Supporting Indigenous Children and Parents in Early Childhood Settings

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Abstract

In this article, authors Cathy Richardson and Isaac Romano draw from their experience with early childhood education, counselling, parent support and cultural rituals to describe practices to support the Aboriginal early childhood development (ECD) experience. They have recently developed a course for early childhood educators who work with Aboriginal populations in various contexts. They describe the process of centring Indigenous culture, working with elders to design culturally sound rituals and incorporating Indigenous teachings and stories. As well, they present a number of practice ideas about supporting children in times of distress or disconnection, promoting a sense of inclusion and belonging among children in care settings. These practices include cultural safety and learning about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. They discuss the importance of becoming an ally and working across difference and how to incorporate/centre Indigenous ways of being and knowing in an early childhood setting. Finally, the authors provide approaches for practice, including "deep listening" to restore a child's sense of connection and esteem following experiences of distress. Richardson and Romano share Indigenous examples of community-centred models or "hubs," which other community members and services can "wrap around" in the participatory care of children.

Introduction

This article is designed to orient the early childhood practitioner to cross-cultural learning in the specific area of Indigenous early childhood education and development. In this work, the authors present perspectives on cultural bridge building as well as practices that place Indigenous world view, values and methods at the centre of early childhood settings. Even though not all early childhood educators come from an Indigenous background, there are aspects to working with Indigenous children in a culturally grounded manner that will rely on workers building relationships within the local Indigenous communities. Through these relationships, information and support may be elicited to support the Indigenous curriculum and planning. This article will provide some insight about how early childhood practitioners can reach out, build relationships and follow appropriate protocols in order to decolonize, strengthen and organize early childhood programming to support Indigenous children in their culture.

Terminology Used

In this article, the terms *Indigenous* and *Aboriginal* are used interchangeably. There are three Aboriginal groups recognized in the Canadian constitution (*Constitution Act* 1982): First Nations, Métis and Inuit. As well, there are urban Aboriginals, status and non-status, 6-1s and 6-2s, and other categorizations of Indigenous people through Canada's racialized legislation known as the *Indian Act* (King 2003). The term *Indian* or *Native* is used only when it is used as such in federal documents or articles. *Early childhood development* tends to include prebirth to age 9 or 10, depending on the source. In this course, childhood will be considered to go to age 12, a time before puberty/adolescence. *Early childhood development* includes working with families,

communities, service providers and elders to ensure the holistic well-being and education of Indigenous children. This work involves an active engagement with self, opening to new ideas and perspectives that may exist in a world view that is substantively different than the European-Canadian or western world view.

While it is important to be cautious in overgeneralizing about people and cultures, the term *world view* relates to what is called *epistemology* and *ontology*—the nature of knowing and the nature of being found in a particular society. This course centres an Indigenous world view, in which there are many diverse views and cultural practices. While every society has alternative influences and subcultures, we will explore broader traditional practices related to the cultural survival, substance, spirituality and flourishing of Indigenous peoples. You are wholeheartedly invited to bring your own culture, traditions and perspectives to the forefront of your knowing while learning about those that are important for Indigenous children.

The term *epistemology* in western research refers to ways of creating, experiencing and constructing knowledge. *Ontology* refers to ways of being, the nature of "being-ness." Much of European culture and knowledge has been described as scientific in nature, perhaps since the time of the Renaissance and then again in the Industrial Revolution (Kuhn 1962). Knowledge and "truth" were taken apart in ways that could be analyzed by students of life to decide how things work. This knowledge was sometimes removed from its origins or context. The nature of Indigenous knowledge or cosmology has been described as related to ancestry and ancestors, integral to the land, circular and holistic, including concerns and functions of the mind, body, spirit and emotions. Holistic representations of knowledge are propagated/taught through holistic processes, such as storytelling, dream interpretation, and engaging in rituals and ceremonies that acknowledge the relationship and interdependence with Mother Earth. Well-being in life for Indigenous children has been evidenced as being related to connection to culture and extended family and having a solid sense of identity. As articulated in the United Nations rights of the Indigenous child, one has a sense of one's people, one's land, one's traditional languages and one's ancestors (Carriere and Richardson 2009; Ermine 1995; Greenwood and Shawana 2003; Sinclair 2007). [1]

Looking back to 1972, to the National Indian Brotherhood's "Indian Control of Indian Education" document, the concerns of that time appear to remain relevant:

> Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him [or her], the history of his [or her] people, their values, their language, he [or she] will never really know himself [or herself] or his [or her] potential as a human being. (National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations 1972, 9)

Beginning with an Acknowledgement of Land and Territory

All early childhood programs are situated on land, on someone's traditional territory. Whether we are talking about an inner-city program, an on-reserve program or a program in sub-urban Canada, it is likely to be situated on unceded Indigenous land. The acknowledgement of this fact, in itself, can be considered an initial act of decolonization. This paper is written on traditional Coast Salish, Cowichan territory and Abenki territory in Quebec. To begin, we acknowledge the ancestors of these lands, Mother Earth and the nations who have traditionally cared for this land through their presence.

Some of the questions we invite early childcare providers to consider are below. ECE/ECD students are asked to do this research where they live, to learn about the Indigenous children and families they may be serving.

- Who are the Indigenous peoples in your local area?
- What Indigenous languages are spoken in your area?
- What does the map of Indigenous peoples in your area look like?
- What is a treaty? Which treaties were signed in your province?
- What are land claims?
- What kinds of Aboriginal family-supporting organizations and agencies exist?
- What are the protocols for visiting Aboriginal communities?

Learning the lay of the land and about the Indigenous people on that land is the first step toward becoming an effective cross-cultural early

[1] Editor's note: see also "General Comment No 11 (2009): Indigenous Children and Their Rights Under the Convention," available at www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC.GC.C.11.doc (accessed June 5, 2014).

childhood educator, as well as working, living and learning in a decolonizing Canada.

Learning About Culture—One's Own Culture

While it is important that an early childhood educator have a basic sense of the local Indigenous culture, it is not a realistic or particularly helpful goal to become an "expert" on Indigenous culture. What is more imperative is to have a sense of one's own culture and ancestry, in order to truly appreciate what it means to feel "filled" by one's culture, to be guided by culture in the important aspects of life and the life cycle (such as birth, naming, learning, adolescent rites of passage, parenthood, elderhood). Research on Indigenous well-being states, unequivocally, that culture and belonging, including the running of one's own community services, relate directly to the thriving of Indigenous children. Having a relationship to one's own culture and ancestors forms a solid foundation from which to "work across difference" with Aboriginal families. Indigenous educator Robina Thomas states, "I don't have to go to church to learn how to work with Christians, just like you don't have to go to our Thi'Lelum (Big House) to learn how to work with Indigenous people. What you need to learn is how to work across difference" (Robina Thomas, personal communication, Social Work 354, University of Victoria).

Cultural Safety and Colonialism

The practice of cultural safety is an important quality or spirit as the essence of working with diversity and in Indigenous-centred environments. Basically, this means that the setting will be pro-inclusion, pro-diversity, Indigenous-centric and anti-racist. In a context of colonialism, the term *cultural safety*, which was developed in the Aoterroan Maori nursing community, serves an antidote to Eurocentric or structurally racist policies (Papps and Ramsden1996; McDonald 2001; National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO] 2006). In this context, students learn to "walk alongside" Indigenous families, to support their sacred concerns and aspirations for their children. Workers are invited to consider how to become an ally to Indigenous families. Activist and community counsellor/educator Vikki Reynolds has articulated a process for walking alongside in her article "The Role of Allies in Anti-Violence Work" (2008). She documents practices for working as an ally, across difference and across cultural lines, to promote social justice and inclusion. If students are asked to assume this stance before they are prepared in their own analysis and learning, an "honouring diversity" workshop or training may be important for childcare staff. One example of such a successful pro-diversity model is the NCBI (National Coalition Building Institute) method, used with the Los Angeles Police Department during the time of the Rodney King riots (see http://ncbi.org/our-clients/). In British Columbia, Cathy Richardson and Jeannine Carriere delivered a successful five-day Aboriginal cultural awareness training for Ministry of Children and Family child and youth mental health workers (Carriere and Richardson 2013). There may be local models developed specifically for your local context. Where possible, local models are probably the best because they prepare workers to meet issues and conditions in the local community with specific tribal groups.

Cultural safety education focuses on teaching students about colonial history and its attack on Indigenous peoples. Cultural safety can form a background of respect for educational engagement, learning and exploration in this course. In relation to the content, ie, Indigenous early child education and development, cultural safety relates to restoring historical harm in various contexts, promoting decolonization, working respectfully across difference and working towards social justice.

Cultural safety education focuses on student self-discovery. It is important that as students engage in a reflective practice they are aware of what they bring to professional interactions, including their attitudes, metaphors, beliefs and values with an understanding of their cultural implications.

Cultural Safety and Connection

An approach that centres Indigenous ways of knowing and being does not exclude non-Aboriginal children from the program. Such programming assumes the courageous and decolonizing stance of privileging Indigenous culture and the methods for promoting inclusion, belonging and identity that are central to the well-being of Indigenous children. ECD scholars and practitioners have shown us that children want to feel connected to other people (Carriere and Richardson 2013, 2009; Gerber 2013; Romano 1999).

Young children want to be connected to other people, but this sense of connection is fragile, particularly in a colonial context where it has been

consistently undermined. Promoting isolation, separation and cultural erasure were strategies of colonization that saw children kidnapped from families and placed into institutions referred to euphemistically as residential schools. Similar strategies were repeated through child welfare strategies, and Indigenous children remain over-represented in child removals today despite later 20th-century commitments to social justice.

This is one of the reasons that caring for children is considered a sacred task. Elders tell us that children are gifts from the Creator, and their development (physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social) has been traditionally approached with great care and delicacy. Cree elder Eddie Bellrose said that the purpose of life is to care for children. He reminds us that someone cared for us when we were children, and now it is time to care for a child. The children's sense of connection is easily broken through separation, isolation, criticism and experiences that are stressful and too hard to process developmentally.

When children experience disrespect or disconnection, their need for love and dignity is violated. Children let us know when their sense of connection has been broken in various ways, one being through acting out with behaviours of protest (letting us know something isn't right). Providing cultural safety is a basic step toward restoring dignity and connection—their need to belong and feel love and appreciation.

Cultural safety education enables students to respect diversity. Respecting and acknowledging the dignity of each person may include dignifying practices (Richardson and Wade 2008) such as asking permission of others before acting or offering advice. In professional settings, it means asking the family what would be helpful for them, and asking permission before requesting information or acting on their behalf. Cultural safety can protect marginalized people from the imposition of dominant cultural ideas and practices, opening space for difference and Indigenous practice.

As early child educators, we can meet children's developmental and learning needs while providing cultural safety. This means ensuring we do not blame Indigenous families for historical process and current plights. It means doing research on colonialism and learning about the background to social conditions and relations of disparity in Canada. It means learning about the dynamics of racism to which Indigenous families are subjected and ways to restore past harms through kindness, through being an ally and walking alongside those we work with and the children we serve.

Why Is Cultural Safety Needed?

The presence of colonialism in Canada and the attempted destruction of Indigenous culture and communities mean that it is important that early childhood educators educate themselves about this situation. For example, it is relevant to be aware that

- nearly half of children in foster care are First Nations, Métis and Inuit (http://aptn.ca/news/2013/05/08/nearly-half-of-children-in-foster-care-aboriginal-statistics-canada; Woods and Kirkey 2013); many Indigenous adults were raised in foster care;
- many Indigenous adults were placed in non-Aboriginal adoptive homes. According to Indigenous researcher Raven Sinclair, the adoption breakdown rates for Aboriginal adoptees was often as high as 95 per cent (Sinclair 2007);
- the majority of status Indians were forced to attend the internment facilities referred to as *residential schools*. This relates to the past hundred years of Canada's history, so at least three or four generations in one family may have been interned as children and taken from their parents by force, in accordance with the *Indian Act*;
- most of the Indigenous people in prison were in foster care;
- most Indigenous people experience some form of racism on a daily basis; and
- at the time of contact, 100 per cent of the land was held by the First Peoples. Today, less than one-quarter of 1 per cent of the total land in Canada is held by Aboriginal people; over 99 per cent is in the hands of non-Aboriginal Canadians (Coyes 1997).

Topics that are important in an ECD/ECE curriculum include

- racism and anti-Aboriginal prejudice;
- systemic discrimination and laws of segregation;
- Indigenous resistance and responses to colonization;
- the internment of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children in institutions called *residential schools*;
- child welfare, foster care, adoption and the history of mass child removal and the "Sixties Scoop"; and
- the five Rs related to Indigenous life—reserves, RCMP, racism, residential school and religion (Gerry Oleman, the Indian Residential School Survivors' Society, cited in Young-Leon 2011, 26).

Philosophies of Connection and Interconnection

Indigenous prayers tend to end with the words "All my relations." These words indicate the sacred interconnection of all life forms, that one cannot exist without the other and that well-being is based on this interconnection. Early childhood educators are encouraged to engage with Indigenous elders and cultural consultants/educators to impart the important teachings so central to Indigenous life. Such teachings include

- Indigenous world view and local stories of creation and relationship,
- the philosophy of interconnectedness,
- teachings related to land and place,
- the role of animals in Indigenous life, and
- perspectives on learning and knowledge.

Many of these teachings and lessons can be summarized with the question "What does it mean to be human (within my culture)?" The more the individual child is contextualized and situated within his/her people and traditions, the more likely that the child will experience a sense of purpose and belonging (Carriere and Richardson 2009).

While Indigenous philosophies are unique to Indigenous communities, complementary theories can be found in western literature, provided that they include an analysis of social interaction, ecology and adversity/oppression. Many European theories of childhood do not talk about oppression, which is central to the lives of Indigenous communities. Theories such as those of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), with his ecological model, and sociologist Erving Goffman, in his study of stigma and life in institutions (1963, 1961), probably come closest to understanding some of the ecological complexities in developing a sense of self. One of Bronfenbrenner's contributions is the inclusion of culture in the systemic model, given that culture is such a source of strength and spirituality for many Indigenous families.

Within Indigenous social structures, elders are traditionally highly regarded as teachers, philosophers, linguists, historians, healers, judges and counsellors (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, cited in Gerlach, Smith and Schneider 2008). While not every elderly person self-identifies as *elder* in terms of passing on traditions, communities typically identify elders and grant them respect as transmitters of intergenerational knowledge. Grandparents are traditionally valued as teachers, passing on their knowledge and practices to the next generation (Gerlach, Smith and Schneider 2008). For many families, "together time" involves participating in activities that reflect a vital link to a community's identity and history—whether it be fishing, berry picking or hunting (Gerlach, Smith and Schneider 2008).

Aboriginal Child Development

For many Aboriginal peoples, child development refers to a child's spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical wellbeing with a special consideration of the Aboriginal context of his or her community and culture (Carriere and Richardson 2008). This includes everything from storytelling, smudging, learning, singing and practising community protocols to being introduced to traditional foods and customs. Such practice and belief represent quality children's services and education in that they contribute to building and/or maintaining the child's emotional and spiritual well-being. This will help children acquire the skills, resiliency and confidence to succeed in any education system. This success can be promoted by instilling in children the prosocial values of their culture.

British Columbia Aboriginal Infant Development Coordinator Diana Elliot promotes the Seven Sacred Teachings in her work with Indigenous ECD: love, respect, courage, honesty, wisdom, humility and truth. Each teaching honours one of the basic virtues intrinsic to a full and healthy life. Each law is embodied by an animal to underscore the point that all actions and decisions made by man are manifest on a physical plane. The animal world taught man how to live close to the earth, and the connection that has been established between the animal world and that of man has instilled a respect for all life in those who follow the traditional Aboriginal way (http://schools.cbe.ab.ca/b244/seven.htm).

Practice That Strengthens Connection

Early childhood practitioners can assist children in ways that strengthen children's sense of connection with others. They can help children work through moments of difficulty. When we refer to children as "acting out," they are often experiencing disconnection or trying to work through an experience that is difficult to process. Early childhood educators and students in educational programs can be taught about dignity-based practices (Richardson and Wade 2008) and practices of deep listening, similar to those

described in Patty Wipfler's "Hand in Hand" parenting.[2]

Key skills include

- the benefits of deep listening;
- learning to assess the child's needs in the moment;
- addressing challenging child behaviours with "the spot assessment";
- supporting mothers, fathers and caregivers and intervening in ways that acknowledge and strengthen their bond/sense of connection with their child;
- respecting the feelings of children by telling or showing them that it is okay to have these feelings;
- incorporating opportunities for child laughing and child-led play for stress release and child self-care;
- engaging in adult peer support in the work setting through empathic listening and emotional release (as a clinical supervision practice); and
- creating a culturally-centred, integrated community space for ECD programming.

These methods can promote the goals of Indigenous child care and early childhood development.

Promoting Holistic Well-Being Through Emotional Expression and Support

Parenting instructor and child developmental psychologist Aletha Solter, who studied for two years with Jean Piaget in Switzerland at the University of Geneva, wrote that children have "inborn repair kits," referring to their inherent processes of crying, laughing, symbolic playing and talking about their problems (Solter 1989). When children have been disrupted by experiences that are stressful and difficult to process, adults can help them return to a state of calm, balance and connection. As Gerber (1979) outlined, offering "full listening" to a child who is in distress constitutes offering a form of respect that can help meet the child's need for closeness and security, thus helping the child to feel better.

In the ECD curriculum, we encouraged early child educators to (1) make sure that the child's needs for attention, closeness and security are met; (2) attend to the child's needs after making sure the child is not ill or in pain; and then (3) "just listen" to the child's crying and the child's feelings in order to help restore the child to well-being and a sense of connection. When this sense of connection is restored, the child will be ready to re-engage with his or her surroundings.

We encourage early child educators to approach a child's difficult behaviour within a framework of connection and dignity (eg, has the child been excluded or humiliated?). When a child "acts out" in an ECD setting, it is an indication that the child's sense of connection has been temporarily disrupted. In that moment, it is important to be able to assess the reasons for the child's "acting out" in a way that is developmentally appropriate. Solter encourages early childhood educators/caregivers to ask and to developmentally assess on the spot, asking, "Does the child have a legitimate need for attention, closeness, food, stimulation, autonomy? Are the child's needs being thwarted in some way?" (Solter 1989).

We add to Solter's list the following considerations:

- If the child is a First Nations, Métis or Inuit child in a mainstream child care setting, one might also ask if the child's culture and sense of inclusion are being thwarted in some way. Is the child's culture being acknowledged and upheld as part of the curriculum?
- Does the child lack a piece of information, or is he or she too young to understand or remember a rule?
- Does the child have an accumulation of stress from the past? Is he or she feeling anxious, jealous, fearful, angry?

Stress can be defined as the accumulation of unprocessed physical and emotional pain. The plan of action depends on the results of the assessment.

Patty Wipfler has identified an intervention called Staylistening. In her Hand in Hand Parenting approach, Wipfler recommends using deep listening to address a child's behaviour when the child is feeling disconnected and is acting out in a form of protest.

Wipfler says that a child who is not feeling good has a lot of feelings to share. This is the impetus behind the tantrum or angry outbursts or actions. She reminds us that crying is *not* bad and that laughing is an important function for clearing the mind of "emotional gunk" and helping repair the sense of connection. She says that we can "allow a child to tell us and show us how bad it feels on the inside." It can take a while, but this is a healthy developmental process. As caregivers, we can help

[2] See www.handinhandparenting.org.

a child to feel good by supporting him or her to "offload emotionally," to dissolve blocks, allowing them to function well. Sometimes we have to offer a good 20 minutes to support a child through tears and difficult emotions, just listening and reassuring the child that he or she is safe and cared for. Afterwards, a child who feels good again may act as if the episode never happened.

Crying does not mean that we or they have done something wrong; crying often means that there is a healing process in progress. And rather than telling children "Don't be afraid," "Stop crying" or "Be a big boy," we can tell them, by giving good attention and eye contact and by our facial expression, that it's okay to be afraid, supporting them where they are in the moment. It helps children when we give them permission to feel what they are feeling.[3]

The caregiver can plan ways to provide more attention and quality time to an older child once the younger one has been taken care of. Perhaps the baby will soon nap. The caregiver can then take that opportunity to be with the older child. Since children are experts on tension release, they will do what they need to do to get the attention of the adult and find security. The adult can then unbusy him- or herself from other tasks (or multitasking) to be more fully present with the child. At that moment, the caregiver can give the child full attention and follow the child's lead in the interaction.

When adults are distracted or multitasking, children sense that they are less important than other things and begin to feel disconnected. Building in times of connection and attention is the remedy for this sense of not mattering.

"Hand-in-hand parenting" approaches such as Staylistening can also be effective among colleagues in a work setting. The purpose is to help one another, in the intimacy and safety of a private space, to express feelings that may be causing distress and impairing healthy, happy interaction.

While these interventions may not have been developed in an Indigenous context, they can be relevant for Aboriginal communities if they succeed in restoring that vital sense of connection, belonging and being cared for by loved ones.

Community-Centred Care

The final point in this article is the importance of community-centred care. Researchers and Indigenous communities have expressed the benefits of establishing a variety of social services centred on early childhood educational services and care. Children are the centre of the community, and caring for children can become an activity of priority for the entire community (Ball 2010, 2008). Various Indigenous communities have included child care services at the centre of their community. There are models from Euro-cultures that demonstrate the desires of community to self-organize. One such model was called the Peckham Experiment (Goodway 2007).

Peckham centred on early childhood care and learning based on community self-organization. It reflected the English community at the time, reflecting movements of anarchism and socialism in which people took more responsibility for preparing their society for community-driven life. Only the medical part of Peckham was kept private; all other aspects were organized by the families, who also selected the ECD/ECE curriculum. To participate, you had to live within the distance you could walk with a baby stroller. During 1926–29, the centre was joined by 115 families (or about 400 individuals).

Principles of Community Dignity and Self-Determination

Author and former Mohawk psychiatrist Clare Brant, who has since passed away, wrote about what he calls *Native ethics*. His article (Brant 1990) can be informative in showing non-Aboriginal helpers about some of the general cultural differences between Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal ways of being. To summarize, he says that the following principles need to be understood and respected in the interactions with Native peoples and communities. He based this analysis on his 24 years of work with Indigenous communities in Quebec and Ontario. These principles are (1) conflict suppression, (2) noninterference, (3) noncompetitiveness, (4) emotional restraint, (5) sharing (6) the Native concept of time, (7) the Native attitude toward gratitude and approval, (8) protocol and (9) teaching by modelling. The most important themes from Brant's research seem to be finding the delicate balance between being an ally—a helper/supporter—and not telling others what to do. This is an act of preserving the dignity of others and their cultural practices.

[3] For access to more information about Patty Wipfler and her programs, visit her website, www.handinhandparenting.org.

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