

# Indigenous Early Childhood Development (IECD) Programs

- Multi-component, multi-year, multi-funded program of research
- Indigenous goals for child development
- Indigenous knowledges about childhood and care
- Promising practices in Indigenous communities e.g., HELP project – cultural knowledge in IECD
- Construction & piloting of culturally appropriate assessment tools
- Demonstration of impacts of IECD initiatives

# Indigenous knowledge in IECD

- *What are 'successful practices' incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into ECD programs?*
- Define 'practices incorporating IK'
- Define 'success' and how to observe it.

Jan – May 2003:

- Literature reviews:
- Culture in ECD
- Cultural identity research with very young children
- Impacts of cultural knowledge/esteem on other aspects of child development

# Data collection

- 7 sites to date:
- Halfway, Prophet River, Doig, Blueberry, Salteaux, Moberly Lake, Mount Currie
- IECD Observations and document gathering
- Interviews with IECD staff
- Pilot questionnaire with Indigenous parents on goals for their children

# Primacy of 'Aboriginal ways'

- Broad agreement on Indigenous goals for IECD:
  - ◆ Retain and revitalize Indigenous cultures and languages
  - ◆ Build on community strengths
  - ◆ Promote positive cultural identity in young children
  - ◆ Involve the whole community in culturally-proactive IECD
  - ◆ Ensure distinctive practice (not Indigenous people doing 'white things')

# IECD cultural curriculum

- Indigenous materials (books, posters, instruments, colours, labels, toys, craft kits, masks)
- Indigenous songs, language, stories, drumming
- Indigenous rituals (smudging, talking stick)
- Indigenous interactional forms (circles, talking stick, Elder-child teaching)

## IECD cultural curriculum (cont.)

- Prep and participation in Indigenous special events (pow-wows, salmon days)
- Specific Indigenous life skills (berry picking, bear skinning, moose hides, smoking meat/fish, rabbit snares, gathering reeds for baskets)
- Playground elements (clan houses, nature)

# Cultural meaning in IECD

- Disembodied knowledge is not knowledge
- Words without context and spirit are not language
- Involvement with cultural artefacts risks trivializing the significance of core cultural concepts and practices

## Cultural meaning in IECD (cont.)

- ‘Floating lessons’ from Elders: need careful renegotiation of intergenerational teaching / learning roles and relationships in order to anchor this curriculum in a meaningful, accepted context
- Contextualizing: Need to teach the relationships among things within authentic, meaningful contexts, not the things themselves



# Culture as a 'lived' curriculum

- *“We don't think about what we do to make this program 'Aboriginal.' It is Aboriginal because we are doing it, because it is here in our (Aboriginal) community, on our traditional lands.”*
- *“We have never met to talk about 'culture' in our program. It is just always there.”*
- *“We (the staff) are all Aboriginal. Each of us has something we are specially good at that we bring in to the program. We don't plan this, and if some one leaves, we don't plan how to replace that 'part' of the curriculum. It just happens because it's about who we are and what we live.”*

## IECD as 'family'

- *“We don't necessarily think of our centre as a program as much as a family. Aboriginal people need to feel welcome and safe and like part of a family – and that goes for the parents as much as the children.”*
- *“Long-term relationships that extend way beyond the program develop when a parent brings their child to the program.”*
- *“We give lots of hugs and use endearing names like in a family.”*
- *“Because we are all Aboriginal, in fact we are a family.”*

# IECD as healing

- “It is therapeutic for parents and Elders to be playful and to feel safe - something they never experienced in residential school.”
- *“My 5 yr. Old grandson is a role model for me. I asked him to teach me to a song he was learning, called “Love Potion Number 9” and we are going to be able to sing it together. It is so healing for me, to learn from him how to play, and how to just enjoy being childlike. It’s the first time for me.”*
- “Having an Aboriginal child care program is a gentle path to our own healing and healing our communities.”

# Distinctive intention of IECD

- Holding and Healing Environments

versus

- Targetted Learning Environments

- High frequency words:

Being, holding, family, honouring, thanking, caring, healing, traditional foods, knowing who they are, our own language, knowing they belong, respect, love.

# Intent of IECD

Low frequency words used by Indigenous staff and parents to describe IECD programs:

*Managing, behaviours, challenging behaviours, school, readiness, skills, learn their numbers, know their colours, pre-reading, self-control, family conference, special needs, class size, ratios, individualized, accountability, regulations.*

# IECD as finding a way home.

- *“The valuing of culture in our programs helps us to remember our past - where we came from.”*
- *“We are recovering our identities, recovering our languages, learning from Elders, from those who know our culture, and supporting one another to REMEMBER. When we recover our memories, we recover our selves.”*
- *“The future of our children depends on them knowing who they are. For this to happen, we have to know who we are, and this means knowing and facing up to and honouring our past.”*

# Heritage language priority

- Survey of Indigenous parents revealed priority of heritage language over English language facilitation in IECD and in parent education
- Learning heritage language is linked to retention and passing of cultural values and meaning
- Recognition of implications for ‘school readiness’
- Ask: Are schools ready for our children?
- Preference for band-operated schools and language immersion programs K-12.

# Culture & school readiness

- Recurrent theme:
- If children:
  - ◆ *'know who they are'*
  - ◆ *'feel good about themselves'*
  - ◆ *"know they are loved"*
  - ◆ *'know where they belong'*

.....they are much more likely to get along well in school.

*"Developing their skills with writing or reading or speaking English won't give them [these strengths]."*



# Fluid program structures

- 'All gifted': Reluctance to designate children as 'special needs.' *"In our culture, children who are different are regarded as specially gifted."*
- 'All the children': Reluctance to break out children by age (EC itself is an etic construct)
- 'All the family': Involvement of parents as equally important as their children (though optional)

## Fluid program structures (cont.)

- ‘All the community’: Activities planned for every one to get involved.
- ‘All the time’: Relationships don’t begin or end inside the program. They extend into social life. Staff are friends, ‘role models’ and advisors for parents in the community, and ‘Aunties’ of children in the community.

# Holistic service delivery

- .....All needed supports
- Impressive efforts to co-locate and integrate multiple services to support child and family development
  - ECD
  - Nutrition
  - Dental caries
  - Speech-language
  - Well-baby monitoring, immunization
  - Parent ed / information / support groups
  - Elder gatherings / cultural centre of community
  - Heritage language
  - Occupational therapy
  - Referral