



Brief: *Indigenous Early Learning and Care in the city of Edmonton (2019)*

Indigenous Early Learning and Care in the city of Edmonton: Articulating the experiences, perspectives and needs of Indigenous parents/caregivers (2019) was developed for the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) by Tibetha Kemble, a PhD Candidate at the University of Alberta and Senior Manager, Indigenous Relations and Support at Norquest College. The purpose of the paper is to inform and guide future advances in the design of a system of early learning and care that is responsive to the needs of Indigenous children and their families in Edmonton. The paper is based on discussions, in the form of Talking Circles, with the parents and caregivers of Indigenous children. We thank Elder Francis Whiskeyjack for his guidance, the EndPovertyEdmonton Indigenous Circle and the participants in the Talking Circles for their willingness to share and help undertake this work in a good way.

The ECELC is an organization composed of institutional and community partners tasked with improving early learning and care in the city, with a focus on vulnerable populations. It was established in response to Action #29 of the EndPovertyEdmonton Road Map in 2016.

Historical Context

The impact of colonial policies and funding regimes amounts to the near total lack of intergenerational wealth transfer that is considered the most important and necessary marker of improved social mobility. An Indigenous parent is more likely to have children viewed by the child welfare system as “neglected” because Indigenous-specific poverty, Indigenous-specific structural barriers, and discrimination limit an Indigenous parent’s capacity to provide the basic needs defined by a non-Indigenous system.

Experience

The current system of options was seen by participants of the Talking Circles as both unresponsive and out of reach due to rising costs under a fee-for-service model. It was also viewed as being largely unsafe for Indigenous parents/caregivers due to the ever-present threat of child-welfare intervention. We also heard from non-Indigenous early learning and care staff and administrators about the limits of the current system both in terms of accessibility and relevance to the lived realities of Indigenous parents and their children. The current system does not adequately prepare child care providers to work with Indigenous children and parents, nor is it responsive to the lived realities of Indigenous people.

Culture

In their daily lives, Indigenous parents/caregivers recognized the limited number of spaces and places where they could build and practice their own connections to culture. Likewise, program providers and staff recognized the limited ways in which they could learn more about Indigenous culture and Indigenize curriculum, spaces and places. Parents and providers also noted the need to

increase Indigenous representation in the early learning and care workforce in order to cultivate better connections to culture and build trust.

Relationship, Location and Transit

Indigenous parents provided keen insight into the value of relationships and the need to build deep and trusting relationships between childcare providers and themselves as parents. It is widely known that Indigenous parents are more likely to face intervention by Children’s Services, which has led to parents being afraid of being perceived by providers as neglectful.

Where trusting relationships could be developed, many parents described the value of single-entry point services, or those centres where childcare and other family supports were all available in one location. Conversely, some locations for these supports necessitated parents, often single mothers, spending 2-3 hours per day on public transit to access these services. The high-cost of transit, even with subsidy, was also mentioned.

Cost

Indigenous parents indicated that the cost of child care, even after subsidy, was too high relative to their income, and affected their ability to balance the needs of the household unit and their ability to afford other basic necessities such as food, clothing, and/or transportation. Few lived in neighbourhoods with an Early Learning and Care (\$25/day) Centre and/or could not travel the distance to have their children attend one. Importantly, even with the reduced cost, the fees in a \$25/day daycare would still be too high for limited incomes, so the program was not seen as accessible or relevant by some parents.

Recommendations

- A. Indigenize early childhood spaces and places and provide single points of entry for child care and other family services.
- B. Provide very low cost or no cost child care.
- C. Actively recruit Indigenous people into the field of early learning and care; implement targeted strategies to increase the number of Indigenous early child care workers
- D. Provide mandatory pre-service and in-service training for early childhood professionals on the history and legacies of colonialism, Indigenous peoples’ histories, perspectives and contributions; anti-racist and trauma-informed practice for working safely and respectfully with Indigenous peoples, and Indigenizing spaces, places and curriculum.
- E. Develop a longitudinal pre/post professional development continuum, competency model, and ECD professional quality standards.
- F. Develop an Indigenous Early Learning and Care certificate or diploma program to better meet the needs of Indigenous children and their families.

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