboriginal rates (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2009). Niles et al. (2007) believe 'early educational and social enrichment can compensate for disadvantages brought about by poverty and its associated problems' (p. 109).

### **Applying a theoretical model to Aboriginal early childhood education**

In evaluating Aboriginal early childhood education programs, Niles et al.'s (2007) critique of the term *best practice* is particularly relevant. These authors remind readers that policies and judgments associated with best practices for early childhood education frequently stipulate dominant societal values and codes of behavior as orthodox in nature. As a result, culturally specific Aboriginal childcare practices are either ignored or denigrated. Stairs and Bernhardt (2002) offer additional insight pertaining to evaluative research in early childhood education: a fundamental principle of ethical research involving Aboriginal peoples is that research needs to be harmonious with the interests of the community. Ideally, any research involving Aboriginal peoples should include elements of 'democratizing' (p. 331) and 'reframing' (p. 312), where Aboriginal principles of collectivity are reinstated and research issues are defined in the community's own terms.

In addition to questionable terminologies and culturally abrasive research methodologies, Niles et al. (2007) highlight the limitations of dominant theoretical models that have traditionally supported the development and evaluation of early childhood programs. For example, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992/2005; Reynolds, 2000) and risk and resiliency theory (Stevens, 2005; Wright and Masten, 2005) are commonly used to analyze early childhood research. Both of these theories are premised on universalistic assumptions that the social world is a predictable and orderly place. A major flaw within these theories is the belief that there exists a normalcy standard for all children. Employment of ecological systems theory and risk and resiliency theory privileges the childrearing practices, norms, and values of the dominant, White, middle-class people, therein largely ignoring the unique cultural aspects of Aboriginal communities. We openly acknowledge that a child's healthy development is dependent upon multiple intersecting and overlapping influences of families, peers, schools and neighborhoods; however, we challenge the notion that a priori principles exist for Aboriginal children and that Aboriginal children can be compared, in any competent manner, to dominant societal standards.

Rather than basing Aboriginal early childhood education on mainstream best practices or theoretical models of assimilation, by utilizing cultural compatibility theory, a more appropriate conceptual approach to the development and evaluation of Aboriginal early childhood education programs is achieved (Niles et al., 2007). Exercising the constructs of this paradigm means recognizing the importance of giving Aboriginal communities a decisive voice in determining

what programs and/or what parts of programs are most suitable for their community's cultural context. Furthermore, central to cultural compatibility theory is the principle of congruence – the belief that when values and expectations of the classroom are harmonious with those of the school community, student participation and learning improves (Demmert, 2004; Yamauchi, 1998). We concur with Demmert (2004) and Yamauchi's (1998) cultural compatibility hypothesis that when a child is immersed in an educational environment that is culturally compatible with the values of the community, learning prospects are improved.

Applying cultural compatibility theory to Aboriginal early childhood education means Aboriginal communities have the latitude to determine the design and implementation of early childhood programs based upon contextualized realities. Applicable examples of cultural compatibility within early childhood education vary based on the epistemological beliefs and ontological standards of individual Aboriginal communities; however, some examples may include Aboriginal people: a) determining the start and closing times of programs (i.e. hour of the day and season of the year), b) identifying the holidays and ceremonies to be celebrated within programs, c) promoting culturally relevant snacks/recipes for children enrolled in programs and d) influencing the architectural design of a school to endorse Aboriginal pedagogy of group work and talking circles. Numerous more culturally compatible examples are threaded within the following section.

## **Quality early childhood education for Aboriginal peoples**

What follows is a review of the key features of quality Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada. Because we apply cultural compatibility theory to this information, our intent is not to make blanket claims about the usefulness of any one characteristic or program. Rather, the information presented is merely a description of the main attributes of quality Aboriginal early childhood education. Stakeholders, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will tailor these suggestions to the needs and circumstances of their communities. Thus, mindful of the widespread cultural diversity of Aboriginal communities throughout Canada, we offer the following observations. 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. We describe these components and spotlight specific examples Aboriginal early childhood programs currently delivered throughout Canada. An overview of these Canadian programs is illustrated in Table 1.

### ***Aboriginal pedagogy***

Notwithstanding current progress, there is a general lack of awareness among Canadian educational stakeholders concerning the particularized pedagogy and learning styles of Aboriginal students. 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 (Gorman, 1999). For the most part, education is structured by teachers 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 approach to assessment is ill-matched with Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning (Jagers and Carroll, 2002; Riehl, 2000).

**Table 1.** Aboriginal early childhood education programs in Canada

Key component	Example of Aboriginal early childhood education program	Location
Aboriginal pedagogy	<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>
Infusion of Aboriginal language and culture	<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 Kin</li> <li>• St. Frances School Nhiyawak Cree Immersion Kin</li> <li>• Opaskwayak School Cree Immersion Kindergarten</li> <li>• <i>First Nations Partnership Program</i></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, MN</li> <li>• Meadow Lake, SK &amp; University of Victoria, BC</li> </ul>
Supplying qualified Aboriginal teachers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Across Canada</li> <li>• Across Canada</li> </ul>
Empowering Aboriginal parents and communities	<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>• BC</li> <li>• SK</li> <li>• ON</li> </ul>
Full-day kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compulsory</li> <li>• Available by 2010–2015</li> <li>• Available by 2010–2015</li> <li>• Located within all schools within city of Whitehorse</li> <li>• Located within some schools</li> <li>• Not available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NB, NS, QC</li> <li>• ON</li> <li>• BC</li> <li>• YT</li> <li>• PE, AB, SK, NT</li> <li>• MB, NU, NL</li> </ul>

In contrast, a review of Aboriginal pedagogy stresses the importance of experiential learning, service learning and out-of-school experiences. As compared to mainstream practices, sound Aboriginal pedagogy incorporates an increased wait time between the teacher's questions and the student's answer (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008; Tharp and Dalton, 2008). Aboriginal pedagogy endorses student control over the pace of classroom conversations, and it allows students opportunities for self-determination (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008). For 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 (Friesen and Friesen, 2005; Gorman, 1999; Hards, 2006; Tunison, 2007). Archibald (1995) explains that Aboriginal education 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). A quality learning environment for Aboriginal children also integrates feasts, cultural camps and Aboriginal ceremonies in which students actively participate (Regnier, 1995). Scientific knowledge pertaining to biology or the life cycles of animals, for example, can be acquired through travelling, nature camps, fishing, hunting, trapping, storytelling, art and environmental studies. An experiential learning environment is exemplified by young children watching and imitating adults engaged in meaningful activities (Ohmagari and Berkes, 1997). 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: 119).

Aboriginal pedagogy pertaining to the assessment and evaluation of learning also differs from mainstream practices. For Aboriginal peoples, learning is not something that can be easily measured through formalized practices or written results (Tunison, 2007). Instead, Aboriginal forms of assessment are dependent upon dimensions of reflection and self-growth, which are extremely personal processes manifested within the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical realms of each student (Preston, 2008b). This type of self-assessment reduces performance anxiety, while increasing loyalty to teachers, promoting group cohesiveness and establishing a continued enthusiasm for learning (Gorman, 1999). Because a child's learning is traditionally monitored through a student's positive or negative experience, teachers do not need to invoke grades upon the learning journey of a student.

During our research we were unable to identify any one Aboriginal early childhood program solely grounded on the precepts of Aboriginal pedagogy. With that stated, the programs and services listed within the next sections incorporate many aspects of Aboriginal pedagogy.

### *Aboriginal language and culture*

The political and philosophical foundation of quality Aboriginal early childhood education emphasizes an environment where Aboriginal peoples have the right to care for and educate their children within rich linguistic and cultural surroundings (Demmert, 2004; Greenwood, et al., 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Stairs and Bernhardt, 2002). This assertion is strongly 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 (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, 2006; Greenwood et al., 2007; Kanu, 2002; Kipp, 1999; Leavitt, 1993; Martinez and Strong, 2005; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Swanson, 2003). The inclusion of local language and culture into early childhood education is also associated with the increased well-being of entire Aboriginal communities (Ball and Pence, 2005; Corbiere, 2000; Norris, 2004). For these reasons, the design of Aboriginal early childhood educational programs needs to foster the unique identities of Aboriginal peoples through the implementation of curricula built upon local Aboriginal cultures, languages and knowledge (Archibald, 1995).

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 of Aboriginal children and their families (Ball, 2005; 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 (Government of Canada, 2001). 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 (Barrieau and Ireland, 2003; Public Health Agency Canada, 2008). Barrieau and Ireland (2003) identify the positive outcomes exhibited by young Head Start children who advanced into kindergarten. 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. Colbert (1999) states that Head Start programs are often housed in elementary schools or include regular visits to elementary schools. Hence, Head Start

children are typically familiar with the elementary school setting, making their transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten a more comfortable, natural experience.

In addition to the Head Start program, Aboriginal language immersion programs promote the revitalization of Indigenous language and culture. The Kihew Waciston Cree Immersion School in Onion Lake (Saskatchewan) is an example of a successful nursery to grade 3 Cree immersion program (Onion Lake Cree Nation, n.d.). The Opaskwayak Cree Nation (Manitoba) has multiple classes of kindergarten students participating in a Cree immersion program (CBC News, 2006). Cree Immersion Kindergarten began in September 2005 at Confederation Park School (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan) (Florence, 2007). 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 (Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, n.d.). 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) note that 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. Early childhood education teachers are generally required to attain standardized qualifications before being considered for employment within the early childhood education sector. Furthermore, most Aboriginal early childhood programs require a formal license from provincial authorities before being funded.

Although the aforementioned formalities may assist in ensuring quality early learning programs, at the same time, governmental leaders and 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. As reflected by 2006 statistics, 51 percent of First Nations people living on a reserve predominantly converse in their Indigenous language (Fitzpatrick, 2008), and few postsecondary institutes provide instruction in an Aboriginal language (Hardes, 2006). 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. Although several postsecondary institutions do provide some early childhood educational training

in the form of outreach programs (e.g. Ball, 2004; Brandon University, 2008; NORTEP/NORPAC, n.d.), more could be done to improve the training opportunities available for potential early childhood education providers.

A renowned Canadian program that has successfully addressed many of the aforementioned challenges is the *First Nations Partnership Program*. This postsecondary program was initiated in 1989 when the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (Saskatchewan) partnered with the University of Victoria (British Columbia). This collaboration established culturally- and community-sensitive approaches to postsecondary early childhood education for the Cree and Dene First Nations peoples living in northern Saskatchewan (First Nations Partnership Programs, n.d.). The First Nations Partnership Program replaces a one-size-fits-all approach to early childhood educator training by incorporating the contextual realities of individual communities and the Aboriginal knowledge retained by Elders and community members. As explained by Ball (2004), the two year, accredited program is ideally suited to communities motivated to actively participate in the co-delivery of early childhood training and those communities who desire to play an active role in bringing local cultural content into early childhood education. Ball (2005) explains that postsecondary students enrolled within this early childhood education program experience unprecedented high rates of completion and successful transitions from education to relevant work.

### *Empowering Aboriginal parents and communities*

Research acknowledges that children are a catalytic channel for strengthening communities. As Preston (2009) indicates, by focusing on the needs of young children, social ties within a community are strengthened and community bonding is enhanced. Ball (2005) claims that early childhood educational services should be the nucleus of Aboriginal communities. Ball concludes 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. The promotion of Aboriginal early childhood education can mobilize family wellness and instigate a variety of community services. 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 (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004; Holmes, 2006). To empower the autonomy and voice of Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal leaders, Elders, instructors, staff, students and community members need to be integral components within 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 needs to 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 (Eni, 1998). The unique orientations, concerns, predispositions and cultural richness reflected within each Aboriginal community can only be adequately addressed by empowering local community members to actualize their local potentials. In order to do so, governmental funding criteria and formulas must be adjusted to recognize local needs for the creation of culturally relevant early learning programs and curricular resources.

In an effort to promote early childhood education, there are additional ways to empower Aboriginal communities, one of which includes promoting parent/caregiver participation in early childhood education. A plethora of research has confirmed the notion that parent/caregiver

involvement in school has positive effects on a child's school experience. Specific student advantages of parent/caregiver involvement include increased academic achievement, better attendance, improved behavior and a stronger motivation to succeed (Darch et al., 2004; Epstein, 2001; Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). 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 needs to attend to the needs of parents and communities in additional ways. The concept of early childhood education needs to incorporate a focus on the development of healthy mothers, healthy families and community wellness (Battiste, 2005). 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 well-being (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

Research supporting the positive effects of full-day kindergarten<sup>5</sup> abounds. Participating in full-day kindergarten contributes to school readiness (Lee et al., 2006), 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 and Kirk, 2000; Rothenberg, 1995). As compared to children in part-time kindergarten, children who participate in full-day kindergarten have advanced prerequisite skills for reading (de Costa, 2005; de Costa and Bell, 2001; Larson, 2003). The five-day routine provides consistency for both the child and parent (Clark and Kirk, 2000; de Costa and Bell, 2000; Larson, 2003). Plucker et al.'s (2004) research highlight that participating in full-day kindergarten decreases kindergarten repeat rates and offers a seamless transition into grade 1. de Costa and Bell (2000), Fromboluti (1988) and Housden and Kam (1992) conclude 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. 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 (Campaign 2000, 2006).

Although Canadian policy-makers and educational leaders are advocates of full-day kindergarten, the provision and accessibility of full-day kindergarten varies greatly across Canada. Within New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, full-day kindergarten is compulsory for five-year-old children (Beach et al., 2009). As a part of Quebec's early childhood education full-day kindergarten programs are available for all five-year-olds, and a \$7 a day childcare service is provided for children, newborn to aged four (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2008).

During 2005, the Yukon Territories introduced full-day kindergarten into all schools within the city of Whitehorse (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2008). Partially due to a recent report entitled, *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario* (Pascal, 2009), the Ontario government plans to phase-in full-day kindergarten between 2010 and 2015 for four- and five-year old children<sup>6</sup> (Hammer, 2009). Beginning September 2010, the Government of British Columbia is scheduled to fund full-day kindergarten for half of the province's five-year-olds, and, by 2011, full-day kindergarten is to be offered to all five-year-olds (Steffenhagen, 2009). Within Alberta, Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, and Northwest Territories individual School Districts, School Divisions or Divisional Education Councils decide whether to offer full-day or part-time kindergarten and in which schools the program is offered (Beach et al., 2009). Within Manitoba, Nunavut, and Newfoundland and Labrador, part-time kindergarten is available for children (Beach et al., 2009).

### **Closing remarks: Acquiring capacity for Aboriginal early childhood education**

The provision of quality Aboriginal early childhood education holds educational, social, economic and political potential for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal early childhood education is about preparing children to be better equipped to start school, thereby creating the potential for parity in educational achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners (Jacob and Ludwig, 2008). Achieving equity in educational outcomes, especially in terms of high school graduation, is a critical first step in the reduction of the socioeconomic disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. The provision of quality Aboriginal early childhood education offers the hope of eliminating the appalling systemic inequalities experienced by many Aboriginal peoples, it has potential to maximize human capacity in terms of Aboriginal labor market participation and it has capacity to improve social cohesion between Canadians (Pascal, 2009).

Strong collaborative efforts need to be put forth by multi-level leaders to ensure that quality Aboriginal early childhood education is actualized throughout Canada. 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. Federal, provincial/territorial and local funding must be supplied to Aboriginal students in pursuit of postsecondary education. 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 well-being, 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. In line with cultural compatibility theory, the structure of the early childhood program needs to fit the values of the community. 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.

## Notes

1. Saskatchewan is one of three of Canada's Western Prairie provinces, the other two being Alberta and Manitoba.
2. The *Aboriginal educational gap* refers to the fact that within Canada much disparity exists between the academic performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, with non-Aboriginal students faring better results.
3. This insight was supported by the personal experiences of one of the authors, a Cree *Moshom*/Grandfather.
4. INAC is the Canadian federal department responsible for policies related to Aboriginal issues.
5. The term *full-day kindergarten* implies the child attends school all day, five days a week.
6. This action is accompanied with a \$1.5 billion price tag.

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