



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
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**ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION
FIRST NATION TRUSTEES COUNCIL**

**FIRST NATION TRUSTEES' INPUT ON THE DRAFT CURRICULUM
FOR
ONTARIO'S FULL-DAY EARLY LEARNING-KINDERGARTEN
PROGRAM**

The First Nation Trustees Council of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the Ministry of Education on the Draft Curriculum for the Early Learning-Kindergarten Program.

On August 25, 2011 First Nation trustees had a morning of dialogue with Assistant Deputy Minister Jim Grieve and with Dianne Riehl, Education Officer, Curriculum Policy and Assessment Branch. This was a very productive exchange. In addition to the detailed input contained in pages 3-19, First Nation trustees would like to emphasize some key issues raised in the August dialogue.

The Early Learning-Kindergarten Program offers a unique opportunity to incorporate perspectives on First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures, languages, traditions, and histories into Ontario's curriculum from the earliest years. Having a curriculum that is geared to all students but contains significant content on First Nation, Métis and Inuit perspectives providing children with a sustained sense of who they are and the struggle of their people for nationhood, identity and language, enriches the education offered to all Ontario students.

The successful implementation of the Early Learning-Kindergarten Program is related to building relationships with First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities, honouring families and supporting each child's sense of identity. In this regard, it will be important not to lose the benefits of the graduated entry of students to the program. If all students begin on the same day, the teacher and ECE team have a diminished opportunity to get to know the children, the families they are serving and the child-rearing practices that are unique from community to community.

A foundational consideration to the success of the program is the education and professional development of the teachers and early childhood educators. Specifically,

- There is a need to bring school staff to the First Nation community to build up the awareness and knowledge of educators in areas such as traditions, the importance of the pow-wow, why grandparents are so involved with their children, what they are teaching. This could include having a meal with the elders, attending a feast or gathering where teachers can ask questions. Coming to a feast on the reserve would be more beneficial for educators than a week of workshops; First Nation communities would welcome this kind of interaction. It is helpful when administrators at boards encourage their staff to work with communities and with First Nation trustees to strengthen their knowledge of the population they serve.
- Effective professional development in school boards involves inviting in people from the Aboriginal community talk about their history, customs, practices, perspectives and issues of identity.
- In dealing with First Nation students, there is no "one size fits all", child-rearing practices are different from community to community and Aboriginal students are in communities both on and off reserve. This is important information for the

teacher-ECE team to know. The curriculum should contain clear directions for teachers to get to know their community and to be respectful of individual differences.

- In teacher pre-service education programs, the infusion of First Nation, Métis and Inuit perspectives is essential. While many teachers are eager to acquire this knowledge, it should be mandatory for all teachers. This is a fruitful area of discussion with Deans of Education.

Indicators at the board level that demonstrate an effective and inclusive approach to the Early Learning-Kindergarten program might include: incorporation of First Nation languages, an active and inclusive advisory board, prevalence of First Nation, Métis and Inuit education issues on the Board agenda, a strong tuition agreement, rich and diverse First Nation, Métis and Inuit resources throughout the board's schools. Prevalence of these indicators would serve to avoid uneven implementation of the program.

The Early Learning-Kindergarten program at Ottawa's Inuit Centre demonstrates innovativeness and openness and is a hopeful step in the change that has to happen in the world of education. The changes reflected in the draft curriculum are heartening in terms of moving away from the over-structuring of school. The reconceptualizing of Early Learning as evidenced by the introduction of this initiative is a positive step in public education.

With regard to further consultations on this draft curriculum, First Nation trustees support an approach that involves strong efforts to engage First Nation communities in ways that are respectful of their cultures and offer adequate time and opportunity to reflect on issues requiring input.

The following pages set out excerpts from the Ontario Draft Curriculum for the Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Program and offer comments and recommendations (see box areas) that focus on inclusion of First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures and perspectives. Comments emphasize broad concepts rather than specific suggestions for detailed curriculum expectations.

Draft curriculum, p.1

“The Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program is based on the understanding that children develop within a complex set of interrelated systems that includes the family, the school, the broader community, and the world. Although early learning programs have traditionally acknowledged the importance of these systems, they have tended to address each one separately, in terms of its individual impact on the child. By contrast, the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program recognizes the importance for the child’s development of the *interrelationships* between and among these systems, and builds on those interrelationships.”

Draft curriculum, p.2

“Principles

1. Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health.
2. Partnerships with families and communities strengthen the ability of early childhood settings to meet the needs of young children.
3. Respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion are prerequisites for honouring children’s rights, optimal development, and learning.
4. A planned curriculum supports early learning.
5. Play is a means to early learning that capitalizes on children’s natural curiosity and exuberance.
6. Knowledgeable, responsive educators are essential.”

“The program aims to provide every child with the kind of support he or she needs in order to develop:

- self-regulation
- health, well-being, and a sense of security
- emotional and social competence
- curiosity and confidence in learning
- respect for the diversity of his or her peers”

It is suggested that this introduction to the goals of the program include a reference to the importance of early childhood education in the development of a strong and positive sense of identity – this is a key consideration for First Nation, Métis and Inuit children, their families and their communities.

The literature on First Nation Early Learning continues to quote from the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: “Aboriginal people want to prepare their children for stronger academic performance but their concerns go beyond a singular focus on cognitive development...Most important. They see early childhood education as a means of reinforcing Aboriginal identity, instilling the values, attitudes and behaviours that give expression to Aboriginal cultures.”¹

“The priority is for kids to know who they are as an Aboriginal person, and they are rooted in their identity as an Aboriginal person, and they become proud of who they are. It matters that they’re good people and they’re proud of who they are. If they are happy and self-confident and have a strong sense of identity, it makes everything else in their life easier, including academics.”²

Draft curriculum, p.3

“Four- and five-year-old children arrive at school as unique individuals shaped by their particular cultural and social backgrounds and day-to-day experiences, and at different stages of development. Their early experiences with school are of paramount importance. Children will thrive within classrooms that meet their developmental needs and that provide a secure, respectful, and nurturing environment. An early learning program can meet these needs, and provide an environment conducive to learning, only if it is culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate. Expectations should be challenging but attainable, and the learning environment needs to reflect the social and cultural context in which each child is developing. The program should be flexible enough to respond to individual differences and to make children feel comfortable in applying their unique ways of thinking and learning.

...Teachers, early childhood educators, members of the community, and families should work together to provide challenging and engaging learning experiences that will build children’s confidence, encourage them to continue to see learning as both enjoyable and useful, and provide a strong foundation for their future intellectual, physical, and social development.”

This part of the introduction to the draft curriculum points to the need for specific training for Early Learning-Kindergarten teams to support them in ensuring that the learning environment reflects the social and cultural context of the child. The culture and world views of First Nations will vary from community to community and it is important that educators in a particular region are oriented to the uniqueness of the relevant culture and world view. Connecting with the community and inviting Elders to participate in training and to contribute to the classroom is necessary. It is also important for all Canadian children, not just First Nation, Métis and Inuit children, to be introduced early to the history of the country.

“Accommodating the diversity of First Nations cultural groups can be challenging. Each cultural group has its own beliefs, customs and practices that must be respected and supported. This is why it is important to involve Elders and other traditional people in early learning programs.”²

Draft curriculum, p.4

“A supportive social environment has a positive impact on children’s learning. Children are more able and more motivated to do well and achieve their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate and in which they feel safe and supported. “School climate” may be defined as the sum total of all the personal relationships within a school. When these relationships are founded in mutual acceptance and inclusion and are modelled by all, a culture of respect becomes the norm. Children, members of Early Learning–Kindergarten teams, and parents all benefit from a supportive social environment, and there are various practices that can foster such an environment – from formal measures (e.g., school policies, programs, and guidelines that promote inclusion and the removal of systemic barriers; bullying prevention, healthy foods, and anaphylaxis protocols; clubs and organized support groups) to informal behaviour (e.g., occurring within unstructured peer interaction or free play).”

“School-community partnerships provide access to resources and services that can offer additional support to school staff, children, and families in the development and implementation of healthy school initiatives. Various organizations, including public health units, can collaborate with Early Learning–Kindergarten teams to deliver programs and services within the school setting.”

Additional considerations here could include specific recognition of local First Nations, e.g., the territory on which the school is situated, use of First Nation, Métis and Inuit languages on signs/posters, building of relationships with First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities and organizations, including local Friendship Centres.

“Children and parents need to feel welcomed into an environment that reflects Aboriginal culture...create a First Nations presence in your building and office using cultural images and objects.”³

Draft curriculum, p.5

“It is important that children be connected to the curriculum; that they see themselves in *what* is taught, *how* it is taught, and how it *applies* to the world at large. The program recognizes that the needs of learners are diverse, and helps all learners develop the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they need to be informed, productive, caring, responsible, healthy, and active citizens in their own communities and in the world.”

Draft curriculum, p.6

“Young children learn best through activities that are relevant to their lives and varied enough to be challenging and engaging. Children develop their knowledge by building on their past experiences and the learning they have already acquired.....Every child is unique, and has individual needs. Children develop at different rates and in different ways. Their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and daily realities contribute to differences in the ways they develop and demonstrate their learning. Consequently, children need opportunities to learn in ways best suited to their individual needs and at appropriate times in their development. They need to be given learning experiences that fall within the range of things they can do with and without guidance.”

Draft curriculum, p.7

“The ability to self-regulate, or to set limits for oneself, allows a child to develop the emotional well-being and the habits of mind, such as persistence and curiosity, that are essential for early learning and that set the stage for lifelong learning. Self-regulation involves attention skills, working memory, and cognitive flexibility – qualities that provide the underpinning for essential skills needed throughout life, such as planning and problem-solving skills.”

Early Learning-Kindergarten Team – “Team members should also use their knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which the children live to develop and provide learning experiences that are meaningful, relevant, and respectful.”

“In their relations with families, members of the Early Learning–Kindergarten team can play an important role in facilitating the significant transition that children face between their home and the school environment. Team members also need to be culturally aware, and should encourage parents¹ to become involved in school life and to take an active part in their child’s education.”

The above excerpts from the draft curriculum underscore the need to include content related to First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures, histories and world views in the learning program. They also underscore the importance of ensuring that the Early Learning-Kindergarten Team learn about First Nation, Métis and Inuit philosophies and practices in parenting and childhood development.

“To foster a positive Aboriginal identity among children, culture must form the foundation of early learning experiences. Culture is learned through language, ceremonies, gatherings, stories, music, games, arts and crafts, as well as land-based experiences. It is important for (educators) to have a good understanding of their own cultural beliefs and to respect the diversity of cultural beliefs of the children and families they are working with. Elders and other resource people are considered the most important means for cultural knowledge to be transmitted to children and families.”²

“Including First Nations culture, history and language is central to recognizing the value of First Nations knowledge and placing it on an equal footing with the Western knowledge system.”²

Draft curriculum, pp. 8-9 Role of Parents

“Parents are their children’s first and most powerful teachers and role models. They offer learning opportunities that are based on the deep knowledge they have of their children. Children’s learning and development occur within the context of their daily lives in families and communities. Parents and other caregivers nurture and teach children at home and in the community, supporting the dynamic process of early learning. Parents are an integral part of the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program, and are often present in the classroom. Knowing their child as well as they do, parents are able to provide team members with important information that makes the team better able to meet the child’s individual learning needs.”

“Families bring with them rich knowledge and varied viewpoints about child-rearing practices, childhood, and development. When they are able to share that knowledge, as well as their understanding of their child, with educators, they will be more supportive of their child’s learning (Pascal, Every Child, p. 5). Mutual respect and reciprocal learning between parents and team members can only benefit the children in the program. It is important to understand that parents’ and families’ level of comfort with the school develops over time, and that team members should invest the time needed to nurture family and community involvement.Parents should be able to expect that team members will be culturally aware and sensitive to the school-community relationship and that they will support parental involvement in school life. “Same-sex parents, grandparents, new Canadian parents, fathers and very young parents are easily discouraged from participation – raising their comfort level is a prerequisite to involving them in the program” Active family involvement can include parenting in the school setting, communicating with children and other parents, volunteering in the classroom or in organizing school events, helping children learn at home, participating with team members in decision making, and collaborating with the community. Families who are involved are more likely to establish peer networks with other families and to have more information about their children’s school.”

“Invite Parent Involvement:

- *Invite parents to come to the classroom to tell or read stories in their first language, or to create dual-language books for the children.*
- *Invite parents or community members to talk about their careers (e.g., pharmacist, farmer, taxi driver, miner, veterinarian).*
- *Invite family and community members (e.g., Elders, grandparents, retired volunteers) to come in and share their stories.*
- *Invite parents to join the class on visits to areas of interest in the community – for example, visit the local market, take photographs, and bring back various kinds of produce to use in vocabulary development.”*

These excerpts reinforce the earlier comment about the Early Learning-Kindergarten Team becoming aware of First Nation, Métis and Inuit philosophies and practices in parenting and childhood development. The comments about “level of comfort with the school” could be expanded to include the specific difficulties many First Nation parents have in dealing with the school system as a result of historical suffering at the hands of successive governments and agencies of authority. In the points quoted above that relate to ways to involve parents, dual language books in First Nation languages would be welcomed; with regard to parents or community members talking about their careers, it would be useful to invite a First Nation, Métis or Inuit parent who is a model of leadership in the community; with regard to areas of interest in the community, the local Friendship Centre could be added to the examples.

“There is a historic mistrust of the formal education system stemming from experiences with the residential school system. Allowing parents to make choices about what is best for their children is a powerful method of building a good working partnership with families.....A strength-based approach considers the skills, knowledge and resources that parents and families already have and builds upon them.”²

“A holistic, developmental approach must be taken when developing programs and policies for First Nations children. A too narrow view will fail to take into account the role and influence of parents, extended family, Elders and community.”⁴

Draft curriculum, p. 11 – Community partners

“It is essential for the Early Learning–Kindergarten team to work with members of the local school community in order to develop familiarity with the community’s unique characteristics, strengths, and needs, and the opportunities it affords for learning.....Projects and activities in early childhood settings can involve learning about community life. Taking field trips to interesting places in the community, inviting community experts to the classroom, and having community members bring in artefacts from the community related to topics of immediate interest to the children are examples of activities that promote learning and bring the local environment into the daily activities of young children. Children benefit from respectful interactions with a variety of community members, and from a sense of connection and engagement with their environment.”

The examples provided in the earlier suggestion reflect meaningful approaches to community partnerships with First Nation Métis and Inuit communities.

“To have a sense of belonging and of identity as a First Nations person, it is important for children and families to be connected to their community. Many First Nations people still maintain strong ties to their home communities. Supporting these ties fosters good relations with the child and family in the long term.”²

Draft curriculum, p. 12 – Teaching/Learning

“Assessment is the key to effective teaching and is the starting point for instruction in the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program. A well-planned program provides Early Learning–Kindergarten teams with many opportunities for ongoing observation and assessment of children’s strengths, needs, and interests. On the basis of this ongoing assessment, teachers should plan instruction to help children

build on what they know and extend their thinking. For example, team members might pose open-ended questions, give a direction, ask a child to demonstrate a familiar concept in a new way, or encourage a child to try a new activity.”

It is important to incorporate an awareness of First Nation cultural norms and values in approaches to assessment.

“It’s not an early learning opportunity, it’s not a teachable moment, it’s not an early learning experience – if culture is not included in it.”²

Draft curriculum, pp. 13-17 – Play-based Learning

“...there is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy, and social, physical, and emotional skills. Young children actively explore their environment and the world around them through a process of learning-based play. When children are manipulating objects, acting out roles, or experimenting with various materials, they are engaged in learning through play. Play, therefore, has a legitimate and important role in early learning and can be used to further children’s learning in all areas of the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program..... *“Through play, children learn trust, empathy, and social skills.”* (Pascal, Every Child, pp. 8, 9)

As children move naturally from noticing and wondering about the objects and events around them to exploring, observing, and questioning in a more focused way, the Early Learning–Kindergarten team helps them develop and extend their inquiry process. Team members provide children with opportunities to plan, observe, and gather information, and then to compare, sort, classify, and interpret their observations. They provide a rich variety of materials and resources, and interact with children to clarify, expand, or help articulate the children’s thinking. They then encourage children to share their findings with one another through oral and/or visual representations. Many different skills make up inquiry-based learning for children, and children need numerous opportunities to develop and use these skills as they progress through the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program.... Using real-life contexts for activities in the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program is a highly effective way of motivating young learners. Children grasp ideas more easily and more effectively and maintain their interest in school when they have an educational program that enables them to connect their learning to their own lives and the world around them. The program should emphasize the interconnected learning that occurs when children are exposed to real-life situations and activities in the classroom, home, school, and neighbourhood.”

“When developing activities using real-life contexts, Early Learning–Kindergarten teams should ask themselves the following questions:

- Do the activities address one or more of the overall expectations?
- Do the activities reflect what we know about how young children learn?
- **Do the activities reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the children in the class?**
- Do the activities involve topics of interest to the children, or are they based on topics that are too abstract for young children to think about deeply and concretely?”

“Children learn best when dealing with topics they can explore directly and in depth. Abstract topics (e.g., rainforests, penguins, planets) are difficult for children to conceptualize. The topic of any inquiry should be drawn from things that are familiar to children in their daily lives. Integrating the arts with other areas of learning allows children to make meaningful connections between program areas, and can be highly motivating. For example, important links can be made between music and language development. Children can gain an appreciation of the rhythm and flow of language through song. Musical instruments allow children to experience rhythm and beat and to feel the sounds in rhyming stories, songs, or poems. Drama offers children a variety of opportunities to retell stories using props, puppets, masks, and costumes. Drama also gives children the opportunity to respond in role and to take on roles in which they express different points of view, and thus supports the development of empathy. Creative movement and dance provide a vehicle for response and for interpretation of something children have heard, seen, or felt. Through sculpting, painting, constructing, and drawing, children not only express their thoughts and feelings, but may also articulate their learning about their community and place in the world.”

“Participating in and responding to appropriate arts experiences gives children opportunities to reflect on their own experiences and those of others. These activities can enhance children’s self-concept and increase their sense of accomplishment, and can help them develop their oral language ability and their ability to respond to others.”

The above excerpts place an emphasis on children’s experiential learning from the world around them. This is central to First Nation child-rearing practices. In terms of integrating the arts, there is broad scope for incorporating references to First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures and reinforcing a positive sense of identity.

“Aboriginal people seem to prefer holistic, observational, and experiential learning techniques. Children who demonstrate a strong visual spatial learning style prefer using images, pictures, colours and maps to organize information and communicate with others. They love to draw, scribble, doodle and work with their hands. For these children it is recommended that the teacher demonstrate to students what and how to do something (as opposed to giving oral instructions.)”²

“The outdoor world provides an abundance of resources and materials for supporting learning through the arts. Children can discuss the lines, shapes, or textures that they have observed in a field, local park, or school yard. They can listen for different sounds in the environment and watch how animals move, and then imitate the sounds and movements in music and dance activities. They can create art works and musical instruments using found and recycled materials – for example, they can use leaf and shell rubbings in collages.”

A vital aspect of First Nations cultures is respect for and connection to the land – this should be included in this section of the curriculum document.

“(Early Learning) programs must be rooted in First Nations knowledge(s), values and beliefs – one of the most fundamental of these being the spiritual connection to the land, and the connection to all things and beings. These connections are expressed in First Nations languages and geographic and ecologically distinct cultures – each with its own world views, philosophies, beliefs, values, traditions, customs, protocols, practices, hopes and dreams.”⁵

“Art galleries, theatres, museums, and concert venues (where available) provide rich environments for field trips and for exploration of the local community and its resources. Alternatively, local artists, musicians, or dancers could be invited into the school. A number of programs – such as the Ontario Arts Council’s Artists in Education program – can assist Early Learning–Kindergarten teams in more fully integrating arts and cultural programming into the classroom.”

This section could be broadened so that it is more inclusive of remote and rural communities. Inclusion of examples such as First Nation cultural celebrations, artists, actors and story-tellers would also be helpful.

Draft curriculum, p. 18 – Oral Language Development

“Oral language is the basis for literacy, thinking, and relating in any language. All young children need learning experiences that help them understand, acquire, and build on oral language. The foundations of language development and literacy begin to be established at birth and continue to be built through interaction and communication with adults and other children at home, in child care, in the community, and at school.....Listening to someone reading stories and other kinds of texts enables children to learn new words, extend their experiences, and become familiar with the patterns, rhythms, and structures of a language. If a child’s first language is a language other than English, the team should also encourage parents to continue to use their own language at home in various ways – for example, telling or reading stories in their own language – as a foundation for language and literacy development in English. It is also important to find opportunities to bring children’s first languages into the classroom – for example, by reading dual-language books or using parents or other community members as resources.”

Given that language and culture are intertwined, an important consideration would be inclusion of the suggestion to invite a First Nation parent/community member to the classroom to read/tell stories in the local First Nation language.

“Learning one’s ancestral language can lead to: development of a positive cultural identity, increased sense of self-esteem and security I knowing one’s heritage and culture. Statistics Canada defined language and traditional and cultural values and customs as broader determinants of health.”⁶

Draft curriculum, pp. 20-21 – Early Numeracy Development

“Learning in mathematics is no different from learning in other areas of the program in that young children learn best through experiences that are connected and integrated. Children are more motivated to solve problems when the problems are the real-life problems of the classroom. Attempting to solve such problems engages children in posing their own questions and finding a variety of solutions. When the mathematical problems they are exploring are connected to real life, the problems provide a vehicle for children both to apply what they know and to develop new strategies. For example, as children measure the growth of their plants, they begin to see the connections between mathematics and their everyday lives, and they strengthen their understanding in both mathematics and science.”

This concept reinforces earlier points made about experiential learning as a value in First Nations culture and an appropriate example linking a math concept to activities in the local culture could be inserted here.

Draft curriculum, pp. 22-27 – The Program

“The Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program consists of six areas of learning – Personal and Social Development, Language, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Health and Physical Activity, and the Arts. The six areas of learning are based on the five developmental domains – social, emotional, communication/language, cognitive, and physical – that are often used as a basis for early childhood education and Kindergarten programs in Canada and in other countries.

| Areas of Learning | Developmental Domains | Big Ideas |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Personal and Social Development | Social, Emotional | Children are connected to others and contribute to their world. Children have a strong sense of identity and well-being. |
| Language | Communication/Language, Cognitive, Emotional | Children are effective communicators. |
| Mathematics | Communication (mathematical literacy), Cognitive | Young children have a conceptual understanding of mathematics and of mathematical thinking and reasoning. |
| Science and Technology | Cognitive | Children are curious and connect prior knowledge to new contexts in order to understand the world around them. |
| Health and Physical Activity | Physical | Children make healthy choices and develop physical skills. |
| The Arts | Communication/Language, Cognitive, Emotional, Physical | Young children have an innate openness to artistic activities. |

It is appreciated that among the “Big Ideas” in this chart there is an emphasis on a strong sense of identity and of one’s contribution to the world. In the specific curriculum expectations that flow from this area of learning, it will be important to have content that reinforces the contributions of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples to Canada and to the world.

“Dr. Cornell Pewewardy identifies the components of self-esteem to be ‘significance, competence, power, and virtue’. He describes these components as follows:

- *Significance: nurtured I a world view that celebrates the universal needs for belonging*
- *Competence: developed and insured by providing opportunities to master skills and abilities*
- *Power: developed and encouraged by the expression of independence and individuality*
- *Virtue: demonstrated and realized in the over-arching value of generosity”³*

Interactions

“Effective Early Learning–Kindergarten teams recognize that their own learning is a continuous and reciprocal process. They learn from each other, from other educators, and from the children and their families. They value the local knowledge and wisdom of community members, including Aboriginal Elders.”

This is appreciated and is a necessary underpinning of the training provided to the Early Learning-Kindergarten Team.

“You just can’t walk in with a cookie-cutter approach and say, ‘This is what we’re going to do.’ The teachings that I’ve been told, how do you know what I need unless you ask me? You can’t suppose it. You’re looking at a difference of a dominant culture that says, ‘Oh, you need this.’ It’s a really dangerous precedent to set up. Although we have good intentions, although we’re well education and we think we know everything, I think we always have to remember we’re going to learn something new every day.”²

“Making Connections: Ways in Which Children Might Demonstrate Their Learning

The material ... provides examples of narrative modes of assessment that capture children’s learning within the contexts of relationships and environments. *Children are not required to demonstrate their learning in all three ways.* While the examples given under “Saying” and “Doing” happen within the school day, there are some examples in the “Representing” section of ways in which learning may be demonstrated at home and shared by parents with the Early Learning–Kindergarten team. When parents are invited to share their stories about learning at home, they become more active and engaged partners in their children’s learning.”

“Saying: Team members record examples of children’s talk as part of their ongoing assessment information. In addition, the team uses examples of children’s talk to report to parents. It is essential that the children’s home language is valued and encouraged.”

These excerpts point to the value of taking a diverse approach to assessment that incorporates the uniqueness of the cultural context in which the child lives. Skill development for Team members in building trust with parents and thereby engaging them is a critical step to success.

“An Aboriginal perspective on learning is holistic, meaning it engages and develops all aspects of the individual: emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual. The Early Development Index (EDI) used to measure early development milestones reflects this perspective; however further analysis is needed to determine the effectiveness of these instruments in assessing early childhood learning for Aboriginal children.”¹

Draft curriculum, pp. 28-31 – Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting

“Children in the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten Program are in their first years of school and are going through the process of adjusting to the school environment. They should be given ample time to demonstrate their learning through varied learning opportunities that are appropriate for their stage of development and that are within the range of things they can do with and without guidance. Early Learning–Kindergarten teams should also take into consideration that the period of adjustment to school is longer for some children than for others.”

“Assessment strategies should encourage children to show what they know and can do, rather than focus on what they do not know or cannot do. An assessment that focuses on what children can do takes into account the child’s developmental stage.”

These excerpts support the value of respect for differentiated ways of developing and for a “strengths-based” approach to assessment rather than a deficit model. This is appreciated.

“Team members need to make careful choices about assessment methods to ensure that the methods are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate. Assessment should be frequent, well planned, and well organized, so that the team is able to assist each child in progressing towards achievement of the overall expectations.”

“Observation, as well as the documentation of observations, is the most important method for gaining assessment information about a young child as he or she works and interacts in the classroom. Observation should be the primary assessment strategy used in the early learning program.”

“....Family and community are anchors for children’s development and learning. Research shows that increasing families’ engagement in their children’s learning reaps powerful benefits. “Benefits are greatest when there is planned programming for children and their families and relationships with families are based on mutual trust and respect and are sensitive to family culture, values, language, and composition ... Parents want to understand how their children develop and learn. They benefit from observations and information about how to support learning and to recognize how their children are doing. Parents also benefit from contributing to what is offered in the program and what goes into the curriculum. Early childhood programs need family/ community perspectives if they are going to serve young children in light of parent and community needs” Communication with children and their parents throughout the assessment and evaluation process is critical to successful learning. Early Learning–Kindergarten teams provide information for parents to assist them in understanding the assessment and evaluation process, including the ways in which assessment helps identify a child’s strengths and needs and the next steps for program planning. The Early Learning–Kindergarten team should gather as much information as possible from the parents and consult with them when assessing the child’s adjustment to school and progress towards achievement of the learning expectations. Parents should be invited to observe their child in the classroom setting and to discuss their observations with the team. Also, since parents are familiar with their child’s knowledge and skills in the home setting, the team should invite parents to share their observations of their child throughout the school year. “

This is a sensitive area and vital to positive school-parent relationships. Parents want to know that the cultural context and home environment are taken into account and viewed in a positive light. They want to know that they are seen by the staff as the first teachers of their children. They want to know that the many ways in which their children learn are valued and are being observed in a positive way rather than judged.

“Reporting - communicate findings from assessment and evaluation of achievement to the parents, the child, and others involved in the child’s learning. When reporting on what children have achieved, teams will describe the assessment and/or evaluation methods used, the purpose of the assessment, and the expectations for which progress was assessed or achievement evaluated. The reports must reflect evaluation of achievement in all six areas of learning. Reports should include anecdotal comments on the child’s achievement in relation to the overall expectations and the next steps for the Early Learning–Kindergarten teams, as well as next steps for the parents to assist them in supporting their child’s learning. Reporting should be ongoing and should include a variety of formal and informal means, ranging from formal written reports and discussions with parents and the child to informal notes to parents and conversations with them.”

Meaningful, respectful reporting to parents is also vital. Parents want to know that the Early Learning-Kindergarten team sees “the whole child” and this can best be demonstrated through concrete, encouraging anecdotal information. Skills development for Team members in engaging in this kind of reporting will be critical.

“Current learning indicators widely used by governments and researchers must be broadened to measure more than simply years of schooling and performance on standardized tests...there has been little consideration of the importance of knowledge acquired by learning through experience. Experiential learning, including learning from the land, Elders, traditions and ceremonies, community, parental and family supports, as well as the workplace, is a widespread and vital – but often unrecognized – form of Aboriginal learning.”¹

Draft curriculum, p.33 – Developmental considerations for children

“Team members need to keep in mind that individual development proceeds at different rates and is influenced by family and community contexts. Team members should also be aware that families may view development differently. For example, views on child-rearing practices and approaches to discipline will vary depending on social and cultural contexts.”

As noted earlier, it will be important for the Early Learning-Kindergarten team to be aware of First Nation, Métis and Inuit values with regard to child-rearing practices.

Draft curriculum, p.35 – The learning environment

“In planning programs, Early Learning–Kindergarten teams should ensure that the learning environment is inclusive and that it is one in which children feel comfortable and safe, yet stimulated to learn and explore. The atmosphere the team creates is vital to the emotional development of the children. The environment should be one that encourages empathy, interest in trying new things, and the development of self-confidence.”

An environment that is not only free from discrimination but actively supports First Nation, Métis and Inuit children to be proud of their identity and of the contributions of their communities is essential.

Draft curriculum, p. 37 - Use of resources

“•distribute meaningful and inclusive literacy and numeracy materials throughout the classroom (e.g., provide books at the reading centre; class lists at the wordstudy centre; number cards to record attendance; dual-language books, writing materials, shopping lists, and newspaper flyers at the house centre; labels at the block centre; sign-up sheets for outdoor riding toys);

- have parent and/or community volunteers and older students, where possible, assist and interact with the children.”

It is important that culturally-relevant artifacts and written materials that honour First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities are among the resources used by children in the program.

Draft curriculum, p.37 - 42

This section includes sub-sections for program considerations for: English language learners, children with special education needs, and equity and inclusive education. Currently there is a brief reference in the equity and inclusive education sub-section as follows:

“Early Learning–Kindergarten teams can give children a variety of opportunities to learn about diversity and diverse perspectives. By drawing attention to the contributions of women, the perspectives of various ethno-cultural, religious, and racial communities, and the beliefs and practices of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples, they enable children from a wide range of backgrounds to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. It is essential that learning activities and materials used to support the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program reflect the diversity of Ontario society. In addition, teams should differentiate instruction and assessment strategies to take into account the background and experiences, as well as the interests, aptitudes, and learning needs of all children..... Special outreach strategies and encouragement may be needed to draw in the parents of English language learners and First Nation, Métis, or Inuit children, and to make them feel more comfortable in their interactions with the school.”

It is recommended that there be a specific sub-section related to the needs of First Nation, Métis and Inuit children.

Draft curriculum, P.39 – Children with Special Education Needs

“Early Learning–Kindergarten teams are the key educators of children who have special education needs. They have a responsibility to help all children learn, and they work collaboratively with special education teachers, where appropriate, to achieve this goal. They commit to assisting every child to prepare for living with the highest degree of independence possible.

Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6, 2005 describes a set of beliefs, based in research, that should guide all program planning for children with special education needs. Early Learning–Kindergarten teams need to pay particular attention to these beliefs, which are as follows:

- All students can succeed.

- Universal design and differentiated instruction are effective and interconnected means of meeting the learning or productivity needs of any group of students.
- Successful instructional practices are founded on evidence-based research, tempered by experience.
- Classroom teachers are key educators for a student’s literacy and numeracy development.
- Each student has his or her own unique patterns of learning.
- Classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports students with special education needs.
- Fairness is not sameness.

In any given classroom, children may demonstrate a wide range of strengths and needs. Early Learning–Kindergarten teams plan programs that recognize this diversity and give children tasks and challenges that respect their particular abilities so that all children can derive the greatest possible benefit from the teaching and learning process. The use of flexible groupings for instruction and the provision of ongoing assessment are important elements of programs that accommodate a diversity of learning needs.”

With due regard for the importance of early intervention to meet the needs of children, the approach outlined is supported.

“In mainstream environments, supporting children with special needs is important in making them feel accepted and that they belong. It also helps other children in these environments learn to accept differences. Early intervention is important. Having resources to support children with special needs is critical.”²

Draft curriculum, p.43 – Environmental Education

Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow sets out the goals for environmental education in Ontario schools.

It is recommended that the First Nation values around respect for the land and the environment be incorporated in Early Learning-Kindergarten environmental education.

“It’s not just about the physical stuff like learning to walk and the three R’s. they have to focus on the other two parts of the wheel, that sense of community, that sense of belonging both to people but also with the natural environment and teaching about those relationships...getting our children to refer to the moon as our grandmother. That’s starting to teach them about a relationship to the natural environment.”²

“...suggestions on how to connect to the land and support early learning ..included learning traditional skills through activities such as camping, ceremonies, retreats, and picking berries and sweet grass; encourage parents to take their children outside to experience the natural environment; in urban settings, encourage families to visit parks and gardens; take a field trip to a berry farm or maple sugar bush.”²

Draft curriculum, p.44 – Healthy Relationships

“A safe and supportive social environment in a school is founded on healthy relationships – the relationships between children, between children and adults, and between adults. Healthy relationships are based on respect, caring, empathy, trust, and dignity, and thrive in an environment in which diversity is honoured and accepted. Healthy relationships do not tolerate abusive, controlling, violent, harassing, or

inappropriate behaviours. To experience themselves as valued and connected members of an inclusive social environment, children need to be involved in healthy relationships with their peers, the Early Learning–Kindergarten team members, and other members of the school community.”

The values referred to in the Early Learning-Kindergarten curriculum reflect values in First Nations cultures such as the Seven Grandfather teachings and it is recommended that this would be an important cultural/spiritual reference for Early Learning-Kindergarten teams to be aware of.

Draft curriculum, p.45-46 – Critical Thinking

“Children who are critically literate are able, for example, to actively analyse media messages and determine potential motives and underlying messages. They are able to determine what biases might be contained in texts, media, and resource material and why that might be, how the content of these materials was determined and by whom, and whose perspectives might have been left out and why. Children would then be equipped to produce their own interpretation of the issue. Opportunities should be provided for children to engage in a critical discussion of “texts”, which can include television programs, movies, web pages, advertising, music, gestures, oral texts, and other means of expression. This discussion empowers children to understand how the authors of texts are trying to affect and change them as members of society. Language and communication are never neutral: they are used to inform, entertain, persuade, and manipulate.”

This is an important concept for children to learn – to question respectfully and to be aware that stories, reports and the recounting of history can be biased and can omit important facts. There is much relevance not just for First Nation histories but for contemporary experiences.

Draft curriculum, p.46 – Role of the School Library

“The school library program plays a key role in the development of information literacy and research skills. In collaboration with Early Learning–Kindergarten teams, teacher-librarians design, teach, and provide children with authentic information and research tasks that foster learning, including the ability to:

- access, select, gather, process, critically evaluate, create, and communicate information;
- use the information obtained to explore and investigate issues, solve problems, make decisions, build knowledge, create personal meaning, and enrich their lives;
- communicate their findings for different audiences, using a variety of formats and technologies;
- use information and research with understanding, responsibility, and imagination.”

It is suggested that this section include reference to diversity in library materials so that children will see themselves reflected in the storehouse of knowledge that is valued in schools.

“The Royal commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended that all schools, whether or not they serve mainly Aboriginal students, adopt curriculums that reflect Aboriginal cultures and realities. ‘Educators can either make or break the school experience of the Aboriginal student. This is why it is so important that the Aboriginal students see themselves – history, origins, culture – in the classroom. (Dr. Pamela Toulouse, 2008). This applies equally to school libraries.

Notes

1. *State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success (CCL)*
2. *Founded in culture – Strategies to Promote Early Learning in among First Nations Children in Ontario (Best Start Resource Centre – 2010)*
3. *Developing Culturally Focused Aboriginal Early childhood Education Programs (BC Aboriginal Child Care Society)*
4. *First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Action Plan – Assembly of First Nations (2005)*
5. *BC First Nations Early Childhood Development Framework (FN EDC, 2009)*
6. *Early childhood Development and First Nations, Inuit and Métis children (NAHO, 2009)*