

Emily Payne

Dr. Alicia Fahey

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Programming in Early Education through forced colonial assimilation sustains the cultural genocide against Canada's Indigenous peoples

This paper was created on the unseeded lands of the Coast Salish, Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, Stó:lō, Stz'uminus and Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group peoples. Its author recognizes that this land was taken by force from these peoples and that the author's presence on this land has complex and difficult colonial implications which can never be fully understood or forgotten. The author would like to thank and acknowledge the original stewards and protectors of these lands.

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This paper addresses the compulsory assimilation of Indigenous peoples into a colonial education system that has irreversibly damaged these peoples and their cultures. Prejudicing our education system to reflect solely colonial narratives and values, while ignoring and suppressing those of the indigenous peoples who first stewarded this land. This inherently means it has deeply impacted our education spaces, particularly our early childhood spaces, through the lack of meaningful programming including indigenous peoples and cultures. Without proper inclusion of the peoples who have cared for this country since its inception, we continue to singularly define our nation as one built through European colonial heritage, which is categorically false. Canada has taken a lacklustre approach to meaningful and inclusive Indigenous programming within the early childhood education system. Creating meaningful programming around Truth and Reconciliation and inclusion of Indigenous heritage is essential to truly acknowledge the Indigenous roots our land has.

To begin to think about meaningful programming, we must first honestly and critically look at where we are now. We must critically analyze our efforts in regard to Truth and Reconciliation, and the relationship between European colonizers and the Indigenous people who first inhabited this land. Since the initial signing of the Selkirk Treaty in 1817 documenting the official beginning of a relationship with western Indigenous people and the crown (Hall 2011) has continually showcased their indifference to the rights and cultures of Indigenous peoples. With continuous instances of injustice, discrimination and inherent negative connotations surrounding the Indigenous peoples of Canada, they are continually at a disadvantage when it

comes to having access to proper resources, quality education, healthcare and much more. These injustices have been woven into our society from its colonial construction, this has largely led to the Indigenous population being disregarded and not considered in most aspects of our countries' establishment.

However, when we look at the data, it seems vitally important that we invest more resources into the Aboriginal population, as they are and remain “the fastest growing and youngest ethnocultural group in Canada” (Statistics Canada 2021). The 2016 Census conducted by Statistics Canada also made a point to acknowledge that “Since 2006, the Aboriginal population has grown by 42.5%—more than four times the growth rate of the non-Aboriginal population over the same period. According to population projections, the number of Aboriginal people will continue to grow quickly.” (Statistics Canada 2016). With this analytical data, we can see how vital it is that early education and access to culturally appropriate inclusive programming is now and will be in the future. Furthermore, the dire need for an inclusive and culturally accurate curriculum is not only reflected in statistical data, but also in the foundational documents of our early learning environments.

When we consider what we as early childhood educators are called to do in our BC early learning framework, we can see that where we are now is far from where we should be. We are called to collaborate, to actively participate alongside children and families in their education, and not to dictate a specific set of values or cultural normalities (Ministry of Education 2019). Taking into consideration those core values in relation to indigenous learning, the divide is evident from the very concept of our framework. Currently, in Canada, we still hold two separate Early learning Frameworks - one colonial-based, and one Indigenous framework created by Indigenous people, seemingly only for Indigenous people. While yes, our “standard” framework

does make reference and politely states that Indigenous people were consulted on the document, there inexplicably remains the need to separate the colonial framework from the indigenous. Canada stated clearly that a major principle of reconciliation is “Supporting Indigenous peoples’ cultural revitalization and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, laws, protocols, and connections to the land into the reconciliation process are essential” (Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2021). Integration of Indigenous culture in a meaningful way is imperative, not only for indigenous children to have the right to learn about their cultural makeup and history but, for the settler children as well. It is an essential means to begin educating our children on the complex implications of our inhabitation on this land. To gloss over the complex implications of colonization, or to only choose to only focus on the trauma faced by the Indigenous peoples, only furthers the singular colonial narrative and reinforces assimilation. The constant colonial undertone in our current early learning environment and continuing to hold separate frameworks only furthers the exclusion of Indigenous people. It invalidates the inherent value they bring as it pertains to constructing an honest picture of Canada’s cultural foundation.

As yet, there has not been a single early childhood program solely focused on the concepts of Indigenous learning and guidance (Preston, Jane P, et al. 2012). When we investigate the implications of what that has on our early childhood education, we can see it creates a very narrow view of our heritage and only serves to whitewash our classrooms. After reading multiple studies from sources that situate from all across the globe, one of the prevailing factors why Indigenous programming is routinely ignored is the lack of representation in the education staff trying to teach these complex topics. One study conducted out of New Zealand states “Whilst the curriculum document has been widely celebrated for its sociocultural and holistic paradigm, the aspirations it contains have nevertheless remained challenging for an educator workforce that is

predominately monoculturally Pākehā (of European descent)” (Rau & Ritchie 2011). How do we expect our educators who are predominantly from the dominant social group, in other words, white and of European descent, to be fully capable of explaining a culture of which they are entirely unfamiliar?

True reconciliation must first start with the truth, which acknowledges the complex implications of colonialism and the cultural genocide sustained over centuries that have led to where we are at present. Indigenous people have lacked the rights to their cultural heritage and connection to their ancestral history for generations, which in turn leads to uncertainty around their positionality in this colonial society. It is fallacious to think that the teaching of Indigenous culture, history, values and language could be properly done by a social group that historically did everything possible to eliminate these very subjects for centuries. It is a performative gesture to try and teach these subjects with no consultation or dialogue from the very people these subjects belong to. Furthermore, it is mortifying to think that we as settlers on this land are more capable of instructing students on a culture and history that we have been given almost no education on ourselves, and that we do not actively seek out the wisdom held by these Indigenous knowledge keepers on their cultural birthright.

When we think of meaningful programming surrounding Indigenous culture, we must reflect on the example given in Ritchie & Rau’s 2006 paper surrounding the rights of Indigenous children to their culture and language. The study combatted the complex issue of lack of representation in teaching staff with a thoughtful and considered approach. As they began their process of integrating and working alongside Indigenous educational values, educators worked alongside Indigenous Elders that were thoughtfully situated within the local region according to the location of each educational space. This effectively provided the educators and the children

with localized knowledge, language, and practices of the peoples on the land they occupy. Most important of all, they learned these local customs and values from the very people who stewarded the territory before colonization. They also described how this education was not only beneficial for the indigenous students but was indispensable to the colonial children as they greatly lacked opportunities to learn directly from the lived experiences of these insightful knowledge keepers. A clear outcome from all the centres that adopted this pedagogy of learning through elders was that the families of the indigenous students also expressed and participated in their child's centres, feeling much more welcomed and celebrated. These are the outcomes we should be striving for when it comes to meaningful programming alongside Indigenous peoples, these are the steps towards true reconciliation.

Currently, as I mentioned previously in this essay, we are still a nation culturally divided. We learn multiple colonial histories such as the French, English and Spanish historical takes on the beginning of our nation - yet the one who came before all of those is routinely cast out of our classrooms. The pedagogical approach that the Ritchie & Rau study undertook seems to be a concrete way to combat this separation of the cultural heritage. The study explained the curriculum further as an approach akin to bilingual or biliteracy education models, describing it as "bicultural early childhood care and education" (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). As we are already a bilingual country as of 1969 (Canadian Museum of History 2021) it is only logical that we would seek to continue our efforts of cultural inclusion. In actuality, therefore, a bicultural model and pedagogical approach to early childhood education seem like the most logical curriculum for us as Canadian ECE educators to adopt.

Using a framework that chooses to teach our cultural heritage in collaboration with all the cultures that make up our nation is imperative to truly foster a space where reconciliation can be

present and developed over time. As a key component of our frameworks' manifesto is “Learning to live well with others” (Ministry of Education, 2019) it implores us to seek to include and work alongside all of our community members and to be reflexive and responsive when considering our programming choices (Ministry of Education, 2019). It is therefore directly conflicting that as of now we have yet to join our Early Learning Frameworks and policies and to invite the Indigenous to help us in understanding and creating a respectful curriculum that is inclusive and honouring of their heritage and culture. By creating an environment where we as colonial people can step aside and learn from the original caretakers of the land we now occupy, we begin to learn this nation's authentic history in full.

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