

Meaningful Change for First Nations Children

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On December 31, 2021, the federal government, First Nations organizations and class-action lawyers announced details of two agreements in principle that, if approved, could end a nearly 15-year-old legal battle over the racist underfunding of child welfare services in First Nation communities across Canada. The deals, worth \$40 billion, would respectively spend \$20 billion compensating tens of thousands of families victimized over the last three decades and another roughly \$20 billion over five years on program reform. It's the largest settlement in Canadian history. We hope this agreement serves as a roadmap to satisfy the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal order to end discrimination against First Nations children. But, in the words of Cindy Blackstock, "a true apology is changed behavior." The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society have published an [information sheet](#) on their website, along with countless other resources and publications, to inform the public about the ongoing battle for First Nations children's rights.

The AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation acknowledges the two agreements in principle and commits to raising awareness to ensure that the injustices experienced by First Nations children and families will no longer be ignored and their stories are heard. As early childhood educators, we are committed to stepping into actionable change that is needed in our sector.

A report titled, [Children Back, Land Back: A Follow-Up Report to the First Ever Gathering of First Nations Youth in Care Advisors](#) written by Gabrielle Fayant and Ashley Dawn Bach (2021) for the Assembly of Seven

Generations, includes essential messages that we feel the early childhood education and care sector must hear and actively discuss.

As part of the education profession, as people who care about children, as RECEs with a legal duty to report, we must be informed by the experiences of First Nations children and youth in/from child welfare. The report clearly outlines solutions and recommendations put

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forward by youth who have experienced the child welfare system first-hand (Fayant & Dawn Bach, 2021). The report is timely given the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal order to end discrimination against First Nations children and the aforementioned agreements in principle that would compensate children, youth, and families while also funding system reform.

We strongly encourage ECEs, and anyone who works with children, youth, families and/or community to engage with this report and the ways in which our profession can and should amplify the voices of First Nations children and youth in/from care. Fayant & Dawn Bach (2021) remind us of the substantial overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare; according to Statistics Canada (2016), Indigenous children represent 52.2 % of children in Canadian foster care under the age of 15, despite only accounting for 7.7% of the population. This is true across the country, in Ontario, Indigenous children are placed in care at a rate 8.6 times higher than non-Indigenous children (Sinha et al. 2011, as cited in Fayant & Dawn Bach, 2021). As well, we know that the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has found that Canada is discriminating against First Nations children by not upholding Jordan's Principle - a child-first principle to ensure First Nations children get the services they need when they need them (Fayant & Dawn Bach, 2021).

The report includes findings from research conducted with Indigenous youth who have direct experiences in/from the child welfare system. The report disseminates qualitative findings about the participants' views on ending discrimination as well as their experiences and needs in/from care (Fayant & Dawn Bach, 2021). The report's findings highlight "the cost of doing nothing" (First Nations Caring Society, 2005, as cited in Fayant & Dawn Bach, 2021) to ensure First Nations children and youth have access to equitable services. Survey respondents pointed to the serious ways in which underfunding of services in their community impacted their childhood and adolescence as well as long-term impacts. As one participant shared, "...there are no resources such as therapy, medicinal clinics and rehab centers on reserve. Waiting lists for these services are long and not cultural [sic] safe" (Fayant & Dawn Bach, 2021, p.20).

The survey also collected recommendations put forward by First Nations youth as to how Canada can put an end to discrimination in First Nations child and family services. The recommendations are meaningful, relevant, and informed by their own lived experience in/from care. The recommendations outline a clear and

evidence-based path forward for how the earmarked \$20 billion should be spent to reform the system to bring about real change and equitable opportunity for First Nations children, youth, families, and communities.

[Please read the report.](#) You can print a copy for your staff room or share it digitally, read and discuss the findings with your ECE colleagues, with children and families in your programs. Think, what can we do together to show our support and love for First Nations children? This is not just an "Indigenous issue." This is about how we, as a people, as a society, as a country, can walk with Indigenous people in working toward real policy and funding change. To us, this is how we can actively work toward the goals of reconciliation.

There are multiple opportunities for all levels of education, governance, and service agencies to take steps that will enhance the quality of life of First Nation children and families in Ontario. In the context of early childhood education, many of the First Nation educators teaching and providing care are impacted by

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the two agreements in principle alongside many First Nation families accessing early childhood services. We need to recognize big wins; ideally, the child welfare reform will implement culturally responsive early childhood programs that are Indigenous family lead programming. We all have a role to play in shifting common/normative thinking by moving towards inclusive/collaborative thinking to expand social,

cultural, and local diversities in policies and practices. Activism in everyday ECE includes our choices in our programs, practices, curriculum, language, etc.

“Teaching Indigenous people starts with relationships.” Elder Brenda describes Euro-Western education as “it teaches us to lead with our minds intellectually but often leaves out the holistic approaches to learning.” She then compares this to an Indigenous approach: “wisdom is already in you. It’s your heart that enhances our understandings confirming what we know, and the work we do reflects our truth as we walk with our values” (Elder Brenda Mason, personal conversation, September 2018).

This year, public support will be needed more than ever to ensure that the spirit of the agreement is respected and translated into meaningful change for First Nations children.

A Call to Action to ECEs

The time is now. Every ECE should be aware of the disastrous failure of the federal government to ensure equitable funding for programs and services for First Nations children and families. As ECEs, we are not neutral in this matter, and we cannot be silent. Advocating for the well-being of children and families is our responsibility as ECEs. Take the time to read the Assembly of Seven Generations report (see references). Share this information within your program and through your pedagogy, see what children and families think, explore the possibilities, what is possible if we act together? How can we show up for First Nations children?

Invitation to join an upcoming Indigenous ECE sharing circle

This year the Guiding Committee hopes to hold its first virtual sharing circle for Indigenous ECEs and staff from across Ontario (any Indigenous person working with children, youth, families and/or community

is welcome). This circle would be supported with guidance from Elder Brenda Mason and Indigenous members of the Guiding Committee. As envisioned, this space would be held for Indigenous ECEs, and others working within the community to meet and discuss their work with children and families. The hope is to hold the sharing circle a few times a year to allow for connection and knowledge sharing. The Guiding Committee will be planning the first virtual sharing circle for Indigenous ECEs and those working in a community with children and families over the coming months. We welcome any Indigenous folks who are interested in helping with and/or participating in this initiative to reach out to us by sending an email to info@aeceo.ca.

Lori Huston and Lyndsay Macdonald co-authored this submission on behalf of the Guiding Committee on Truth & Reconciliation.

References

- Gabrielle Fayant & Ashley Dawn Bach. (2021). Children Back, Land Back: A Follow-Up Report to the First-Ever Gathering of First Nations Youth in Care Advisors. *Assembly of Seven Generations*. Retrieved from: <https://www.a7g.ca/reports.html>
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