

Reconciliation in Early Childhood Care and Education: An Invitation

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The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (BCACCS) supports First Nations and Aboriginal communities across the province through advocacy, training, research, and direct service in early learning and child care (ELCC). As we approach 20 years of service, we celebrate the growth of ELCC in our communities and the caring and hard work of those who dedicate their efforts to quality programming for young Aboriginal children and their families—theirs is very important, challenging, and complex work. In our 20-year history, we have seen changes that have benefited First Nations ELCC. Communities that had few or no early childhood programs have created many exemplary models of community-based ELCC that have inspired and guided diverse ideas and practices, both traditional and contemporary. We have seen strong advocates work tirelessly to improve opportunities for our resurgent peoples, and raise our future leaders and citizens proud to practise their cultures and lead their communities and Nations.

Twenty years ago the residential schools were a fresh blemish in many of our communities, a dark injury in many others. As First Nations youth followed the steps of our Elder pioneers in Indigenous education, health, law, and economic development, we had an awareness of our historical relationship with Canada, and this encouraged

us to raise our voices and revitalize the strengths of our ancestors and heal the wounds of colonization.

Our Elders have taught us that children are our future. What can this mean for a diverse collection of Indigenous peoples who have in common painful experiences from generations of oppressive government policies—policies from which all Canadians continue to benefit today? The loss of our languages, lands, ability to govern in our traditional ways, and family and community social systems have taken a terrible physical, emotional, and spiritual toll on our peoples. And yet, now we emerge with new strengths, new hope, and new solidarities. In this complexity, we are asked to take a position on reconciliation.

Where to Begin?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf) is one important map for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike, for those in search of justice in troubled histories—histories of which too many remain unaware. The calls to action, along with the rest of the impressive and painful documentation by the commission (see nctr.ca/reports.php), are a good place to start. But maps sometimes take us to unexpected destinations



and cause us to re-examine our journey. Do we dare take the risk?

If your answer is yes, we feel obliged to comment on the meaning of reconciliation. This is no simple matter! Reconciliation can be seen as a process of social transformation, as a process of healing, as a response to historical wrongs, as a matter of legal reform among competing ideas of state and territorial sovereignty, as a chance to respond to the truths of colonization (including rejecting any Indigenous obligation to reconcile at all!), as a shared journey of people with different positions in search of justice in a

common world, etc., etc. Reconciliation stirs up a lot of thoughts, and there is much to explore together when we inhabit the history of these territories in justice and seek to educate and show care in truthful and forthright communities of difference, and for this to be a basis of our strength and respect for one another. We urge early childhood educators of all backgrounds to take up the invitation, to study the map to help lead our youngest towards a future where such troubling actions towards anyone will never be repeated. Surely none of us want our peace won at someone's expense, especially if we can create it truthfully together. Here is reconciliation's powerful warning, as well as its beautiful opportunity.

Our choices today determine whether oppressive and painful histories are permitted to continue. We all inherit a history that has determined society's current forms and that influences actions taken in its name. Symptoms abound as indicators of social ills: Indigenous children grossly overrepresented in state care, high incarceration rates, distressing suicide statistics, and pervasive child poverty. The statistics consistently shame Canada where Indigenous peoples are concerned. Why do you think there is a need for a National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls?

Indigenous people have lost languages, lands, and teachings that protected and united communities and families. Government, church, and commercial policies and practices have forever changed Indigenous lives, lives that reach back with these lands for hundreds of generations.

Today's governments assist communities destroyed by fire and floods. The responsibilities of reconciliation are more complex. Compensation and redress in the recovery of languages and stolen artifacts, support for Indigenous forms of

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community life and child rearing, and restitution for land appropriation and economic development in traditional territories are part of Nation-rebuilding processes. In reconciliation, not only are First Nations rebuilding, Canada is too. As early childhood educators of young children, we can honour diversity and learn from Indigenous priorities and we can remember that Aboriginal peoples are the original people of these territories, the only ones who did not come here to someone else's land. Indigenous hospitality has always been extraordinary, and we hope it

may no longer be abused but rather accepted with grace and justice. This opportunity comes now with the name of reconciliation. Our hope is that Canada, and Canadians, can and will live up to it. Much remains at stake for our children, our families, our communities, and our Nations.

So we conclude this brief examination and invitation to a larger journey, with the notion that reconciliation must involve new beginnings. In ELCC, new beginnings are something we are all experts in. We know that early childhood educators have a responsibility of leadership as we guide children through crucial early years, modelling safe and caring relationships, sharing our knowledge of child development and resources that most parents expect to find in quality child care. Reconciliation means that children in today's ELCC programs will carry the language of understanding and acceptance into the future, and it means recognizing that we will walk forward together. To do so in peace, we must honour the truth of history, and not fear change on its account.

This is our invitation, and we thank you for considering it.

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