

A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050

The Promise of the Present Moment

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Abstract

Across Canada, the enormous disparities in physical health, social and emotional wellbeing, educational and economic outcomes experienced by First Nation, Métis and Inuit adults in comparison to non-Indigenous adults are well documented. Throughout the years, early childhood programs have played an important role in helping to address these disparities. School readiness is an important concept in the early years for the transition into school, yet the current approach to “school readiness” has the potential to perpetuate disadvantage in early years education when applied to Indigenous children. This paper explores the concept of a holistic two-way approach to school readiness in relation to the readiness of the child and the teacher. A Scenarios approach is used to explore the ways in which high quality early childhood education programs can play an important role in working with Indigenous peoples to develop an Indigenous school readiness perspective and early childhood programs responsive to the diversity of all students.

Introduction

The experiences in early childhood have the potential to determine the trajectory of one’s life and, as such, the early years are considered to be the most important developmental period across the lifespan. Research has shown a strong correlation between early development and experiences to later socio-economic, health and well-being outcomes as adults (Elango et al., 2015). High quality early childhood programs have been instrumental in improving short and long-term outcomes among disadvantaged and vulnerable people and as such, continue to play

an important role in tackling disadvantage across Canada and the world (Elango et al., 2015).

Fundamental to early childhood educational planning and the design of intervention programs and strategies to combat the effects of disadvantage in the early years, is the concept of school readiness. The current approach to “school readiness” has the potential to perpetuate disadvantage in early years education when applied to all children, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and situations. Ensuring all children have the opportunity to grow and learn requires all stakeholders in education to challenge the notion of school readiness as a deficit discourse and reframe the narrative to include a focus on “teacher readiness” in providing a high quality early childhood program responsive to the diversity of all students.

Across Canada, the enormous disparities in physical health, social and emotional wellbeing and economic outcomes experienced by First Nation, Métis and Inuit adults in comparison to non-Indigenous adults are well documented (Kolahdooz et al., 2015). This is largely due to the ongoing structural effects of colonialism and intergenerational trauma resulting in “poverty, poor housing, under-funded education, substance misuse and, in many cases, lack of access to safe drinking water” (First Nations Child and Caring Society [FNCARES], 2020). Likewise, the education gap that exists for Indigenous students has also been well documented and is reflected in, but not limited to, lower achievement levels, decreased numbers of students graduating high school, greater incidences of in-school problems, and higher rates of absenteeism. Addressing these issues through a high quality culturally responsive early childhood program that determines the

readiness for school through a culturally appropriate “school readiness” system requires strategic foresight and futures thinking.

Scope and Impact

To redress the disparities noted above, a new approach to school readiness that is inclusive of the Indigenous worldview of readiness needs to be developed and adopted in early childhood settings. This needs to be supported with a high quality early childhood program that is culturally inclusive and responsive to the needs of all children. This will create a holistic two-way approach to school readiness in early childhood education. This paper, therefore, will explore alternative futures using a scenarios approach to imagine the future of early childhood education when both school readiness and teacher readiness intersect. It will focus specifically in the context of Indigenous education in Canada, to help redress the layers of disadvantage Indigenous students face often from the start of school, and to actively work toward the Calls to Action (6 – 12) presented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). Early childhood programs are currently offered both on reserve and off-reserve. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on school readiness and the readiness of the teacher in off-reserve early childhood programs available to Indigenous families. While early years programs are offered in childcare centers and at the school level, the scenarios suggested in this paper reflect the Kindergarten program offered within school systems.

Exploring an alternative paradigm of “school readiness” in early learning closely links with UNESCO’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal 4.2

which specifically relates to access for all children to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education to ensure readiness for primary education. In this current volatile, ambiguous, complex and uncertain COVID-19 global pandemic world, UNESCO has raised further concerns that early childhood care and education are often being overlooked in the current education discussions, and have launched a new drive specifically to protect early childhood education in the context of COVID-19.

Researchers in Canada estimate that the socio-economic skills gap caused by the pandemic could increase by more than 30 per cent, thereby disadvantaging vulnerable groups even further. Therefore, it is of considerable importance now to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of young children, “empowering them to think and act together” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p.14) and enabling each child to become “who [they] want to become” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p.16). A holistic two-way approach to school readiness is necessary to help achieve this outcome.

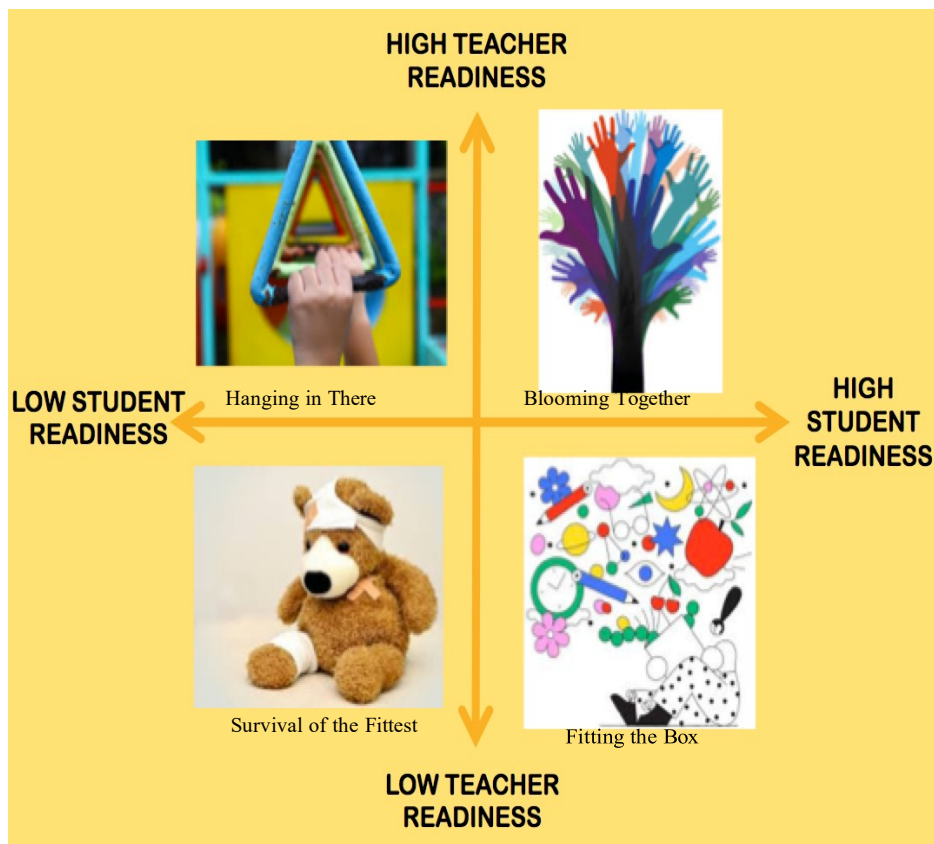
UNESCO’s *Futures of Education 2050 – Learning to Become* “invokes the need to develop the capacity to imagine a good and fulfilling life” (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). This highlights the importance of valuing human dignity. This can be achieved through the development of a positive identity, on the individual and collective level, and the ability to work and have a sense of economic security. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) “all aspects of adult human capital, from work force skills to cooperative and lawful behaviour, build on capacities that are developed during childhood, beginning at birth” (p.4). This underscores the importance of access to

high quality early childhood programs for all children and connects with the International Commission of UNESCO's consideration "of the longstanding UNESCO commitment to a pluralistic, integrated and humanistic approach to education and knowledge as public goods" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). The importance in addressing the issue of quality early childhood education for all Indigenous children in Canada is reflected in the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework through which the Government of Canada committed \$1.7 billion in funding over 10 years starting in 2018 – 2019 "to strengthen ELCC programs and services for all Indigenous children" (Assembly of First Nations and Employment and Social Development Canada, [AFN], 2018), as well as the continued commitment to the federally-funded Aboriginal Head Start program established in 1995.

Strategic Foresight

Matters (2019) highlights the importance of "having a diversity of perspectives involved" (p. 6) in strategic foresight conversations. In this context, it is important to note that this paper is written exclusively from an individual Western worldview. The decision to use the scenarios tool was made in order to align with Matters' (2019) discussion on the importance of foresight tools being flexible and encompassing of Indigenous ways of knowing. Further research involving Indigenous perspectives is obviously necessary to strengthen the preferred proposed future of early childhood education for Indigenous students posited in this paper.

To be effective in reducing the effects of disadvantage, all early childhood programs need to be based on school readiness data that is evidence-appropriate to each individual child, as well as a culturally inclusive learning program and environment in which they can develop positive self and cultural identities. The following scenario matrix shows the connection between the readiness of the child for school and the teacher's readiness for the child through a visual representation to help all stakeholders involved in the education of young children make connections to the way in which their "actions and decisions impact the future" (Matters, 2019, p. 6).



Key characteristics of each scenario have been identified as shown below:

<p style="text-align: center;">High Teacher Readiness / Low Student Readiness <i>Hanging in There</i></p> <p>Child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low attendance rate • Child can decide attendance • Lack of understanding of program expectations and rules • Lack of connection to and interest in the program • Lack of family and community support or involvement <p>Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple assessments of school readiness • Ecological understanding of children and readiness – family, school and community • Contextual understanding of the impact of social, cultural and political constructs • More autonomy to create critical and intentional pedagogy based on multidimensional reflective practices • Listening to and respecting children’s perspectives • Incorporating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action • Play-based and culturally inclusive 	<p style="text-align: center;">High Teacher Readiness / High Student Readiness <i>Blooming Together</i></p> <p>Child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent attendance • Familiarity with program expectations and rules • Trust in the program and teacher • Feelings of safety • Active involvement in decision making in the program • School readiness is affirmed • Family and community involvement • Positive social and emotional development <p>Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple assessments of school readiness – including Indigenous readiness perspective • Ecological understanding of children and readiness – family, school and community • Contextual understanding of the impact of social, cultural and political constructs • More autonomy to create critical and intentional pedagogy based on multidimensional reflective practices • Listening to and respecting children’s perspectives • Incorporating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action • Play-based and culturally inclusive
<p style="text-align: center;">Low Teacher Readiness / Low Student Readiness <i>Survival of the Fittest</i></p> <p>Child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low attendance rate • Mismatch between cultural and program expectations • Expected to adapt to the mainstream program • No interest or connection to the program <p>Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-worldview of school readiness testing • Dominant Western curriculum and pedagogy • No connection to child’s home background • Deficit-based thinking • Checklist approach to learning – “I taught it...” approach • Predetermined standards that are passed or failed • Mental wellbeing of students not important 	<p style="text-align: center;">Low Teacher Readiness / High Student Readiness <i>Fitting the box</i></p> <p>Child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent attendance • Understanding of expectations • Able to adapt to the mainstream program • Able to adapt to expectations • Active learner <p>Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-worldview of school readiness testing • Dominant Western curriculum and pedagogy • No connection to child’s home background • Focus on skill and drill to “close the achievement gap” • Disconnect with emotional and social wellbeing and the impact on learning • Reliance on standardized tests

The Preferred Future of Early Childhood Education

This paper argues that the “Blooming Together” scenario is the preferred future of early childhood education for Indigenous children as it incorporates a multi-perspective approach to school readiness while also envisioning the “readiness” of the teacher to “close the gap between instruction and children’s potential toward excellence” (Durden, 2017, p.77) by being reflective and culturally inclusive beyond the surface level. The key to the “Blooming Together” approach is that both the child and the teacher are “school” ready. In the other three scenarios, if either the teacher or the child has a low school readiness, the early years program will not have the same high-level impact on the child’s learning and future success. The “Blooming Together” approach will have the children, family, community, and teachers and school all actively working together to remove the barriers in education that have a negative impact on learning. Together all stakeholders will create an early years program in which students thrive and are ready, not just for school, but ready to “lead their own life and lead it well” (Biesta, 2019, p.660).

Discussion and Implications

School Readiness

While research has consistently shown that children attending high quality early childhood programs are more successful in the transition to school and beyond, work still needs to occur to bring programs to the level where students and teachers are blooming together. The Reggio Emilio approach to education is currently seen as one of high quality for all children and it has been adopted in varying degrees by some early childhood programs throughout Canada. According

to Thomas (2006) every “early school success has been linked to the abilities, behaviours and attitudes that young children bring with them as they enter school for the first time” (p.6). Despite the importance of this, we still use contemporary school readiness programs and assessments that are based on the one language, one worldview system of the dominant Western culture. This leads to defining readiness through a narrow knowledge system that allows for only “one frame of reference” (Battiste, 2005, p. 9). Studies highlight how the concept of school readiness has both cultural and historical/social patterns that lead to variations in just exactly what ready means, but there is a dearth of information in this area that specifically identifies just what those variations are for Indigenous cultures.

School readiness has also often been understood from a one-dimensional perspective of individual qualities and capacities and considered as a “natural part of child development” (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2016, p. 10). This understanding does not take into account the role others play in developing a child’s readiness for school – families, schools and communities. This interplay between all stakeholders in a child’s education can be defined through an ecological definition of readiness – the concept of ready children, ready families, ready communities and ready services (ACER, 2016, p. 10). Yet assessments viewing school readiness, even from this ecological perspective, still do not take into consideration an Indigenous perspective of school readiness and conflict may arise between Western and Indigenous child rearing practices and worldviews. According to Ball (2012) Indigenous children come to school with cognitive strengths and skills not recognized in the readiness assessments. It then follows that an understanding of what readiness means from an Indigenous perspective is required.

An Indigenous assessment of school readiness would enable programs and interventions to be developed that would “strengthen their impact, not to erect barriers to participation” (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007, p.27). Children’s readiness would then be affirmed, “thereby naturally creating positive school outcomes such as improved student-teacher relationships, positive conceptions of school and improved self-confidence” (ACER, 2016, p. 12). Currently there is a lack of knowledge available in this area. Researching Indigenous perspectives on readiness would be a way forward for our local communities and our society as a whole, to work toward developing an Indigenous assessment of school readiness. Scenarios and a Causal Layered Analysis would be useful foresight tools to begin the process of collecting this information from one or more Indigenous perspectives.

Early childhood programs often place a set of expectations on Indigenous children that are “foreign” to them in that they do not experience them in their home environment. According to Dockett, Mason and Perry (2006), “Aboriginal learners...need to adjust to an extra range and layer of experiences, demands and expectations relating to their cultural, language and social skills”. If teachers are assessing readiness to learn, then these issues have the potential to complicate and negatively skew that assessment. Cummins (2009) challenges school leaders and teachers to examine the choices they make when considering Indigenous students and define them in the positive of what they have, rather than the usual negative by what they lack.

The First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Landscape

The inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing in our education system is a treaty right and also a determination of the Supreme Court of Canada, stating the “right to teach such a practice, custom and tradition to a younger generation” (Battiste, 2005, p.7). The Leadership Quality Standard also recognizes the importance of leading the school community in acquiring, applying and supporting “foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students” (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 6). The Western world-view though, has always dominated the knowledge systems imbedded in the educational system, thereby making Indigenous teachings, world-views and languages devalued and invisible. According to Preston et al. (2011) it is also well known that there is a “general lack of awareness among Canadian educational stakeholders concerning the particularized pedagogy and learning styles of Aboriginal students” (cited in Peterson et al., 2018, p.1).

As such, it is well understood that the educational environment has the potential to impact the learning of a student in both a positive and negative manner, and that current curricular and practices, exclusively through a Western worldview, and taught by teachers with limited to no understanding of Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing, continues to fail Indigenous children (Battiste, 2005). According to Cummins (2009), this can occur through the daily decisions made in relation to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment and refers to these as the “normalized assumptions” (p.262) of schooling. To overcome this requires leaders and teachers to have an understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the ways of being and behaving that stem from this. To address this issue in Alberta, resources have

been developed to assist teachers in gaining “understanding of and respect for the diversities of Aboriginal cultures, languages, histories and worldviews” (Alberta Education, 2005, p.v). Battiste (2002) acknowledges the role of these resources in providing content, but argues that they do not address the understanding of epistemologies – “the ways of learning and coming to know” (Peterson et al., 2018, p.3) that are necessary for cultural infusion.

Indigenous knowledge has been described as a living process that is fluid, deeply personal and unique to an individual, and informed by ancestral voices. Indigenous ways of knowing are imbedded within specific communities, influenced by the land, culture and language, passed down the generations, and continually evolving through the process of modifying, adapting and building on the knowledge from one generation to another. It is, therefore, highly erroneous to view Indigenous knowledge systems as one system that educators can learn and apply equally to all students. This requires teachers to gain an understanding of Indigenous culture and knowledge specific to the Indigenous children they teach. Chewka (2017), highlights the importance of trying to make changes for Indigenous children and youth from within the system (cited in FNCARES, 2019).

Conclusion

“There has been an assumption that Indigenous children will have better success at school if their readiness is enhanced, rather than any serious questioning of how schools can be made more ready for Indigenous children”

(Carbines et al., 2008, cited in Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016, p. 23)

This paper posited that understanding “school readiness” from a nuanced understanding of Indigenous perspectives that encompasses a two-way approach of child readiness and teacher readiness as a preferred future of early childhood education is essential if leaders and policymakers are to actively work toward closing the gaps and many life outcome disparities currently experienced by Indigenous children across Canada.

UNESCO’s *Futures of Education 2050 – Learning to Become* highlights the importance of valuing human dignity, and promotes the initiative “to rethink education and shape the future” (Futures of Education, 2020). Early childhood education needs to lay the foundation for this in helping to grow strong and positive identities in Indigenous children, both as individuals and as collective cultures. It is important for teachers to challenge their thinking and educational philosophy to realize the potential power they have through their programs, pedagogy and relationships that will enable them and the children to “Bloom Together”. The future development of an Indigenous school readiness approach, combined with early years teachers continued cultural and contextual understanding of the Indigenous children they teach, will be the catalyst for the change that will help Indigenous students feel empowered and successful. It is time to imagine the future in the present in how to remove the negative discourse and labels of school readiness often associated with Indigenous children’s early educational experience; labels that often follow the child throughout their entire school days and impact adult outcomes.

The dignity of each individual can also be recognized by collaborating with Indigenous communities to help empower Indigenous peoples to overcome the

challenges they face due to colonial imperialism. Enabling Indigenous students to connect with Indigenous ways of knowing and being is essential in addressing the challenges Indigenous students continually face. The challenge for early childhood programs today, is how to create cultural competency in the early years context that genuinely respects and promotes Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous ways of readiness, and ultimately enables the success of all students so the trajectory of their life is a positive one.

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