



Indigenous Early Learning & Care in the city of Edmonton

Articulating the experiences, perspectives and
needs of Indigenous parents and caregivers

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Executive Summary

Since City Council's approval of the EndPoverty Edmonton Roadmap in 2016, some notable progress has been made within each of the six Game Changers that are intended to result in essential and radical change for those experiencing poverty. To date, EndPoverty Edmonton has implemented 35 specific actions across these six Game Changers which represents the broad work of many people who are contributing to the goal of ending poverty in a generation.

The scope of this report is to inform, support, and advance the work of Game Changer #5: Affordable & Quality Child Care which recognizes that access to a system of early learning and care plays an important role in eliminating poverty in the city of Edmonton. More specifically, research has shown that access and exposure to high-quality early childhood education in the first six years of life has a dramatic and lasting impact on later outcomes in primary/secondary education completion rates, income and employment, incarceration and recidivism, and lower levels of poverty, to name only a few. While access and exposure to high-quality early learning and care is important for *all* children, it remains painfully out of reach for many, especially those who are most acutely affected by poverty and who experience system-level barriers and discrimination. For Indigenous children and their parents/caregivers, the importance of early learning and care takes on new meaning when situated against the backdrop of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the long, complex, and painful history of colonization in Canada. As will be discussed throughout this report, Indigenous peoples have thrived and survived for centuries despite persistent attempts to eliminate Indigenous peoples from the national landscape. However, despite this survivorship, the effects of colonization linger and can be seen in the fractured relationships between Indigenous peoples and communities, and most notably in the broken bonds between Indigenous parents and their children that were constructed during the Indian Residential School era and that have transcended generations. Additionally, ongoing colonization that arises from colonial policy regimes and chronic underfunding in every other social system (education, health, child welfare etc) has situated Indigenous peoples at the farthest margins of society and can be understood as the mediator of the persistent poverty experienced disproportionately by Indigenous peoples in the city of Edmonton, throughout Alberta, and across Canada.

Understood in this way, early learning and care that is responsive to the needs and lived-realities of Indigenous children and their families holds significant promise to redressing the legacy of colonialism and the Indian Residential school system, and to advancing the process of reconciliation by strengthening nations and communities, restoring and strengthening the bond between Indigenous parents and children, and to strengthening Indigenous children's ability to be successful at school entry and later in life. However, early learning and care in its present formation may not be meeting this unique and distinct need. The purpose of this report, therefore, is to inform and guide future advancements in the design of system of early learning and care that is responsive to the needs of Indigenous children and their families in the city of Edmonton. To do so, the content of this report and related recommendations puts forward the voices, perspectives, and lived-realities of Indigenous parents who shared openly and honestly with the Talking Circle Team about their experiences and needs vis-a-vis early learning and care. As will be described throughout, while some important progress has been achieved -- much remains to be done.

Indeed, the Talking Circle Team heard consistently from Indigenous parents/caregivers that early learning and care is a critical part of a larger whole of system-wide supports and services that are necessary to narrow the gap in outcomes across all systems, but most acutely important to affecting the depths of Indigenous-specific poverty. For many Indigenous parents, accessible, affordable, relevant, and safe early learning and care options were not only important to creating pathways to employment or re-entry into the workforce or higher education, but also to creating safe, nurturing, and stable learning environments for their children. What we heard; however, was that the current system of options was both unresponsive and out of reach due to rising costs under a fee-for-service model and was 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. As will be explored throughout, non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants shared that the current system did not adequately prepare them to work with Indigenous children and parents, nor was it responsive to the lived-realities of Indigenous peoples. To that end, this report intends to properly situate and historicize the present-state of early learning and care for Indigenous parents/caregivers and to provide upstream and downstream recommendations that contribute to addressing poverty experienced by Indigenous peoples in a generation.

The sections to follow explore in detail the legacy of colonialism on the current outcomes and depths of poverty experienced disproportionately by Indigenous peoples and explores the role of substantive equality as the legal underpinning for the provision of more, not equal, levels of support for Indigenous parents/caregivers vis-a-vis early learning and care in the city of Edmonton. The report then moves on to describe the need and methodology of the Talking Circles, and concludes by summarizing the important voices of Indigenous parents/caregivers and non-Indigenous caregivers about their experiences and perspectives in relation to early learning and care in its present state. The report concludes with 10 broad recommendations (5 from Indigenous parents/caregivers, 5 from non-Indigenous caregivers) and 7 sub-recommendations that work to address long-standing gaps in the current system and give voice to a future vision of early learning and care for Indigenous children and their families that is meaningful, responsive, safe, and affordable.

The Talking Circle team remains grateful to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents/caregivers and staff/administrators who shared so openly and honestly so that important changes could be made to the current system of early learning and care that would positively impact the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous peoples.

Introduction

After concluding its mandate in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final reports and 94 Calls to Action as a means of redressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and advancing the process of reconciliation. With a specific focus on Education, Child Welfare, Health, Justice, and Languages & Culture, these Calls to Action bring forward into the national consciousness the understanding that the deep and persistent inequities experienced disproportionately by Indigenous peoples across all social and economic domains are not individual or personal shortcomings/failures, but rather the manifestations of centuries of colonization that has as its sole target, the elimination of Indigenous peoples from the national landscape. As time moves on, and as more and more truth telling about the purposeful erasure of Indigenous peoples gains greater national focus, Canadians are coming to realize that our efforts to redress the legacy and ongoing impacts of colonialism must be systems-focused and meaningful. Indeed, the TRC's Calls to Action make abundantly clear that our individual and collective efforts must first work to understand the history of colonization and its impacts on Indigenous peoples, and second we must work to dismantle the complex ways in which system-level policies, processes, and procedures engage and reinvigorate the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous peoples on a massive scale.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the TRC's important work is the way in which it points our attention to the long-term impact of chronic underfunding of basic programs and services that are available to all others, yet remain deeply inequitable in respect of Indigenous peoples and communities. The discriminatory provision of funding for programs and services has long been chronicled, and is perhaps best articulated by Dr. Cindy Blackstock in her work in the field of Child Welfare, Indigenous Child Poverty, and Jordan's Principle. When examined against the backdrop of the treaty promises and obligations of the crown, it is clear that Indigenous peoples remain positioned at the farthest outer limits of society precisely because of the inequities that exist and the provision of meaningful funding regimes that remain painfully and purposefully out of reach for Indigenous peoples specifically. The impact of these funding limitations has, without question, manufactured the present conditions of "crisis" that exist in education and health¹, the rapid decline in language and culture transmission from one generation to the next, and to the deep income disparity between Indigenous peoples and all others. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2010), it is estimated that addressing the income inequality gap would take approximately 63 years at the current rate of progress² and underlies, if not mediates, the vast overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the Justice and Child Welfare systems.

¹ 30 year gaps are observed in both health and education outcomes compared to non-Indigenous peoples.

² Wilson, D., & McDonald, D. (2010). *The Income Gap Between Aboriginal Peoples and the Rest of Canada*. (Non-Government). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved from <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/income-gap-between-aboriginal-peoples-and-rest-canada>

Articulating the legacy of colonialism and the social location of Indigenous Peoples

As an entry point to understanding one part of the ongoing and multiple crises, in 2011, for example, the Standing Committee Senate Committee on Aboriginal Affairs reported that “First Nations education is in crisis [and] in some First Nations communities a staggering 7 out of 10 First Nations students will not graduate from high school this year” (p. 1). As we now understand, this crisis arises from the historic and ongoing underfunding of First Nations education that undermines Indigenous student success. As the report highlights, and as numerous Auditor General reports attest, First Nation education is underfunded by \$5,000 to \$13,000 on a per-student basis every year. When considered over a lifetime, a single cohort of students will have struggled to receive a comparable education to their non-Indigenous peers that was underfunded between \$1.2M and \$3.12M. On a national-scale, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimates that the federal government spent \$336 million to \$665 million *less* on an annual basis than would be needed to provide education comparable to those students get elsewhere.

It should come as little surprise, then, that the persistently poor educational outcomes among First Nation peoples remain the norm rather than the exception as First Nations communities struggle to provide quality education with what little funding they receive. The success and strength of communities to persist for centuries under these conditions is a testament to their commitment to ensuring the next seven generations have what they need to be successful at home, in the community, and within society as a whole. However, First Nations education is only one small part of the larger whole. Indeed, the persistent underfunding of *all other* basic social and health services, adequate housing, community social infrastructure, and limited access to nutritious foods has led to the highly-correlated outcomes that are observable in the disproportionately low levels of employment, high levels of income-support dependency, poor health status, overrepresentation of Indigenous children in “care”, and high rates of incarceration, to name only a few.

An important and interrelated consideration is the way in which colonial policies and funding regimes (past and present) have made Indigenous-specific poverty intergenerational in nature. For example, colonial policy regimes that prohibit the acquisition of land and housing on reserve, coupled with few meaningful income generating opportunities (i.e., employment), have effectively limited the capacity of Indigenous peoples to generate/accumulate wealth, and/or to leverage assets (e.g. housing) to pass on to the next generation. In this example, the impact of colonial policies and funding regimes amounts to the near total lack of intergenerational wealth-transfer that is considered among the most important and necessary markers of improved social mobility.

To that end, the social location of Indigenous peoples within the Canadian landscape can be understood as the manifestation of multiple, overlapping, and interlocking systems of oppression that have at their core, Indigenous-specific poverty. As countless reports and Indigenous peoples themselves have noted, poverty remains the chief barrier to improved social location, mobility and advancement, and large-scale achievement of Indigenous peoples and communities. When considered against the backdrop of the TRC Calls to Action that call for adequate resources across all social domains, efforts to redress colonialism

and advance the process of reconciliation must then focus on achieving *substantive equality* — more precisely, redressing historical disadvantage experienced by Indigenous peoples as the sole targets of colonialism.

Understanding the role of substantive equality in addressing historical disadvantage among Indigenous peoples and communities

What is Substantive Equality?

According to the Government of Canada, substantive equality refers to:

achievement of true equality in outcomes. It is achieved through equal access, equal opportunity, and, most importantly, the provision of services and benefits in a manner and according to standards that meet any unique needs and circumstances, such as cultural, social, economic and historical disadvantage.

Substantive equality is both a process and an end goal relating to outcomes that seeks to acknowledge and overcome the barriers that have led to the inequality in the first place.

When substantive equality in outcomes does not exist, inequality remains.

Achieving substantive equality for members of a specific group requires the implementation of measures that consider and are tailored to respond to the unique causes of their historical disadvantage as well as their historical, geographical and cultural needs and circumstances.³ (emphasis added)

Sangiuliano⁴ (2015) explores the “juridical conception of substantive equality [as] a distinction between the vertical application of the law by the state to citizens’ activities and horizontal relations among citizens within society that make up the context within which the law’s vertical application is embedded” (p. 609). More specifically, Sangiuliano explains that the horizontal inequalities observed between citizens constitutes a “status hierarchy” (p. 609) and occur not just when there are material disparities in wealth within society, but primarily when some social groups are perceived as having higher or lower degrees of symbolic prestige relative to others. Accompanying these hierarchies are structures of domination and oppression: Members of groups with lower status are subordinated to members of groups with higher status in that the identity associated with the former is defined as it is constructed by the latter. The cultural values of subordinate groups are hence labelled as deviant relative to the norm controlled by dominant groups.

³ Government of Canada, 2018, n.p. Jordan’s Principle – Substantive Equality Principles. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/indigenous-services-canada/services/jordans-principle/jordans-principle-substantive-equality-principles.html>

⁴ Sangiuliano, Anthony Robert. "Substantive Equality As Equal Recognition: A New Theory of Section 15 of the Charter." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 52.2 (2015) : 601-646.
<http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj/vol52/iss2/9>

As it has been widely explored elsewhere (e.g. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), the current social and economic status of Indigenous peoples in Canada arises, in part, by the oppression imposed by Settlers through policy and regulatory mechanisms (explored above), but also through the imposition of the ideological framework that positioned Indigenous peoples as “inferior”, “backwards”, “savage” and in need of salvation by settlers. This powerful ideology has transcended generations of non-Indigenous Canadians and positioned Indigenous peoples as subordinate—or possessing lower symbolic-prestige than non-Indigenous peoples—and has legitimized the oppression of Indigenous peoples on a massive scale.⁵

Substantive Equality & Jordan’s Principle

Important work has been advanced in this regard by Dr. Cindy Blackstock who has championed and worked to hold the federal government accountable for its obligations to fund health services for First Nations children on reserve under Jordan’s Principle.

Jordan’s Principle aims to make sure that all First Nations children can access the products, services and supports they need, when they need them, and supports a wide range of health, social and educational needs that are culturally based and take into full account the historical disadvantage linked to colonization. As this work moves forward, its scope and reach expand to ensure that First Nations children not only have equal access, but that these programs and services meet or exceed those received by non-Indigenous children who have not had to contend with inequitable and discriminatory funding regimes over their lifetimes.

Positive Discrimination & Substantive Equality in Action

The amelioration of the conditions of disadvantage under Jordan’s Principle points to precise ways in which governments and others can ameliorate the conditions of disadvantage in the present context by redressing past injustice. As Canadians, we are afforded the right to ‘positively discriminate’ in the ways noted above by virtue of the Equality Rights enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms under Section 15 (1) and (2) which states,

- **15. (1)** *Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.*
- **Affirmative action programs**
(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are

⁵ Sanguiliano (2015) explores the multiple and multifaceted ways in which the courts have interpreted the application of Substantive Equality vis-a-vis Indigenous peoples. See pages 619-623.

disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Within the Alberta context, the Alberta Human Rights Act similarly provides a mechanism to “positively discriminate” to address historical disadvantage based on race, among other things, and states,

Ameliorative policies, programs and activities

10.1 It is not a contravention of this Act to plan, advertise, adopt or implement a policy, program or activity that,

(a) has as its objective the amelioration of the conditions of disadvantaged persons or classes of disadvantaged persons, including those who are disadvantaged because of their race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation, and

(b) achieves or is reasonably likely to achieve that objective.

Through that lens, it must be understood that the poverty experienced by Indigenous peoples is both distinct and unique and arises specifically from the impacts of colonialism directed at Indigenous peoples and communities. Therefore, efforts to eliminate and redress Indigenous-specific poverty must be informed by the impacts of colonialism that have created the conditions of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous peoples alone, and then secondarily to ameliorate these conditions through measures that are informed and guided by substantive equality.

Having situated Indigenous-specific poverty against the backdrop of colonialism, the next part of this report will examine the work of Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) in understanding the needs, experiences and perspectives of Indigenous parents/caregivers vis-a-vis early learning and care in the city of Edmonton.

Context and Background to the Indigenous Parents and Caregivers Talking Circles on Indigenous Early Learning and Care

Affordable, high-quality childcare has long been a concern for Canadian parents. Data from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives indicates that daycare fees are increasing on an annual basis, and often at a rate that exceeds inflation.⁶ Although high-quality and affordable childcare is a nation-wide concern, it is also a local concern for parents and caregivers in the city of Edmonton. In 2018, for example, the median monthly fee for infants was \$975, \$875 for toddlers, and \$835 for preschoolers—making Edmonton among the 15th and 16th most expensive cities in Canada vis-a-vis child care⁷. In other words, parents and caregivers in Edmonton are spending tens of thousands of after-tax dollars each year

⁶ Macdonald & Friendly, 2019.

⁷ Macdonald & Friendly, 2019.

to ensure that their child(ren) are receiving the best possible care while parents/caregivers pursue education and employment opportunities. That is, assuming parents and caregivers are able to afford to do so.

EndPovertyEdmonton—a community-based initiative with the goals of “advancing reconciliation, the elimination of racism, livable incomes, affordable housing, accessible and affordable transit, affordable and quality child care, and access to mental health services and addiction supports”⁸—has made affordable and quality childcare one of its six “Game Changers.”⁹ As key elements of focus for local organizations, groups, and governments, Game Changers are “larger actions, made up of smaller ones spread across the community, that will have the net result of essential and radical change for those experiencing poverty.”¹⁰

One of EndPovertyEdmonton’s strategic priorities is to “plan and implement a system of early learning and care”¹¹ within the City of Edmonton; this goal resulted in the formation of the Early Learning and Care Steering Committee (ELCSC) (*the current entity is now the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care). Membership of the ELCSC comprised representatives from the City of Edmonton; the provincial ministries of Children’s Services, Health, Education, the Status of Women, and local school boards (Edmonton Public School Board and the Edmonton Catholic School Board); local post-secondary institutions (MacEwan University and the University of Alberta); as well as individuals from the early learning and care field.

The ELCSC’s vision was to design, advocate for, and build an integrated system of early learning and care that:

1. is publicly managed,
2. is supported by public funding,
3. has a workforce that is appropriately educated and well supported,
4. coordinates the range of services needed to support young children and their families, and
5. contributes to eliminating poverty.

One of the guiding principles of ELCSC is that Indigenous perspectives and guidance are required because of the structural conditions created by Edmonton’s, Alberta’s, and Canada’s long history—and ongoing practice—of anti-Indigenous discrimination. Furthermore, efforts to meet the unique and distinct needs of Indigenous children and their families must be grounded in the right to self-determination. Ensuring this right is upheld in all phases of the development of a system of early learning and care in the City of Edmonton is foundational to redressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools, advancing the process of reconciliation, as well as strengthening and supporting Indigenous communities to establish and control their educational systems in their own languages and cultural methods of teaching and learning.

⁸ “About Us,” 2019, para. 1.

⁹ “The First Six,” 2019.

¹⁰ “Game Changers & Goals,” 2019, para. 1.

¹¹ Raymond, 2019, para. 3.

Considering the population demographics of Edmonton, this is of vital importance for four reasons. First, out of the City's total population of 932,546 residents,¹² 76, 205, or 8.17% identified as Aboriginal.¹³ Second, although Aboriginal people equate to roughly 5% of Canada's population, Edmonton has a greater percentage population.¹⁴ Third, Edmonton has the second-highest Indigenous population in Canada.¹⁵ Fourth and finally, the 2016 census reported that 29.2% of the Aboriginal population in Canada is fourteen years of age or younger. This means that the Indigenous population of Edmonton is not only large compared to other locations in the country, but that it is also more likely to comprise children and young people. Unequivocally, then, the design of an integrated system of early learning and care that also meets the unique and distinct needs of Indigenous children and families is not only essential, but also responsive to the dynamic and shifting demographic population of Indigenous peoples in Edmonton and to advancing the process of reconciliation.

Participating in reconciliatory processes has been an important endeavour for organizations, institutions, and governments since the release of the *TRC's Calls to Action* in 2015. Indeed, EndPovertyEdmonton (EPE) named [reconciliation](#) as one of two overarching goals meant to support the six game changers. This is in recognition of three important factors. First, Indigenous peoples experience poverty at rates 2.5 times greater than non-Indigenous peoples.¹⁶ Second, EPE acknowledges that all peoples are treaty people; more specifically, that treaties are "an inheritance, a responsibility, and a relationship"¹⁷ that all peoples should work on together. Third, EPE aims to inform the public on reconciliatory issues, especially those related to poverty and the game changers that impact the well-being and health of Indigenous peoples.

In order to meaningfully implement the *Calls to Action*, the ELCSC has committed to examining and understanding the experiences, needs, and perspectives of Indigenous parents and caregivers vis-a-vis early childhood learning and care within the City of Edmonton. As we've explored above, this commitment is underscored by the growing Indigenous population in the city of Edmonton, but also because Indigenous peoples experience disproportionate rates of poverty compared to the non-Indigenous population. Perhaps most importantly, Indigenous children in nearly every province and territory are more likely to experience poverty than all other Canadian children. Data from the Canadian Poverty Institute indicates that 25% of Indigenous peoples and 40% of Indigenous children live in poverty¹⁸ and in some provinces, such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan, it is estimated that more than 60% of Indigenous children live in poverty—more than 4 times higher than non-Indigenous children. In

¹² Statistics Canada, 2018.

¹³ Statistics Canada, 2017.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada, 2017

¹⁵ Statistics Canada, 2017.

¹⁶ "Reconciliation," 2019.

¹⁷ "Reconciliation," 2019, para. 5.

¹⁸ For First Nations children in particular, the rate of poverty increases to 50% and in some provinces such as Manitoba this rate increases to more than 60% of the total First Nations child population. See Macdonald & Wilson, 2013.

https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2013/06/Poverty_or_Prosperty_Indigenous_Children.pdf

Alberta and B.C., rates of Indigenous childhood poverty are similarly and distressingly high in that more than 50% of Indigenous children in these provinces live in poverty.

Information Gathering

In order to understand the experiences, needs, and perspectives of Indigenous parents/caregivers in the City of Edmonton, a team of individuals sought feedback, insights, experiences, and perspectives from Indigenous parents and early childhood caregivers of Indigenous children. This information was collected for the purpose of informing future policy and direction in respect of planning for and implementing a system of early learning and care.

The accounts, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous parents / caregivers were provided to the Talking Circle Team¹⁹ in confidence via six (6) Talking Circles that took place throughout late winter 2019 and into the early Spring 2019. The Talking Circle Team remains grateful to all of those who participated and interacted in the Talking Circle process.

Talking Circles

Talking Circles are a non-hierarchical practice of dialogue,²⁰ which is part of the traditional knowledge practices of many Indigenous nations. Participants in the Talking Circle sit in a circle facing each other in order to share their thoughts and opinions with others: The circle symbolizes completeness and also signifies that there is equity and belonging amongst all participants.²¹ Talking Circles are considered safe spaces by the Indigenous nations that practice them; knowing this and the ongoing concerns Indigenous peoples have with their cultures and knowledges being ‘collected’ by and for the use of outsiders, participants were told that what they shared with us would only be done in a report with the purpose of advising policy writers.

The purpose and intent of the Talking Circles was to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous children and families were captured to better understand their needs and to ensure that engagement with Indigenous parents was undertaken in culturally-responsive and culturally-safe ways. At present there are no data that reflect the Indigenous population of Edmonton, though there is data and literature for Edmontonians as a whole. Furthermore, there is a need to do this work in a *good way*—working directly with Indigenous peoples in relationship as well as adhering to the credo of "Nothing about us without us." This philosophy focuses on the premise in policy development that policies should not be developed without the complete and explicit participation of persons who would be most affected by the policy.

This principle is also reflected in [Flight - Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework](#):

¹⁹ See Appendix 1: Talking Circle Team

²⁰ "Aboriginal Teaching Strategy," 2009; "Talking Circle," 2019.

²¹ "Aboriginal Teaching Strategy," 2009; "Talking Circle," 2019.

We recognize that curriculum meaning making in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities has not been addressed. We humbly acknowledge that we cannot speak authentically about early learning and child care in these communities, nor can we take the lead on bringing these voices to the Alberta curriculum framework. This will require critical leadership from First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities in Alberta, as well as dedicated resources. (p. IX)

Lastly, the Talking Circles were organized and conducted in this way because they are reflective of the constitutional obligation that Canada and Canadians have to Indigenous peoples as self-determining nations. In other words, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples come together as equals and work together in order to best determine the course of action for the future. Doing work in this way supports efforts to redress past harm in past research processes where Indigenous peoples were actively excluded from designing/controlling research processes about Indigenous peoples and communities, and who have been the targets of destructive research processes that have rendered them as “subjects” to be studied and “fixed”, as opposed to strong, independent, autonomous peoples with agency and control over their lives.

In order to determine the best way to engage with Indigenous families and caregivers in the Edmonton community, the Talking Circle Team approached the End Poverty Edmonton Indigenous Circle for guidance. In 2019, permission to present to the Indigenous Circle was granted and a member of the Talking Circle team presented the proposal to examine Indigenous Early Learning and Care in the City of Edmonton to members of the Indigenous Circle. At this session, Indigenous Circle members generously provided feedback and insights as to whom to engage, when, and how the Talking Circle Team may proceed.

Based on these insights, the Talking Circle Team developed an engagement plan to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and voice were meaningfully captured and included and responsive to the unique and distinct needs of Indigenous peoples. Members of the Talking Circle Team conducted six Talking Circles with partners in the field of early learning and care, government workers, early childhood educator instructors, and parents/caregivers of Indigenous children from March to June 2019.

The focus of these Talking Circles was to inform the development of a system of early learning and care in the City of Edmonton that is responsive to the needs of Indigenous children and their families based on responses to five interrelated questions²²:

- a) What are the experiences of participants within the area of early childhood learning and care?
- b) What is working well for Indigenous families and children receiving early childhood learning and care in Edmonton?
- c) What are the challenges Indigenous children and families are encountering while receiving early childhood learning and care in Edmonton?

²² Not all questions were asked in each of the six Talking Circles because in some instances they did not need to be due to the natural flow of the conversation.

- d) What are possible solutions that could be enacted to help Indigenous families and children receiving early childhood learning and care in Edmonton?
- e) What are your hopes and dreams for the children and families receiving early childhood learning and care in Edmonton?

The feedback, perspectives, insights, and experiences of Talking Circle participants was recorded and later examined and then summarized into a “What We Heard Report.” The WWHR report thoughtfully summarized Talking Circle participant feedback and then organized perspectives, experiences, and future directions into themes. The scope of these themes are articulated in the section to immediately follow.

What We Heard: Overview and Summary of Themes

For each of the six Talking Circles, participants’ feedback, insights, and perspectives were recorded and later reviewed and analyzed for themes across sessions and participants. While each Talking Circle session was unique both in demographic composition and perspective, there were similarities in participant responses to the five interrelated questions (above). These themes are important to explore as they help build a shared understanding of what is wanted and needed from those accessing early childhood learning and care services in Edmonton, and second, they can inform future policy decisions. These themes will be explored in the section to immediately follow.

Preamble to Indigenous Parent/Caregiver Themes

Before describing the dominant themes shared with the Talking Circle Team by Indigenous parents, it is important to properly historicize the dispossession of Indigenous parents from their children as part of the larger colonial project.

As the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) articulates, the Indian Residential School (IRS) system was implemented as **one part** of a coherent policy regime designed principally to “kill the Indian in the child” (TRC, 2015, p. 130) and to accelerate the process of assimilation of Indigenous peoples into the body politic. More specifically, the IRS system was an attack on Indigenous parents who had been deemed “unfit” because of what the Canadian government assumed was an indifference to their children’s education and their future as Canadian citizens. Indeed, as Sir John A. MacDonald told the House of Commons in 1883:

When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men. (emphasis added)

The TRC makes clear that the IRS System was designed and implemented not to educate Indigenous peoples, but rather to break the bond between Indigenous peoples to their culture and identity, and ultimately to each other. In the years since the closure of the last IRS in 1996, Indigenous communities throughout Canada have worked tirelessly to restore and heal the fractured bond between parent and child, within and between members of the community, and to rebuild an education system for Indigenous children that has, as its foundation, Indigenous ways of knowing and being. As the seminal document *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972)²³ outlines, Indigenous parents play a critical role in shaping the values and beliefs of their children and Indigenous parents must, therefore, have control and responsibility of education that not only “reinforce[s] their Indian identity” (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3) but also “provide[s] the training necessary for making a good living in modern society... without causing damage to the child.” (p. 3).

Since then, provincial, federal, and Indigenous governments have worked to restore and decolonize Indigenous education in ways that cause no more harm, and that also reinvigorate and situate parents as the first and most important teachers in the lives of their children. However, and as was described previously, these efforts have been undermined by the persistent and deliberate underfunding of basic programs and services by the federal government to Indigenous peoples and communities. As a result, Indigenous parents / caregivers must contend with the manufactured conditions of crisis, and the persistent and deep levels of poverty, that render Indigenous parents and their children at greater risk of interference by the state and the recirculation of the assumption that Indigenous parents are “unfit.”

Indigenous Child Welfare and the Link to Poverty

In 2018, the former Minister of Indigenous Services Canada, the Honourable Dr. Jane Philpott, called the disproportionate number of indigenous children caught in Canada’s child welfare system a “humanitarian crisis” that echoes the horrors of a residential school system that saw 150,000 Indigenous children forcibly removed from their homes. Despite occupying a small proportion of a province’s entire population, Indigenous children are vastly overrepresented in Canada’s provincial child welfare system - often making up 80 to 100 percent of all children in care (see Figure 1²⁴).

²³ National Indian Brotherhood. (1972) *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Retrieved from: <https://oneca.com/IndianControlofIndianEducation.pdf#targetText=Based%20on%20two%20education%20principles,treaties%20and%20the%20Indian%20Act.>

²⁴ Edwards, Kyle (2019). *First Nations Fighting Foster Care*. <https://www.macleans.ca/first-nations-fighting-foster-care/>

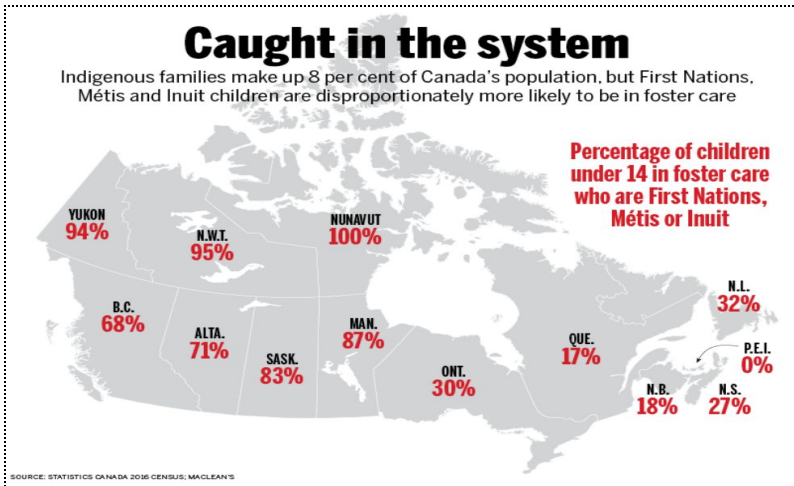


Figure 1: Edwards, (2019) Fighting Foster Care.

Despite decades of ongoing calls for an overhaul of the child welfare system by Indigenous communities, national child welfare statistics paint a stark and increasingly grim picture of the status of the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care. What fails to be recognized and examined, however, is the policy architecture that places Indigenous parents/caregivers and their children at the greatest risk of involvement with the child welfare system in particular.

The New Shape of Colonialism: Indigenous Parenthood and Neglect

A 2018 review of B.C.'s Ministry of Children and Family Development child welfare data shows that nearly "75 percent of the kids in their care by December 2018 were apprehended because of "neglect," a term experts say is too often linked to poverty."²⁵ (see Table 1 and 2)

Types of 'Neglect'	↑ ↓	All ↑ ↓	Indigenous ↑ ↓	Non-Indigenous ↑ ↓
Child abandoned: inadequate provision		2.2%	2.4%	2.0%
Deprived of necessary health care		0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
Neglect by parent with physical harm		24.0%	25.9%	20.5%
Parent unable/unwilling to care		45.6%	46.4%	44.2%
Total		72.2%	75.0%	67.0%

Table 1: Breakdown of Neglect in The B.C. Handbook for Action on Child Abuse and Neglect - for providers.

²⁵ Kamloops Matters. (June 9, 2019) BC Paying Foster Parents Instead of Supporting Struggling Families. <https://www.kamloopsmatters.com/local-news/bc-paying-foster-parents-instead-of-supporting-struggling-families-experts-say-1497921#targetText=As%20of%20December%202018%2C%20nearly,too%20often%20code%20for%20poverty.>

Reasons for CYIC by Court Order for Protection				
As at December 31, 2018				
Reasons For Court Orders	↑↓	All ↑↓	Indigenous ↑↓	Non-Indigenous ↑↓
Emotional harm by parent		3.4%	3.2%	3.9%
Neglect		72.2%	75.0%	67.0%
Other abuse/neglect concerns		3.9%	4.1%	3.5%
Physical harm by parent		8.7%	8.5%	8.9%
Sexual abuse/exploitation by parent		0.7%	0.8%	0.7%
Total		88.9%	91.6%	83.9%

Table 2: Breakdown of the term “neglect”

Approximately 75 percent of Indigenous children in B.C. were apprehended under the auspices of “neglect” which the B.C Handbook for Action on Child Abuse and Neglect (2017)²⁶ defines as:

A failure to provide for a child’s or youth’s basic needs. It involves an act of omission by the parent or guardian, resulting in (or likely to result in) harm to the child or youth. Neglect may include failure to provide food, shelter, basic health care, supervision or protection from risks, to the extent that the child’s or youth’s physical health, development or safety is, or is likely to be, harmed.

While Alberta’s Ministry of Children’s Services does not publish the reasons for child apprehension, it has similar policy architecture and definitions of “neglect” similar to the province of British Columbia. In Alberta:

Neglect is when a parent or guardian **does not provide their child or youth** with basic age-appropriate care such as: **food, clothing, shelter, love and affection, protection from harm...** [and/or when a child/youth displays signs they] may be hungry and steal or hoard food; be underweight or dehydrated; have poor hygiene; wear clothes that are torn, dirty, do not fit or are not right for the season; try to take on adult responsibilities like caring for siblings, doing household tasks or looking after a parent; say that their parents are rarely home or not want to go home; have **medical or dental problems** that will not go away such as infected sores, decayed teeth or difficulty seeing that is not being addressed.²⁷ (emphasis added)

Although the term neglect is both narrowly and broadly defined, it is important to consider the sub-categorizations of “neglect” which includes “unable/unwilling.”²⁸ Importantly, being “unable” refers to the *structural* barriers that limit a parent’s capacity to provide the basic necessities of life including

²⁶ Government of BC. (2017) The B.C. Handbook for Action on Child Abuse and Neglect: For Service Providers https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/public-safety/protecting-children/child-abusepreventionhandbook_serviceprovider.pdf

²⁷ Government of Alberta. (2019) What is Abuse and Neglect. <https://www.alberta.ca/what-is-child-abuse-neglect-and-sexual-exploitation.aspx>

²⁸ It should be noted that prior to 2019, the Alberta Ministry of Children’s Services policy language concerning neglect included “unable/unwilling.” In 2019, these terms were replaced with “does not.”

food, shelter, clothing, whereas “unwilling” refers to a choice to not provide the same. In both instances however, the narrowed definition of “neglect” must be understood against the backdrop of the historical impacts of colonialism on Indigenous-specific poverty that position Indigenous parents/caregivers as more likely to be classified as “neglectful” and viewed as “unfit.”

As explored above, Indigenous parents have been positioned as being incapable of caring for, nurturing, and providing the resources, tools, and supports that would enable the appropriate and meaningful development of their children. However, what has failed to be explored up until the release of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation reports is that colonialism and colonial policy have created a legacy of disadvantage that permeates and underpins the individual and collective social location and the persistent depths of poverty experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. Unlike all others, Indigenous peoples are disproportionately poor, and the cycles of disadvantage continue precisely because of the historical disadvantage that arises from the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. Through that lens, an Indigenous parent, regardless of their home province, is more likely to have children viewed by the child welfare system as “neglected” precisely because Indigenous-specific poverty, Indigenous-specific structural barriers, and anti-Indigenous discrimination delimits an Indigenous parent’s capacity to provide the basic needs defined by a non-Indigenous system.

Indigenous Poverty in the City of Edmonton

According to the Edmonton Social Planning Council’s recent Profile of Poverty in Edmonton (2019), approximately 76,205 individuals identified as Aboriginal according to the 2016 Census²⁹. Among this group,

Métis comprise the largest group with over 39,000 individuals, followed by First Nations at 29,760. For those identifying as Inuit or with Multiple Aboriginal identities, only 500 or so individuals in Edmonton identify with either group. When examining low income prevalence between Aboriginal communities, the highest prevalence is among First Nations at almost three-times the rate compared to those who identified as Non-Aboriginal. While Métis and Inuit each had a lower prevalence as compared to the average among all Aboriginal groups, they are still much higher when compared to those who reported as Non-Aboriginal. (See Figure 3.)

²⁹ The Edmonton Social Planning Council notes that this figure must be underscored by the understanding that this number may represent an “incomplete enumeration [because it does not include data from] Indigenous reserves. In addition, this data does not contextualize the different lived experience of Indigenous populations, and does not capture band support.” It should be further noted that the Census does not seek confirmation of Indigenous identity from those who choose to self-identify - meaning that there may be instances where an individual believes they are Indigenous, yet they have no tribal/community affiliation or ancestral ties to an Indigenous community, yet still self-identify as Indigenous on the Census. Moreover, there may also be those who have legitimate claims to Indigenous status, yet choose not to self-identify for personal reasons. Therefore, statistics about the total population of Indigenous peoples in the city of Edmonton may be over or underestimated and should be used with caution.

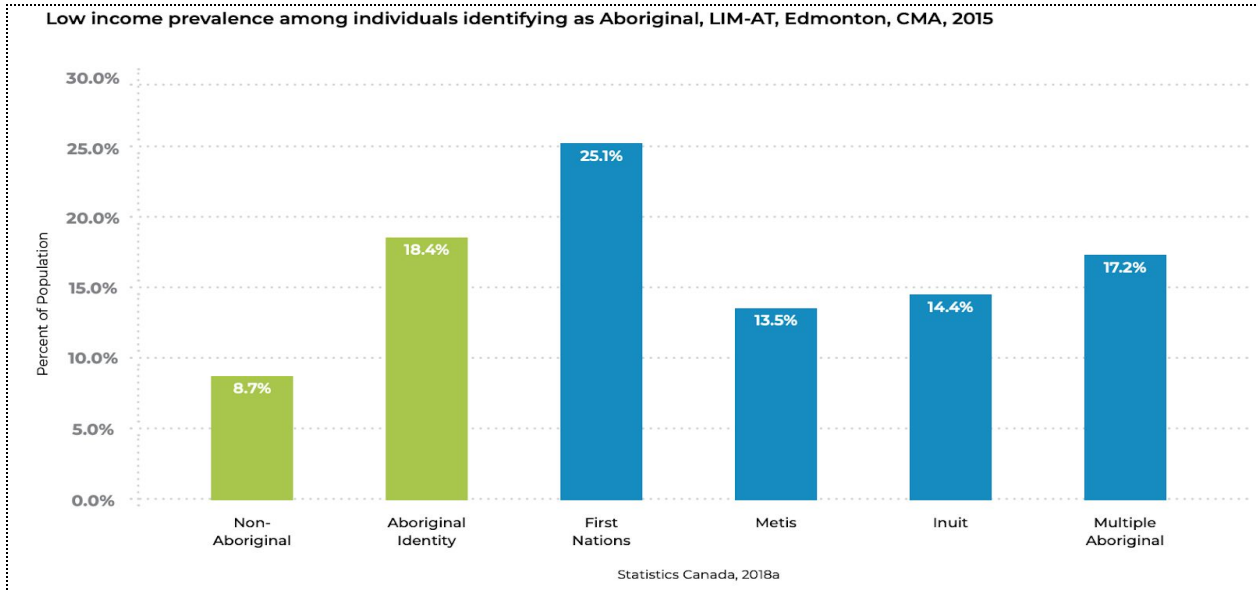


Figure 3: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2019. A Profile of Poverty in the City of Edmonton. P. 14.

Similar to other excluded groups, the prevalence of poverty was much higher among Indigenous women in that “Females identifying as Aboriginal are more than twice as likely to live in lower income compared to their Non-Aboriginal counterparts.” (See Figure 4)

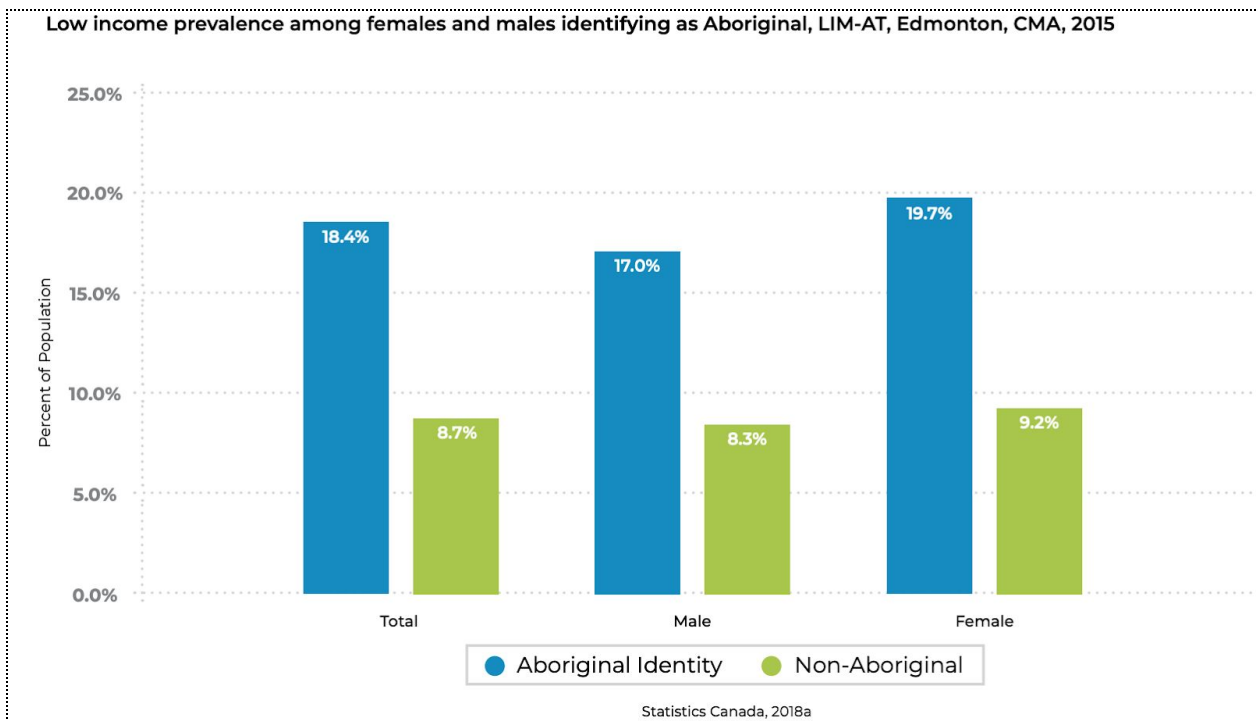


Figure 4: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2019. A Profile of Poverty in the City of Edmonton. P. 15.

As these statistics illuminate, Indigenous peoples, and First Nations people and women in particular, are disproportionately overrepresented among the city’s poor/impooverished population. As noted

previously, colonialism and destructive colonial policies have had, and continue to have, a significant and negative impact on the lives and well-being of Indigenous peoples. These statistics support the understanding that the social location of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples (both locally and nationally) arises from the complex and oppressive nature of colonialism and is maintained through Indigenous-specific poverty.

Sohkâpiskisow: The Strength and Survival of Indigenous Parents/Caregivers

Summary of Themes from Indigenous Parents

Before exploring the dominant themes that emerged from Indigenous parents who participated in the Talking Circles, the Talking Circle Team would like to express our deepest gratitude to Indigenous parents for sharing their experiences, perspectives, insights, strength and hope with us so that together we can work to improve the scope, delivery and ultimately the design of a system of early learning and care in the city of Edmonton to meet their unique and distinct needs. We honour what Indigenous parents shared with us so openly and with such courage so that their children (and their children's children) would have improved experiences and outcomes as Indigenous peoples and where all Indigenous peoples could thrive, as opposed to simply survive. Without question, Indigenous parents held a common vision for early learning and care: a system that acknowledges the complex ways in which colonialism has shaped their current realities, and a just system that is responsive to their needs as Indigenous peoples.

To the Indigenous parents who shared, and whose experience, strength and hope we strive to articulate fully in the sections to follow, thank you. Hiy, hiy.

1. Ability to connect or reconnect with culture.

Indigenous parents described their unique experiences with colonialism and the related impacts to their identities, cultures, traditions, and values. More specifically, Indigenous parents described being intergenerational survivors of the Indian Residential School system, the Sixties Scoop, and/or the Millennial Scoop, and the ways in which these experiences impacted their ability to learn about, or be the recipient of, cultural knowledge, traditions and practices of their communities of origin. Relatedly, Indigenous parents/caregivers spoke about their desire to learn about, and be immersed in, Indigenous cultural teachings in order to:

- a) impart this knowledge to their own children;
- a) Strengthen connections to their child(ren);
- b) Build/strengthen pride in their own, and their children's identities as Indigenous peoples and;
- c) Serve as a protective factor.

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. However, in some of the child care centres, Indigenous parents recognized a number of opportunities provided by their children's child

care provider where parents could actively or passively engage in and learn about Indigenous culture on their own terms. There was also a strong consensus among Indigenous parents that efforts by their child's care provider to include Indigenous culture and teachings into the daily curriculum and activities were important aspects that strengthened their connection to their choice in child care providers.

2. Trepidation at leaving the service they are currently accessing for something else.

The Talking Circle Team spoke with Indigenous parents/caregivers whose children attended child care centers located in schools or within agencies where parents had easy access to their children. In some instances, the child care centre was located in the same building as where the parent was attending school and/or where the parent was receiving a social support and where the service provider focused on supporting the "family's holistic and comprehensive needs" -- that is, where parents would be able to access information (e.g., housing, food, health information) and/or other supports and services to meet the comprehensive needs of the whole family. In that regard, Indigenous parents who participated in the Talking Circles described the benefits of their child care centres that included:

- a) Having easy access to their children (i.e., parents could visit their children during breaks, breast-feeding mothers would be able to break from their studies to breast-feed their children on-site, etc.);
- b) Spending less time travelling to and from the childcare centre and their school or agency provider;
- c) Being able to receive multiple supports, not simply child care, in one location.

Through that lens, parents described their anxiety about "levelling out", or not being able to find or access a similar comprehensive network of support once they had completed their education and/or other programs and moved into post-secondary institutions or the labour market.

3. The importance of relationships to child and caregiver as well as parents and caregivers.

Overwhelmingly, Indigenous parents/caregivers described the importance of a deep and trusting relationship between the childcare provider and themselves as parents. Some Indigenous parents described past negative experiences with child care providers where the relationship was merely "transactional" and where there was little opportunity to build a meaningful and trusting relationship. In these instances, Indigenous parents described:

- a) Anxiety and fear about being misunderstood;
 - i) Indigenous parents overwhelmingly recognized the ever-present threat of intervention by the Ministry of Children's Services (or CS) and the fear they had about their children being apprehended. In some instances, knowledge and fear about child intervention and apprehension was passed down from one generation of mothers to the next -- that is, a mother's mother would describe her own experiences with CS and the need to be "on guard" for CS involvement. In other instances, it is simply a known fact that, for Indigenous parents, CS intervention is almost always something to contend with.

Therefore, parents were afraid of being perceived by daycare providers as neglectful if they sent their children to daycare not properly dressed, or without enough food or basic necessities. Relationships with care providers, therefore, was of central importance so that they could build an understanding in their child care provider of their life and social circumstances as a protective factor against CS involvement.

b) Feeling supported;

- i) Again, Indigenous parents spoke to the ways in which positive and trusting relationships with child care providers were central to receiving the best and most holistic support from child care providers. In some instances, Indigenous parents were able to build strong and trusting relationships with their child's care provider in ways that facilitated sharing information about their life experiences and circumstances. In doing so, Indigenous parents felt as though they were able to be "heard and seen" in an empathetic way and, in return, felt at greater ease with the centre and in being able to ask for additional supports and services to better meet their needs.

4. Transportation concerns (e.g., lack of access, expense).

The majority of Indigenous parents who participated in the Talking Circles had children who attended a child care centre that provided holistic wrap-around supports for the family unit. These "resource hubs" were the most favoured among Indigenous parents as their day-to-day lives were often too consumed with trying to make ends meet through low-paying work that was a notable distance from the child care centre. In many cases, Indigenous parents were able to access health care workers via a resource-hub style child care centre, were able to connect, or be connected with, other programs and services (such as the food bank or housing supports). However, while resource hubs were most favoured among Indigenous parents, for the most part these hubs were located in parts of the city that parents had difficulty accessing. Indigenous parents described their daily commutes on public transportation that lasted, in some cases, more than 2 hours with one or multiple children in tow. After having dropped their children off, Indigenous parents would then have to spend additional time on public transportation to get to work or school - and in some cases, there were Indigenous parents who would spend 2-3 hours per day on public transportation to make sure their needs, and their children's needs were met.

Other parents expressed that the cost of transportation was too high, even after a subsidy, and that the distance they would have to travel to get to where they needed to go on a daily basis was tiring, and an additional stressor. There was a desire among Indigenous parents to have very low cost transportation on routes that took them closer to child care centres that were a "resource hub" where they could access multiple supports and services in one location to meet the needs of their families.

5. Need for Indigenous childcare workers.

The Indigenous population in Canada has risen dramatically over the last two decades and has a growth rate that is four-times higher than the non-Indigenous population. The most recent census (2016)

estimates that the total Indigenous population in Canada to be 1.6 million, which represents nearly 5% of the total Canadian population. In addition to the dramatic rise in population, Indigenous peoples are also entering into post-secondary institutions at historic levels, and into the labour market in increasingly diverse and important ways. More specifically, Indigenous peoples are now, more than ever, occupying fields in the labour market that have historically been underrepresented in terms of Indigenous participation (e.g., banking, entrepreneurship, TV/Radio broadcasting, academia, public service, politicians, hospitality/cooking). As a result, Indigenous children, youth, and those entering the workforce are able to “see themselves” within the labour market in more diverse ways and are able to shape their goals and career aspirations accordingly.

However, Indigenous parents who participated in the Talking Circles spoke to the paucity of Indigenous representation within the field of child care and the corresponding need/desire to have greater Indigenous representation within this field specifically. Importantly, Indigenous parents spoke to the ways in which Indigenous participation and representation in the field of early learning and care served both as a way to build a sense of safety and belonging, and also a protective factor against child intervention. Indigenous parents expressed the understanding/perception that Indigenous early child care workers would be better equipped to understand their lived experiences as Indigenous parents and that the threat of child-intervention/apprehension would be reduced. Moreover, Indigenous parents expressed the importance of Indigenous early childcare workers as having the capacity to share and teach their children about Indigenous culture, traditions, and ways of knowing and being in meaningful ways and in ways that caused no more harm.

6. Need for free, or low-cost, childcare.

Indigenous parents who participated in the Talking Circles had children who attended a child care centre or program that was either subsidized based on low-income status and/or provided at a reduced cost within the scope of the comprehensive programs and services they were receiving as a family unit. All of the Indigenous parents who attended the Talking Circles were female, lone parents, either unemployed or underemployed, and low-income status.

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. Many Indigenous parents noted that often times they would make a “trade off,” that is, they would reduce spending in one or more critical areas of the households needs (e.g., food) in order to pay for the child care that would enable them to work, go to school, or attend other programming. Parents often worried about the relative impact of these choices on how they would be perceived/judged as parents and again worried about child welfare intervention in the event it was believed they weren’t providing sufficiently for their children on their limited, or extremely limited income.

In a few Talking Circles the topic of the Government of Alberta’s \$25/day Day Care initiative was discussed. In most cases, Indigenous parents indicated that they did not live in a neighbourhood with a \$25/day centre, and/or could not travel the distance (no transportation) to have their children attend

one. Perhaps most importantly, Indigenous parents indicated that even with the reduced cost, the fees in a \$25/day daycare would still be too high and, as such, the program was not accessible or relevant to their lived experiences and realities as Indigenous peoples in the city of Edmonton.

7. Struggling to make ends meet as a single mother.

As noted previously, the recent poverty profile of the city of Edmonton indicates that Indigenous-specific poverty is more than two-times higher than that of non-Indigenous peoples. Poverty becomes even more acute for First Nations people in particular, but also for Indigenous women who experience poverty at nearly 3 times the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

These statistics were reflected in the Indigenous-parent participation in the latter three Talking Circle sessions. The majority of Talking Circle participants spoke to their prolonged exposure and experiences with deep levels of poverty as well as the intergenerational nature of Indigenous-specific poverty—that is, their parents were poor, and their parents’ parents were poor. Despite their circumstances, Indigenous parents were hopeful that they would be able to escape poverty through achieving advanced levels of education and by gaining more meaningful and long-term/sustainable employment. While the hope, strength, and resiliency of Indigenous women who participated in the Talking Circles is important to highlight, it is also important to acknowledge and speak to the multiple cost pressures Indigenous parents, and Indigenous single mothers, had to contend with on a monthly basis. Nearly every Indigenous parent spoke to the pressure to provide for their families on an extremely limited income, while trying to improve the trajectory of their lives, and the lives of their children, through employment and/or post-secondary education. Unlike the majority of non-Indigenous parents, Indigenous parents spoke to the fact that they did not have family networks of social or financial support to help bridge the gap between income and expenses and/or social support networks to manage childcare needs during non-standard hours.

However, Indigenous parents who attended schools or program centres that offered a comprehensive network of supports and services, had a greater capacity to improve social location and/or to ease the financial burden of a fixed/limited income and to make ends meet. For example, parents who attended a school with an “in-house” child care facility that also offered housing support (i.e.. dedicated housing and/or housing subsidies), and funding supports (i.e.. parents received a subsidy to attend school) perceived that they had the greatest capacity to pursue and achieve their educational/employment goals and aspirations. On the other hand, Indigenous parents who attended school or a program without a network or “hub” of resources and supports did not feel they had enough social or financial support to be successful over the long term.

8. Understanding of colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous histories, cultures, and languages.

Every Indigenous parent who participated in a Talking Circle described their own unique and distinct experiences with colonialism and the related and intergenerational impacts. Many Indigenous parents spoke to the lasting impacts of Indian Residential schools on the ability of their parents, and their

parents-parents, to hold on to and pass down Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and cultural/ceremonial teachings to their children. As a result, Indigenous parents spoke to their sense of isolation and dislocation from their cultures and communities-of-origin, but also to their overwhelming desire to connect and reconnect with themselves, their communities, and their cultures and languages, and to other Indigenous peoples.

However, Indigenous parents were clear in their desire for child-care centre staff who had knowledge and an understanding of:

- a) History and impacts of ongoing colonialism;
- b) The multifaceted impacts of colonialism on identity, connection to community, culture, and languages based on Indigenous-identity (that is to say, an understanding of the differences between First Nation, Inuit and Métis people; the related social/economic impacts of the proximity of the colonial relationship to social/economic outcomes etc.); and
- c) The manner in which colonialism continues to operate and manifest in social and economic policies in ways that act as barriers to the advancement of Indigenous peoples as a whole.

In articulating this, Indigenous parents were making clear that child care centre staff who possessed this important and foundational knowledge would have greater capacity to work safely and respectfully with Indigenous parents in ways that did no more harm and that properly contextualized their lived-realities and experiences against the backdrop of historical and ongoing colonialism.

9. Importance of non-judgmental treatment by staff.

Related to a number of themes explored previously, Indigenous parents shared a number of positive experiences with child care centres, and child care staff who had taken the time to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with them as parents. As a result, child care staff had a deeper understanding of their social and economic circumstances were less likely to be judgmental and/or make racist or prejudiced assumptions. Indigenous parents also expressed that their current child care arrangements were positive precisely because staff seemed to have an informed and properly historicized understanding of their lived-realities as Indigenous parents, but also because the child care staff took active measures to work against the prevailing assumptions and fictional narratives about the “fitness” of Indigenous parents (and peoples) that permeate nearly every system in society. In doing so, parents felt at ease not only spending time in the centre, but also with leaving their children to be cared for. Staff who had a compassionate, informed, and empathetic understanding of the lived-realities of Indigenous parents were more trusted and valued.

10. Fear of Child and Family Services (e.g., apprehending children, prohibiting visits from children)

No other theme emerged from the Talking Circles quite as powerfully as the fear most, if not all, Indigenous parents had about their children being apprehended by child welfare. As explored previously, the Indigenous child welfare in Canada has reached an epidemic level and has been called a “humanitarian crisis.” In the majority of Canadian provinces, Indigenous children often makes up less

than 5-6% of the total population, yet are disproportionately overrepresented in the Child Welfare system. In the western provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta for example, up to 90% of all children in the child welfare system are Indigenous. As a whole, it is estimated that there are more Indigenous children in care now than there were at the height of the Indian Residential school era. As Dr. Blackstock has reported, between 1989 and 2012, Indigenous children have spent more than 66 million nights in foster care — the equivalent of 180,000 years.

Not surprisingly, Indigenous parents spoke to their legitimate fear of child welfare intervention, but also about losing their children altogether to the system for no other reason than simply because they are Indigenous. Nearly every Indigenous parent who participated in the Talking Circle described their past experiences with the Child Welfare system, either as a child who was apprehended through the 60s scoop or the Millennial Scoop or as a member of a family who had a child or children apprehended in the past, or as a parent whose child (or children) had been apprehended. In describing their experiences, Indigenous parents spoke to the multifaceted ways in which the Child Welfare system was designed in such a way as to (a) keep them away from their children through structural/system-level barriers, or (b) incentivize non-Indigenous peoples to adopt or care for their children.

More specifically, Indigenous parents whose children had been apprehended (who had been returned or who were still in care), spoke to the system-level barriers that prevented them from being able to have their children returned to them. The child welfare policy architecture, for instance, places tremendous pressure on Indigenous parents to adhere to a non-Indigenous standard of “acceptability” which Indigenous parents were unable to achieve due to financial/social barriers and significantly limited income. For instance, in a situation where more than one child was apprehended, Indigenous parents could not be reunited with their children until they had secured a housing unit where each child had their own living space, or room. For single mothers on a limited income with multiple children (e.g., 4 or 5), this translated to having to rent a 4-5 bedroom home, which range in cost from \$1400-\$2000 per month. In the event a single mother was receiving income assistance and housing subsidy, the cost to achieve the level of “acceptability” by child welfare were, in many cases, unattainable and not sustainable.

Indigenous parents also identified that the child welfare system also incentivized non-Indigenous parents to adopt or to become foster parents because of the Alberta Child Welfare policy framework that provided significant financial support to non-Indigenous foster parents. According to the Ministry of Human Services in Alberta³⁰,

Foster parents receive financial compensation to help them care for their foster children, including:

- Basic maintenance allowance – helps cover the day-to-day costs of raising a child, such as food, clothing, shelter, personal care items, general household costs and a spending allowance. This rate is based on the age of the child.

³⁰ <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/foster-kinship-care/15436.html>

- Skill fee – compensates foster parents for their level of training and expertise in caring for a child. This rate is based on the classification of the foster home (Level 1 or 2).
- Reimbursements for the costs of equipment needed for an infant, such as cribs or car seats that are required to accept an infant placement.
- Monthly reimbursements to help compensate for the costs of formula, diapers and baby supplies.
- Medical coverage – covers each foster child
- Any other child-related costs that a foster parent may have to pay and receive reimbursement for.

Indigenous parents described the painful irony that the financial support provided to foster parents through the Ministry of Human Services were for programs, services, and basic needs that were precisely the rationale for which their children were apprehended in the first place. In many ways, the Alberta foster care policy regime financially rewarded foster parents and punished poor or impoverished Indigenous parents and placed Indigenous parents in a vicious cycle of trying to meet a standard of care for their children that was either unattainable, or not reflective or understanding of their lived experiences as Indigenous peoples. More specifically, the policy architecture failed to understand the ways in which the legacy of colonial policies has manufactured generations of impoverished Indigenous parents, families, and communities and, as such, placed them at the highest risk of child welfare intervention. On the other hand, the same system provided more than adequate levels of financial support to foster parents to keep their children in care. The inequitable and discriminatory policy framework and related funding support were a painful reminder of the systemic barriers that they alone could not address.

Within the child care environment, some Indigenous parents spoke to the ways in which trauma-informed child care workers were able to support them as they worked with child welfare staff to have their children returned. These workers were able to support Indigenous parents in navigating the complexity of the child welfare system, and acted as a protective factor by navigating conversations with child welfare workers who were less than sympathetic, abusive, racist, and/or unwilling to work with Indigenous parents in ways that were safe and respectful. In instances where child care centre staff were not trauma-informed, Indigenous parents spoke to their fear of being perceived as “unfit” and to losing their children because they were unable to provide for their children that measured their success against a policy framework that pivoted around an unstated standard of a “nuclear family unit.”

While not directly related to early learning and care, Indigenous parents recognized the multiple spaces and places in which they had to protect themselves and their children from child welfare intervention. Child care, while seemingly benign, was a “space” where the threat of child welfare intervention was real. In the absence of trained, trauma-informed and supportive workers, parents recognized child care as a site where child intervention and apprehension was not only possible, but painfully all too real.

Themes from Non-Indigenous Participants in Talking Circles

The Talking Circle Team remains grateful to the child care centre staff, administrators, and government workers who attended the Talking Circles to share their experiences, insights, and perspectives in working with Indigenous parents and children. In many ways, those who participated echo what Indigenous parents have expressed, namely that child care for Indigenous parents may not be meeting their distinct and unique needs as Indigenous peoples but also may not be contributing to larger efforts directed at redressing the legacy of colonialism and Indian Residential Schools or to advancing the process of reconciliation. The section to immediately follow will explore the dominant themes that emerged from non-Indigenous participants who attended any of the six Talking Circles.

1. Pre-Service & In-Service Professional Development - Learning Along a Professional Continuum

The most dominant theme in nearly every Talking Circle was the desire among child care staff and administrators to learn more about the history and impacts of colonialism, and about Indigenous peoples themselves. Many Talking Circle participants spoke to their desires to “do no harm” and to learn as much as possible in order to best support Indigenous parents and their children and to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Some Talking Circle participants were somewhat aware of the root causes of the deep and persistent levels of poverty, low levels of education and unemployment, and so on that are disproportionately experienced by Indigenous peoples; however, a large percentage of the non-Indigenous cohort did not fully understand the historical and complex underpinnings, nor did they have an understanding of histories, languages, and cultures of Indigenous peoples themselves. For instance, non-Indigenous participants spoke to their lack of understanding about how a First Nations person's experiences and outcomes could vary so widely from a Métis or an Inuit person, and expressed a desire to want to understand the impacts of colonialism in greater depth and detail. In many ways, non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants viewed this knowledge gap as a barrier to being able to meet the needs of Indigenous children, but also to being able to interact with Indigenous parents in ways that are culturally safe, trauma informed, and that advanced the process of reconciliation.

Non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants overwhelmingly identified the need for mandatory pre-service education for all early childhood educators to prepare them for working with Indigenous children in a culturally-safe and trauma-informed way, and that there be a continuum of learning and professional development opportunities as they progressed through their careers to better equip them to develop and deliver early learning and care for and with Indigenous children. Some non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants viewed the latter as an important mechanism to redressing the legacy of colonialism that has dispossessed Indigenous peoples from their ways of knowing and being and were keen to identify Indigenous-specific early learning and care as a good first step in supporting Indigenous peoples in reclaiming their identities, ceremonies, and values/beliefs. Additionally, non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants shared the ways in which their centre has already designed and developed Indigenous-centred child care to better meet the needs of Indigenous parents and children, which

sparked an interest in others to learn more about their processes, and about the design and delivery of early childhood curriculum in their own centres. Indigenous parents echoed this theme and spoke to the value of pre-service and ongoing professional development for early childhood staff that would work to support improved relationships, build trust, reduce stigma and assumptions, and create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for Indigenous parents and their children.

Lastly, non-Indigenous participants spoke to the need for professional development or training that would equip them to inform others, and shape and guide the Indigenization of spaces, places, and curricula in their respective child care centres. Interestingly, non-Indigenous participants who had previously attempted to Indigenize their spaces spoke to the resistance they encountered from others who insisted a focus be placed on ensuring child care be “inclusive” and not focus on the needs of only **one** group, such as Indigenous peoples. The Talking Circle Team does not find this surprising, and in many respects has encountered similar levels of resistance to Indigenous-focused initiatives in the past in other spheres (e.g., postsecondary education). What should be noted here is the persistence and prevalence of a *liberal multicultural narrative* that permeates Canadian society and suggests that no one group take precedence over another because of the myth that suggests “we are all equal.” However, what history has shown is that true equality among and between all Canadians remains elusive for black people, Indigenous peoples, and persons of colour (BIPOC) who, to this day, remain disproportionately discriminated against and have a long and painful history of disadvantage. In that regard, while “inclusion” is important to ensure that no one be left behind, it is similarly important that special care and consideration be given to bringing the voices and experiences of marginalized groups to the surface. Education and training, therefore, about human rights and anti-racism, among other things, was also identified as a necessary part of a continuum of professional development required by pre-service and in-service early childhood professionals to address the impact of liberal multiculturalism and its effect on muting the needs and experiences of marginalized groups.

2. Holistic Care - or the Hub Model of Care

The Talking Circle Team was fortunate enough to have significant representation by staff who worked at child care centres that were part of a larger network of programs and services located in one central location. This “hub model” was the primary resource within the community and provided holistic and wrap-around supports and services to under-served and marginalized people in the city of Edmonton. This resource-hub model was viewed by Indigenous parents as the most responsive model to meet their family’s needs. As explored above, Indigenous parents who participated in the Talking Circles were often low-income or impoverished single-mothers of one or more young children who were unemployed, underemployed, precariously employed, and/or attending school. Further, Indigenous parents shared that the resource hub worked well as it was a “one-stop shop” that met their **whole** family’s needs and where Indigenous parents didn’t need to travel to multiple places throughout the city to get similar services.

For non-Indigenous staff, being able to provide parents with multiple supports and services engendered a more positive interaction with Indigenous parents, and enabled child care staff to establish a foundation of trust and respect with Indigenous parents and their children. However, it was recognized

in nearly every Talking Circle, the “resource-hub models” was the exception as opposed to the rule and that the fee-for-service model dominated the market. It was further recognized that in a fee-for-service dominated market, many Indigenous parents were less likely to pursue education or employment and were more likely to stay out of the labour market until such time as their children entered publicly funded school. In many ways, the fee-for-service model provides little incentive (even at the lowest cost in the market today (i.e., \$25/day or subsidized care)) and is still too great of a threat to keeping families intact while advancing Indigenous women’s employment and education.

Perhaps most notably, child care staff and administrators in resource or hub-models spoke to the success of being able to meet marginalized and Indigenous parents “where they were at,” yet they spoke to the concurrent limitations on space, or the number of spaces, they had available to meet a growing population. Simply put, there are simply not enough hubs, nor spaces within existing hubs, to meet the needs of Indigenous parents/caregivers in the city of Edmonton.

3. The Importance of Relationships

A number of non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants spoke to the difficulty in establishing trusting and meaningful relationships with Indigenous parents and their children. In some instances, non-Indigenous participants identified the root cause of this challenge as being directly related to the long history of anti-Indigenous racism in Alberta and throughout Canada that positioned Indigenous peoples as “lazy”, “undeserving”, and where Indigenous peoples are uncertain about who to trust for fear of being discriminated against. In many ways, Indigenous parents who were hesitant to form relationships were, in effect, establishing their own protective measures to mediate anticipated discrimination. However, some non-Indigenous participants shared their own processes for building and establishing trust with Indigenous parents and spoke to the ways in which positive and meaningful relationships underscored their ability to provide better and more holistic care. This was facilitated by child care centres that were “resource hubs” and were less transactional (i.e., parents pay, the child receives the service, with little to no interaction or relationship with parents occurs) and where child care workers had a deeper understanding of the history and impacts of colonialism.

In other instances, child care centres had taken active measures to “Indigenize” their child care centres and Indigenous parents responded positively to “being seen.” As a result, Indigenous parents indicated that they were more likely to engage with the child care centre and with staff as this indicated to Indigenous parents that the centre had an understanding and acceptance of Indigenous peoples. These active measures were viewed by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants as one way to build and form relationships with parents.

Some Indigenous parents shared that in “seeing themselves” in centres was viewed as a non-threatening way in which they could learn alongside their children. In some centres, Indigenous parents and their children were actively encouraged to attend Indigenous-specific events hosted by the child care centre, and Indigenous parents viewed this as a non-threatening way for them to participate, build their own knowledge and understanding, and to connect with their children on a deeper level. As a result,

Indigenous parents were more likely to engage with the centre and with centre staff, and ultimately to build/establish relationships with centre staff.

4. More Indigenous Child Care Workers

Similar to the perspectives of Indigenous parents/caregivers, non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants spoke to the paucity of trained Indigenous child care workers in the city of Edmonton and the related impacts to being able to develop and deliver culturally safe, responsive, trauma-informed child care that meet the needs of Indigenous children. Questions arose from non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants that sought to understand the root causes of this critical shortage of Indigenous workers. Specifically, non-Indigenous participants wondered whether the shortage could be explained because the profession itself was unappealing to Indigenous peoples, or because the early child development training/education programs lacked relevance, and/or because of the fact that child care workers are generally underpaid as a profession.

These insights generated considerable discussion about the need for an Indigenous Early Childhood Development certificate, program, or diploma in order to attract Indigenous peoples into the profession. This would, in their opinion, begin to address two major challenges within the field of early learning and care: (1) the critical shortage of Indigenous workers/staff, and (2) the known knowledge gap about Indigenous-specific programming and/or training that would meet the distinct needs of Indigenous children and their families. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants identified the need and desire for Indigenous Early Learning and Development programming and/or certification as a meaningful step to begin addressing the early learning and development needs of Indigenous children in the city of Edmonton.

5. Poor availability and accessibility of child care spaces

Non-Indigenous participants spoke to the positive benefits of working in a resource or hub-model child care centre in terms of meeting the holistic needs of Indigenous families. However, they further noted the paucity of “hubs” in the city and that the number of spaces in the hub centres was too small to meet demand. Non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants both identified the critical shortage of hub-model child care spaces in the city of Edmonton and the related impacts to the persistent levels of poverty, underemployment, and under-enrolment in post-secondary education by Indigenous women. A number of Indigenous women spoke to the “trade-off” that arose because they could not access an affordable, or very low cost child care option, and the impact this had on their decision to stay out of the workforce, or not return to school until their children were eligible for publicly funded kindergarten. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants noted that the static number of “hub-spaces” coupled with the rise in the number of fee-for-service child care centres in the city of Edmonton, has made accessibility and affordability of child care nearly impossible for Indigenous women and their children.

Conclusion

While quality and affordable child care plays one important part of a network of Game Changers that intend to result in essential and radical change for those experiencing poverty, it remains out of reach, lacks relevance, safety, or affordability for Indigenous parents/caregivers specifically. As Indigenous parents/caregivers shared with the Talking Circle team, early learning and care holds both promise and risk in its present formation, and that important structural and systemic changes are necessary to the current system of child care in order to redress the legacy of colonialism, advance the process of reconciliation, and to affect radical change to Indigenous-specific poverty in particular.

While some common themes emerged (see next section) across Indigenous and non-Indigenous Talking Circle participants (e.g. pre-service mandatory training etc), Indigenous parents made clear that early learning and care that was responsive to their lived-realities as Indigenous peoples played a critical role in creating pathways out of poverty, and towards greater opportunity in achieving higher levels of education and more meaningful employment that would positively affect the trajectory of their own lives, and the lives of their children.

The recommendations summarized throughout this report are both bold and responsive. We recognize that while some may be achievable in the short term, many will take considerable effort, resources, and collaboration and commitment across multiple levels of government to make radical and lasting change to the depths and persistence of Indigenous-specific poverty. We further recognize; however, that while these changes won't be easy, they are critical to redressing the legacy of colonialism embedded within the realm of early learning and care, to advancing the process of reconciliation, and to ensuring that the system does no more harm. As Dr. Cindy Blackstock (2016) so aptly states, the efforts we undertake today to support Indigenous children and their families, means we create the conditions where Indigenous parents can "raise a generation of Indigenous children who never have to recover from their childhoods again."

Recommendations

Indigenous Parents/Caregivers

1. Indigenizing early childhood spaces and places.
 - a. This includes creating spaces that are culturally safe, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed to better meet the needs of Indigenous parents and their children.
 - b. It also includes adapting spaces to be reflective of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and to creating daily curriculum that weaved in Indigenous culture, traditions, and perspectives.
2. Increasing the number of resource-hub child-care centres where the holistic needs of the family unit are met through comprehensive programs and services.
 - a. This includes working with other agencies to support the income, housing, transportation needs of Indigenous parents/caregivers.
3. Providing very low-cost or no cost child care.
4. Active training, development, and meaningful recruitment of Indigenous peoples into the field of Early Learning and Care.
5. Mandatory pre-service training and a continuum of in-service training for Early Childhood professionals on the history and legacies of colonialism, Indigenous peoples' histories and perspectives, and Indigenizing spaces, places, and curriculum.
 - a. Upstream recommendation for the training and development of Ministry of Children's Services personnel on: (a) the impact and legacies of colonialism on Indigenous peoples, and (b) decolonizing existing Child Welfare policy that dispossess Indigenous parents.
 - b. Upstream recommendation to the Ministry of Children's Services to review, examine, and make changes to child welfare policy frameworks, including but not limited to the [*Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*](#), to:
 - i. ensure they are responsive to the lived-realities of Indigenous parents/caregivers and
 - ii. Ensure these policies and legislative frameworks take into account the historical disadvantage arising from the impacts of colonialism that disproportionately place Indigenous children and their parents/caregivers at risk of intervention and apprehension.

Non-Indigenous Caregivers and Administrators

1. Mandatory pre-service and in-service training for all early childhood professionals
 - a. Scope to include the histories, perspectives and contributions of Indigenous peoples; the legacies of colonialism; anti-racist and trauma-informed practice for working safely and respectfully with Indigenous peoples.
 - b. This also includes developing a longitudinal development continuum, competency model, and ECD professional quality standards.
2. Enhancing the availability of low-cost or no-cost spaces and accessibility of "Resource-hub Models" of care.

3. Increased access to resources and funding to Indigenize child care spaces and curriculum as a mechanism to building safe and trusting relationships with Indigenous parents and caregivers.
4. Targeted strategies to increase the number of Indigenous early child care workers.
5. Developing an Indigenous Early Learning and Care certificate or diploma program to better meet the needs of Indigenous children and their families.

Appendix 1: Talking Circle Team

Tibetha Stonechild (Kemble)

Tibetha is a PhD Candidate in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta and her research focuses on decolonizing the philosophies of early childhood. Tibetha's role in this work was to co-facilitate Talking Circles One, Two, and Three, and lead Talking Circles Four, Five, and Six.

Danielle Lorenz

Danielle is a PhD Candidate in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta; her research focuses on K-12 teacher training and settler colonialism in Alberta. Danielle's role in this work was to transcribe the conversations at Talking Circles One through Four and Six, as well as to write the What We Heard report that informed and provided the foundation for this report.

Chelsea Freeborn

Chelsea is a PhD student at the University of Alberta and a faculty member in Grant MacEwan University's Early Learning and Child Care program. Chelsea's role in this work was to co-facilitate Talking Circles One, Two, and Three.

Heather Raymond

Dr. Heather Raymond completed her PhD at the University of Alberta in 2002. Dr. Raymond is currently working with EndPovertyEdmonton supporting the Early Learning and Care Steering Committee. Dr. Raymond's role in this work was to transcribe the conversation at Talking Circle Five and to coordinate and facilitate meeting spaces for the Talking Circles to occur.

Appendix 2: Talking Circle - Demographics

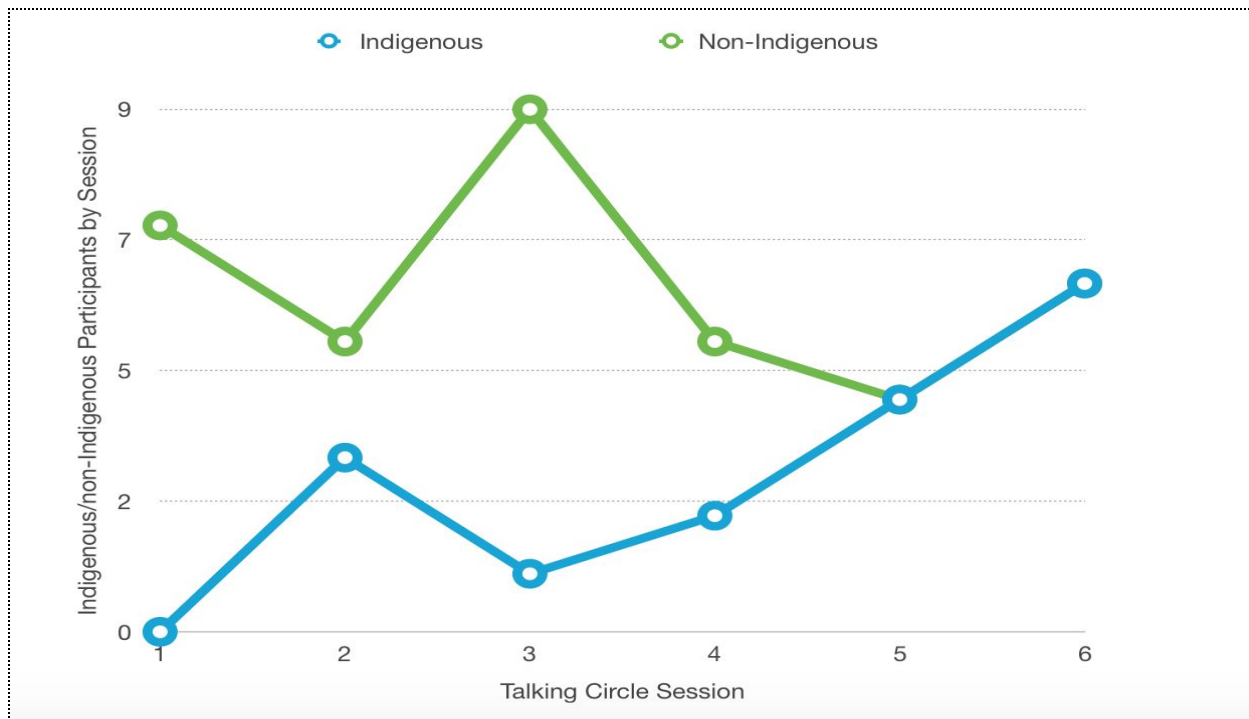
Talking Circle Demography: Gender

TALKING CIRCLE	WOMEN	MEN
1	7	1
2	7	0
3	9	1
4	7	0
5	8	0
6	12	0
Total	50	2



Talking Circle Demography: Indigeneity

TALKING CIRCLE	INDIGENOUS	NON-INDIGENOUS
1	0	7
2	3	5
3	1	9
4	2	5
5	4	4
6	6	6
Total	16	36



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