

Children as citizens of First Nations: Linking Indigenous health to early childhood development

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Shuswap Elder Mary Thomas once observed that “children are the future” of Aboriginal peoples*. Her observation, while deceptively straightforward, has important health implications, particularly when Indigenous health is understood within the context of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986) and of subsequent realizations both that health encompasses much more than biomedical concerns (1) and that considering health holistically is a cost-effective practice (2). Thus, it is with Elder Mary Thomas’ words in mind that the present paper explores the link between the growth and development of Aboriginal children and Indigenous health and well-being.

One cannot examine the health and well-being of Aboriginal children without understanding and acknowledging their unique social, political and historical context. In Canada, Aboriginal children are born into a colonial legacy: low socioeconomic status (3), intergenerational trauma associated with residential schooling (4), high rates of substance abuse (5), increased incidents of interaction with the criminal justice system (6-8), and extensive loss of language and culture (6) are but a few of the indicators suggesting the immediate need for health promotion in Indigenous communities. Aboriginal children’s growth and development, particularly growth and development that fosters and promotes cultural strength, congruency and citizenship, is at the forefront of addressing these health disparities. Indeed, as Chandler and Lalonde (9) have established, a sense of cultural continuity in Indigenous peoples and communities builds resiliency and results in demonstrated reductions of negative health outcomes, including youth suicide. The right of cultural continuity is affirmed by the Canadian Constitution, which states that “First Nations children have a right to live proudly as a First Nations person on their ancestral lands [and] First Nations children have a right to learn, maintain, and preserve their respective language(s) and cultures”. The rights affirmed in the Canadian Constitution parallel those established at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), including the recognition that “traditional cultural values are highlighted as essential for the protection and harmonious development of children”. Finally, considerations

established by the Canadian Constitution and the CRC are mirrored in the draft ‘United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous people’, wherein Article 15 states that

Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State...[and] all Indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their own education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

Given the overwhelming need to improve Indigenous health in Canada, and given both the evidentiary foundation of improving their health through holistic health promotion strategies and the link between early childhood development and overall societal health (10), it is only logical to situate considerations of Indigenous health within discussions regarding the care and education of young Aboriginal children. This situating, however, demands a much fuller discussion of the epistemological and ontological roots of Aboriginal-specific early childhood, including their interface with the concept of Indigeneity as it pertains to Aboriginal children.

If Aboriginal children are to become well and healthy adults who meaningfully contribute to their communities and broader society (in other words, if Aboriginal children are to become healthy citizens of their Nations and the world), it is imperative that they are well versed in the fundamental values of their histories and cultures. Little Bear (11) writes that different peoples see and interpret the world in different ways. He observes that these unique ways are evident through different world views and cultures, and that colonialism maintains a single social order or world view, thereby suppressing the diversity of other human world views. As individual cultures seek to socialize their children into their ways of knowing and being, the programs developed for young Indigenous children – early childhood programs – cannot afford to ignore Indigenous knowledges as articulated by Indigenous communities. It is important to note that while there are common themes among

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*Throughout this paper, the use of the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used exclusively to describe Canada’s first peoples and thus includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis people

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Indigenous knowledges, they are as diverse as the locales and peoples themselves.

Indigenous philosophies are underlain by a world view of interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural and the self, forming the foundation or beginnings of Indigenous ways of knowing and being (12). There is an energy that stimulates, encases and is generated by the essences of these interrelationships and the worlds themselves (11-20). Cajete (15) describes Indigenous peoples' relationship with the land as embodying a "theology of place", a reflection and sacred orientation to place and space. He explains that we come to a spiritual understanding through "the intimate relationship people establish with place and the environment and with all things that make or give them life" (15). He goes on to say that "the land has become an extension of Indian thought and being because, in the words of a Pueblo elder, 'It is this place that holds our memories and the bones of our people ... This is the place that made us'" (15). Anchored in this holistic philosophy of totality are manifestations/sources of both understandings that serve to teach those in the present and that hold knowledge for those of the future. Castellano (14) offers three overlapping categories of knowledge sources: traditional teachings, revelation and empirical observation. Traditional knowledges build upon knowledges that have been passed intact through the generations. These knowledges sit within a context of language and orality and are evident in such processes as storytelling and ceremonies. One cannot understate the role of Indigenous languages in the preservation, restoration and manifestation of new Indigenous knowledge. The sound, the meaning and the relationships conveyed in the spoken word manifest the very essence of Indigenous knowledge in a way that the written word cannot. Some believe that language may be viewed as "the pathway to the manifestation of Indigenous knowledge" (D Rangiaho, personal communication). Weber-Pillwax (21) writes that it is impossible "to 'translate' the lived cultural effects of philosophies and beliefs that are embedded within and associated with the words and terms themselves. Yet, ... herein lies the source of the power and meaning of those words and terms". For many Indigenous peoples, the old stories are a form of primary orality that provides opportunities for participants to come to understand Indigenous knowledge. These stories serve to both transmit and teach Indigenous knowledges. Stories in this context are specific devices that contain the cultural teachings and processes of living history (16,18,20,22-24). Sterling (23) writes that "... stories remain alive in the present tense of the stories, reviving, restoring, and revitalizing what has been lost ...".

The foundations of Indigeneity, then, are comprised, in part, of values that privilege interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural and the self; reflect a sacred orientation to place and space; encompass a fluidity of knowledge exchanged between past, present and future, thereby allowing for constant and dynamic knowledge growth and change; and honour language and orality as an important means of knowledge of transmission. Given this, the question arises as

to how these values may be translated and reflected in early childhood programs and practices, thereby informing the citizenship of Aboriginal peoples, thus having the potential to positively impact on Aboriginal health and well-being. Battiste and Semaganis (25) deconstruct issues of citizenship, particularly the contrast between Aboriginal consciousness about self and community and liberalist ideologies underlying Canadian citizenship and enforced within a context of colonization. They argue that in contrast to Canadian citizenship, citizenship for Aboriginal peoples is, at its minimal level, based on the tenet that every entity and being is a part of a whole in which they are interdependent. In this conceptualization of citizenship, individuals have the right to travel their independent paths with a sense of security to discover that path without interference. Aboriginal citizenship values the group over the individual and, therefore, models of kinship imply a distinct form of rights whereby everyone has the right to give and receive according to their choices. From birth, Aboriginal children are placed firmly within this kinship context of family, extended family, community and Nation. In this kinship context, they are taught to respect and respond to the needs of their kin, and it is these teachings that are the beginnings of Aboriginal citizenship.

The concepts of Canadian citizenship can be linked to the goals and process of colonization, whereas the concepts of Aboriginal citizenship can be seen as the heart of decolonization strategies. The care and education of children, including formalized early childhood programs characteristic of current realities, thus becomes contested sites of ideologies imparted to children, and questions arise as to whether programs and services for children implicitly or explicitly continue to colonize our children or whether programs and services serve to impart concepts of Aboriginal citizenship and therefore have the ability to contradict strategies of colonization directed at the youngest members of our Nations. These considerations remind me of a question posed by an Elder in the mid-1990s, a time when Aboriginal peoples in Canada were first realizing the establishment of formalized early childhood programs and services for their children. She said, "are we once again putting residential schools in the hearts of our communities, only this time for even the younger ones?" This is a fundamental and important question that strikes at the heart of citizenship questions. The question is holistic and in its holism takes into account the complexities of past and present relationships and their realities; the question thus considers early childhood programs and services beyond a simple notion of looking after children and moves the programs instead to a place of exchange and contestation.

Taking into account these fundamental tenets, any early childhood program and service for young Aboriginal children must begin with a fundamental premise derived from guidance by the collective or community to which children belong and by which they build themselves. This complex transformation of ideology into practice might be conceptualized through an analogy to dance: who will lead and who

will follow? If we consider the underlying values of Indigeneity as the starting point for conceptualizing early childhood programming for Aboriginal children, then should we not expect that these values are evidenced in the conceptualization of policy frameworks and implementation? We would then see and feel the ownership collectivity felt by the community for a program embedded in the heart of its being, a place where children are nestled in the bosom of their collective, their Nation. The ultimate goal of early childhood programs would be to foster the development of Aboriginal citizenship. The programs would move away from, for instance, a more contained goal of ensuring school readiness in children, readiness skills that are borne of assumptions, values and beliefs not embedded within values of Indigeneity, readiness skills that might therefore be understood as creating cognitive dissonance in Aboriginal children, ultimately fostering skills that lack meaning and connection to Aboriginal reality.

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