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BUILDING LEADERS
Early childhood Development in Indigenous Communities

Inuit Roundtable Summary
April 2015





The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal, provincial and territorial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

Established in 1987, the Forum has earned a reputation as a trusted, nonpartisan facilitator, capable of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in productive dialogue. Its research program provides a neutral base to inform collective decision making. By promoting information sharing and greater links between governments and other sectors, the Forum helps ensure public policy in our country is dynamic, coordinated and responsive to future challenges and opportunities.

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1405-130 Albert St.
Ottawa, ON K1P 5G4
Tel: (613) 238-7160
Fax: (613) 238-7990
www.ppforum.ca

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Introduction

In the summer of 2014, Canada's Public Policy Forum launched *Building Leaders: Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*, a national initiative to advance early childhood development (ECD) in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. As part of this project, the Forum is convening a series of multi-sector roundtables across the country to explore opportunities for enhancing the outcomes of ECD programs in Indigenous communities.

On February 19, 2015, the Forum convened a roundtable in Ottawa to coincide with the Inuit ECD Working Group meetings organized by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. Focused on Inuit perspectives, this fourth roundtable brought together ECD practitioners from across Inuit Nunangat and Inuit organizations in the national capital to share best practices, key challenges, and new avenues for greater impact.

The Current Context

Many Inuit communities recognize the benefits of ECD, especially the impact on health and education outcomes. In fact, ECD is a key component of the Nunavut Suicide Prevention Strategy, as growing up in a healthy family and community and an environment that fosters a strong sense of cultural identity can help build self-esteem. Although promising models of ECD have been implemented across Inuit regions, many programs face a number of challenges particular to northern, isolated regions, including food scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, and capacity constraints. From nutrition and heating to training and retention, many issues continue to undermine ECD in Inuit communities. Some areas, particularly Iqaluit and urban centres, are also experiencing population growth, which increases demand for ECD and creates additional barriers to cultural preservation.

The urban context presents other disadvantages for organizations delivering Inuit ECD programs. As funding is primarily focused on First Nations and Métis communities, programming tends to overlook the specific needs and realities of Inuit children and families. It is also time-consuming to adapt ECD training programs to better reflect Inuit values, culture, and traditional child-rearing practices. Another funding barrier is the broad impact required by some health programs, which excludes initiatives targeting Inuit populations.

Positive Developments

Despite concerns about the state of ECD in northern and urban Inuit communities, roundtable participants highlighted best practices from both contexts. With representation from all four of the Inuit regions, the Inuit ECD Working Group (IECDWG) provides a platform for sharing knowledge and expertise, as well as promoting a common vision for the future. In addition to conducting research and organizing national gatherings, IECDWG has contributed to a number of positive developments, such as ensuring the recognition of educators and supporting culturally appropriate programming, such as expanding language nest immersion programs. As the first Inuktitut daycare in Iqaluit, Tumikuluit Saipaaqivik is another example of culturally-relevant programming that is helping to advance better educational outcomes. While Aboriginal Head Start programs have been successful as a result of their child-centred, community-driven approach, they are not available in all Inuit communities.

Based on the roundtable discussion, Nunavik stands out as a model for other Inuit regions to consider. Amid the shift toward more progressive ECD policy in Quebec during the late 90s, Nunavik's leadership was instrumental in securing funding proportional to community needs and long-term block funding for Head Start programming as part of land claim negotiations. Municipalities also played a role in improving access to ECD. The autonomy and security provided by this funding arrangement has enabled the Kativik Regional Government (KRG) to allocate resources according to community needs. Rather than having to justify and apply for separate sources of funding, the KRG has been able to use their block funding to build child care facilities, offer language immersion and culturally-appropriate nutrition programs, and collaborate with educational institutions to conduct health research and provide ECD training in communities. The successful model in Nunavik has also increased Inuit employment in the region.

The Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC) is another example of a promising practice. Located in an urban setting, the OICC has found innovative ways to provide culturally-relevant programming despite the diversity of dialects and limited access to Inuit educators and Elders. For instance, OICC serves traditional Inuit food, ensures that every classroom has an Inuit assistant, and organizes a teachers' circle to share cultural knowledge. OICC's holistic approach to ECD extends to the well-being of all community members, as demonstrated by the accommodations made for staff struggling with personal issues.

Key Issues and Considerations

While best practices can be found across regions, participants raised a number of common challenges throughout the roundtable discussion. In particular, funding models are not aligned with changing community needs, and barriers to training continue to constrain capacity building across regions.

Funding Models

Inuit communities are expanding in the North and South, costs are rising, and issues are evolving. However, funding levels are not keeping up with this dynamic context. Neither the Aboriginal Head Start program nor the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative have received funding increases since being introduced in the late 90s. Faced with growing demands that include population growth, as well as support for special needs and family trauma, many Inuit ECD programs are forced to accept difficult trade-offs when allocating limited federal funding, such as cutting back on transportation subsidies and staff benefits. Some have explored other sources, but most alternatives involve short-term arrangements. Without adequate funding, successful programs also become inaccessible as greater uptake leads to longer wait lists.

Funding processes and conditions create further hurdles for Inuit communities seeking additional resources. Participants expressed frustration over the amount of time it takes to secure small amounts of funding from different departments and jurisdictions and to fulfill reporting requirements for multiple agreements. Navigating these funding silos requires a lot of work, leaving little time for other priorities like program planning. To complicate matters, funding is increasingly tied to specific conditions set by governments, which can include curriculum guidelines, partnership requirements, and child care licensing regulations that may not reflect community constraints or perspectives.

According to participants, multi-year block funding may be the best way to meet long-term community needs. Most were supportive of a single-window model that would eliminate the need to apply to different programs for different purposes. Rather than pan-Aboriginal, per capita funding, a need-based, Inuit-specific approach may be more effective. This type of targeted funding will require community input to ensure that program design and implementations align with Inuit needs and local priorities.

Capacity Building

Across all Inuit regions, similar barriers to ECD training exist. Although provinces have introduced regulatory requirements for qualified staffing, the number of certified early childhood educators and funding for ECD training remains limited. Another key issue is the lack of personnel to meet regulatory standards for staffing ratios. Meeting new licensing regulations is especially challenging for isolated communities located far from educational institutions and dependent on informal child care arrangements. For example, the Northwest Territories requires primary caregivers to be over 19 years of age and have a certificate or be working towards certification. However, some Inuit communities rely on Elders and mothers without institutional training to provide child care services and serve as language and cultural instructors.

As training opportunities are not readily available in Inuit communities, building capacity involves travel and living expenses, as well as time away from work and family. Certification can take up to four years, while quicker options often cost more and are not always recognized. With trained staff moving to schools providing better benefits, high turnover creates an ongoing financial burden. Communities are also concerned about access to culturally-relevant training delivered in their own language and programs that leverage local experience and knowledge. While consistency and availability of ECD training is an ongoing challenge across Inuit Nunangat, programs have been offered by such institutions as Aurora College, Nunavut Arctic College, Cégep de St-Félicien, and College of the North Atlantic.

Financial support for training is needed, but Inuit communities will benefit from more local and online programming grounded in Inuit culture and values, especially given the prevalence of southern-based ECD curricula. To address recruitment and retention issues, participants emphasized the need to change public perceptions of ECD from babysitting to education. Although some Inuit communities are seeing a gradual shift in thinking among youth, greater enrollment in training will require ongoing effort to promote the value of ECD. Communities can also bridge capacity gaps by collaborating with outside experts, like researchers and educators, to conduct meaningful studies while providing training and support to educators and staff in communities.

Future Action

Supporting children today will help ensure that they lead productive lives in the future. Despite the role of ECD in helping to minimize social costs down the line, it continues to be perceived as simply babysitting. Based on the roundtable discussion, meaningful ECD programming depends on a broader vision that goes beyond meeting basic needs to include other approaches like land-based and home-visiting initiatives. Children benefit from environments that expand their mind and help cultivate a positive sense of identity. Their development is also tied to family and community well-being.

Taking a holistic approach is just as important as shifting perceptions about ECD, as demonstrated by the success of community-driven programs. But a holistic approach requires an integrated, sustainable funding model to provide supports that are accessible to all. Program success also depends on the availability of quality ECD training and implementation of culturally-relevant curricula embedded in Inuit knowledge, culture, and values.

As communities have been dealing with the same issues for a long time, participants want to see action given that much research has already been done. To generate a sense of urgency, a concerted effort is needed to ensure that leaders across communities and sectors understand the value of quality care and education throughout the early years. Parents, families, as well as local, regional and national organizations need to become champions of ECD to build a broader support base. For instance, increasing corporate awareness of the impact of ECD on workforce development can lead to more comprehensive resource development agreements that include support for ECD programming. With 2015 being an election year and emerging national debates about universal child care, there is an opportunity to leverage the current political environment to push for lasting change.

Building Leaders: *Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities*

February 19, 2015
Public Policy Forum - Boardroom
1405-130 Albert Street
Ottawa

AGENDA

9:00am – 9:15am	Arrival and breakfast
9:15am – 9:25am	Opening blessing by Elder Sally Webster
9:25am – 9:45am	Opening remarks and introductions <i>Why is the topic of this roundtable important/relevant? What is our aspirational goal for the outcome of this project?</i>
9:45am – 11:30am	Moderated discussion <i>Roundtable participants will explore a number of questions, including:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are some of the best practices/notable achievements in early childhood development in your local area or region?• Where are the current challenges or barriers in early childhood development in your local area or region?• What lessons can be learned from promising ECD policies or programs across Canada and abroad?• What are key priorities for enhancing early childhood development in your local area or region?• How can governments, the private sector, communities and families play a role in driving better outcomes for young children?
11:30am – 12:30pm	Working lunch <i>In small groups, participants will identify key priorities for future action</i>
12:30pm – 12:55pm	Conclusion of moderated discussion
12:55pm – 1:00pm	Closing remarks

Building Leaders:

Early Childhood Development in Indigenous Communities

February 19, 2015

Ottawa

PARTICIPANT LIST

Judy Eecherik

Regional Child Care
Coordinator
Kivalliq Partners in
Development

Eva Eetuk- Groves

Regional Child Care
Coordinator
Kakivak Association

Lena Egotak

Regional Child Care
Coordinator
Kitikmeot Inuit Association

Lauren Goodman

Senior Policy Advisor
Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Sébastien Goupil

Vice President
Public Policy Forum

Janine Lightfoot

Policy Analyst, ECD File Lead
Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.

Natalie Lloyd

Director of Early Years and
Community Initiatives
Ottawa Inuit Children's
Centre

Christine Lund

Project Coordinator
Tungasuvvingat Inuit

Jenny Lyall *(by phone)*

Regional Childcare
Coordinator
Nunatsiavut Government

Tara Matte

Interim Manager
Ottawa Inuit Children's
Centre

Anna Claire Ryan

Senior Project Coordinator
Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Maria Storr

Child Development Program
Manager
Inuvialuit Regional
Corporation

Maryse Turcot

Regional Child Care
Management Advisor
Kativik Regional Government

Sally Webster

Inuit Elder

Winnie Wong

Project Lead
Public Policy Forum

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