

# **Closing the Education Gap: A Case for Aboriginal Early Childhood Education in Canada, A Look at the Aboriginal Headstart Program**

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## **Abstract**

This paper raises awareness concerning the education gap between Aboriginal youth and the non-Aboriginal youth population in Canada. It argues that the historical consequences of colonialism that resulted in diminished sense of self-worth, self-determination, and culture have placed Aboriginals at the low-end of the socio-economic strata. This continuing phenomenon has meant that Aboriginal youth perform far worse than non-Aboriginals in terms of their ability to obtain higher education and employment. Given this, using welfare-state theory and Indigenous-based theory I argue that early-childhood education which is culturally sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal children and controlled by Aboriginal communities will help to remedy and close the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. The paper concludes with solutions to rectify the situation in Canada. Specifically, it discusses the current government initiative, Aboriginal Head Start (AHS), that has been making significant strides throughout the Aboriginal community.

**Key words:** Self-determination, culturally appropriate, Aboriginal control

## **Author's Note**

Mai Nguyen is a PhD candidate at York University. She conducts research in the area of public administration and public policy focusing more specifically on Aboriginals in the administrative process. Her current thesis looks at the role of public consultations between the public sector and Aboriginals in effecting Indigenous-based change.

### **Résumé**

Cet article vise à sensibiliser la population sur le faible niveau d'instruction chez les jeunes autochtones au Canada et suggère comment la situation pourrait être améliorée. Il soutient que les conséquences historiques du colonialisme, qui a abouti à la diminution du sentiment d'estime de soi, d'auto-détermination, et du sens de la culture, ont placé les autochtones au bas de l'échelle socio-économique. Une des conséquences de ce phénomène continue est que les jeunes autochtones réussissent moins bien que les non- autochtones en termes de leurs capacités à obtenir une éducation supérieure et un emploi. Compte tenu de cela, en utilisant la théorie de l'État-providence et la théorie autochtone, je soutiens qu'une éducation préscolaire culturellement sensible et adaptée aux besoins des enfants autochtones, et contrôlée par les communautés autochtones, permettrait de réduire et de remédier à l'écart entre les jeunes autochtones et les non-autochtones. L'article conclut sur des solutions pour rectifier la situation au Canada. Plus précisément, il traite de l'initiative actuelle du gouvernement, le programme d'aide préscolaire aux autochtones, qui a été créé pour essayer de remédier à la situation désastreuse de l'éducation des autochtones au Canada.

### **Note de l'auteur**

Mai Nguyen est candidate au doctorat à l'Université York. Elle mène des recherches dans le domaine de l'administration publique et des politiques publiques se concentrant plus particulièrement sur les populations autochtones dans le processus administratif. Sa thèse en cours examine le rôle des consultations publiques menées entre le secteur public et les populations autochtones pour introduire des changements en faveur des autochtones .

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### **Introduction**

Welfare state theory postulates that in order for countries to be economically competitive and successful, governments must increase human capital by providing their citizens with the tools necessary to become productive workers and citizens. One of the crucial tools is education, a right that should be afforded to all citizens. According to some welfare-state theorists (T.H Marshall, 1992; Gosta Esping-Andersen, 2002) education is the one social service that can alleviate inherent disadvantages bestowed upon the marginalized of society. More importantly, state investment in early childhood education will diminish welfare problems amongst future adults — problems such as unemployment, low pay, housing, etc. (Esping-Anderson, 51). In the Canadian case, Aboriginals largely occupy this socio-economic position. As a colonized minority group they suffer daily tragedies such as chronic unemployment, low wages, and social exclusion. These tragedies are attributed to the historical consequence of colonialism; specifically, the tragedies of military, missionary, and bureaucratic interventions that gradually stripped Indigenous nations of their chosen destinies (Daes 2000, p.6). It is on this point that this paper argues that state-funded early childhood education that focuses on the cultural needs of Aboriginal children and their families will help alleviate their disadvantaged position in society while simultaneously restoring Aboriginal identity and self-worth. This is embedded in the theoretical framework of Indigenous scholars (Jo-ann Archibald, Marie Battiste, Linda Goulet, etc.) who argue that Eurocentric education (education focused on the belief systems of the colonizers while simultaneously rejecting and ignoring the world-views, values, and languages of Aboriginals) cannot rectify the consequences of colonialism on its own. Instead, Aboriginal education needs to be reframed in an Aboriginal context that will provide Aboriginal children with a sense of self-worth. That is, a sense of who they are and where they come from, which will impact community self-government and self-determination.

In addition, this paper analyzes data from Statistics Canada, which will provide a recent snapshot of the non-reserve Aboriginal population in Canada. This portrait of the Aboriginal population sheds light upon the disparities between Aboriginals and the general Canadian population, disparities that can be rectified through preventive strategies, such as Aboriginal-specific early childcare. Recognizing the eminent need for this, in the 1990s the Canadian Federal government began implementing preventative programs like the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) initiative that focused on the culturally-specific needs of Aboriginal children and their families. This paper will examine the success of AHS and the obstacles facing Aboriginal youth on their journey to higher education. In the end, this paper concludes that early Aboriginal childhood education is crucial in the development of self-actualization and self-worth for Aboriginal youth. Improvement in these facets of life will bring greater results to the Aboriginal community at large.

### **The Unfortunate History of Colonization: A Look At the Aboriginal Population Yesterday and Today**

It is widely known that Canadian Aboriginals (the term Aboriginal and Indigenous will be used interchangeably) are the most disadvantaged and marginalized group in Canadian society. From shorter life expectancy rates to higher crime rates, Aboriginal communities carry a disproportionate burden of society's troubles. The marginalization that is experienced by Aboriginal groups diminishes the groups' capacity to become meaningful participants of Canadian society. This phenomena is not new but one that has deep roots in Canadian history. The genocide of Aboriginal culture via British colonization has ultimately weakened Aboriginal groups' ability for self-determination and has led to their marginalization. The question then is how did this come to be?

The Crown in Canada has been instrumental in the destruction of Aboriginal communities, economies, and culture. In the tradition of empire-building, the British stripped Aboriginals of their land, attempted to assimilate the Indigenous population and change the power relations within Aboriginal societies. By doing this the Crown changed what was once an egalitarian society into a class-based society and consequently altering the livelihood of Aboriginal communities. More specifically, the engine behind empire building — the expansion of the market economy — changed Aboriginal communities towards the capitalist variety. That is, Aboriginal communities began to lose their self-sufficiency and became dependent on the colonizers for their livelihood. More importantly, Aboriginal culture began to change and erode.

To contextualize, the Crown committed cultural genocide through its assimilation processes stripping Aboriginals of their cultures and, more importantly, their language, which is at the crux of Aboriginal culture. Language, through oral tradition was the most important mode of communication for Aboriginals. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs states, "Language is inextricably linked to culture. It expresses cultural concepts and our understanding of the environment we live in. Put simply, language expresses what matters to society" (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 25). Without an official written language, Aboriginals depended on storytelling and oral tradition to transmit culture, customs, and to convey information (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 26). According to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC previously DIAND), "Among Canada's native peoples, wise and deliberate speech was an art form and honoured tradition...both language and gestures were used to communicate information and images" (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 7). The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) further illustrates this point when stating that,

Our Native language embodies a value system about how we ought to live and relate to each other...It gives a name to relations among kin, to roles and responsibilities among family members, to ties with the broader clan group...There are no English words for these relationships...Now, if you destroy our languages you not only break down these relationships, but you also destroy other aspects of our Indian way of life and culture, especially those that describe man's connection with nature, the Great Spirit, and the

order of things. Without our languages, we will cease to exist as separate people. (AFN, 1992, p.14)

It is these traditions that ensured the livelihood of Aboriginal culture and community daily and intergenerational.

Unfortunately, assimilation processes jeopardized the Aboriginal way of life by forcing a Eurocentric agenda upon Aboriginal communities. As Battiste states:

For a century or more, DIAND attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal world-views, cultures, and languages. It defined education as transforming the mind of Aboriginal youth rather than educating it. Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youth were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages, and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. The outcome was the gradual loss of these world-views, languages, and cultures and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities (Battiste, viii)

The result of this historical relationship between Aboriginals and the Crown — that involved the dispossession of land, removal of Aboriginal rights and culture, and the destruction of their economies — has been that Aboriginals suffer higher levels of poverty, chronic illnesses and unemployment (to name a few), compared to that of the general Canadian population (Brady, 364).

### **Aboriginal Education Yesterday and Today: A Historical and Statistical Analysis**

Many scholars (David Walters, Jerry White, Paul Maxim, and HelmarDrost) suggest that Aboriginal inability to resolve these problems is caused by lack of education, a consequence of colonization. As Helmar Drost states, “Unemployment among Aboriginals is higher than for any other ethnic group in Canadian Society. One of the factors considered being a major obstacle for Canadian Aboriginals in finding and securing employment is their relatively low level of general education and occupational skills” (Drost, 52-53). Therefore, to gauge the severity of the state of Aboriginal education in Canada and for analytical purposes, it is useful to sketch a portrait of the Aboriginal population in Canada. For the most part, this section will use 2006 and 2007 data from *Statistics Canada* to illustrate the education gaps between the Aboriginal and Canadian population. These data will demonstrate that the higher the level of educational attainment, the greater the chances of employment. However, even with this in mind, Aboriginal youth continue to fall behind their Canadian counterparts.

According to Statistics Canada in the *2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey* (APS), there are approximately 837,475 off-reserve Aboriginals with 623,470 Aboriginals living

in urban areas, from a group that has surpassed the one million mark (APS, 2006). It is estimated that 244,475 of the off-reserve Aboriginals are children aged 14 and under with 175,410 living in urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2006). More importantly, the Public Health Agency of Canada notes that, “Currently 38 percent of Aboriginal people are children under the age of 15. This is proportionally twice as high as the rest of the Canadian population” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008). Given this, the future and viability of the Aboriginal community largely depends on the future of Aboriginal children. As the 1996 federal government’s *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) states,

We believe that the Creator has entrusted us with the sacred responsibility to raise our families...for we realize healthy families are the foundation of strong and healthy communities. The future of our communities lies with our children, who need to be nurtured within their families and communities” (RCAP, 1996).

Unfortunately, upon examination of the data the future of Aboriginal children come into question because comparatively, they continue to lag behind the general youth population.

According to the 2007 Statistics Canada research paper, “The Aboriginal Labour Force Analysis Series,” prepared by Dominique Perusse, Aboriginal youth do not fare as well compared to the general population in terms of education. For instance, 43 percent of Aboriginal youth (ages 15-24) were enrolled in school compared to 50 percent of non-Aboriginal youth (Perusse, 19). In addition, it is estimated that two-thirds of the Aboriginal population over the age of 15 have no post-secondary qualifications compared to one-half of the Canadian population over the age of 15 (Statistics Canada, 2001). In general, amongst off-reserve Aboriginals ages 20 to 24, 48 percent have not completed secondary school while that number is only 26 percent for the non-Aboriginal counterpart in the same age group (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Table 1.

*Aboriginal education in Canada*

AGES 15-24	ENROLLED IN SCHOOL	NO SECONDARY EDUCATION	NO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION
ABORIGINALS	43%	48%	66.6%
NON-ABORIGINALS	50%	26%	50%

In terms of employment, Perusse reveals that 24.1 percent of off-reserve Aboriginals, ages 15 to 24, without a high school diploma were reported to be

unemployed (Perusse, 07). However, it is increasingly concerning that even with equivalent education the gaps persist. Perusse states, “Aboriginal people with a post-secondary certificate or diploma or a university degree had an employment rate 6.3 percentage points lower than their non-Aboriginal counterpart” (Perusse, 16). While unemployment for Aboriginals ages 15-24 who possessed at least a high school diploma and some post-secondary education, was only 12.2 percent but that number was only 10 percent for the same non-Aboriginal group (Perusse, 07). Even when examining statistics between Aboriginal groups the gaps continue. As Perusse notes,

Education also tends to reduce the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people. The difference in unemployment rates is especially pronounced between those who do not have a high school diploma and those who have one; in 2007, the unemployment rate between these two Aboriginal groups was 14.2% compared to 8.0% (Perusse, 16).

These data strongly suggest that Aboriginal youth can improve their life chances by prolonging their education. Unfortunately, what is also revealed from these statistics is that Aboriginals continue to lag behind their non-Aboriginal counterparts in terms of employability even when education levels remain the same. The question then is what has prevented Aboriginals from achieving higher education and higher employability? Part of the answer lies with the fact that historically Aboriginal education has been controlled by the federal government.

The evolution of Aboriginal education policy in Canada stems from the *British North America Act of 1867* and the *Indian Act of 1876* (Carr-Stewart, 132). These Acts gave the federal government jurisdiction over Aboriginal education policies even though education is an area normally controlled by provincial governments. According to Patrick Brady, the federal government’s role in Aboriginal education can be characterized by three distinct phases (Brady, 1995). The first phase, and possibly the most infamous, was the creation of residential school in which the federal government entered into agreements with numerous Christian denominations to create industrial schools that would partake in the education of Aboriginal children by teaching them the Euro-Canadian way of life (Brady, 350). Aboriginal children were sent away from their homes and forced to reside at the residential schools for extended periods of time and later it was reported that many endured mental, physical, and emotional abuse, ultimately hindering their development. More specifically, Aboriginal families were only allowed to participate in their children’s education through consent to send their children away. As Jo-ann Archibald (1995) states,

This consent was all the involvement that First Nations people were allowed in the education of their children. Religious educational aims focused on conversion and gradual civilization. The ‘knowledge of most worth’ was considered to be Catholicism, English, and later, the general subjects of grammar, spelling, and arithmetic, in this order...Elders and

parents were beginning to see inimical attitudes being instilled in their children. Their First Nations language was forbidden in school and their strong cultural beliefs were dismissed as mere superstition (Archibald, 293).

Because of this, First Nations parents began to fight back through absenteeism as a form of resistance (Archibald, 293). Though these schools taught industrial skills, many Aboriginal students could not obtain employment in their fields upon leaving school and therefore, returned to reserves (Archibald, 294). This arrangement existed until after World War Two (Brady, 350).

The period after World War Two signified the beginning of phase two and was marked by the new *Indian Act of 1951* (Brady, 351). This Act allowed the federal government to enter into agreements with provincial governments and permitted Aboriginal children to attend provincially operated schools but these schools were culturally insensitive to the needs of Aboriginal children. As Archibald states,

little attention was paid to the cultural differences of First Nations children...Cultural differences were later seen as the cause of education problems among First Nations children. Culturally deprived students were helped through remedial or readiness programs which actually separated First Nations children from regular classroom experiences. This created additional social and self-concept barriers for them (Archibald, 295).

Discerningly, Brady notes that the outcomes of these agreements were significant. He states that, “the percentage of Native children attending provincial schools rose from 27 percent in 1963 (Frideres, 1983 cited in Brady, 315) to 56.3 percent in 1979” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1988 cited in Brady, 351). During this time many Aboriginal children were placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes or adopted out. This resulted in a great sense of lost identity for these Aboriginal children (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008).

The third phase was characterized by the *Indian Education Paper Phase One of 1973* that emphasized the need to improve Aboriginal education and transfer control of education back to Aboriginal society (Brady, 351). Brady notes that since the passage of this policy, the enrolment in First Nations-operated schools has almost doubled from 26 percent to 44 percent during the period from 1985 to 1991 (Brady, 351). However, it should be noted that these numbers reflect only enrolment among status Indians who live on-reserve. Since 1992 it is estimated that approximately 75 percent to 80 percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children attend non-Native schools controlled by the provincial governments (Brady, 351). This is concerning because the attendance of Aboriginal students in non-Native schools or under non-Aboriginal controlled curriculum can be detrimental to the students’ success. As Battiste (1998) states,

The federal government has entered into agreements with First Nations



bands that require them to adopt provincial curricula as a minimum requirement to assume control of their education. In almost all of these provinces, these curricula are developed away from Aboriginal communities, without Aboriginal input, and written in English. In effect, the curricula serve as another colonial instrument to deprive Aboriginal communities of their knowledge, languages, and cultures. Without Aboriginal languages and knowledge, Aboriginal communities can do little to recover their losses or transform their nations using their legitimate knowledge and languages. (p.1).

Historically, the government of Canada has been instrumental in deciding the faith of Aboriginal children through its education policies, which, as this paper argues, has resulted in the failure of Aboriginals to achieve higher education and employment compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

### **Understanding State-Funded and Culturally-Appropriate Education – Theoretical Framework**

Marie Battiste argues that a space for Indigenous knowledge (IK) needs to be carved out in educational institutions. The lack of such a space has meant that Aboriginal education continues to be Eurocentric. As Battiste (2008) states, “This struggle demands an urgent agenda to effect educational reform...and to protect and enhance Indigenous heritage and livelihood damaged by colonial assimilation projects, neglect, diminishment, and racism” (85). In the last 40 years this has come to the fore-front in regards to education policies. For example, in 1969 the federal government released its *White Paper Policy* that sought to transfer federal responsibility for First Nations education on reserves to the provinces (Battiste, 1995, viii). Ultimately the federal government continued to want all Aboriginal students to become absorbed into provincial systems and mainstream society (Battiste, 1995, viii). In objection to this, Aboriginal communities began to mobilize and, according to Battiste, “argued that Aboriginal communities themselves had the right, based on their Aboriginal status and treaties, to administer educational programs for their children” (1995, viii). The acceptance of IK into mainstream education began taking place. As Battiste states:

Indigenous Knowledge is being revealed both nationally and internationally as an extensive and valuable knowledge system. It is not only a remedy to the continuing failures of the education system, but also the opening to understanding distinct knowledges that the twenty-first century education must learn to operate in...IK provides a positive approach to dealing with self-doubt and low self-esteem among Indigenous populations...(Battiste, 2008, 87).

This is the minimum standard needed for the survival, dignity, and well-being of the Indigenous peoples (Battiste, 2008, 89).

These shortfalls in the education system prevent Aboriginal children from developing a strong sense of self and developing greater cognitive skills (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008). Aboriginal controlled and culturally appropriate education curricula are both important features of Aboriginal society and must be taken into account during the policy-design process. More importantly, focus on these twin issues must begin at the early stages of development where a sense of identity begins to emerge. More recently there has been an emphasis on the need for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal children's education. Brady notes, "Native parents in both Canada and the United States are often limited in their ability to influence their children's education, particularly when their children attend schools in non-Native education systems. The key to Native control of Native education would therefore appear to lie in having Native children attend educational institutions controlled by Native peoples" (Brady, 357).

This has been acknowledged and recognized by the Canadian state. RCAP recommends that "the federal, provincial, and territorial governments co-operate to support an integrated early childhood funding strategy that...c) maximizes Aboriginal control over service design and administration...and e) promotes parental involvement and choice in early childhood education options" (RCAP, 1996, cited in Child Care Canada, 1998). These recommendations will assist Aboriginal children in developing a greater sense of self and identity. As Public Health Agency of Canada states,

We are constantly developing our identity, from birth to the end of our lives. We build it based on our relationships to relatives, friends, community, geography, language and other social factors. Identity plays a key role in healthy child development. When a child feels a sense of belonging to family, community and peers he or she is better able to deal with adversity. The importance of identity is particularly true for Aboriginal children's healthy development since community and belonging are such important parts of their cultures' belief systems. (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008)

More importantly, Goulet, Dressyman-Lavallee, and MacCleod (2001) state that,

Different Aboriginal organizations have identified the need for early childhood programs and child care controlled by Aboriginal people. Studies by the Assembly of First Nations, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and the National Association of Friendship Centres all advocate for childcare for a variety of reasons. First is the preparation of children for academic success...But beyond that, they also see early childhood programs as a necessary support to Aboriginal parents striving to overcome a life of poverty through employment or training...Most of all, they see quality early childhood education "as a means of reinforcing Aboriginal identity, instilling the values, attitudes and behaviours that give expression to Aboriginal cultures (RCAP, Vol. 3, 1996, 449). (p. 137-138)

The desire to preserve Aboriginal culture means that education policies must be returned to Aboriginal peoples as a form of self-government and must reflect a holistic approach that includes not only governments but also Aboriginal families, elders, and the Aboriginal community as a whole (Turcotte & Zhao, 2004, p.11). Holistic control over Aboriginal education will lead to a culturally appropriate and acceptable education curriculum and therefore, lead to better results.

Statistical data has long supported this finding. For example, uncovered in the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) is the connection between family and language retention. That is, the more children could rely on numerous sources for learning — such as parents, grandparents, school teachers, and extended family — the more likely they were to speak and understand an Aboriginal language (APS, 2001 cited in Turcotte & Zhao, 19). As the survey reveals,

38 percent of children who can rely on three sources of assistance are able to speak and understand an Aboriginal language well. This proportion rises to 54 percent for those benefiting from five different sources of assistance, and to 80 percent for those benefiting from seven sources or more for assistance (APS, 2001 cited in Turcotte & Zhao, 2004, p.19).

Furthermore, the Aboriginal Education Office of Ontario notes that the lack of cultural understanding amongst provincial schools can be partially blamed for the low levels of educational attainment experienced by many Aboriginal youths. As the Ministry states, “Factors that contribute to low Aboriginal student outcomes include...a lack of awareness among teachers of the learning styles of Aboriginal students and a lack of understanding within schools and school boards of Aboriginal cultures, histories and perspectives” (Aboriginal Education Office, 2006). Similarly, Bernard Schissel and Terry Wotherspoon’s 2003 survey of Aboriginal communities came to similar conclusions.

Schissel and Wotherspoon note that there is a positive correlation between cultural education and educational outcomes. According to the authors, 11 percent of students who received cultural education and 14 percent who received a little cultural education indicated that they “liked everything about school” (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 92). This is compared to only 6 percent of students who received no cultural education (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 92). In addition, approximately one-third of students who received no cultural education “liked nothing about school” compared to 22 percent of students who received cultural education and only 9.5 percent who received little cultural education (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 92). More importantly however, the survey reveals that cultural education has an effect on high school dropout rates. Schissel and Wotherspoon state, “The results illustrate that cultural education is indeed associated with the likelihood that students will stay in school. Just under 40 percent of students with cultural education have dropped out of school at least once, compared to 50 percent of those with no cultural education” (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 95). Conclusively, there is little doubt that a culturally appropriate curriculum is vital for educational success amongst Aboriginal youth. This can be achieved when control of Aboriginal education is

returned to Aboriginal communities, which historically has not been the case.

Harvey McCue places blame on the provinces and states, "It should be obvious to anyone that the provincial education system has failed Aboriginal students...What is needed is a curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal schools...that is culturally appropriate, more applied in content than the status quo, and taught by instructors who are trained in the cultural dimensions of Aboriginal classrooms" (McCue, 5). There are factors unique to the Aboriginal population, namely the importance attached to Aboriginal controlled and culturally appropriate curriculum, which must be addressed and implemented in order for Aboriginal youths to succeed as students and as individuals in their Aboriginal community and the Canadian community at large. The next section of this paper examines how both the federal and provincial governments have approached, and attempted to provide preventative strategies concerning the issue of Aboriginal education, through government initiatives, more specifically, the *Aboriginal Head Start* (AHS) program.

### **Case Study: Aboriginal Head Start Program**

In the mid-1990's, royal commissions on Aboriginal peoples and on education highlighted the need to improve Aboriginal education. The federal and provincial governments began to recognize that Aboriginals were largely occupying the lower end of the income strata and bore a disproportionate burden of unemployment, much of which could be related to lower levels of education. Both levels of governments acknowledged the need for action. Informed by welfare-state theory and the royal commissions, both levels of government introduced Aboriginal education initiatives concentrating on all stages of education, from pre-school to post-secondary education. This section of the paper will examine the federal government's 1995 early child care initiative, *Aboriginal Head Start*, regulated by Health Canada (Child Care Canada, 1998).

According to RCAP there is a strong belief that early childhood experiences are vital for the development of the self. As RCAP states, "Early childhood is one of the most important points in the learning process. In recent decades, research has confirmed the critical importance of infancy and early childhood as a foundation upon which identity, self-worth and intellectual strength are built" (RCAP, 17). These early years, from ages zero to six, are decisive in determining the success of children later on in the education process. It is important to stress both the federal and provincial government's understanding of this theory. RCAP states that,

If stresses interfere with the development of a child's capacity for health, self-esteem and intellectual growth before beginning school, the schooling experience soon accentuates the child's 'weaknesses.' Once they have entered the formal education system, children may never recover the ground lost in these early years. The link between early childhood experiences and success in the formal schooling system has been studied intensively by researchers since the 1960s...After three decades of examining early childhood interventions, there is strong evidence that such

programs do make a difference, particularly if they continue into elementary school system. There is substantial research showing that children who participate in high quality early childhood development programs are more likely to finish high school and to be employed. (Weikart, 1989 cited in RCAP, 19)

In addition, the Ontario government in the, *Report of the Royal Commission on Learning* emphasizes the same rationale. As the Commission states,

Children who come through a carefully planned process of early education gain significantly in competence, coping skills, and (not the least important) in positive attitudes towards learning...We're convinced that early childhood education significantly helps in providing a level playing field of opportunity and experience for every child, whatever her background." (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994 cited in RCAP, 19)

Both royal commissions drive home the point that early childhood education is at the crux of self-development.

In recognition of this, the federal government, with the help of provincial governments and non-profit Aboriginal organizations, began the AHS initiative which, was originally provided for off-reserve Aboriginal families in urban communities and the northern region and, later expanded in 1998 (in light of RCAP) to include on-reserve communities (Health Canada, 1998). According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, the key goal of this initiative is to "demonstrate that locally controlled and designed early intervention strategies can provide Aboriginal children with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning, and opportunities to develop fully as successful people" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). It is a half-day, for four days a week, pre-school experience for children ages zero to six with an emphasis on children age three to six (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004).

AHS sites, as specified in the program's national principles and guidelines, are managed by Aboriginal non-profit organizations and directly support the parent/caregiver in his/her role as the natural advocate and teacher of the child. According to AHS, "Parents are directly involved in the design, implementation and management of local projects" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). In addition, projects are administered in a holistic framework that allows not only parents and guardians a role, but extended family and community members also play a significant part in the program design, implementation, management, evaluation, and ongoing planning of the project (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2005). According to Health Canada, "The AHS National Office in Ottawa provides national coordination, leadership, resources, and training, as well as coordinating a national evaluation of the program. A National Aboriginal Head Start Council provides Health Canada with expertise, and ensures project and regional-level input into the operation and management of the program" (Health Canada, 2005). In essence, the AHS principles and guidelines recognize and affirm the need to provide

holistic and community-based approaches to the programs in addition to the recognition and respect of cultural diversity (Public Health Agency of Canada, 1998).

The AHS principles and guidelines are contained in the program's six component areas: Culture and Language, Education and School Readiness, Health Promotion, Nutrition, Social Support, and Parental and Family Involvement (Health Canada, 2004). The first two components are of utmost importance here while the last component merely reinforces the AHS's principles and guidelines. The Cultural and Language component are to provide projects that will increase the process of cultural and linguistic revival and retention with the hopes that children will, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, "aspire to learn their respective languages and participate in their communities' cultures after AHS" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). The AHS education component is designed to

support and encourage each Aboriginal child to enjoy life-long learning. More specifically, the projects will encourage each child to take initiatives in learning and provide each child with enjoyable opportunities to learn. This will be done in a manner which is appropriate to both the age and stage of development of the child. The ultimate goal is to engage children in the possibility of learning so that they carry forth the enthusiasm, self-esteem and initiative to learn in the future (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004).

The ability to learn is therefore, pivotal in the development of individuals and is a life-long process. Based on the program's success, AHS has continued to grow strong.

By 1998, three years after the program's inception and with the inclusion of on-reserve communities, there were approximately 99 AHS sites coast to coast (Health Canada, 1998). In the year it was launched, federal funding was announced at \$83.7 million over a four year period, roughly \$21 million per year until 1999 (Child Care Canada, 1998). Over the years federal funding has increased by approximately 20 percent. For instance, in 2002 funding was estimated at \$26 million (Social Union, 2006). By 2006, this amount was increased to \$31 million (Social Union, 2006). The incremental increases in funding over the years have also meant a greater increase in accessibility for Aboriginal families. In 2004, there were 126 AHS sites and by 2005 this number increased to 140 AHS sites (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2005). In addition, enrolment has followed the same trajectory. In 1998, available spaces and enrolment was estimated at 3000 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). Since then enrolment in 2004 increased to 4000 and by 2005 it is reported to have stood at 4500 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2005). Conclusively, these data suggest that the initiative continues to be expanding and reaching more Aboriginal children and families.

Some examples of AHS sites include, the Tiknagin (Chiannou) AHS program in Val d'Or and Senneterre, Quebec (Health Canada, 1998). This site integrates the cultures of the Algonquin, Cree, and Attikamek First Nations (Health Canada, 1998). A six-year

old graduate of this program made national headlines when he saved his family from an evening house fire by employing the fire safety skills he learned at this AHS site (Health Canada, 1998). There is also the Awasisak Cultural Development Program in Prince George, British Columbia, which uses Métis curriculum and is in the process of working with local school districts to establish a Métis kindergarten and a tracking system for AHS graduates as they progress through school (Health Canada, 1998). Last, there is the Mannawasis AHS program located in St. Paul, Alberta. This program educates children in both Cree and English and spirituality is strongly emphasized (Health Canada, 1998).

The continuation of the program and the increase in federal funding and spaces suggest that the program has been popular and effective amongst the Aboriginal community. According to the 2001 Census, only four percent of Aboriginal children aged 14 had attended Aboriginal pre-school programs when they were pre-schoolers (this would have occurred between 1987 and 1993) (Statistics Canada, 2001 cited in Turcotte & Zhao, 2004, p. 13). Within the same Census, 16 percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children aged six reported attending preschool programs designed for them, such as AHS (Statistics Canada, 2001 cited in Turcotte & Zhao, 2004, p.13). Though the numbers appear minimal, there has been a four-fold increase in enrollment since 1987 and this is considered a significant stride for Aboriginals. In addition, in 1998 Health Canada stated, “Reports indicate that parents are very pleased with the progress that their children are making and with the opportunity to be involved with Aboriginal Head Start” (Health Canada, 1998). As one AHS parent notes,

I am the mother of a child who is currently attending the Aboriginal Head Start program. I feel that AHS has made a positive impact on our family life. We are able to understand our child more clearly now. Before our son started school he was unable to put two words together. At one point we had him seeing an Early Childhood Interventionist but unfortunately he showed no signs of speaking more. After being in Head Start for a couple of months I have seen many improvements with his speech. He is able to tell me how his day went and what things he did. (Public Health Agency of Canada, 20)

More importantly, the department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada note that local evaluations, parents, kindergarten teachers, and community members report significant gains in all areas of children’s development, improved family relationships, and the development of parenting skills (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2005). More specific impact statements and evaluations are currently in the process of being reported. Though it is premature to know the long-term effects of the program on Aboriginal children and on their journey to higher education, the progress that attendees of the schools have made thus far suggests that AHS programs are breaking new ground in education for Aboriginals and their communities.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that quality early childhood education is one of the strongest defenses against poor socio-economic effects. This is especially the case for Canadian Aboriginal youth. More than any other ethnic group in Canada, Aboriginals have suffered from lower levels of education and employment. Much of this is embedded in Aboriginal-Crown relations both past and present. Historically, colonization stripped Aboriginal peoples of their lands, society, and culture, therefore leading to a loss of self-identity and self-worth. More recently, the inability to reconcile Aboriginal education curriculum with that of the Canadian education curriculum has meant that education policies still do not work for Aboriginal children. In other words, even with similar education levels, Aboriginal youth are still lagging behind their Canadian counterparts in terms of employability.

As demonstrated in this paper, such levels can be attributed to the exclusion of Aboriginals from the education policy process, beginning with its creation all the way to the implementation of education policy. Data presented here suggest that Eurocentric curriculum is not sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal children, making it difficult for them to enjoy and stay in school. Informed by Indigenous-based theory, this paper argues for a holistic approach to Aboriginal education. Such an approach will assist in restoring Aboriginal identity and self-worth back into individuals and their communities at large. Part of this approach is being implemented in the federal government's AHS program designed to address the issues pertaining to Aboriginal education. Though empirical data relating to the program's success are limited, to say the least, there is some evidence to suggest that the program is making significant progress throughout the Aboriginal community and has paved the way for a stronger and increasingly educated Aboriginal population who have, more importantly, a better understanding of who they are and where they come from. These are steps needed to restore self-determination and ultimately, self-government in Aboriginal communities. As AFN (1998) states,

Education is one of the most important issues in the struggle for self-government and must contribute towards the objective of self-government. First Nations' governments have the right to exercise their authority in all areas of First Nations education. Until First Nations' education institutions are recognized and controlled by First Nations' governments, no real First Nation education exists. The essential principles are that each First Nation government should make its own decisions and arguments and apply its own values and standards rather than having them imposed from outside (AFN, 1:47)

The federal government's Aboriginal Head Start program is achieving success in helping Aboriginal Canadians work towards these goals, and this author strongly encourages this program's continuation and expansion.



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