



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - An Aboriginal View on Child Care

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Aboriginal perspective

The writings of prominent early childhood researchers Belsky,¹ Howes,² Owen,³ Anherter and Lamb,⁴ McCartney⁵ and Peisner-Feinberg⁶ provide a response to the question, “What impact does child care have on young children?” As I read through the synopsis, I was continually reminded that I was reading findings and discussions that were derived from a specific way of knowing and being in the world, a way of knowing that I understand, but which is not inherently mine. I am reminded of a familiar place, a way of knowing through the words of our Elders, the words of Shuswap Elder Mary Thomas:

We have been caring for our children since time immemorial. [We have not always had the right to raise our children.] The teachings of our values, principles, and ways of being to the children and youth have ensured our existence as communities, nations, and peoples. The values of our people have ensured our existence. It is to the children that these values are passed. The children are our future and our survival. The care of these children was a shared responsibility by the family and the community.⁷

How then do the findings and discussions presented by Belsky,¹ Howes,² Owen,³ Anherter and Lamb,⁴ McCartney⁵ and Peisner-Feinberg⁶ fit with this way of knowing and being in the world? The concept of formalized child care (as it is understood by these researchers) is a foreign one to Aboriginal people and one that has found its way into our communities. I am not advocating cultural stasis, whereby we live in the traditional past and do not take advantage of current-day opportunities. I am, however, saying that we need to be critical of the impact on our children of these non-traditional structures and ways. Do Euro-colonial formalized child-care structures teach values that are born of the land and of our ways? Do they ensure the distinctiveness and survival of our peoples, or, even more importantly, can they assist our children and peoples to thrive? We must look to see whose ways of being are taught. We must be constantly vigilant against assimilation and we must determine our own destinies through our own early childhood research – asking our own questions and finding our own answers. That is not to say that we cannot learn from others, but we must have our own voice and destiny. To do any less is to run the risk of assimilation.

The specific work of these researchers must be set in their context (that is, works specific to the United States and its realities) and be analyzed from that critical place whereby Aboriginal people question formalized Euro-colonial child-care structures.¹⁻⁶ To assume that these structures are neutral is wrong and can in fact be detrimental to children, families and communities.

An Elder once said to me, “Take what is good, that which you can use, and leave the rest behind.” This answers the question, “What are the implications of the research findings to my work?” There is much to be learned from these researchers that can be of use to Aboriginal peoples, but it must be the choice of Aboriginal people to use it and to use it within our contexts.

What are the main gaps between the research, practice and policy? There are few, if any, Aboriginal studies on child care. There is a need for Aboriginal people to conduct their own research. Finally, there appears to be disagreement in these authors’ works concerning the definition of quality care for young children. If we do not define quality ourselves, as Aboriginal people, we run the risk of inaccuracy. Perhaps what we need is not to define quality but rather to regard it as a process in constant evolution and fluidly reflective of the community or peoples. Diversity instead of homogeneity may be the order of the day, so that the validation and respect of all peoples may form the foundation upon which to build the care and education of children. Diversity is not tied to theories that change over time, with each being better than the last. Rather, we need to seek the essence of who we are as a people; those are the things that should be passed on and be inherent in the care and education we provide children. These values, beliefs, traditions and customs hold the distinctiveness of peoples in place. In my case, this starts with recognition and validation of Indigenous knowledge as a way of knowing and being that is distinct from others. The essence of this knowledge is built upon a respect for diversity and difference and as such offers us a path that is inclusive of all.

This diversity needs to be reflected in the ways and structures that we develop to meet the care and education needs of children and their families. Currently, there are not enough options to address this diversity. These options could be built upon community and the collective of peoples that comprise it, that is, the structure of the system, what is taught and the ways in which it is taught. Most models of child care are developed from an American or Euro-colonial perspective, including those offered here in Canada. We are thus not meeting the needs of all children and families.

I now go back to the place I started, to a place of encouraging societies to critically examine the care and education of their children, to know that we do not live in the past, to know that we have much to learn from others. As Elder Mary Thomas says, we must honour those unique values and beliefs that have been woven through time and serve as the tapestry upon which we weave the lives of our children. This will be our survival, and our future.

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