

AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF PUBLIC POLICY AND PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN BC: A COLD WIND BLOWS



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BC **Aboriginal**
Child Care Society

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BCACCS is a provincial Aboriginal non-profit organization dedicated to supporting Aboriginal early childhood development and care (Aboriginal ECDC) programs and services in British Columbia. Our services are provided to Aboriginal children, families and communities in rural, remote and urban locations on and off reserve. We develop and share spiritually enriching, culturally relevant, high quality early childhood tools and services in order to ensure every Aboriginal child in BC has access to quality care. We also provide training (delivered directly to communities), research, advocacy, and an annual professional development conference. In addition, we manage two urban Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) Programs.

Thank you to the Eagle's Nest AHS preschool early childcare workers for use of their photo for the front cover and to Melody Charlie for use of her photo in the table of contents.

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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 well-being 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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INTRODUCTION: CLOSING THE GAP IN LIFE CHANCES

“There will always be some interest in protecting the well-being of children. There will never be a more important one.” UNICEF, Report Card 11, 2013.¹

Purpose

This 2014 *Environmental Scan* updates the 2007 *BCACCS Environmental Scan: Winds of Change*. The purpose is, as in 2007, to clarify, describe, and put in political context the confusing patchwork of federal and provincial early childhood development and care (ECDC) policies and programs specifically designed by the federal and BC provincial governments to close the gap in life chances² between Aboriginal³ children and other children in BC.

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

The three key questions that the *Scan* seeks 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 government policies and programs in regards to ECD for Aboriginal children in BC?

To answer these questions, the *Scan* reviews federal and provincial policies and programs specifically designed for Aboriginal preschool children between 2½-6 years of age 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 world citizens and leaders.

Ensuring a positive future for Aboriginal children also means that the health and well-being of their families and communities must be vastly improved. However, the objective in this *Scan* is to shine a spotlight on policies and programs that put young Aboriginal children at the

¹ UNICEF, Office of Research (2013) *Report Card 2011. Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview*. www.unicef.ca/en/discover/article/child-well-being-in-rich-countries-a-comparative-overview

² Health Canada. *2013-14 Supplementary information (tables) report on plans and priorities*. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/performance/estim-previs/plans-prior/2013-2014/supplement-eng.php> Accessed 3/6/2013

³ The term “Aboriginal” is used here as it is in S.35 of the Canadian Constitution to refer to First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. When the information in the *Scan* refers specifically to First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, these are the terms used. The term Indigenous peoples is used when the context is an international one.

centre. A child specific approach for budget planning was recommended by the UN Committee monitoring countries' compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 2012 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."⁴ The child specific approach taken in this *Scan*, following the recommendation of the UNCRC Committee excludes current government programs that may be funded as Aboriginal early childhood development but which are primarily designed for adults - such as pregnancy and maternal health or anti-smoking initiatives - in order to identify ECDC programs designed specifically for Aboriginal preschool children.

The inequality in life chances between Aboriginal children and other children in Canada today is well documented. What comes under less public scrutiny, and what this *Scan* examines, is the apparent lack of political will on the part of both the federal government and the BC provincial government to implement policies and programs that would create fundamental change in the lives of young Aboriginal children and their families. A number of Canadian Senate Committees that have produced reports making recommendations on the need for the federal government to take action to transform the lives of Aboriginal children and their families have had their findings and recommendations largely ignored.⁵

The lack of concerted action on the part of federal and provincial governments to act to close the gap in the educational attainment and well-being of Aboriginal children compared with other children or to comply with international conventions on the rights of the child or the child's Indigenous rights has also been criticized in international forums - for more than a decade - by organizations such as the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).⁶

In 2011 the members of the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates - who are probably in a better position than most policy makers to have acquired a detailed knowledge of the conditions facing vulnerable children in all Canadian provinces - submitted a report to the UNCRC that was highly critical of Canada. The report focused primarily on the plight of First Nations and other Aboriginal children and on government inertia in addressing the issues.⁷

4 UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012). *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic report of Canada, adopted by the Committee at its sixty-first session (17 September - 5th October 2012).*

tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=5&TreatyID=10&TreatyID=11&DocTypeID=5

5 For example, the reports of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights (2007), the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples (2011), the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (2008), and the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development have made related recommendations

6 Reported in Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (2011). *Special report: Aboriginal Children: Canada Must Do Better: Today and Tomorrow.*

http://www.rcybc.ca/Images/PDFs/Reports/CCCYA_UN_report-Final. Retrieved 2014-03-24

7 Ibid.

There is no single or simple solution that will heal or undo the profound intergenerational harm caused by the residential school system and the discriminatory government policies of the past two hundred years. The issues are complex, racism persists and remnants of colonial era policies such as the 150-year-old federal *Indian Act* remain firmly in place today.

However, there is compelling international evidence that public policies which support high quality early childhood development, education and care (ECD/ECEC) can work to close the gap in life chances between Aboriginal and other children in Canada. Some U.S. longitudinal studies that have tracked vulnerable child participants in ECD programs into adulthood show long-term benefits for child participants can persist throughout their lives and that the benefits to society as a whole are substantial.⁸

The federal government recognized the potential of this approach two decades ago when it implemented Aboriginal child care and Head Start programs but, unfortunately, as we discuss later on, it has only taken hesitant steps since then to implement effective policies and programs to counter Aboriginal early childhood inequality.

Research shows that to be effective in closing the gap between Aboriginal and other children in Canada, Aboriginal ECDC programs must be of high quality. High quality in an 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, and ways of being and ways of caring for young children.⁹

The requirement for programs to reinforce pride in identity may also be a prerequisite for children's success right through school. Political scientist, John Richards of Simon Fraser University, notes in a 2009 paper analyzing the gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and other students in Canada, "Virtually all analysts of education gaps among marginalized minorities stress the importance of affirming the inherent value in the minority culture – both for its intrinsic worth and as a means to improve performance in core academic skills."¹⁰

The BC Ministry of Education recently affirmed the importance of such an approach in 2012 when it committed funding for the inclusion of Aboriginal languages, history and culture in the BC school curriculum. A Superintendent of Aboriginal Achievement was also appointed in 2013. The new approach is designed to address the high dropout rate of Aboriginal students and the wide gap in high school graduation rates between Aboriginal and other students.^{11 12}

8 National Institute for Early Education and Research (2012), Barnett, W.S. and M. Nores. *Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Global Perspective*. [Nieer.org/publications/presentations/meeting-early-childhood-education-and-care](http://nieer.org/publications/presentations/meeting-early-childhood-education-and-care). Retrieved 2014-03-24

9 BCACCS (2004). *Quality Statement*. www.acc-society.bc.ca/files-new/quiz-2.html Retrieved 2014-03-25

10 Richards, John and Megan Scott (2009). *Aboriginal Education: Strengthening the Foundations*. CPRN Research Report. cprn.org/documents/51984-FR.pdf Retrieved 2014-03-25

11 Government of B.C., Ministry of Education (2013). *How are we doing? Aboriginal Performance Data*. www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/performance.htm. Retrieved 2014-03-25

Scope

This *Scan*:

- Describes currently existing federal and provincial early childhood policies and programs designed specifically for young Aboriginal children and their families in BC;
- Provides an analysis of the changing political and policy contexts for these programs;
- Provides an overview of the current socio-economic and demographic contexts for these programs;
- Draws conclusions about the current state of Aboriginal early childhood policies and programs.

APPROACH AND METHODS

Approach

The conceptual approach used here is grounded in the early childhood theory of change that evolved from the ecological systems theory for human development of psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, a founder of the U.S. Head Start program. The theory of change identifies five environmental systems within which an individual child interacts and that need to be understood and acted on to effect change: 1) the immediate environment of the child such as family, school, and neighbourhood; 2) the relations between these immediate contexts; 3) the wider outside environment that affects the child's family and community; 4) the broad cultural context; 5) the patterns evolving from socio-historical circumstances.¹³ This approach provides a framework for understanding the many intersecting contexts that influence outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families.

Methods

The information and analysis in this *Scan* is directed to the questions included in the Approach and drawn from: federal and provincial government documents; parliamentary proceedings; communications and interviews with a number of key BC government officials and non-profit agency personnel; academic research; information about the immediate effects of changes in authority around the delivery of ECD on reserve in BC provided by the First Nations Health Authority; BCACCS community consultations and focus groups conducted over the last few years; and the BCACCS Aboriginal ECDC programs and services mapping initiative of 2012. The patterns and trends that emerge in the process are based on the accumulation of evidence presented throughout this report.

12 Vancouver Sun (Jan, 29, 2014). *Support pulls First Nations children through school. Editorial.* p. A14.

13 Paquette, Dede and John Ryan (2001). *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.* [www.floridahealth.gov/alterantivesites/CMS-Kids/providers/early_steps/training/documents/bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory.pdf](http://www.floridahealth.gov/alterantivesites/CMS-Kids/providers/early_steps/training/documents/bronfenbrenner's%20ecological%20system%20theory.pdf). Retrieved. 2014-03-24

THE POLITICS OF NAMING EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The varied terms currently used to describe early childhood programs and services for children 0-6 years are loaded with unacknowledged historical and cultural connotations and need to be understood in their geo-political context.

In Canada, governments define the meaning and scope of the terms used for government-funded early childhood programs. Over time, this ascribed meaning and its scope tend to gain broad acceptance.

The child specific approach recommended by the UNCRC and adopted for this *Scan* means that components of current federal or provincial government programs that may be labeled and funded as ECD or ELCC (or the Early Years) but which are aimed at adults such as pregnancy and maternal health programs, or anti-smoking initiatives are not a focus here.

In the literature, the umbrella term used for early childhood research may reflect the particular focus of a given profession. For example, those involved in health-related fields seem more likely to use the term early childhood development (ECD) whereas educators in Canada and Europe are likely to use the terms “early learning” or “early childhood education and care”.

It is important to be aware, however, that the extensive literature that is cited to demonstrate the success of early childhood programs in addressing inequality is based primarily on studies of early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs, broadly similar to the Canadian Head Start program, and usually designed for children 3-6 years old. These programs focus on early learning as well as on approaches that foster the well-being of vulnerable children.¹⁴

Some of the other terms for early childhood policies and programs currently used in Canada - sometimes interchangeably - include: early childhood care and development (ECCD), early learning and child care (ELCC), early childhood education (ECE) and in BC, “the Early Years” which appears to be the umbrella term now favoured by the province as a replacement for ECD.

In the international development literature, the term “early childhood development” may be used to describe a broad spectrum of early childhood programs. The emphasis of these ECD programs is on reducing inequality and social exclusion through a range of programs that aim at improving the health and well-being of disadvantaged young children and their families and communities. Similarly, ECD is also the term currently used by the federal government to refer to the select range of initiatives aimed at closing the gap in life chances between Aboriginal children and other children in Canada by improving their health and well-being.

¹⁴ National Institute of Educational Research (2012). Op.cit.

ECD is also a term understood within the Aboriginal community to refer to the existing federal programs for Aboriginal preschool children.

“Child care” can also be used as a comprehensive term as it is by BCACCS. However, the phrase now tends to be used in Canada, as “day care” was, to refer specifically to non-parental care for children and is mostly linked to the labour force attachment of mothers with young children.

BCACCS chooses to use the term Aboriginal early childhood development and care (Aboriginal ECDC) to describe the range of publicly-funded preschool programs and services for children age 2½-6 years of age that are designed to address the inequality in life chances of young Aboriginal children in Canada today.

BCACCS mapping research indicates that there is a gap in services for BC Aboriginal children ages 0-2½ and their families but information and analysis of programs and services for this age group is not within the scope of this report.

SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT FOR ABORIGINAL ECDC POLICIES AND PROGRAMS IN BC

Population of Young Aboriginal Children

Currently, Aboriginal children represent between 8%-9% of all BC children.¹⁵ The population of Aboriginal children in BC is growing at a faster rate than that of other children and so it is likely that Aboriginal children will comprise an increasing proportion of BC’s young children in the foreseeable future.¹⁶ This growth means that it is more crucial than ever to develop culturally appropriate Aboriginal ECDC, education, health, and social services for young First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children.

Where First Nations children and their families live and receive these services is also an important planning issue. Research shows that the First Nation population is quite mobile. It is commonplace for young families to move from reserves to urban centres or rural areas in search of employment, training, or housing.¹⁷

The statistics used in this section of the *Scan* come from the mandatory 2006 Census rather than the voluntary 2011 National Household Survey because, as the Auditor General of Canada noted in May 2014, quality data for 25% of Census subdivisions was lacking in 2011 and cannot be reported. The response rate had also dropped to 69% from 94% in 2006.¹⁸ The

15 Extrapolated from *B.C. Stats. 2006 Census Fast Facts* www.BC.Stats@gov.bc.ca Retrieved 2014-03-26

16 Ibid.

17 Newhouse, David and E. Peters, Eds.(2009). *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal peoples.*

18 Canada, Auditor General of Canada (2014) *2014 Spring Report of the Auditor General of Canada.* www.oag-bvg.gc.ca?English / par1_oag_201405_e39319.html. Retrieved 15/05/2014

2006 Census statistics are therefore likely to be more reliable for Aboriginal and other low-income communities than those of the 2011 Survey.^{19 20}

The 2006 Census statistics are broken down into sections for ages 0-4 and 5-9 years and not the 0-6 demographic that is the focus of government policies and programs discussed in this report. Census 2006 numbers for both 0-4 and 5-9 years are shown below. Whether to ascribe Aboriginal identity or not to a young child in a Census form likely reflects the decision of the householder who completed the form which could lead to some variability in reported identity over time.

Number and Residence of Aboriginal identity children in BC (0-4 years) Census 2006:

- 16,195 Aboriginal children lived in BC.
- 11,785 (72.8%) of these children were First Nations [Note: North American Indian is the Census term].
- 4,120 (34.9%) of First Nations children lived on reserve.
- 1,220 (10.3%) of First Nations children lived in a rural area.²¹
- 6,440 (54.6%) of First Nations children lived in an urban area.
- 3,905 (24.1%) of BC Aboriginal children were Métis.
- 3,015 (77.2%) of Métis children lived in an urban area.
- 860 (22.0%) of Métis children lived in a rural area, only 25 lived on reserve.
- A total of 45 Inuit children lived in BC, 40 in an urban area.

These statistics show that almost three quarters of all Aboriginal children 0-4 years in BC identify as First Nations and that just over half (54.6%) of First Nations children 0-4 lived in an urban area, as did more than three quarters of Métis children and almost all Inuit children.

Number and Residence of Aboriginal identity children in BC (5-9 years) Census 2006:

- 18,010 Aboriginal children lived in BC.
- 12,295 (68.3%) of these children were First Nations children.
- 4,450 (36.2%) of First Nations children lived on reserve.
- 1,595 (13.0%) of First Nations children lived in a rural area.
- 6,250 (50.8%) of First Nations children lived in an urban area.
- 5,155 Métis children lived in BC.
- 3,825 (74.2%) of Métis children lived in an urban area.
- 1,300 (25.2%) of Métis children lived in a rural area, 30 lived on a reserve.
- 75 Inuit children lived in BC, 70 in an urban area.

19 Canada, Statistics Canada. *2006 Census: Aboriginal peoples*. www.12.statcan.gc-ca. Retrieved 2014-03-25

20 Goar, Carol (2014). "Canada's globally admired statisticians undercut. Auditor General's report provides a first look at the damage the Harper government has done by hacking statistics Canada." *The Star*. *Commentary*.

21 Rural in the Census refers to "sparsely populated lands lying outside urban areas" (Statistics Canada 1999a:226) Cited in Statistics Canada, Agriculture Division, Agriculture and Rural Working Paper Series. (2002) "Working Paper No 61." *Definitions of Rural*.

These statistics show that the number of Aboriginal children 5-9 years is almost 2,000 greater than the number in the 0-4 years category. For First Nations children on reserve, the increase in the 5-9 years category over the 0-4 category is a total of 330 more (4,450- 4,120). Most of the 2,000 overall increase in numbers relate to Métis children in the 5-9 age category. About a third more Métis children age 5-9 years are identified as Métis over the number of children age 0-4 years identified as Métis.

A partial explanation for the increase in the Métis child population numbers is provided by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) demographers reporting on national trends to a parliamentary committee in 2008. The demographers noted, “among Métis, in particular, the primary component of the urban Aboriginal population explosion is due to changes in self-reporting of ethnic identity from one Census to another.”²² As the demographers further note, “The misinterpretation of urban population growth could result in an over emphasis of migration from Indian reserves to cities ...It might also lead to pressures for a policy shift away from First Nations and Inuit communities. Using the community wellness index, it has been recognized that those are among the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in Canada. Misinterpretation of the urban population growth could therefore have a significant impact on policy orientation.”²³

The observations about a misinterpretation of the urban Aboriginal population growth and a policy shift are prescient. A major policy shift is reflected in the May 18, 2011 change of name of the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada.

On Reserve Population Size

Population	10-199	200-599	600-999	>1,000
No. of reserve communities	86	68	22	5
% of reserve communities	44%	35%	11.3%	2.6%

This table indicates the 181 on reserve communities that had First Nations children living in them in 2010. Population sizes vary considerably. The table indicates that the vast majority (79%) of registered BC First Nations living in 181 on reserve and crown land communities had

22 <https://openparliament.ca/committees/aboriginal-affairs/39-2/34/eric-guimond-1/only/ccs/aboriginal-affairs/39-eric-guimond>

23 Ibid.

populations of less than 600. Partial or no statistics were available for about 50 very small on-reserve communities.²⁴

44% of communities had populations of less than 200; 35% had populations between 200-599; 11.3% had populations between 600-999 and 2.6% had populations over 1,000.²⁵

According to the BCACCS Mapping Initiative, access to government ECD programs for the 44% of First Nations children with populations under 200 is likely to be limited compared with the 14% of communities with populations over 600.²⁶ The larger on reserve communities tend to have a greater capacity to respond to government requests for proposals, grants or other initiatives than small communities do. Unequal access to early childhood programs and services is therefore increased by the small size, remoteness or isolation of a community, as a BCACCS Mapping Initiative of ECD services for First Nations and Aboriginal communities in BC found in 2012.

Early Childhood Inequality

If the primary goal of Aboriginal ECD is to eliminate the inequality in life chances between Aboriginal children and other children in Canada, as so many government documents say, a major factor in that inequality in life chances is poverty. The likelihood that a young Aboriginal child will live in and be affected by poverty is high, much higher than that of a non-Aboriginal child in Canada. On family income alone, the differences are great. In 2006, the median income of First Nations families was \$11,224 on reserve and \$17,464 off reserve – much less than the median income of \$25,955 for non-Aboriginals. The gap in income levels between First Nations and non-Aboriginal families has not decreased in several years.²⁷

On reserve First Nations children are particularly likely to be living in poverty. According to 2006 Census statistics, Aboriginal children were almost nine times more likely to live in families with a crowded home (26%) than non-Aboriginal children (3%). Single parents are those most likely to experience continuing and deep poverty. 35% of First Nations children aged 14 and under - living off reserve - lived in a single parent family; as did 26% of the children on reserve. 31% of Métis children lived in a single parent family. The vast majority (86%) of these Aboriginal single parents are women. This number included grandmothers caring for their grandchildren. These figures show a discrepancy compared with the 14% of non-Aboriginal people that are single parents.²⁸

According to Dieticians of Canada, Aboriginal children are going to school hungry and experiencing higher rates of obesity and diabetes because of a lack of access to nutritious

²⁴ Information on community population size based on AANDC statistics provided by AANDC 2011.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ BCACCS. (2012). *Aboriginal ECD Programs and Services Mapping Initiative*. Unpublished.

²⁷ Statistics Canada (2009). *Canadian Social Trends. First Nations People: Selected findings of the 2006 Census*

²⁸ Statistics Canada, 2006 Census (2009). *Living arrangements of First Nations and non-Aboriginal children 14 years of age and under*

foods.²⁹ Indeed, Aboriginal people were found to be four times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to experience hunger as a direct result of poverty.

The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH) recently noted “poverty and ill-health are inextricably linked” and that “poverty has many dimensions – material deprivation (food, shelter, sanitation, and safe drinking water) social exclusion, lack of education, unemployment and low income – each of which ‘diminishes opportunities and limits choices, undermines hope, and threatens health.’”³⁰

ECDC RESEARCH AND EARLY CHILDHOOD INEQUALITY

Since the early 1960s, studies focusing on the outcomes of early childhood policies and programs for disadvantaged children have been conducted by educators, economists, political scientists, epidemiologists, biologists, sociologists, social workers, and medical practitioners, among others. The researchers all agree that a child’s experiences in the early years are crucially important for a child’s development and can affect the whole of a child’s life and his or her contribution to society. The issues are then, how to ensure these children get the opportunity to develop to their full potential through policies and programs, which policy and program changes can make sure they have the opportunity to have a safe, happy, healthy childhood.

Many of these studies have focused on the effectiveness of ECD programs designed to counter the effects of poverty, racism, and marginalization in early childhood. The best known of these studies are: the U.S. HighScope Perry Preschool study started in 1962,³¹ the Abecedarian public preschool project started in 1972³², and the U.S. Head Start³³ program started in 1964 as part of the U.S. *War on poverty policy*. The studies have found that these programs can result in major improvements in the socio-emotional development, well-being, and school readiness of disadvantaged children.

Some studies of the impact of these programs over time have shown that they produce long-term benefits that include increased high school graduation, years of education completed and higher earnings, and reduced crime and teen pregnancy.³⁴ Such programs offer savings

²⁹ Dieticians of Canada (2013). News Release, July 23,2013. *Dieticians horrified that vulnerable Aboriginal children exposed to nutrition experiments*. <http://www.dieticians.ca/NEWS-Releases/2013/Vulnerable-Aboriginal-Children.aspx>

³⁰ National Collaborating Center for Aboriginal Health (2008). *Fact Sheet. Poverty as a Social Determinant of Health*.

³¹ HighScope Perry Preschool Study. *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through to Age 40.(2005)*. www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219

³² Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (N.D). Abecedarian Project. evidencebasedprograms.org/1366-2/abecedarian-project. Retrieved 2014-03-25

³³ US Department of Human Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (January, 2010) Head Start Impact Study: Final Report.

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/head-start-impact-study Retrieved 2104-03-25

³⁴ Yoshikama , Hirokazu, and Christina Welland et al. (2013). Investing in our future: The evidence based on preschool education. Foundation for Child Development.

to society that have been quantified by, for example, the U.S. National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) which notes that a Chicago Longitudinal Study of pre-Kindergarten programs reported a benefit-cost ratio of \$11 for every \$1 invested in the program.³⁵

More recently, however, studies have emphasized that to be effective ECD must be of high quality and researchers have noted that the earliest successful programs were so effective because they were well resourced.³⁶

Some others have focused on research that shows the result of inaction on early childhood poverty and the neurological effects of early deprivation and stress on young children.

Professor Jessica Ball, who has done extensive research on Aboriginal early childhood issues in Canada, summarizes that body of research thus:

“Research linking early experiences with neurobiological development suggests that environmental conditions in the early years literally ‘sculpt’ the developing brain. Poverty, with its attendant risk factors of poor nutrition, high stress and high stigma, has a particularly strong impact on early development. A plethora of studies show that up to 50% of the variance in early childhood outcomes is significantly associated with socioeconomic status. Education deficits of Indigenous children can thus be understood to reflect the cumulative effects of pervasive poverty and social exclusion.”³⁷

Dr. Ball concludes that early childhood care and development programs (Dr. Ball’s preferred term) have been shown to be a “powerful equalizer” for children from disadvantaged backgrounds because they foster the development of strong social and communication skills and support overall cognitive development and learning skills.³⁸ These advantages, she states, not only better prepare children to start school, but are also linked to better long term outcomes such as improved high school graduation rates.

However, together with some other scholars,³⁹ Ball also cautions that mainstream ECD curricula are “cultural constructions grounded in the worldviews, beliefs and norms of those who create and deliver” the teachings. Ball asserts that if ECD curricula are not informed by Aboriginal cultures, they will not be taught in a manner that is “fully accessible to Aboriginal children who have different views, beliefs and norms.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Barnett, W.S. (2012). *Fast Facts Summary*. <http://nieer.org/publications/policy-reports/getting-facts-rights-pre-K-and-presidents-pre-k-proposal>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ball, J. (2012). “Equity for Indigenous Children in Early Childhood Education.” In J. Heyman and A. Cassola (Eds.) *Lessons in educational equity: Successful approaches to intractable problems around the world* (pp. 282-312).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For example, Dahlberg, G, et al. (2004) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives*. 2nd edition, Helen Penn (1997a); Martin Woodhead (1996); Michael Cole (1996)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

In a similar vein, a 2011 study of the Canadian Head Start program by educator, M. Nguyen, argues that there is a positive correlation between culturally appropriate education that fosters a strong cultural identity and the fact that students who receive a cultural education are more likely to report that they liked school and to graduate from high school.⁴¹ This approach implies that students who have a sense of being included in their community are more successful in life. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) also notes that, “When a child feels a sense of belonging to family, community and peers, he or she is better able to deal with adversity.”⁴²

OVERVIEW OF THE CHANGING POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR ABORIGINAL ECDC, 2007-2014: A DECLINE IN IMPORTANCE

Canada decided to invest in ECD policies and programs focusing on Aboriginal children in the mid 1990s - three decades after the U.S. ECD programs were created as part of the U.S. *War on Poverty* policy. Since then, Canadian government support for early childhood programs for Aboriginal children has blown hot and cold depending on the prevailing political wind.

Until the mid 1990s, Canadian health policy, which had largely emphasized the responsibility of individuals for their own well-being, changed direction and began to emphasize a public or societal responsibility for population health and for initiating social change to reduce inequality. At the same time, a new federal interest emerged in the potential of early childhood policies and programs to improve the health, well-being, and educational outcomes of children living in marginalized families and communities. This trend reflected the extensive research that had been emerging in the U.S. and Europe for three decades. It showed the importance of the social determinants of health in health outcomes; it also reflected the findings of long-term studies, largely conducted in the U.S., that quality ECEC and ECDC programs for vulnerable children were effective in reducing inequality both in the short term and long term.

The emergence, in the mid 1990s, of federal programs for disadvantaged Aboriginal children and their families (just as the last residential school was closing in 1996)⁴³ were part of this major change in federal policy. The change also followed on the ratification by Canada of the UNCRC in 1991 and the publication of the findings of the 1991-1996 Royal Commission on

⁴¹ Nguyen, M. (2011). Closing the education gap: A case for Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada: A look at the Aboriginal Head start Program. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 43.3, 229-248. Retrieved , 2013-06-15

⁴² Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada. *Aboriginal children: the healing power of cultural identity*. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/prog-ini/ahsunc-papacun/aboriginal-autochtones-eng.php>. Retrieved July, 2013

⁴³ Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2013). Residential Schools. www.aanfc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1302882353814/1302882592498

Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP).⁴⁴ The RCAP's reports showed, in compelling detail, that Canada's Aboriginal children did not enjoy the same level of health and well-being as other children in Canada and that Canada was in clear contravention of the legally binding UNCRC.

The *2007 BCACCS Environmental Scan*, the precursor to this one, described how enhanced federal and new provincial government policies and programs provided support for early childhood development and education programs for all Canadian children first emerged in the early part of 2000 in the form of *The Early Childhood Development Initiative*. There were four key areas of support that were identified in this ECD Agreement: 1) healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy; 2) parenting and family support; 3) early childhood development and care; 4) and community support. To support the *Initiative* provincial and territorial governments agreed to report on their progress in expanding ECD programs and services.⁴⁵

Margo Greenwood from the University of Northern BC has noted that, "Aboriginal peoples were conspicuously missing" from this Agreement.⁴⁶ However, in 2002, the federal government announced a commitment of \$320 million over the next five years (2003-04 to 2007-08) and \$6.5 million for a strategy to support Aboriginal ECD. An additional amount of \$5 million over five years to "build on federal early learning and child care programs for First Nations children, primarily on reserve," was announced in the 2004 budget. Additional funding of \$10 million over four years (2004-05 to 2007-08) was then announced.⁴⁷

The *Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC)* was announced in 2003. Both the 2000 *Initiative* and the 2003 *Multilateral Framework on ELCC* were established through negotiated agreements among the federal government, provinces, and territories and depended on continued federal funding. They apply to all young children. The objectives of the ELCC agreement are described as expanding the scope of the ECD Initiatives to, "Promote health, pregnancy, birth and infancy; Improve parenting and family supports; Strengthen early childhood development, learning and care; and Strengthen community supports." Apart from the important new emphasis on "learning and care" the objectives of the 2000 and 2003 initiatives are virtually the same.⁴⁸

The funds from these agreements are transferred to the provinces as block funding through a program called the Canada Social Transfer (CST). Accountability for outcomes and expenditures for this funding is not the responsibility of the federal government. According to the federal government, "The Provincial and Territorial governments have the

⁴⁴ Government of Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples*. www.collectionscanada.gov.gc.ca/webarchives/20071115053257/ http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sgmm_ehtml

⁴⁵ <http://www.fin.gc.ca/fedprov/fsc-eng.asp>

⁴⁶ Greenwood, Margo (2005). *Where to From Here? Building a First Nations Early Childhood Strategy*. AFN Secretariat. Retrieved 2014-03-25

⁴⁷ Canada, Department of Finance (2012). *Federal Support for Child Care*. <http://www.fin.gc.ca/fedprov/fsc-eng.asp>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

responsibility to design and deliver these programs and are accountable to their citizens and legislatures for outcomes delivered and dollars spent.”⁴⁹

With the funding from these initiatives, the province of BC became directly involved - for the first time - in the delivery of some ECD programs and services for primarily urban Aboriginal children but also a few First Nations children on reserve. Up until that point they had been mainly concerned with child protection, which often entailed taking Aboriginal children into government care.

In 2014, BC is guided, as are all the provincial and territorial governments, by the objectives of the ECD/ELCC Agreements and required to send regular program descriptions and summary spending reports to the federal government. Since there is, however, no statutory obligation to report specific amounts spent on ECD/ELCC, spending on Aboriginal early learning or ECD is not clearly identified. Monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of these investments appears to be very limited.

In 2005, progress in closing the gap between Aboriginal and other children seemed attainable when, after 18 months of negotiations, First Ministers and national Aboriginal leaders signed the *Kelowna Accord* in November 2005. The *Accord* was an agreement that committed \$5.085 billion over five years to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples of Canada in four key areas: health, education, housing and relationships.⁵⁰

With the defeat of the federal Liberals and the election of a Conservative government, the prevailing federal political philosophy changed back again in 2006 to one that prioritized individual or parental responsibility over societal responsibility for young children’s care and well-being. Immediately after the election, *Early Learning and Child Care* (ELCC) agreements that had been negotiated from 2003 to 2005 between the previous Liberal government and the provinces and territories were abruptly cancelled. After a short hiatus, however, the decision to cancel the ELCC Agreements was reversed; provinces received the expected funding and will continue to do so until 2014-15.⁵¹ The *Kelowna Accord* was, however, shelved.

Plans for a national childcare program promised by the Liberal government prior to the election were also discarded and replaced by the *Universal Child Care Benefit* that is described as promoting “choice in child care.” This benefit gives individual families with children six years and under a taxable \$100 per month per child to offset childcare expenses. According to Ontario ECDC researcher, Martha Friendly, the public cost of this program will

⁴⁹ Canada, Department Human Resources and Social Development Canada (2010). *Public Investments in Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada*. p.23. www.ecd-elcc.ca/eng/ecd/ecec/early_childhood_education-eng.pdf Retrieved 16/10/2014

⁵⁰ Parliament of Canada (2006). Aboriginal Roundtable to Kelowna Accord: Aboriginal Policy Negotiations, Report Prepared by Lisa Patterson. www.parl.gc.ca/content/LOP/researchpublications/prb0604-e.htm Retrieved 10/12/13

⁵¹ Parliament of Canada, Library of Parliament (2007). Child Care in Canada: The Federal Role. Prepared by Judy Cool. www.parl.bc.ca/content/lop/rsearchpublications/prb0420.e.htm Retrieved 2014-03-25

reach \$17.5 billion in 2014. Friendly argues that the funding is not well spent and estimates that “the funds - if used for regulated child care instead - could modestly fund 700,000 additional spaces for children”.⁵²

When Canada ratified the UNCRC in 1991 it agreed to report, every five years, on its compliance with the legally binding Convention to the UNCRC Committee that oversees countries’ compliance with the terms of the Convention. Since Canada’s first report, the UNCRC Committee has been critical of Canada for its lack of a national child rights strategy and for ongoing breaches of the Convention. The extent of child poverty in Canada is a major issue for the Committee and in 2012 the Committee reported, “poverty among Aboriginal, black and immigrant children as well as disabled children is significant and growing.” The Committee further noted, “Canada seems to have no way to ensure that things don’t get worse or to know whether its programs are tackling the problems efficiently.”⁵³

In 2011 the authors of a federal government summative evaluation of the *Understanding the Early Years Initiative* (which ended in 2010) candidly concluded that: “In terms of current alignment, federal and provincial government representatives noted that current federal priorities have changed, so early childhood development has declined in importance.”⁵⁴ In other words, the federal and provincial government officials interviewed for the evaluation about the *Early Years Initiative* were in agreement that the political will to invest in early childhood development was largely gone.

At the same time, some signs of increased awareness by the federal government of the depth of the trauma caused by the residential school system emerged in 2008 when the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, publicly apologized for the harm caused by the residential school system and established the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* on residential schools.⁵⁵ In 2010, Canada also officially endorsed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* after some delay and with some reservations. However, the federal government seems ambivalent about its commitment to any attendant policy changes and continues to claim that the UN Declaration should have no effect on resource development decisions affecting First Nations.⁵⁶

In BC, the previous Premier, Gordon Campbell, who had opposed the Nisga’a Treaty through the courts, unexpectedly moved away from the provincial Liberal’s adversarial relationship

⁵² Friendly, Martha (2013). *The \$17.5 billion question: Has the Universal Child Care Benefit given families “choices” in child care?* Childcare Resource and Research Unit. Retrieved from [http://childcarecanada.org/print/documents/research-policy-practice/13/10/175-billion-question ...](http://childcarecanada.org/print/documents/research-policy-practice/13/10/175-billion-question...) 2013/10/29.

⁵³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

⁵⁴ Canada, Employment and Social Development (2011). *Summative Evaluation of Understanding the Early Years Initiative*. September 2011. 4.1.3.

⁵⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. www.trc.ca/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3 Retrieved 2014-03-24-

⁵⁶ Chiefs of Ontario (2013). Media Release. *Canada Must Respect the Right of Indigenous Peoples to make Decisions about Resource Development on their land*. <http://nationtalk.ca/story/Canada-must-respect-the-right-of-indigenous-peoples-to-make-decisions-about-resource-development-on-their-land>. Accessed 9/13/13

with Aboriginal peoples and began to be more conciliatory. Consultations were held with First Nations, Métis organizations and Aboriginal leaders that resulted in groundbreaking agreements - the *New Relationship* vision statement, the *Transformative Change Accord*, and the *Métis Nation Relationship Accord*. According to the BC government in 2008, these agreements showed that, “we are forging a path to dramatically improve the lives of Aboriginal people and build healthier communities that benefit all British Columbians.”⁵⁷ Former premier Campbell was also directly involved in the negotiations around the doomed *Kelowna Accord*.

Today, in 2014, the climate for consultation with First Nations provincially is chilly according to Stewart Phillip, Grand Chief of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs. Chief Phillip was recently quoted as saying that Premier Campbell was heading in the right direction but that the warmer relationships then developed between government and First Nations have since deteriorated.⁵⁸

In recent years, a number of lesser agreements with First Nations and Métis in BC relating to child protection and the delegation of responsibility for child protection to First Nations and Aboriginal agencies have also been signed. However, a coherent provincial policy or plan for providing prevention, early learning, and development related early childhood programs for young Aboriginal children in BC has not emerged.

The scope and scale of investment by both levels of government is not sufficient to achieve the desired outcome of closing the gap between Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal children.

The newly established Provincial Office for Early Years (OEY) that opened in February 2014 will provide a cross-ministry coordinating body for ECD and ELCC policy and programs including Aboriginal ECD.⁵⁹ The OEY is responsible to MCFD. Only time will tell how effective this new Provincial Office of the Early Years will be in ensuring the provision, delivery and coordination of ECDC programs for young Aboriginal children and their families.

In BC, the broad context for all ECD/ELCC programs is that child and family poverty is high and has been the highest in Canada for most of the last decade.⁶⁰ During the tenure of former BC Premier Gordon Campbell, successive cutbacks in social, education and health services funding, as well as legal aid shredded the social safety net that had been slowly developing until then.⁶¹ Since Aboriginal families tend to have the lowest incomes, have

⁵⁷ Province of BC (2008) *The New Relationship with First Nations and Aboriginal People*. <http://www.newrelationship.gov.bc.ca>. Retrieved 17/09/2013

⁵⁸ Vancouver Sun (2014). *Advisory Body Plays Key Role in Development*. January 30, 2014, p. D8

⁵⁹ www.newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2014/01/provincial-office-for-the-early-years-launched.html. Retrieved 2014-03-12

⁶⁰ B.C. campaign 2000 (2012). *Child Poverty Report Card*. [www.firstcallbc.org.pdp/Economic equality/First%20CallBC%20child%20Poverty%20Reports](http://www.firstcallbc.org.pdp/Economic%20equality/First%20CallBC%20child%20Poverty%20Reports). Retrieved 2014-03-24

⁶¹ Coalition to Build a Better B.C.! (2011) *The Cutbacks* www.betterbc.ca/the-cuts/ Retrieved 2014-03-25

worse health, lower levels of educational attainment and employment, and to be more frequently in conflict with the law than other Canadians, they are deeply affected by these cuts.

A positive new development since the last *BCACCS Environmental Scan* of 2007 is that, starting in October 2013, the administration and delivery of most of the federal ECD programs established in the 1990s for First Nations on reserve are being transferred to a new BC First Nations Health Authority (FNHA). One related program that has not been transferred is the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI). FNICCI is part of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) program delivered by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

The goals and content of the transferred ECD programs will likely remain unchanged in the immediate future. The extent to which other ECD/ELCC programs for First Nations, Inuit and Métis, provided by the Province, will be affected is unclear. What is clear is that the federal government, for better or worse, is gradually divesting itself of the responsibility for promoting ECD/ELCC/ECEC for Aboriginal children and their families.

FEDERAL POLICY AND PROGRAMS FOR ABORIGINAL ECDC

Federal ECDC Policies for Young Aboriginal Children: addressing the gap in life chances

Currently, funding for Aboriginal ECD/ELCC flows through the *Early Childhood Development and Early Learning and Child Care – Strategy for First Nations and other Aboriginal Children*. The goal of the *Strategy* is the same as that announced in October 2002, “to address the gap in life chances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children by improving the developmental opportunities which Aboriginal children (and their families) are exposed to at an early age (0-6 years).”⁶²

The *Strategy* has involved three federal departments and one agency: 1) Health Canada (HC), which was responsible for the on reserve ECD programs in BC that have now been transferred to the BC First Nations Health Authority (FNHA); 2) Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) which is responsible for the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) a component of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS); 3) the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) which is responsible for Aboriginal

⁶² Government of Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat. *Early Childhood Development and Early Learning and Child Care: Strategy for First Nations and Other Aboriginal Children*. www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/hidb-bdih/initiative.eng
Retrieved 2014-03-25

Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC); and, 4) Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) which was responsible for capacity building funding and the coordination of the *Strategy*. This involvement ended in 2012.⁶³

Federal Aboriginal ECDC Programs in BC: Descriptions

Table 2 (below) lists the Aboriginal ECDC programs operating in BC that are federally funded, the number of projects or sites, the number of children served and the approximate funding levels where this information is available. Funding levels have not increased significantly since 2005.

TABLE 2: FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ABORIGINAL ECDC PROGRAMS IN BC ⁶⁴				
Program	Description	Govt. Dept.	No. of Projects & Children Served	Funding
Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR)	Enriched, half-day preschool four days a week for on reserve children 2 to under 6 years of age	Health Canada (First Nations and Inuit Health)	121 on reserve sites in BC The no. of children in each site varies greatly	\$9.8 million (2013-2014)
Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)	Program design is similar to above but for urban Aboriginal children	Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC)	12 sites No. of children served: approximately 500	\$4,109,708 million (2014-2015)
First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) ⁶⁵	Funds childcare spaces for First Nations and Inuit children with parents entering employment or training	Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC)	approximately 75 centres 900-1000 funded child care seats	\$6,272,736 million (2014-2015)

The federal Community Action Program for Children (CAP-C) is not included here because it does not focus on programs designed specifically for Aboriginal children and families. CAP-C is a multi-ethnic mostly urban program open to all disadvantaged children and may include First Nations, Inuit and Métis children but is not designed to respond to the cultural and other specific needs of Aboriginal children.

Also excluded here are the Prenatal Nutrition Program and the Maternal & Child Health programs since they are adult-oriented and not child-specific.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The budget information in this table was provided by federal government officials in Health Canada, PHAC, and HRSDC/E & SD Canada

⁶⁵ Child care programs and Aboriginal Head Start may be co-located on reserve

Essentially there are only three federal programs that are specifically designed to address the needs of young Aboriginal children – the two Head Start Aboriginal ECDC programs and the FNICCI program which is tied to First Nations parental involvement in the labour force. The components of these programs are described below.

Overview of the Two Aboriginal Head Start Programs

Nationally, two different arms of Health Canada administered (from 1995 and 1998 onwards) the on reserve and the off reserve Aboriginal Head Start programs.

They are:

- 1) The First Nations and Inuit Health (FNIH) arm administered the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve program transferred in BC to the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) in October 2013; and,
- 2) The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) arm administered (since 2004) Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) program for off reserve First Nations, Métis, and other Aboriginal children.

Both the off reserve Head Start program that started in 1995 and the on reserve program that started in 1998 have continued to operate uninterrupted since their inception with varying levels of access for interested First Nations and Aboriginal families. The programs are provided free of cost for Aboriginal children for about 2½ hours per day, four days a week, 48 weeks a year.

The stated purpose and content of the on and off reserve Aboriginal Head Start programs are the same: to improve the health and well-being of First Nations and other Aboriginal children under six years of age by meeting their social, emotional, intellectual and physical needs.

The two programs have the same six components.

- Education;
- Health promotion;
- Culture and language;
- Nutrition;
- Social support;
- Parental/family involvement.

The components of the program appear to have been largely modeled on the publicly-funded U.S. Head Start program for disadvantaged children that has been operating in the U.S. since the mid 1960s.

For almost 20 years, the two Head Start programs in Canada have been the centrepiece of federal government efforts to bridge the gap in the health, well-being and educational outcomes of Aboriginal children compared with other Canadian children.

Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR) in BC: Access and Funding Issues

The planned spending for the Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) program in the 2013-14 fiscal year was approximately \$59 million across Canada. This funding included: \$25 million historical funding, \$21.5 million in enhanced funding under the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Strategy, \$7.5 million in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) funds, and \$5 million in upstream investments.⁶⁶

BC on reserve Head Start funding had remained at \$8.2 million for 86 sites for seven years from 2003 until 2010. However, funding for 15 new BC on reserve Head Start sites was found in 2010 from “internal departmental savings.”⁶⁷ Then \$9.8 million was allocated for 2010-2011 for 120 sites. In 2012 there were 121 sites.⁶⁸

Although the funding for new on reserve sites has increased it appears to be spread more thinly than before, and about 40% of young children living on reserve in BC still did not have access to a Head Start program in 2012.⁶⁹ This calculation accords with the comment made to BCACCS in 2010 by senior Health Canada officials that of the 6,200 registered Indian children less than 6 years of age living in reserve communities in BC, less than 50% lived where Head Start was available.⁷⁰

In 2013, the number of sites had increased by about 20% and the budget by \$1.6 million. More First Nations children and families living on reserve now have access to the program than ever before. However, cost of living increases have risen substantially. According to Statistics Canada, food prices alone rose by a cumulative 19% between January 2007 and December 2012 and poorer people spend more of their income on food.⁷¹ The increases in funding and sites may therefore mean that some Head Start programs on reserve are now receiving less in real terms to operate the program than before. The question now is whether all the sites have the resources to provide the high quality programs required to produce the change in children’s well-being that the program is designed to achieve.

A key issue is ensuring high quality programs. It is unclear how the BC First Nations Health Authority, which has taken over responsibility for the administration of the Head Start program on reserve from Health Canada, plans to guarantee high quality and whether there are plans to expand the program further.

⁶⁶ Health Canada. *2013-14 Supplementary Information (Tables) Report on Plans and Priorities*. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/performance/estim-previs/plans-prior/2013-2014/supplement-eng.php>
Retrieved 3/6/14

⁶⁷ Health Canada, (2011). Personal communication.

⁶⁸ B.C. ACCS (2012) *Mapping Initiative*. Unpublished

⁶⁹ BCACCS (2012). Op.cit.

⁷⁰ Personal communication with Health Canada official.

⁷¹ Statistics Canada (2013) *The Increase in Food Prices Between 2007 and 2012*. By Anne-Marie Rollins.
www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2013027-eng.htm

Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC): Access and Funding Issues

The national funding level for the AHSUNC program remained almost the same at \$28 million to \$29 million from 2006-2007 to 2010-2011.⁷² In BC the funding for AHSUNC programs declined from \$4.8 million in 2006-2007 to \$4.6 million in 2010 and \$4,109.78 million in 2014-2016.⁷³ As with AHSOR, cost of living increases since 2008 mean that that the amount currently being allocated for urban Head Start programs in BC appears to be, in real terms, significantly less than in 2008.⁷⁴

The AHSUNC program is highly rated by families, care providers and researchers. A 2012 evaluation of the AHSUNC program noted, for example, that, “there is a continued and growing need for the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern communities.”⁷⁵ This expanded need is based on population growth rates that are higher for Aboriginal people than for the general Canadian population and the growing number of Aboriginal people in urban centres. The evaluation also had a number of important recommendations.

The evaluation found that positive outcomes associated with the Head Start program included:

- “The program is highly regarded and appreciated by all groups involved in its delivery (communities, children, parents, project and Public Health Agency of Canada staff at all levels).
- The program has had a positive effect on school readiness, specifically improving children’s language, social, motor and academic skills.
- Performance results have demonstrated effectiveness in improving cultural literacy and enhanced exposure to Aboriginal languages and cultures.
- The program also has positive effects on health promoting behaviours such as children’s access to daily physical activity and health services.
- There is evidence that some project sites have become community hubs, creating a sense of community for Aboriginal children and their families.”⁷⁶

Some of the areas identified for improvement included:

- “There are gaps related to knowledge development and exchange.
- There is a need for more coordination and collaboration with other federal departments, provinces and territories as well as other stakeholders.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Personal communication PHAC, November 2014.

⁷⁴ Statistics Canada (2013) *The Increase in Food Prices Between 2007 and 2012*. Op.cit. www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2013027-eng.htm

⁷⁵ Government of Canada, Public Health Agency, Evaluation Services, (2012) *Evaluation of the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities program at the Public Health Agency of Canada*. Retrieved June 15, 2013 from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/about_apropos/evaluation/reports-rapports/2011-2012/ahsunc-papacun/index-eng.php

⁷⁶ Ibid.

- The program has the potential to reach more children (e.g. some project sites have waitlists while others are not consistently at full capacity).
- Staff turnover is a challenge in many program sites.
- The program has not been subject to comprehensive review of its design and delivery.”⁷⁷

The following recommendations were made to enhance future delivery of the program:

1. “Assess delivery models, site locations and partnership to determine if reach can be expanded.
2. Enhance coordination and collaboration with other federal departments, provincial and territorial governments, and key stakeholders.
3. Consider the necessity and feasibility of tracking children’s long-term outcomes (e.g. a longitudinal cohort study or intervention research).
4. Ensure that the approach to program-level performance measurement is comprehensive yet streamlined.
5. Review the governance structure of the program, in particular the advisory function to ensure that the Public Health Agency of Canada has access to balanced, strategic and timely advice.
6. Review the objectives and eligibility criteria of the National Strategic Fund and assess the current approach to managing the fund.”⁷⁸

Despite positive evaluations, and the evident need of the majority of Aboriginal children who now live in urban areas, the number (12) of urban Head Start programs in BC, is small and there are no current plans to expand the program.⁷⁹

The First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative

The First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) is a component of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) program administered by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). ASETS replaced the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement Strategy (AHRDAS) in April 2010. The ASETS program was scheduled to expire in 2015 but in late 2014 the program was extended to 2016.

FNICCI provides funding for child care spaces for children up to 6 years of age in First Nations communities with parents entering or preparing to enter the labour market. In some cases after school care up for children up to age 12 may be provided. The program is administered through 14 ASETS contract holders in BC through five year contribution agreements. The number of child care spaces allocated and the amount per space may vary depending on the ASETS provider’s strategic plan for allocation of the funding.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Personal communication with PHAC employee, February 2014.

Funding levels increased in 2011-2012. According to a government official, the additional funding was not intended to create additional child care spaces but rather designed to enhance existing sites. The increases in funding were based on 2006 Census Aboriginal child 0-6 population. Demand for the program has increased but the funding for the child care component of the program has decreased since 2010-2011. For 2010-2011, the BC allocation for the childcare component of the program was \$6,666,188. For 2014-2015, the budget is \$6,272,736 almost \$400,000 less.⁸⁰

In 2014, between 900-1000 child care seats were provided. An informed estimate of unmet need is that about 50% more child care seats are required. Program quality is controlled through the requirements of the provincial licensing regulations.⁸¹ These regulations are not, however, designed to guarantee high quality and are usually regarded as minimal requirements.

THE FIRST NATIONS HEALTH AUTHORITY AND ECD

Authority over health programs, including ECD, for First Nations children and families living on reserve in BC was transferred to the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) on October 1, 2013 through the *BC Tripartite Framework Agreement on First Nation Health Governance*.⁸² The *Tripartite Plan* is an agreement between: BC First Nations, the federal government, and the BC government transferring responsibility for planning, design, management, service delivery and funding of First Nations Health programs previously administered by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, BC Region, Health Canada, to the FNHA. FNHA views the change of authority over health matters as one that “enables FNHA to incorporate First Nations cultural knowledge, beliefs and values and models of healing into the design and delivery of a health program that better meet the needs of First Nations communities.”⁸³ The transition of authority will be complete by December 1, 2014.

The First Nations governance structure includes:

- The First Nations Health Authority which is responsible for planning management service delivery, and funding the health programs;
- The Tripartite Committee on First Nations Health which is responsible for coordinating and aligning planning and service delivery among the FNHA, the BC Health authorities, the Ministry of Health, and Health Canada;
- The First Nations Health Directors Association which is responsible for supporting education, knowledge transfer, professional development, and best practices for health directors and managers;

⁸⁰ Personal communication, official with Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), April 2014.

⁸¹ Personal communication, ESDC, April 2014.

⁸² Most of the information in this section of the Scan was provided by FNHA in an email in response to specific questions from to BC.ACCS.

⁸³ First Nations Health Authority (2013). *Tripartite Partners Signify New Path Forward with Historic Transfer of Health Services for BC First Nations*. Press release. hc-sc.gc.ca/_2013/2013-149-eng.php Retrieved 16/10/2014

- The First Nations Health Council which provides political leadership and advocacy for implementation of Tripartite commitments and supports the health priorities for BC First Nations.

Regional partnership accords have been signed with each regional health authority in BC and the FNHA Council Regional Caucus.

Canada is transferring \$380 million per annum to the FNHA for a total of \$4.7 billion from July 1, 2013 to March 31, 2013. There is a calculator to account for population growth and cost increases. The BC government has committed \$100 million until 2020 to implement the provisions outlined in the framework agreement and out of this sum has provided \$27 million in 2013-2014.

A BC government press release notes: “FNHA does not replace or duplicate the role of the BC Ministry of Health and regional health authorities but collaborates, coordinates and integrates respective health programs and services to achieve better health outcomes for BC First Nations programs addressing service gaps through new partnerships, closer collaboration, and health system innovation.”⁸⁴

The transferred ECD programs include Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve, as well as the Maternal and Child Health, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum (FASD) Disorder, and the Prenatal Nutrition Programs categorized as ECD by the federal government. All of these programs continue to be defined by FNHA as ECD programs. FNHA describes these programs as providing services for children from birth to age six, their families, caregivers, and communities. A budget figure of \$9,673,663 has been allocated for the existing on reserve Head Start program in BC. Extending full coverage of the Head Start program to all BC on reserve communities is estimated to require an additional investment of \$2-\$3 million.⁸⁵

In response to questions from BCACCS about plans for changes to transferred ECD programs, FNHA said that communities will now have more discretion than before in allocating available ECD resources. The FNHA will support Head Start curriculum development at the community/Nation level that is consistent with each Nation’s unique cultural and social priorities.

The goal of FNHA for ECD is to support programming that is designed and delivered by First Nations communities to meet their unique, locally-defined needs. Strategic plans for ECD currently being developed are described as being based on a wellness approach that aligns with the overall BC First Nations vision and standards which also reflects the direction from the communities and regional planning tables. Regular evaluation of programs is a priority and evaluation data will inform program planning and delivery at the community level.

⁸⁴ Government of Canada, Health Canada (2013). *Tripartite Partners Signify New Path Forward with Historic Transfer of Health Services for B.C. First Nations*. www.hc.sc.ca/ahc/media/nr-cp/2013/2013-149-eng.php retrieved 2014-03-25

⁸⁵ FNHA November 2014. Personal communication

Program quality will be assured through these evaluations and regional health authority inspections by licensing officers. Early Childhood Educators' salaries will be established at the discretion of each First Nation.⁸⁶

It seems possible that there will be more variation in the transferred ECD programs than there is at present and more emphasis on cultural approaches, a key element of high quality Aboriginal ECD. However, another key component of high quality ECD is fair compensation for early childhood educators (ECEs). Currently Aboriginal ECEs tend to be poorly paid and even though jobs are hard to come by in First Nations communities, staff turnover is common and disruptive for children and families.⁸⁷ However, regular evaluation of the ECD programs are to be conducted and will be important in determining how effectively communities respond to the new opportunities and challenges that they are being presented with.⁸⁸

PROVINCE OF BC POLICIES AND PROGRAMS: ENVIRONMENT FOR ABORIGINAL ECDC

The Political Environment for AECD in BC

The broad political direction and priorities of the current BC Liberal government of Premier Christy Clark and the government's commitment to work with and assist Aboriginal peoples, their children and families are summarized in three Throne Speeches delivered on February 12, 2013⁸⁹, June 26, 2013⁹⁰, and February 11, 2014⁹¹ by the Lieutenant Governor of BC.

The overall emphasis in these three speeches is on economic growth, overseas trade, job creation and "small government." Another recurring message is on the necessity to forge agreements with First Nations that will create certainty for an expansion of resource development on First Nations lands.

The June 2013 Throne Speech, states that "Growing our province's economy depends on getting four fundamental things right. One of these is: Working in partnership with First Nations."⁹² It also mentions the development of an off-reserve Aboriginal Action Plan "to

⁸⁶ FNHA. March 2014. Personal communication.

⁸⁷ BCACCS (2012) *Training and Retention in the First Nations ECE Sector: A Report from the Frontlines*. www.acc-Society.bc.ca/files_2/documents/TrainingandRetentionintheFirstNationsECESectorNov2012.pdf Retrieved 16/11/2014

⁸⁸ FNHA. Op. cit.

⁸⁹ Province of B.C., Legislative Assembly (2013). *Speech from the Throne, February 12, 2013*. www.leg.bc.ca/39th5th/4-8-39-5.htm Retrieved 2014-03-24.

⁹⁰ Province of B.C., Legislative Assembly (2013). *Speech from the Throne, June 26, 2013*. www.leg.bc.ca/40th1st/4-8-40-1.htm Retrieved 2014-03-24

⁹¹ Province of B.C., Legislative Assembly (2014). *Speech From The Throne, February 12, 2013*. Engage.gov.bc.ca/throne_speech Retrieved 2014-03-24

⁹² Op.cit.

strengthen and align efforts with urban Aboriginal communities” and the introduction of an *Early Years Strategy* as part of the Premier’s “Families First” election 2013 platform.⁹³

The February 2014 Throne Speech states: “Some of our First Nations communities have been left out of economic growth for too long. We must be the generation that not only puts British Columbia on a path to new economic growth, but also ensures that First Nations are an integral part of that growth. This will help them become the self-sustaining communities their leaders envision – healthy, safe, wealthy communities where every child gets a great education; communities where every child has an equal opportunity for a prosperous future.”⁹⁴

No reference is made in these speeches to the *New Relationship*, the *Transformative Change Accord*, the new *Tripartite First Nations Health Plan* or any of the important agreements with Aboriginal leaders that were forged during the tenure of the previous premier, Gordon Campbell.

The overall political message that emerges for First Nations is clear: Development of First Nations land and resources is necessary for BC to prosper; First Nations need to become partners in development so that First Nations children have an equal opportunity to succeed in life; children’s success in life is contingent on development of First Nations land.

However, another message from the Premier concerns the need for improvement in the services delivered by the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD), the Ministry with primary responsibility for child welfare, ECD policies and programs, and for Aboriginal ECDC. The message from Premier Christy Clark to Stephanie Cadieux, MCFD Minister, in a mandate letter of June 10, 2013 devotes a paragraph to the need to implement an *Early Years Strategy* as a complement to other areas of the Minister’s mandate “to better assist families and children through improved early support and intervention services.”⁹⁵ The letter also states that the Premier expects to see “measurable improvements in the provision of accessible and effective children, youth, and families served by MCFD. Key to these improvements is a continued focus on services and outcomes for Aboriginal children, youth and families.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Op.cit.

⁹⁴ Province of B.C., Legislative Assembly (2013). *Speech from the Throne, June 26, 2013*. www.leg.bc.ca/40th1st/4-8-40-1.htm Retrieved 2014-03-24

⁹⁵ British Columbia (2013). *Premier Christy Clark mandate letter to MCFD Minister Stephanie Cadieux. June 10, 2013*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

The Policy Environment for BC Aboriginal ECDC

The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)

MCFD is the BC Ministry with primary responsibility for delivering ECD programs and services for all children including Aboriginal preschool children.

In delivering its programs and services for Aboriginal children and their families, MCFD is governed by the provisions of the *Child, Family and Community Services Act*. The *Guiding Principles* of the Act state: “aboriginal people should be involved in the planning and delivery of services to aboriginal children and their families ...The cultural identity of Aboriginal children should be preserved ...Services should be planned and provided in ways that are sensitive to the needs and the cultural racial and religious heritage of those receiving the services.”⁹⁷

A key question these specific provisions raise and which is explored here is: Do MCFD’s Aboriginal ECD programs and services respect these requirements for Aboriginal inclusion in planning and for ensuring programs and services are culturally affirming?

History of MCFD Programs

MCFD is responsible for six programs or “service lines”: 1) Early Years (ECD) Services; 2) Services for Children and Youth with Special Needs; 3) Child and Youth Mental Health Services; 4) Child Safety; 5) Family, Youth and Children in Care Services and Adoption Services; 6) Youth Justice Services.⁹⁸

MCFD describes its newly named *Early Years* (described as ECD until 2013) programs as aiming: “to assist parents, families and service providers in providing the best possible start for children from 0-6 years of age and support their healthy development.”⁹⁹

However, the child welfare or child safety and protection service of MCFD has long been the overarching concern of the Ministry and Aboriginal children and families have been a major focus of that service wherever they lived. One outcome is that a highly disproportionate number of Aboriginal children have been removed by the Ministry from the care of their parents over the last few decades in BC since a 1951 change in the *Indian Act* transferred control over child welfare on reserve to the provinces. Over much of this time, until the last residential school closed in 1996, the federal Department of Indian Affairs engaged in the removal of many young Aboriginal children from their families and their communities to live in residential schools.

⁹⁷ www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/complete/strategy/960460_1

⁹⁸ MCFD. (2013) *About Us: Ministry Overview*. http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/index.htm 22/01/14

⁹⁹ MCFD (2012) *Strategic and Operational Plan*. MCFD_Plan-2012_15.pdf Accessed 18/01/14

In 2013, although Aboriginal children are about 8%-9% of all children in BC, they represented over 55% of all children in care and that percentage had steadily increased from 43% in 2001-2002.¹⁰⁰ A consequence of the historical involvement of MCFD in Aboriginal child welfare is that the Ministry tends to be viewed with mistrust by Aboriginal families and communities. A recent report on an Aboriginal child's death by the Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) suggests that Ministry social workers may sometimes be barred from entering a First Nations community to investigate a child safety concern. In the case reported on by the RCY, the Ministry officials did not pursue the matter further, the child was not apprehended, and the child subsequently committed suicide.¹⁰¹

An ongoing transfer of responsibility for child welfare to what are called "delegated" Aboriginal agencies that operate under MCFD guidelines may change attitudes and outcomes in the longer term but at present the housing of Aboriginal ECD or the Early Years in MCFD seems unlikely to produce the best results for Aboriginal children and families.

MCFD has experienced frequent reorganizations, policy and planning changes, and changes in senior management for many years. Its problems have been dissected in two public inquiries: 1) the Judge Thomas Gove *Inquiry into Child Protection* of 1995 and 2) the Honourable Ted Hughes' 2006 *B.C. Children and Youth Review*. These inquiries have focused on the child welfare or child protection service of the Ministry specifically.

Hughes concluded in his report: "The child welfare system has been buffeted by an unmanageable degree of change" with a "revolving door in senior leadership positions" and a "backdrop of significant funding cuts." Hughes also refers to, "the need for new leadership." and mentions the need for a "shift in [MCFD's] traditional authoritarian role to one that is more collaborative, with new emphasis on the important role of local services, communities and families in keeping children safe and well." A key recommendation of the Hughes report was the establishment of an independent children's representative to be an advocate for children and youth in the province.¹⁰²

The first independent BC Representative for Children and Youth, Dr. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond was appointed in late 2006. Since then, Dr. Turpel-Lafond has produced 24 reports on child welfare and child well-being that have been highly critical of MCFD, its policies and practices and changes in direction. In October 2011, Dr. Turpel-Lafond commented to a Standing Committee of the Legislature on children and youth that the degree of instability within MCFD has continued to be a concern for her. In late 2013, echoing earlier words of Ted Hughes to the Child and Youth Committee, she observed that MCFD continues "to be

¹⁰⁰ B.C. Ministry of Family and Children Development (2009). *Aboriginal Children in Care*. Retrieved June 25, 2013 from <http://www.fndirectorsforum.ca/downloads/aboriginal-children-in-care-10-09.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Representative for Children and Youth (2014). *Lost in the Shadows: How a lack of Help Meant a Loss of Hope for One First Nations Girl* documents and analyzes a case where MCFD social workers were not permitted to enter a reserve to investigate an issue of child abuse that led to the suicide of a young girl.

¹⁰² B.C. (2006). *An Independent Review of B.C.'s Child Protection System April 7, 2006*. www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/pdf/BC._children_and-youth_Review_Report_Final_April_4.pdf

buffeted by a significant degree of change.”¹⁰³ Oversight of ECD is also part of Dr. Turpel-Lafond’s mandate but so far she has not examined BC’s ECD programs and services.¹⁰⁴

MCFD ECDC Policy Environment: 2010-2014

Between 2004 and 2013, MCFD had six different Ministers and a number of different Deputy Ministers. These changes at the executive level of MCFD in the past few years and the ongoing transformation or restructuring of MCFD have resulted in the creation of three conceptual and strategic frameworks for ECD, two ECD plans prepared by Aboriginal groups, and seven MCFD service plans between 2010 and 2014.

The following list of MCFD strategic/operational and service plans, and reports from March 2010 to February 2014 that were reviewed for this report provided some clues about what policy and plans for ECD and Aboriginal ECD have included:

- *2010/11- 2012/13 Service Plan*. March 2010.
- *2011/12 – 2023/2014 Revised Service Plan*. No date.
- *2010/11 Service Plan Report, British Columbia Early Years Annual Report 2010-2011*. No date. This report also includes some limited information on ECD/Early Learning-related initiatives undertaken by MCFD, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Development.
- *MCFD Strategic and Operational Plan Working Draft (2012) 2012/13-2014/15*. No date.
- *MCFD Framework Document for Developing 2012/13-2014/15 Strategic and Operational Action Plan with Aboriginal Communities and Agencies*. November 2011.
- *MCFD Service Plan for 2012/13 -2014/15*. February 2012.
- *MCFD Service Plan*. February 2013.
- *MCFD Revised 2012/13 – 2014/15 Service Plan*. June 2013.
- *MCFD Service Plan 2014/15 - 2016/17*. February 2014.

Given the number of changes at the executive level and the number of plans produced by MCFD since 2010, it is not surprising that in April 2012, the then Minister of MCFD, explained in an Estimates committee of the Legislature that there was some general confusion about MCFD plans and said that the reason for the changes in her Ministry’s most recent three-year service plan compared with previous plan was that “the staff... had trouble understanding where they fit [in the earlier plan], where they could find their items in the budget ... it [the latest plan] does make more sense,” she said “people can understand it, and it’s a little easier to read.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ B.C. Government, (2013). Legislative Session: First Session, 40th Parliament, Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth. *Minutes and Hansard*.

¹⁰⁴ B.C. Government (2006). *Representative for Children and Youth Act*. [SBC2006]

¹⁰⁵ B.C. Legislature (2012). *Estimates: MCFD Legislative Monitoring. April 19, 2012*. Comments by Minister McNeill

The strategic and service plans mainly describe the what, the how, the where, and the when of the Ministry's intentions for programs over a specified period of time, setting out priority areas for action, goals, the methods for achieving the goals, and the budget. The conceptual frameworks that underlie these plans are mainly about "the why" and set out the values and principles that should underlie the service plans. These plans and the frameworks are prepared by Ministry officials sometimes aided by academics and shaped to some extent or other by public input. The government in power sets the broader ideological/political context and direction. Senior government officials make choices around budget allocations.

MCFD Aboriginal ECD Plans and Frameworks

The continuing need for MCFD to focus on and respond to crises in the child welfare service has meant that ECD/ELCC/ECEC has gotten short shrift. Perhaps as a result, a coherent policy and strategy for Aboriginal ECD has still to emerge.

Currently, the diffusion of responsibility and funding for Aboriginal ECD programs is such that it is difficult to determine the overall scope of Aboriginal ECD programs and services in BC or to identify any specific goals or outcomes. No impact assessment has ever been mentioned, federally or provincially.

To obtain a better understanding for this *Scan*, of the direction and level of resources specifically directed to Aboriginal ECD and ELCC programs, three strategic/operational and service plans produced by MCFD in the last four years were reviewed.

The three most recent strategic and service plans that set out the current direction of MCFD are:

- 1) The MCFD *Strategic and Operational Plan Working Draft 2012/13-2014/15*,
- 2) The most recent (June, 2013 and February, 2014) MCFD Service Plan and,
- 3) The 2011 MCFD *Framework Document for Developing 2012/13-2014/15 Strategic and Operational Plan with First Nations and Community Agencies*, the only plan with a purely First Nations/Aboriginal focus.

Sources that provided some further background information for understanding the issues here include the *Early Years Reports* prepared for the federal government and the records of the Minister of MCFD's reports and responses to questions in Legislative committee meetings. Specific information about the scope of programs and particularly about investment is, however, very difficult to obtain.

The service plans of June 2013 and February 2014 setting out the direction for the programs and services of MCFD, include only very limited references to Aboriginal ECD. These plans are grounded in a business model introduced by the Deputy Minister of MCFD Stephen Brown (in

2011 and 2012) in the MCFD *Strategic and Operational Plan Working Draft 2012/13-2014/15* of 2012.¹⁰⁶

A 2011 plan for First Nations, the *Framework Document for Developing 2012/13-2014/15 Strategic and Operational Plan with First Nations and Community Agencies* appears to have been developed primarily for First Nations leaders and focuses on the child welfare or protection service which is not the focus here.

MCFD Strategic and Operational Plan Working Draft 2012/13-2014/15

This draft plan is more informative than most of the plans and of particular interest here because: 1) it provides some key policy, funding and other information not readily available elsewhere; 2) it is based on a new “Lean” business approach to the Ministry’s operations that is also the basis for current planning documents; 3) it shows that MCFD is knowledgeable about the promise of quality ECD; and 4) it shows that MCFD knows that the effectiveness of its services is limited by provincial policies that create high levels of child and family poverty.

The *Draft Plan* includes an assessment of current research on the effectiveness of quality ECD and childcare. It notes, “current research clearly underscores the value of effective ECD and childcare programs and services.” In addition, in an explicit and unusual (in a government document) critique of current government policies, the plan states, “A fundamental issue relating to child vulnerability is that of deep and persistent **poverty** [emphasis in the original].” The document then cites First Call’s *Child Poverty Report Card* on the poverty rates in BC noting that the poverty rate in BC rose in 2009 from 10.4% to 12% while the national rate was 9.5%. Similarly it criticizes the poor record of the province on child care provision and emphasizes the benefits of quality child care.

The *Draft Plan* also provides a few important items of information on funding. It states that the MCFD regional budget allocation for Aboriginal ECD in 2011-12 was \$6.854 million.

Two comprehensive ECD plans prepared between 2010 and 2011 by a First Nations consultative group and a Métis group with MCFD funding assistance are not mentioned in the MCFD planning documents.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ B.C., MCFD (2011). *Strategic and Operational Plan: Working Draft*. Retrieved from First Call, (2012). *Response from First Call to MCFD Strategic and Operational Working Draft, ECD and Child Care Section*. www.firstcallbc.org/pdfs/EarlyChildhood/1-MCFDstratplan.pdf

¹⁰⁷ First Nations Early Childhood Development Council (2009). *Framework*. www.fnesc.ca/Attachments/ECD and Little Drum Consulting (2008). *Creating Pathways for the Dreams of Our Children – Aboriginal ECD and Care*. www.littledrum.com/pdf/Creating_Pathways_for_the_Dreams_of_our_Children_Sept08.pdf

Ministry of Children and Family Development Aboriginal ECD Program Funding

Just under 40% of the MCFD budget for programs for children is concentrated on its child and youth protection service. In 2012, 39% of the funding was allocated to the child protection service. ECD/Child Care received 18% of the total MCFD funding. This funding envelope for ECD, now subsumed into the *Early Years* budget, provides for increases in administrative staff and has a broader mandate. It is shown on the MCFD website as 20% of the total budget in 2014.¹⁰⁸ According to a recent report of the Representative for Children and Youth, “MCFD’s annual budget was reduced by more than \$37 million between 2008/09 and 2013/14 – this amounts to a nearly \$100 million reduction in its budget when accounting for inflation.”¹⁰⁹ The report comments further, “It is difficult to improve services on a shrinking budget.”

BC receives \$66 million annually for ECD and \$46 million for ELCC, for a total of \$112 million from the federal government, in accordance with the ECD and ELCC Agreements of 2000 and the 2003. According to a June 2013 MCFD Service Plan, a budget line of \$27,303 million was committed for early childhood development and \$103.877 million for child care. One conclusion that might be drawn from these figures is that less than a quarter of the ECD/ELCC funding goes to ECD and the rest to child care.

There are, however, no statutory obligations related to reporting on the provision of the ECD programs other than the minimal requirement set out in the September 2000 federal, provincial, and territorial *Agreements* on ECD. The result is that, as a federal government financial report on ECD/ELCC spending noted in 2012, “Early childhood development, learning and care was one of four priorities under the *2000 ECD Agreement*. As spending among the four priorities was at the discretion of each province and territory, the amounts identified here were not necessarily spent on ELCC.”¹¹⁰ What is categorized as ECD funding by BC and how that funding envelope is spent by different ministries is also unknown.

Provincial Ministries and Aboriginal Early Childhood Programs

The Early Years Strategy mentioned in the 2013 Throne Speech was announced February 20, 2013. The “Early Years” is now being used by MCFD as an umbrella term that replaces “Early Childhood Development” (ECD).¹¹¹ However, in 2014, ECD continues to be a term used in MCFD websites.

¹⁰⁸ BC, MCFD (2013). *Budget*. www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/budget.htm

¹⁰⁹ Representative for Children and Youth (2014). *Not fully Invested: A Follow-up Report on the Representative’s Past Recommendations to Help Vulnerable Children in B.C.* www.rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/files/pdf/reports_publications/rcy-recreport2014-revisedfinal.pdf

¹¹⁰ Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development (2012). *Public Investment in Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada, 2010*. Publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/rhdcc-hrsdc/HS64-18-2012-eng.pdf. Retrieved 20-04-2014

¹¹¹ MCFD (March, 2014). Personal communication.

The Provincial *Office for the Early Years* (OEY) opened in March 2014 to coordinate a “one-government” approach to the early childhood years. The goals of the OEY are to improve the quality and accessibility of the early years services. The eight-year Strategy will involve three provincial Ministries: Health, Education and MCFD in the planning and delivery of early childhood programs funded by the ECD/ELCC Agreements. A Director of Aboriginal Stakeholder Engagement and Consultation will be appointed as part of the OEY in August 2014. No details have yet been provided about the scope of this new position.¹¹²

The OEY is responsible to the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), the Ministry with primary responsibility for the implementation of policy and programs for the ECD/ELCC funding. Two other provincial ministries are involved in implementing the *Strategy*: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health.¹¹³

Besides these three Ministries, three additional Ministries: the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Innovation, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, are mentioned in a 2012 MCFD Draft *Strategic and Operational Plan* as also providing ECD/ELCC funded programs or services.¹¹⁴ Information concerning the kind or level of involvement of these other ministries in ECD or Aboriginal ECD or how that involvement is coordinated, or their expenditures on ECD is currently unavailable.

The OEY is described as an acknowledgement of the need for coordination and planning for early childhood programs and services that were identified through an earlier community consultation process. The overall scope of the activities engaged in by the three Ministries mentioned in the *Strategy* appears to be wide-ranging. The Ministry of Health provides a number of ECD programs for young children that are designed for and directed at the general population of all young children and focus on the social determinants of health. The Ministry of Education provides full day kindergarten and some school readiness programs for preschool children called *Strong Start*. *Strong Start* is not designed to respond to the cultural, living conditions and other needs of most Aboriginal children and their families.

The OEY plans to put in place “an integrated system of early childhood services across the province that provides quality information and support through a number of early years centres or community hubs.”¹¹⁵ Whether and how many of these hubs will align with existing Aboriginal Head Start and child care centres on and off reserve is currently unclear.

¹¹² MCFD (2014). Newsroom. <http://www.newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2014/01/provincial-office-for-the-early-years-launched.html>

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ MCFD (2012) *Draft Operational and Strategic Plan*. p. 31

¹¹⁵ MCFD (2014). Newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2014/01/Op.cit.

BC Aboriginal ECD/ELCC Programs

This section provides a list and descriptions of BC ECD programs designed specifically for young Aboriginal children in BC.

Program	Description	Ministry Responsible	No. of Projects & Children Served	Funding
Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP)	Culturally relevant supports and services to families with children under school entry age at risk of developmental delays	MCFD	48 sites on and off reserve no data available on no. of children served	Unknown
Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program (ASCDP)	Assists families of children with extra support needs to access inclusive childcare	MCFD	24 on reserve 21 off reserve Served 906 children 0-12 years 545 are under 5 years of age ¹¹⁷	Unknown
Aboriginal ECD Regional Initiatives	Health of Aboriginal children, language and culture, increase awareness, outreach and access to ECD programs and services for Aboriginal children and communities	MCFD	43 contracts – no data available on no. of children served	\$6.8 million
Aboriginal ECD Re-Investment Initiative	Health, culture, and community capacity development ¹¹⁸	MCFD		\$5 million

¹¹⁶ MCFD, Personal communication, Nov. 27, 2014.

¹¹⁷ MCFD Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program. (2014) *ASCDP Aboriginal Connections*. Summer 2014.

¹¹⁸ Program cancelled March 31, 2014 and replaced by Aboriginal Service Innovations – Early Years (ASI-EY) in 2014/2015. Annual allocation remains \$5 million.

The Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program (ASCDP) Description

The MCFD webpage states: “SCD programs acknowledge the unique position of Aboriginal people and respect their right to design and deliver ASCD in their communities.” It then sets out six principles for an Aboriginal approach to assisting children and families “Based on the recognition of Aboriginal self-governance and jurisdiction.”¹¹⁹

MCFD started the Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program (ASCDP) in 2006 to assist families of children with extra support needs to access inclusive child care. The programs, “promote children’s development along with their peers and allows parents/caregivers to participate in the workforce and pursue their education.” There are 20 culturally based programs in communities across the province. Another 35 are in development, according to the Ministry website.¹²⁰ These programs appear to have been in development for several years.¹²¹ A 2014 report from the ASCD Provincial Advisor notes “Inadequate funding to support the operation of the program continues to be ACSD’s greatest hurdle. With less than half of the ASCD programs provided the funding capacity to offer the full complement of services.”¹²²

ASCD consultants are contracted to assist children and families and act as a resource to communities. A framework for professional practice and accountability includes “the ethical principles outlined in the Seven Sacred Teachings.”¹²³ A handbook has been designed to provide further culturally-focused information for providing SCD services in First Nations and Métis communities.

The Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP)

This program is similar in design to the ASCD program. There are 44 trained counsellors and AIDP consultants providing culturally relevant supports and services to families that have a preschool child with, or at risk of, developmental delays.¹²⁴ A handbook has also been developed as a guide for the consultants.

The 2012 BCACCS mapping initiative of Aboriginal ECDC programs and services in BC showed that both the AIDP and the ASCDP are unevenly available across the province.¹²⁵ Smaller, remote and isolated communities tend to have limited access to these services compared with larger communities or nations with more resources and greater capacity.

¹¹⁹ MCFD (2014) *Aboriginal Supported Child Development*. http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/spec_needs/ascd.htm
Retrieved 2014-03-21

¹²⁰ MCFD (2014). *Aboriginal Supported Child Development*. http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/spec_needs/ascd.htm
Retrieved 2014-03-21

¹²¹ B.C. ACCS (2014) Personal communication.

¹²² MCFD, *Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program (2014) ASCDP Aboriginal Connections*. Summer 2014.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ MCFD (2014) *Aboriginal Infant Development Program*. http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/spec_needs/aidp.htm .
Retrieved 2014-03-21

¹²⁵ BCACCS *Mapping Initiative* . Op cit.

The Aboriginal ECD Regional Initiative

The goals of the Aboriginal ECD Regional Initiative are to:

- “Increase the overall health and well-being of Aboriginal children;
- Foster language and cultural development as the basis of all programs and services available to Aboriginal children;
- Strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal communities to deliver a full range of services with an emphasis on ECD; and,
- Increase awareness, outreach and access to a wide range of culturally appropriate ECD programs and services for Aboriginal children, families and communities.”¹²⁶

Part of the funding for this *Initiative* is allocated directly by MCFD in Victoria and part is allocated through MCFD regional Directors. These Directors appear to have considerable discretion in how funding will be allocated and are not required to report in detail about spending.

Aboriginal Service Innovations - Early Years and the Demise of the First Nations and Urban Aboriginal ECD Re-investment Initiative

In 2010, MCFD created a new Aboriginal ECD fund of \$5 million for three years. This new program, the “Aboriginal ECD Re-investment Initiative”, was designed to be a vehicle for distributing ECD enhancement funding to Aboriginal communities. The funding was overseen by a specially-created Aboriginal entity, the First Nations, Urban Aboriginal and Métis Early Childhood Development Steering Committee and administered until March 31, 2013 under contract to MCFD by the Victoria office of the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFC).

With the contract with BCAAFC set to expire in March 2013, MCFD put the contract out to tender in December 2012 and through a bidding process identified a different Aboriginal organization to administer the funding. MCFD then appeared to experience some administrative problems in allocating the contract to the successful Aboriginal agency and the Steering Committee was dissolved. MCFD then, after some months of prevarication, decided that the funding for 2013-2014 would be distributed to Aboriginal communities directly by MCFD.

The “Re-investment Initiative” was then eliminated in mid 2014 and replaced by a different initiative, the *Aboriginal Services Innovations - Early Years*. MCFD will now contract directly with communities through a bidding process for the provision of Early Years [ECD] services “for First Nations, Métis, and Urban Aboriginal children 0-6 and their families.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ MCFD (2014). *Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Regional Initiative*. http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/early_childhood/aecd.htm Retrieved 2014-03-21

¹²⁷ MCFD, Office of the Deputy Minister (2014). *Aboriginal Service Innovations – Early Years. Call for Applications on B.C. Bid*

The four priorities of the new program appear to be quite similar to those of the previous program:

- “Increasing accessibility of Aboriginal Early Years Services to Aboriginal children and families;
- Enhancing the quality of Aboriginal Early Years services for Aboriginal children and families;
- Increasing Integration of culture and language in Aboriginal Early Years Services; and,
- Increasing the use of collaborative approaches between Aboriginal Early Years programs, non-Aboriginal Early Years programs and other community partners.” 128

It seems quite likely that the competitive bidding process, which tends to reward capacity rather than need, will pit communities against each other in the struggle for needed resources.

A Note on Child Care Funding Programs

Two child care programs that do not fit our criteria of being specifically designed for Aboriginal preschool children but which may assist Aboriginal child care providers are: 1) the Child Care Operating Funding Program and 2) Major Capital Funding For the Creation of New Licensed Child Care Spaces.

- 1) The Child Care Operating Funding Program assists licensed group and family care providers with the cost of providing child care. This assistance is ongoing and based on enrollment. The amount of funding assistance depends on the age of the child and whether the care is provided for four hours or less or more than four hours. It also varies with whether the care provided is group care or family care.

For example, for preschool the amount is \$1.37 for both four hours and over four hours of care. For child care provided in a licensed group care for age under 36 months for four hours or less the amount is \$6 and \$12 for more than four hours. For Grade 1-12, it is \$1.40 for less than four hours and \$2.80 for more than four hours.

For licensed family child care it is \$1.85 for four hours or less for ages up to 36 months. For Grade 1-12 it is \$0.73 for less than four hours and \$1.46 for over four hours.¹²⁹

- 2) The Major Capital Funding for the Creation of New Licensed Childcare Spaces program was launched in 2014. This program funds both non-profit and private sector child care providers to build or renovate a building and buy equipment and furnishings to create new child care spaces. Funding up to a maximum of \$500,000 is available for non-profits and up to \$250,000 for private sector child care organizations. In the first funding cycle,

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ [WWW.mcf.gov.bc.ca/chidcare/operating .htm](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/chidcare/operating.htm)

child care agencies and businesses in 32 communities received a total of \$7 million in funding. Three of the successful applicants were Aboriginal groups.¹³⁰

ECD mainstream programs accessed by Aboriginal preschool children

Aboriginal children and families may also access a number of mainstream child and family related well-being initiatives such as Mother Goose, Building Blocks, HIPPY, Roots and Seeds of Empathy as well as child care programs. These programs may be budgeted as Aboriginal ECD and be assigned the prefix “Aboriginal” but they are not designed specifically to reflect and affirm Aboriginal children’s cultures and identity and are unlikely to be grounded in Aboriginal values and beliefs about educating young children. However, some Aboriginal communities do access and adapt these programs in order to address the needs of their children and families.

A frequent concern of Aboriginal service providers is that these non-Aboriginal programs tend to proceed from a deficit perspective when delivering services to Aboriginal children and families that is not identity affirming or spiritually enriching.¹³¹

The provincial government also allocates ECD/ELCC funding to the United Way to deliver programs and capacity training to Aboriginal groups. Five BC universities receive ECD funding for research activities concerning young Aboriginal children. BCACCS receives funding for providing training for ECEs and the development of Aboriginal ECDC resources.

CONCLUSION: A COLD WIND BLOWS

The purpose of this *Scan* was to review and put in political context the federal and provincial ECD policies and programs designed to close the gap in life chances between Aboriginal children and other children in Canada. Following on the observations of the UN Committee that oversees countries’ compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, this *Scan* takes a child specific approach. The UN Committee recommended in 2013 that Canada take a child specific approach to budget planning because Canada’s reports to the UN showed that the lack of such an approach in Canada made it “practically impossible to identify, monitor, report and evaluate the impact of investments in children.” This *Scan* confirms, in essence, the lack of any reliable means for assessing the child specific component of Aboriginal ECDC programs and funding in BC or the impact of the Aboriginal ECDC programs delivered and funded by the federal and the BC provincial governments.

The *Scan* shows that the federal interest evident in early 2000 in closing the gap in life chances between Aboriginal and other children in Canada and in ECD as a tool for achieving

¹³⁰ http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/childcare/major_capital.htm

¹³¹ For example, in March 2014, a group convened by ACCS to consider indicators of Aboriginal child well-being asked that indicators be developed from a positive, strengths perspective rather than the deficit orientation of most approaches to Aboriginal indicators of health.

that goal has clearly faded. The review of Aboriginal ECD programs indicates that the federal government has little or no interest in expanding access to or ensuring the quality of AECD and indeed seems to be divesting itself of responsibility for closing the gap by transferring accountability for delivery and outcomes of Aboriginal ECD to First Nations and the province. Yet, the inequality in health, well-being, and educational outcomes of Aboriginal children compared with other children in Canada has not decreased. One consequence is that Canada's reputation for caring for its vulnerable children and families has been tarnished internationally and Canada is regularly criticized by the UNCRC for its failure to apply the provisions of the Convention to Aboriginal children.

The province has considerable latitude and few reporting requirements related to how transferred federal funds for ECD are spent. In BC, several different government ministries have accessed ECD/ELCC funding. In addition, many funded ECD programs that are given the prefix "Aboriginal" are delivered in Aboriginal communities but may not be culturally appropriate.

The BC Ministry of Children and Families which has overall responsibility for ECD (now called the Early Years), for Aboriginal ECD, and for the new *Early Years Strategy* has been described in two public inquiries and by independent authorities as being in a continuing state of crisis related to its child welfare responsibilities over the past 20 years. A major issue for MCFD is the huge and continuing over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system. Within that environment, Aboriginal ECDC has not received much attention and it seems clear that Aboriginal ECDC has been, and will likely continue to be, neglected or misunderstood.

Hope for greater transparency, accountability, and better outcomes for preschool and young children now rests with the BC *Early Years Strategy* and the Provincial Office of the Early Years (OEY) established in March 2014. The *Early Years Strategy* appears to be a step forward but so far the need for a different, culturally based Aboriginal approach does not appear to have been factored into the planning. Consultation with the wider Aboriginal community appears to be minimal or non-existent and there is no coherent plan for delivering BC's Aboriginal ECD programs, nor any targets or attempts to measure outcomes. As the UNCRC Committee noted, the lack of a child-specific focus muddies the waters.

The October 2013 transfer of responsibility for federal ECD programs for First Nations on reserve to the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) is another hopeful development. FNHA expects that the transfer will ensure more culturally enriched ECD programs and greatly improve the health and well-being of First Nations children, families and communities in BC. FNHA indicates that First Nations communities will have flexibility in deciding priorities for ECD programs. Whether this approach will lead to higher quality Aboriginal ECDC or not remains to be seen.

In the meantime, Canada continues to be severely criticized for its treatment of Aboriginal children by the UNCRC Committee.

The overall environment of ongoing tensions between First Nations and Governments over access to lands and resources in BC looms over all government relations with First Nations. This context together with the decline of federal interest in ECD, the weak provincial commitment to effective Aboriginal ECD policy and programs, and the continuing high child and family poverty rates in BC mean that the current policy environment for ensuring effective Aboriginal ECDC policy and programs is a chilly one indeed.

