

# The Transition into Kindergarten: A Community Approach to Integrating a Child's Fragmented World

A discussion paper examining issues and implications of early childhood transitions to Kindergarten



Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre and Vancouver Island University

**Aboriginal Early Childhood Development**

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*Sumshathut for the People* is an art design that illustrates the importance of that which each professional carries with him/herself. That is, the spiritual self and the values that guide his/her thoughts, attitudes and actions. The words of the graphic remind one to reflect about the importance of maintaining balance in nurturing and supporting children, families, and community. The sun is sacred to First Nation people. The intent of the graphic is to show the connection to (and between) all First Nation people. *Sumshathut for the People* is a modern day design bridging the old to the present day. The sun represents warmth and growth needed as one develops oneself on the path to help others and community. Inside *Sumshathut* are the core beliefs that guide everyday practice. These beliefs help us remember the importance of our spiritual self and to hold in our heart the importance of Elders, traditional knowledge and the language of the community. Sun rays radiate the values encouraging us to support families and children with a strong focus on respect, holism, integrity, innovation, culture and relationship. The rays illuminate the importance of professional practice that is family centered, community driven, strength based, culturally focused, collaborative and ethical.

Thank-you to the Tillicum Lelum Child Care Advisory group whose words inspired this art design.

*Danielle Alphonse/Qwul'stun'a'wat*

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## A Community Approach to Integrating a Child's Fragmented World

### Introduction

Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre (Tillicum Lelum) has partnered with the office of BC Regional Innovation Chair (BCRIC) for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development (AECD) at Vancouver Island University (VIU) to explore the research and to author a discussion paper about how best to support young children during their transition from early childhood settings into kindergarten.



Tillicum Lelum and VIU have a strong working relationship that spans more than 15 years. This is the third research undertaking between Tillicum Lelum and the BCRIC for AECD.

Funding for this work was made available through Coast Salish Employment Training Society (CSETS).

### Background

Tillicum Lelum Friendship Centre has been delivering Aboriginal Early Childhood Development programs for the last 10 years. These AECD programs were developed to address the specific needs of the community but were not developed within the context of an overall AECD strategy.

In the last year, Tillicum Lelum's representatives made two trips to New York to visit the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) and other community organizations in Harlem. Tillicum Lelum chose HCZ because of their international reputation for innovative programming in early childhood development (ECD). The Tillicum Lelum representatives were inspired by the continuum of ECD services and the benefits of an integrated model that were seen at the agencies they visited.

Tillicum Lelum has since started to shift its organizational focus from intervention to prevention. The organization understands the critical importance of the relationships between early childhood professionals and the role they can play in successful ECD programs. In the past year, Tillicum Lelum has embarked on the creation of an ECD strategic planning process that focuses on child development starting from conception through to Kindergarten.

Tillicum understands the essential nature of collaborative relationships and this has led to the exploration of relationships between ECD and primary education and how the two systems can work together. This paper focuses on understanding the importance of the transitions from ECD to early primary school education and seeks to support Tillicum's belief that strong relationships between and across the ECD and primary systems are necessary to ensure a smooth and supported transition for

children. An understanding about transitions is believed to be an important component of a continuum of care and education.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe: some of the research that identifies the importance of early childhood experiences to healthy, holistic early childhood development and explains the significance of early experiences for Aboriginal children; the affect of transitions from early childhood settings (whether home or child care) to kindergarten and primary programs; the existing fragmentation of services across the early childhood and public school systems and the effects of this fragmentation on both transitions between systems and ultimately on healthy child development. Finally the authors will discuss potential ways to remediate the issues described and propose some recommendations and implementation strategies to address the ‘discontinuities’ across systems.

### Terminology

There continues to be various definitions of the ‘early years’, ‘early childhood’, and early childhood education. Some sources suggest early childhood covers a span of age from 0-8, and some 0-12. Thus early childhood may span ages and programs across two different systems – the early childhood/child care system and the kindergarten and primary system. For the purpose of this discussion paper *early childhood settings* and *early childhood programs* will be used interchangeably and will refer to those settings for children *prior* to formal school entry. Typically, this includes



children from birth to age six. Early childhood development (ECD) is used in this document to describe the broad range of programs and services including, child day care, preschool and the full range of services provided to support the healthy development of young children and their families. It is also important to note that the term Early Childhood Educator (ECE) has been used since the mid 1980s in British Columbia to describe practitioners who are qualified and licensed to work in preschool and child day care settings. This term has been used in the same way in several other provincial jurisdictions in Canada. Therefore, the term ECE will be used in this context. The term ‘teacher’ will be used to describe a teacher of children in the formal school system from Kindergarten through the twelfth grade.

Throughout the document reference is also made to Aboriginal children, families, and communities. The following definitions are used:

- *First Nations* describes people who identify as members of a specific territory or Nation such as in the Central Vancouver Island region: Snuneymux’w (Nanaimo), Stz’uminus (Chemainus),

Penelakut (Kuper Island), Halalt, Lyackson, Snaw-Naw-As and Cowichan.

- *Aboriginal* is a term that includes all the First Peoples in Canada including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people.
- Indigenous is a term used to include all First peoples in Canada including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

The terms Indigenous and Aboriginal are used interchangeably.

### The Importance of Early Years

**Early Learning is the foundation for lifelong learning, and the basis for individual, social, economic and environmental well-being. (Ministry of Health & the Ministry of Children and Family Development, p. 2).**

Ground breaking research in the 1990's culminated in a report by Dr. Fraser Mustard and Hon. Margaret McCain's *Early Years Study: Rethinking the Brain Drain* (1999). This was followed in 2007 with *Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action* by McCain, Mustard and Shanker and most recently *Early Years Study 3: Making Decisions Taking Action* by McCain, Mustard and McCuaig (2011). All of these publications provide extensive information about the science of brain research reinforcing early childhood as a crucial



developmental stage in human life. The authors underscore the remarkable capacity to learn in the early years and provide comprehensive and evidence-based information to show that the way in which society supports positive, holistic, and healthy environments and opportunities for young children will have dramatic and far-reaching effects on how children develop and learn (1999; 2007; 2011).

Researchers have explored various aspects of child development and the ways in which development is affected in the early years. The following points are intended to provide examples that demonstrate the importance of early childhood experiences and development, the range of influence on child development, and the ways in which certain influences can lead to later social and cognitive challenges:

- Good quality ECD environments are believed to be a strong protective factor against poor socio-economic effects (Nguyen, 2011). As well, ECE plays an increasingly important role in educational success (Hare & Anderson, 2010).

- Tarlov (as quoted in Preston, J., Cottrell, M., Pelletier, T., Pearce, J; 2012) states that when children are nurtured in a stimulating environment, they are more likely to develop an extensive range of positive personal, social and intellectual traits including: self-confidence, motivation to learn and the ability to control aggression, solve conflict in non-violent ways and develop and sustain friendships. As well, young children immersed in dynamic, motivational and supportive environments are more likely to graduate from high school and are more likely to develop successful parenting skills.
- Language skills are a strong and early predictor of school success. Children with low language skills at school entry are unlikely to have the process reversed by the school system (McCain et al., 2007).
- One-quarter of Canada's children between birth and age 6 are experiencing some learning or behavioral difficulty. These problems in the early years have been shown to correlate with later difficulties in school performance, social adjustments and health (McCain et al, 2007).
- Socio economic indicators can predict likelihood of low literacy skills and longer-term school achievement (McCain, et al., 2011).
- Health problems can be traced to lower literacy skills in early childhood (McCain et al., 2011).
- Investing in resources in early childhood can improve health outcomes and ultimately reduce rising health costs (Masi, 2012).
- Jacques Van der Gaag, a senior fellow with the Centre for Universal Education who researches the economics of poverty suggests that *"...for every \$1 invested in early childhood programs there is a minimum return to society of \$3, making early childhood a very effective time for investments. Savings are most pronounced for disadvantaged children."* (as quoted in McCain et al., 2007, p. 137).
- More than one in four children enter formal schooling with vulnerabilities. "Children who have trouble coping in kindergarten are less likely to graduate from high school..." (McCain et al., 2011, p. 16).

The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia has been conducting extensive early childhood development research in BC for over a decade to understand more fully how environments and experiences in the early years contribute to inequalities in children's development. As previously noted, these inequalities can become evident by school age and are likely to have a life-long impact. HELP is using the Early Development Index (EDI) created by researchers Dan Offord and Magdalena Janus at McMaster University. The EDI examines child development across five domains of development including: physical health and well being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; and communication skills

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(McCain et al., 2007). The EDI is conducted by Kindergarten teachers in all regions of British Columbia usually in the late winter of each year. Information collected on the EDI is intended to assess vulnerabilities (related to the developmental areas noted above) of groups of children by region. In the last wave of data collection, 30.9% of BC children were vulnerable in at least one area of development compared to 34% of children entering kindergarten in SD 68 (Nanaimo/Ladysmith, BC) region. Physical health and well-being and social competence were the aspects of development most vulnerable for SD 68 children (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2011). Data collected through the EDI is presently used to inform policy directions and decisions for the School Districts across the province, organizations/agencies concerned with child development, and at all levels of government.

### Aboriginal Early Childhood Development: Issues and Considerations

**“...schools need to be ready to receive children who have a rich understanding of who they are and their cultural identity, even if they are not acculturated to the forms of teaching and learning emphasized in dominant culture classrooms.” (Ball, 2010, p.2).**

While the early years are a critical consideration for all children, this stage of development is especially critical for Aboriginal children – Canada’s fastest growing population. The 2006 Census reported a startling 29% growth in the Aboriginal population compared to 8% for non-aboriginals. As well, the Census showed an Aboriginal population much younger than the non-Aboriginal population with over 25% under age 15 (BC Stats, 2009). The devastating effects of colonization and the Indian Act (1876), stripped away the identity and culture of Aboriginal people making them all wards of the state.

The purpose of the Canadian government’s Policy of Assimilation ‘to kill the Indian in the child,’ resulted in more than 150,000 Aboriginal children being forcibly removed from their families and communities and taken to residential schools (Prime Minister of Canada - Statement of Apology, 2008). In what became known as the Sixties Scoop (1960-1990), many aboriginal "children were literally scooped from their homes and communities without the knowledge or consent of families and bands" (Sinclair, 2012). In 1996, Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND) reported that a total of 11,132 status Indian children were adopted between 1960 and 1990. However, it is now believed the number is much closer to 16,810 as many children were not recorded as status either during or after adoption. (Retrieved from an Assembly of First Nations website p. 5, What is the 60's Scoop? <http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/archive/20.pdf>).





These atrocities continue to impact the socio-economic realities of many Aboriginal people and places Aboriginal children at greater risk for vulnerabilities. These factors suggest that focusing on creating community supports for Aboriginal families with young children - particularly from prenatal through school age - could reap significant benefits. As stated by BC's Child & Youth Officer in a Special Report on Healthy Early Childhood Development in British Columbia, "From Words to Action" (2005):

*Many children who come from poor families do have a higher risk of developmental vulnerability...however, consistent parenting styles, safe neighbourhoods that have a strong sense of cohesion and strong cultural identity can mitigate developmental vulnerability... (p. 6).*

Following are some of the issues noted in reports and research papers that point to the need to develop programs and services that address the unique needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities:

- There remains a fear and mistrust of formal schooling and care settings as a result of colonization including the residential school system and the sixty's scoop (Hare & Anderson, 2010).
  - Residential school experiences have resulted in generational impacts on parenting and child-rearing approaches (Ball, 2008; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health [NCCA], 2012).
  - Aboriginal people are over-represented in every aspect of Canada's criminal justice system (Jamieson, 2007).
  - There are significantly lower high school completion rates for Aboriginal Youth. 43% of Aboriginals living on reserve and 23% off-reserve have not completed high school compared to 12% for the non-Aboriginal population (BC Statistics, 2009). The BC Ministry of Education *How are We Doing? Aboriginal Performance Data (2010 – 2011)* reports 54% of Aboriginal students graduated from Grade 12 compared to 83% of non-Aboriginal students (2011).
  - The suicide rate for Aboriginal youth aged 15-24 is 4.4 times higher than for the non-Aboriginal population (Jamieson, 2007).
  - The numbers of Aboriginal children birth to age five living in poverty remain very high and as a result Aboriginal children are more vulnerable to health risks, injury and mortality (Jamieson, 2007).
  - Aboriginal children continue to be over-represented in the child welfare system. In BC it is estimated that approximately 50% of children in care are Aboriginal (Sinclair, 2007).
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- There remains grave concern about the disruption in the transmission of First Nations' language, cultural practices, and traditional ways of knowing as a result of residential school and other colonial policy and practices (Ball, 2008; NCCAH, 2012).
- There is concern that the public school systems in Canada have not addressed the lack of integration of Aboriginal culture and history in the present curriculum and that this omission has created barriers to learning for Aboriginal children (Nguyen, 2011).
- Aboriginal students who feel culturally connected in the school environment and experience supportive relationships have a greater sense of belonging and are more successful in school (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).
- Early childhood settings play an increasingly important role in educational success particularly for Aboriginal children (Hare & Anderson, 2010; Nguyen, 2011; Richards, 2008).
- Growing numbers of communities have expressed the critical need to continue to enhance First language and literacy development in AECD programs and services (Ball, J., 2008; McDonnell, L., & Alphonse, D., 2012).
- Increased access to and availability of Aboriginal early childhood programs, services, and resources that are culturally appropriate is believed crucial to strengthen Aboriginal identity, self-esteem and pride (Aboriginal Headstart Association of BC, 2012; Ball, 2007; Hare & Anderson, 2010).

Dr. Jan Hare of the University of British Columbia with the support of Aboriginal Head Start has developed a resource for parents and educators entitled *Stepping Stones to School* that states "Early childhood programs and schools must attend to the tensions that schooling may invoke for Aboriginal families..." (AHSABC, 2012, p.63). Hare suggests a holistic approach starting with establishing partnerships with community programs and service providers would assist in meeting Aboriginal family's unique transition needs.

### Transition to School

**"A successful transition to school is marked by children's positive approach to school and a sense of belonging and engagement." (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2011, p.1)**

Research conducted around the world concludes that positive transitions to school are important and successful transition to Kindergarten is directly linked to later academic achievement and improved social outcomes (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011). Dockett, Perry and Kearney in *School Readiness: What does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities?* (2010) suggest positive transitions from early childhood into Kindergarten is one of the

key aspects of 'readiness'. The authors challenge the idea of child 'readiness' and instead suggest that schools must be ready for children, and communities must be prepared to "provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and supports to optimize child development and learning" (p. 3). They go on to note that "strong leadership; continuity between early education and school programs; positive support for positive transitions... and commitment to family engagements... [among other characteristics]" are all critical components of creating 'ready' schools (p. 5).

The transition to school is a process that begins much earlier than when children arrive for their first day of Kindergarten (ETC Research Group, 2011; Hare & Anderson, 2010). In the best scenario, the transition process is well planned and supportive of the child and their family. It includes the involvement of various stakeholders acting in the best interest of the child and will have a profound and lasting effect on development (Dockett et al., 2010; ETC Research Group, 2011; Gulley, Matthias & Zobairi, 1991; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro & Wildenger, 2007). Positive transition experiences increase a child's ability to learn and a child that experiences few difficulties during the transition to Kindergarten will develop a sense-of-belonging at school that inspires them to thrive and ultimately complete their formal schooling. A smooth and supported transition, therefore, involves collaborative and effective transition planning that identifies potential challenges and prepares staff and families prior to the child arriving to Kindergarten (ETC Research Group, 2011; Yeboah, 2002).



While, school readiness is the responsibility of the family, primary school, early childhood settings and community, in many jurisdictions these systems do not work well together. In some cases, community agencies and organizations are providing support to children and families in ways that fill the gaps the public education system and ECD agencies have yet been unable to fill. Christine Patton and Justina Wang "*Ready for Success: Creating Collaborative and Thoughtful Transitions into Kindergarten*" (2012) written for the Harvard Family Project, suggest that while we know that visits between early childhood programs and Kindergarten classrooms help to reduce some of the issues associated with transitions from one setting to another (especially for low income families) there is much more that can be done. To encourage a smooth transition and school success they recommend that collaboration between institutions and all adults involved begins well before kindergarten entry. Further, Patton and Wang emphasize the importance of government funding to support such partnerships (2012).

McCain, Mustard, and McCuaig (2011) in the Early Years Study 3 suggest that the fragmentation of services to children and families can be best addressed through supportive government policy that encourages collaboration and partnership. The authors express concern that while community

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organizations and agencies may step forward to address gaps in service, unless government has a coordinating role based on policy these services survive only as long as funding is available. Services developed in reaction to what is missing can result in a patchwork of services and programs rather than a coherent, integrated service model. McCain et al. (2011) go on to say, *“Integrated models challenge staff to abandon professional rigidity and develop a shared understanding and language with respect to early childhood practice”* (p. 57). Government policy that supports relationship building and insists on strong connections between these two vital systems would help to ensure that children adapt to their new kindergarten and to formal schooling more generally.

In summary, it seems robust leadership across the two systems could more effectively bridge the gaps between early childhood settings, kindergarten, and primary education. Schools could help to reduce the challenges children face during transitions from one setting to another by encouraging teachers to welcome children, their parents and Early Childhood Educators to Kindergarten classrooms prior to school entry. As well, the sharing of information between all adults involved could greatly influence the outcome of the transition to school as well as childrens’ future academic success and social outcomes. Schools and early childhood education services/programs can provide facilities; collaborate on curriculum and teaching methods; and cooperatively build and maintain relationships.



The articles reviewed suggest that relationships developed between Kindergarten, ECE staff and children and their families can be used as a catalyst to foster more trusting relationships between family and the public education system. Collaborative relationships and planning; sharing of information; community involvement and child and family-centered approaches are fundamental to providing a seamless transition from early childhood settings (including home) to kindergarten.

### Discontinuities and Recommendations

**“The key discontinuities are those involving differences in curriculum and teaching strategies, difficulties in sharing information, and disruptions in the relationships children and families have developed with teaching staff” (Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH], 2008, p. 4).**

A Policy Brief developed for the Australian government refers to fragmentation of services and programs as *discontinuities* (CCCH, 2008). The word discontinuity seems to appropriately reflect the idea of breaks, gaps, and/or inconsistencies across services and systems and as such will be used to frame the discussion that follows.

The literature underscores the importance of a healthy, successful transition that is significantly influenced by how well children are supported during the transition. In conversation with ECE's and teachers, it seems that presently the early childhood and primary school systems in British Columbia and other jurisdictions in Canada are often *not* formally linked. This suggests an identifiable *discontinuity* with regard to support for children who are making the transition from home or early childhood settings to kindergarten. In Australia it was found that this lack of integration between the two services left teachers unable to provide needed support to children and their families, putting children at risk generally with already disadvantaged children most affected (2008).

Following is a list of various discontinuities described in the publications reviewed and noted (by the authors) during the process of analysis. Following each explanation are recommendations to address the discontinuity described.

***Relationship building and trust:***

Because of the regular and familiar interactions between early childhood settings and families, a family-centred approach has become commonplace in early childhood services (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro & Wildenger, 2007). This family-centredness facilitates the development of positive relationships between ECE's, staff and families. Changes to the closeness of relationships brought about by a transition to the school kindergarten can create discontinuities for both children and family. This idea is reinforced by the CCCH in their statement, *"Discontinuity in the relationships between children and those adults responsible for their care and education, particularly in early years services and school settings, is a potential source of great disruption to successful school transition"* (2008, p. 2). When children and families view the relationship between early childhood and primary educators as respectful, valued, responsive and reciprocal, they naturally increase their trust in the education system and in those that will be teaching and caring for their child (Dockett et al., 2008; ETC Research Group, 2011). The CCCH (2008) goes on to say that there is a perception that children must be ready for school. Instead, they suggest schools must be ready for children and that 'readiness' should be determined through collaborations between family, early childhood educators, kindergarten teachers and others involved. Researchers have documented that supported transitions between the services is critical to the child's school adjustment and later achievement. Consequently, working together across systems to build collaborative relationships to plan and support the transition is prudent (2008).



**Recommendations related to relationship building and trust:**

1. *Create opportunities for families, ECEs and early childhood programs and services, kindergarten teachers and administrators, managers to collaborate by sharing information, questions and concerns related to the transition of children from one setting to another.*
2. *With stakeholders identified above, identify ways that schools can strengthen their readiness to receive children into kindergarten as well as identify ways that early childhood settings and the communities can support children, families, and schools in this process.*

**Information sharing:**

The reviewed articles advise sharing information across systems is important to support young children during the move to a new setting. Families have much to share about their child that will inform a smooth transition (Boethel, 2004; Gulley et al., 1991). As well ECEs acquire knowledge about a child and the family that may benefit the child's new teacher and affect the child's subsequent adjustment (CCCH, 2008). When ECE's communicate information about the child and family with the Kindergarten teacher more cohesive support can be provided to the child. A child's specific learning needs can be identified and appropriate programs and services put in place prior to the child arriving at Kindergarten (2008).

Although ECEs and teachers agree information sharing is important, few articles suggested it is common practice, with little information actually being transferred from early childhood programs to schools (Boethel, 2004; CCCH, 2008; McCain et al., 2007). When information is shared between them it is usually done informally and often incompletely as teachers in these two settings often have differing views on what information should be shared (Yeboah, 2002). Gulley, author of "*Smooth Transition to Kindergarten*" (1991), suggests that when Kindergarten teachers are aware of how children may have learned in early childhood environments, they can give consideration to the children's differing learning styles, build on the child's prior knowledge and experiences, thus increasing the child's self-esteem and success.

**Recommendations related to information sharing:**

1. *Create opportunities for ECEs and teachers to participate in shared workshops and professional activities to increase understanding across the two settings.*

2. *Bring teachers and ECEs and families together to collaboratively determine both what information can and should be shared across the settings and appropriate processes for exchanging information.*
3. *Establish protocols and procedures for sharing information.*

### **Family and community support:**

Schools have a unique opportunity to collaborate with families and community agencies and programs in ways that inform transition-supportive practices (McIntyre et al., 2007). A child-focused and family-centred approach that is developed and supported by various stakeholders, including parents, caregivers and other family members, early childhood programs, primary school educators, and health and community organizations would be conducive to a smooth and successful transition (Dockett et al., 2010; ETC Research Group, 2011). Unfortunately, the least utilized transition practices tend to be those that are individualized and focused on relationship-building (Boethel, 2004). Furthermore, family and parental involvement significantly diminishes once the child enters Kindergarten. It is well known that parent and family involvement has a positive effect on a child's



educational experience, especially with regards to achievement, attendance, behavior and motivation. Creating opportunities for positive and meaningful relationships between schools and families *prior* to the start of school will encourage family engagement and facilitate long-term involvement (Preston et al., 2012).

Community agencies can assist schools by organizing outreach to parents prior to Kindergarten start up. This can be effective in connecting with families who may not typically participate in early childhood programs, such as urban Aboriginal families (Hare & Anderson, 2010). Community workers can reach these families by networking with existing service agencies. McCain et al. suggested that “environmental scans and community utilization information can help identify where parents and children are and what they need” (McCain et al., 2007, p. 126). Using these means will help community agency staff to identify children and families who may need additional support and provide opportunity for outreach to extend beyond the limits of the school day and school calendar.

### **Recommendations related to family and community support:**

1. *Create environments that welcome families both prior to school starting and throughout the school year to support meaningful parent/family involvement. Parents/families can provide*
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*valuable information about their child's experience with the transition to school and can contribute to the teacher's understandings about the child's abilities and behaviours.*

- 2. Create connections across the broader ECD community and schools to ensure outreach to children and families is maximized—in particular those children and families who may be at greater risk for vulnerabilities.*

### **Culture and language:**

In “*Aboriginal early childhood education in Canada: Issues of context*” Preston et al. (2012) tell us that preservation, revitalization and use of indigenous language and culture among Aboriginal early learners is linked to improved educational outcomes. They emphasize that outcomes such as achievement, engagement, attendance, and sense of belonging are all affected by the efforts to include meaningful culture and language opportunities. The authors state “... when a child is immersed in an educational environment that is culturally compatible with the values of the community, learning prospects are improved” (p. 7). Dr. Marie Battiste, Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatoon supports this idea when she says, “Aboriginal learning must be integrally linked to elders and community and opportunities realized to build upon these connections and their language, knowledge and culture” (2005, p. 4). Family and community can provide support for the development of language and culture programs in the school. They can share expertise and resources related to local language, Aboriginal ways of knowing, and cultural traditions.

Ball in “*Culture and Early Childhood Education*” (2010) spoke about research she had undertaken with four different First Nation communities in British Columbia. Ball referred to the community's views about the critical importance of supporting the development of children's self esteem and sense of cultural identity. She stressed that Elders and families believed that schools need to be prepared to support the family and cultural experience of Aboriginal children in addition to introducing the child to the more formalized learning of the kindergarten classroom.



### **Recommendations related to culture and language:**

- 1. Create opportunities for ECEs and teachers to participate in shared and individualized professional development activities that increase awareness about history of First Nations people in Canada and the devastating effects of colonization.*
- 2. Create opportunities for ECEs and teachers to participate in shared and individualized professional development opportunities that increase knowledge about the importance of First language*



*experiences; and family, community and cultural teachings and traditional practices. Workshops and other activities can also build knowledge and skill to support Aboriginal parent, family engagement in these activities.*

3. *Create opportunities for Elders and other respected community members to share their language and traditional knowledge with children and adults in the classroom.*
4. *Collaborate with family and community to provide locally relevant culture and language experiences in early childhood and kindergarten environments.*
5. *Identify available community resources to support learning experiences related to Aboriginal culture and language.*

### **Alignment in curriculum and teaching strategies:**

Children are more vulnerable during the transition to Kindergarten when the curriculum changes from a developmentally appropriate, child led, play-based curriculum to a more structured, teacher directed, traditional primary curriculum. This dramatic change can be difficult for children to adapt to, and increased alignment between early childhood program and Kindergarten curriculum would greatly benefit children in the process of transition (CCCH, 2008; McCain et al., 2007). Although early childhood and Kindergarten teachers reportedly have few opportunities for collaboration, creating these opportunities may help them to: identify and address barriers to working together; enhance continuity in curricula and teaching strategies; and create a better understanding and respect for each other's work. McCain et al. in Early Years Study 3 state "Continuing the early childhood



educational pedagogical approaches into primary school allows new curriculum content to be introduced in ways that are both familiar and responsive to what children know and can do" (2011, p. 94).

Both ECE and kindergarten would benefit by considering the ways curriculum could be more effective for Aboriginal children. Preston et al. (2012) discuss the ways in which the pedagogy can

be adjusted to be more culturally sensitive and relevant. They propose introducing a variety of activities that are more likely to support the learning style of young Aboriginal children such as "storytelling, group discussion, cooperative learning, demonstrations, role modeling, personal reflection, peer tutoring, learning circles, talking circles and hands-on experiences" (p. 8). Expanding learning experiences to include: traditions and ceremony, exploring traditional crafting, songs and dances, and legends and oral history are also stressed as essential ways to connect Aboriginal children to their families, culture and community and thus improve learning outcomes (2012).

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**Recommendations related to alignment in curriculum and teaching strategies:**

1. *Create joint professional development opportunities for ECEs and teachers at which information can be shared about professional and pedagogical approaches to child development, inclusive practice, developing and implementing curriculum and related activities, and working with families.*
2. *Create professional development opportunities to strengthen cultural relevance of curriculum content, and the cultural knowledge, sensitivity and competency of practitioners and professionals.*

**School Culture:**

The school culture includes; the buildings; classrooms; environment; curriculum; teaching strategies and methodologies; approaches; philosophies; rules and regulations; staff and peer relationships; and the roles of parents and community. The culture of early childhood settings and primary school can differ significantly. Minimizing the discontinuity between the two cultures would assist children as they navigate the transition (ETC Research Group, 2011; Hare & Anderson, 2010; Noel, 2011). Also, transition strategies presently employed are typically informal, largely influenced by the school culture and often focused on providing information to parents about the school and the classroom routines and expectations. Transition strategies that include opportunities for the child to learn about the school culture should begin well before the first day of Kindergarten (Hare & Anderson, 2010). Enhancing understanding across early childhood and school cultures could provide exciting opportunities to share curricular approaches and desired learning outcomes addressing some of the discontinuity experienced by children moving from one system's culture to the other.

**Recommendations related to school culture:**

1. *Create joint opportunities for families, ECEs, and teachers to come together to discuss transition processes and related issues; identify what is working and isn't in their region; and make recommendations toward developing informed and effective transitions from early childhood to kindergarten.*

**The Hub Model: A community approach to integrating a child's fragmented world:**

The discontinuities between early childhood programs and schools can compromise children's smooth transition to school and hence their long term academic and social development (CCCH, 2008). When 'school readiness' is seen as the responsibility of the child, their family, and early childhood settings, then children who may be seen as 'not ready' typically have a precarious start to their education. Contemporary realities suggest that primary schools and community have a significant role to play in ensuring that the school is ready to receive children. When schools, early childhood programs, families, community and other professionals collaborate the responsibility for school readiness can be shared among all those involved (Yeboah, 2002).

One of the ways communities are meeting the broad and diverse needs of children and families is through an integrated, intersectoral, model of program and service delivery or 'Hub'. The Hub was described by Jessica Ball in "Early Childhood Care and Development as Hook and Hub for Inter-sectoral Service Delivery in First Nations Communities" (2005). Referring to Ball's work in "Learning, Growing and Leading" (2012) a report commissioned by Tillicum Lelum, the report authors explain:

[Ball] stresses that this model both enhances service provision and strengthens community involvement and engagement... [and is] an important way to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of programs and services. Providing services in the HUB model in Aboriginal communities also strengthens cultural continuity...(pp.18-19).

The Hub model can include ECEC programs with wrap-around services such as culture and Indigenous language, early intervention for development support, and a range of health services, child protection and family support. The implementation of this model could streamline and expedite relationship building and information sharing between and across children and families, early childhood programs, kindergarten and primary programs, the school district, and other professional and support services.

### ***Recommendations related to HUB models:***

- 1. Participate in and support HUB models of service and program delivery.*
- 2. Commit to relationship building and information sharing across the ECD and kindergarten/primary systems.*

### **Implementation Strategies**

The preceding recommendations outline a number of activities that would help to address the discontinuities described in this paper. In order to streamline the process the following implementation strategies are recommended. These strategies are specific to the Nanaimo region and suggest some ways to successfully implement a meaningful alignment of the early childhood and kindergarten/primary systems. Potential partners including School District 68, the elementary schools, early childhood programs and services, the Greater Nanaimo Early Years Partnership, Vancouver Island University and related community child and family agencies are well positioned to engage in collaborative development and implementation of a community action plan.

### ***Strategy 1 - Create a Community Transition Council that will:***

- Bring together early childhood programs and services, the public school system, Vancouver Island University and community to focus on the development of strong, culturally inclusive working relationships between the systems.
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- Develop and implement policies and practices to facilitate the establishment and ongoing development of high quality transition programs that are inclusive, culturally relevant, and responsive to families.
- Develop and implement a system of information exchange between families, early childhood programs and services and schools with action-oriented goals that help children and families navigate the transition to Kindergarten and primary classrooms.
- Identify existing transition programs and resources in the Central Island region and other jurisdictions.
- Monitor and/or evaluate the effectiveness of both existing and new early childhood and primary school transition programs.
- Support linkages between School District 68, VIU BCRC for AECD, Early Childhood Education and Care, and Faculty of Education to promote relationship building and shared post-secondary curriculum and professional development activities across the systems.
- Influence a culture of cooperation and collaboration across post-secondary Education and Early Childhood Education and Care programs at VIU (and other institutions) as well as across the early childhood and school systems.

***Strategy 2 – Create a School-based Transition Team that will:***

- Develop and lead all school based transition activities.
- Establish the position of Kindergarten Transition Coordinator whose responsibilities will include:
  - Support implementation of the transition policy developed by the Community Transition Council.
  - Coordinate collaborative professional development activities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early childhood and teaching professionals.
  - Provide transition support to children and families who are not connected to early childhood services and link to community ECD programs and Kindergarten classrooms.
  - Support the monitoring and evaluation of transition activities.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The preceding discussion has attempted to illuminate a number of ideas central to improving support to children and their families who are transitioning from early childhood programs (including home)

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into the more formalized Kindergarten environment. The purpose of increased support in this transition process is to optimize opportunities to advance the overall healthy, holistic development of young children and to strengthen the likelihood of the child's success in the school environment.

Exploring research regarding the relationships between ECE and schools it became apparent that these two systems often work in isolation of each other with little formal connection. In addition, the research suggested that healthy early childhood development greatly influences the long-term academic success of children, yet the current systems often have limited collaborative opportunities and insufficient alignment. The literature reinforces that community has a role to play in supporting schools to increase early school success especially for the most disadvantaged children.

The discussion paper also describes how for Aboriginal children, there are many inequalities resulting from colonial legacies. The introduction of early learning initiatives has attempted to address some of school readiness issues. However, the complexity of the historical and social realities of many Aboriginal families often prevents them from participating in early childhood programs. Unfortunately these families are often the ones that would benefit most. Community has the ability to connect to these families to build positive relationships prior to the start of school; bridge gaps and strengthen links between ECE, schools and families; and potentially minimize the adverse effects of a fragmented early education continuum.



The authors acknowledge that the literature to which they have referred in this document is not exhaustive on the topic and point out the need for further examination to identify programs that exist for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the early childhood and kindergarten systems. Understanding more fully how these programs redress some of the transition issues noted here will help us learn more about transition program successes and challenges. We can then use this learning to create a range of excellent programs that support children and families as they transition from one system to the other.

The formal recognition of the transition to Kindergarten “as an integral component of quality education provision” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p.5) would have a profound effect on the long-term academic and social achievement of children. It will provide the basis and potential for community, schools, and early childhood programs to develop a collaborative and holistic approach to a healthy, well-supported progression through the education system. In this way, we can best support the development of all young children and their families increasing prospects for a healthier, happier and more promising future.

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