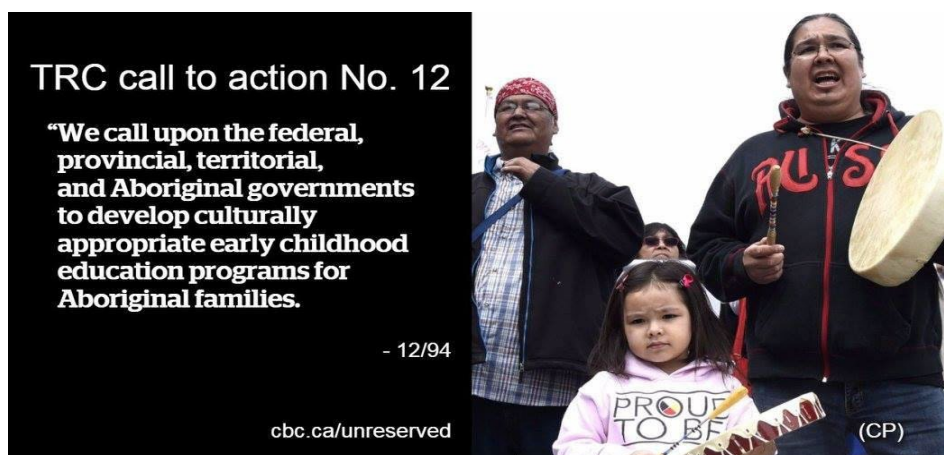


Introduction

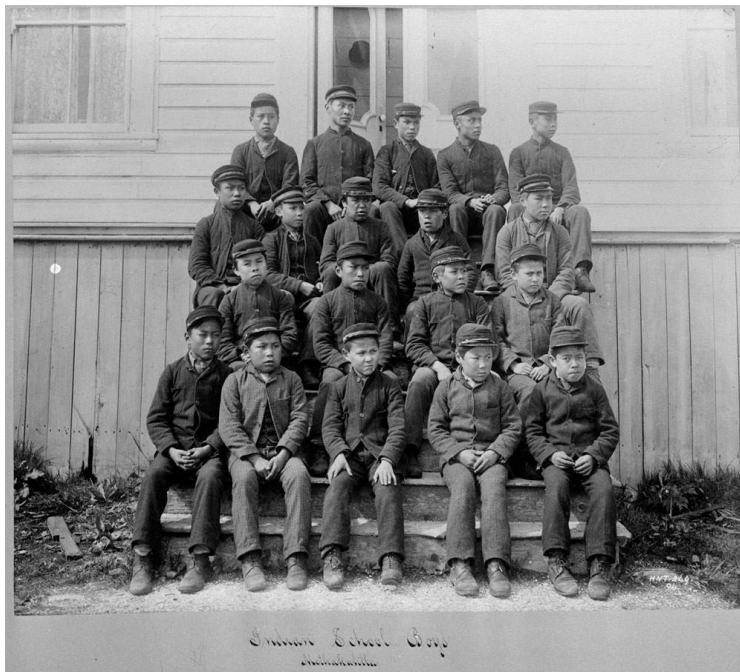
The Federal Government has launched various initiatives aimed at fostering Aboriginal peoples' participation in the society and reviving their cultural heritage. Recognizing the significant role of early childhood education in decreasing the impacts of historical traumas and increasing self-confidence and pride in their language and culture among Aboriginal children has been important to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). *Call to Action #12* urges “federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally tailored early childhood programs for Aboriginal families” (p. 2). When focusing on the challenges in developing effective early learning methods and disseminating them, particularly for children aged 0-6 years, the need for having professional teachers and appropriate programs is apparent. A case study on Manitoulin Island, centered on the Anishinaabemowin Immersion School and early childhood program, reveals a promising path by demonstrating the effectiveness of language immersion as a tool for preserving Indigenous languages. This paper report aims to examine the intergenerational traumas inflicted by residential schools and how, as seen with the Anishinaabemowin Immersion School, successful practices may help reduce such suffering over the years.



**TRC Call to Action No. 12 (Librarianship, 2016)
The Significance of Crafting an Aboriginal Specific Early Learning Curriculum**

Canada has a dark history of forcefully removing Aboriginal children from their parents and communities to attend residential schools. At the time the policy of aggressive assimilation was into effect in Canada, many believed these schools were designed solely to help Aboriginal children integrate into an English- or a French-speaking society. However, what many did not know is the trauma endured by Indigenous children and youth as their culture, language and traditions were stripped from them. As Miller (2024) writes, “The attempt to assimilate children began upon their arrival at the schools: their hair was cut (in the case of the boys), and they were stripped of their traditional attire. In many cases, they were also given new names” (para 4).

Metlakatla Indian Residential School Students



Children had their own clothes taken away and were forced to wear uniforms. (Credit: William James Topley / Library and Archives Canada 2024, image 1 / C-015037)

The trauma experienced by children and youth forced to attend residential schools is addressed by Tamara Roberts: “My parents got cut and they still have those ruler marks, you could still see them on their wrist, they both got sexually molested there. All three of my older siblings went to the residential school, and before they went, they all

spoke Cree. And when they came back, they lost their language” (*National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education*, 2022, 6:08). These residential schools were fraught with problems for students, including prohibitions against speaking their mother tongue, cultural exploitation, physical abuse, and stripping away their individuality and ability to think. Aboriginal children who emerged from residential schools lost their language and culture and became disconnected from their families. Students returned home without a sense of belonging to their culture and felt ashamed of who they were. Equally important, when children spoke out about their experiences, they were questioned by people who had been kept in the dark.

Consequently, there was a high probability that Aboriginal children returning home faced challenges leading to a higher susceptibility to health-related issues, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and higher percentages of unemployment. As stated by Sirkorski et al (2021): “Indigenous students were five times more likely to have used tobacco, 50% more likely to have used alcohol and almost twice as likely to have used marijuana than non-Indigenous students” (para 11). The traumas caused by residential schools became intergenerational. For many former residential school students, when they became parents, they were unable to provide a healthy home environment for their children or possibly support their schooling. The National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education (2022) states: “the effects that we have felt from the residential school intergenerational effects would be alcoholism, codependency, rigid disciplinary parenting, the emotional disconnectedness, etc.” (0:58). In many cases, since former residential school students were made to be ashamed of their language and culture, they deprived their children of their heritage language and/or a sense of belonging to and

pride toward their culture (Hanson et al., 2020, para 3).

As described below, to prevent the continuation of this generational trauma, providing appropriate early education for children is undoubtedly a form of healing for the Aboriginal community. With proper early education children may build confidence in Aboriginal children and a step towards revitalizing the culture of the Aboriginal community.

Analysis of The Present Circumstances Alongside the Achievements Thus Far

In September 2018, the federal government released the *Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework*. In February 2021, the federal budget proposed to invest \$2.5 billion over the next five years to support the framework's mandate (Government of Canada, 2022, para 1). While the recent investment by the federal Government marks a positive step in support of indigenous education, severe historical underfunding of the residential school system reveals a long history of unequal distribution of educational resources and a disregard for the education as well as the development of Indigenous peoples. Adequate funding for education is crucial to prevent imbalances in resources and to provide educators, teaching materials, and sufficient staff to develop frameworks for effective teaching and learning environments. Residential schools were significantly underfunded, leading to children being inadequately educated. The underfunding directly impacted the quality of education provided. Miller (2024) points out that "students received a poor education at the residential schools in terms of academic subjects and vocational training. Students had to cope with teachers who were usually ill-prepared" (para 5). This suggests that students' knowledge of both school and

job skills was substandard at the residential schools. Residential school students have also been exploited as inexpensive labour to generate income for the institutions. Miller (2024) also highlights that “the government tried constantly to shift the burden of the system onto the churches and onto the students, whose labour contributed financially to the schools” (para 5).



Roman Catholic Residential School

Roman Catholic Residential School Study Time, Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories.
(Credit: Library and Archives Canada 2024, image 2 / PA-042133)

To date, substandard education and trauma have affected the employment of survivors of residential schools and their descendants. Individuals affected by residential schools tend to have many psychological concerns: “These range from heightened feelings of anger, anxiety, low self-esteem and depression to post-traumatic stress disorder” (Menzies, 2020, para 3).

The substandard education provided by residential schools left students inadequately prepared for the workforce, lacking critical skills required in today’s job market. Beyond the educational shortcomings, the psychological distress experienced by

students—manifested in coping mechanisms for their trauma which further hampers their employability. These individuals often find themselves at a significant disadvantage when competing for jobs, as their unresolved trauma and associated behaviors may impact their reliability, performance, and the ability to engage effectively at work. As stated by Menzies (2020): “When children experience abuse, neglect and stress in their home environments, they are unable to develop appropriate coping skills or strategies to deal with future life stressors” (para 4). In addition, the impact of these unprepared parents is significant, affecting the skill development of their children, which leads to their inability to develop reliable work ethics (or skills) necessary to enter the job market. Therefore, ending this intergenerational cycle urgently requires an overall improvement in education and enhanced psychological and education support.

National Day for Truth and Reconciliation Visual



(Credit: Government of Canada, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1631130192216/1631130220404>)

It is widely recognized that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis are not monolithic groups; akin to countries with their own dialects, these groups do not share a single

language. In addition, there are distinct cultural nuances among the different groups and localities. To preserve the integrity of Indigenous cultures, the Government of Canada has tailored the *Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework*. For this Framework, interviews were conducted with representatives from three ethnic groups. The *Aboriginal Early Learning and Childcare Framework*, published by the Government of Canada (2022), represents the Government of Canada and Indigenous peoples' work. Together they co-develop a transformative Indigenous framework that reflects the unique cultures, aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children across Canada" (para 1). This approach effectively demonstrates the project's respect for the uniqueness of these three communities and underscores the Canadian government's active engagement with the initiative, rather than simply discussing it. It represents a positive step towards collaboration between the government and Aboriginal groups by engaging directly with different Indigenous communities to refine educational goals. The Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework ensures that each group feels recognized and valued which not only avoids the stereotyping and labeling of Indigenous groups but also truly treats them as independent entities. Providing children with a warm and respectful environment that fosters cultural pride helps heal the historical intergenerational trauma. Warm childhood experiences and memories of being valued will support these children throughout their lives, becoming sparks that ignite widespread change.

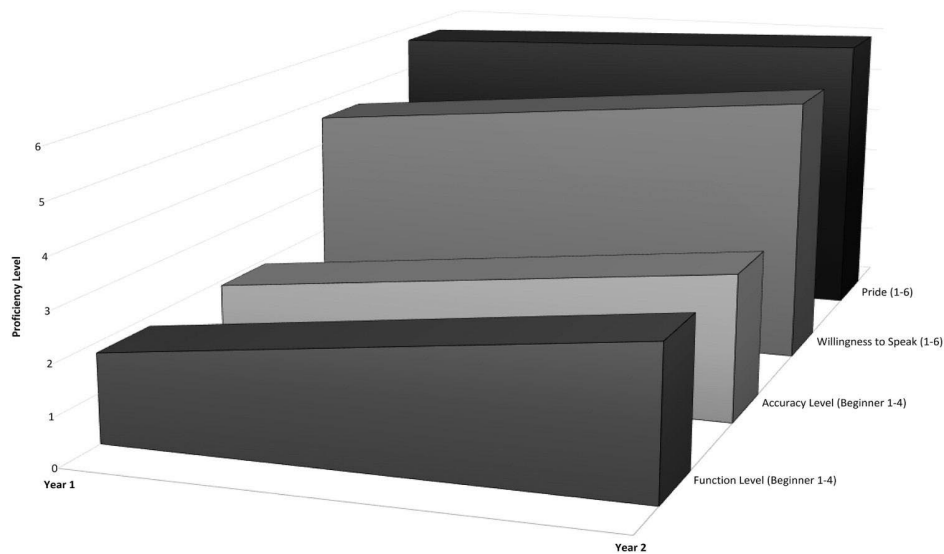
Initiatives and Successes of The MMAK Program

Reviving Indigenous languages and cultures is a challenging task. However, with the release of the federal government's *Aboriginal Early Learning and Childcare Framework*, Indigenous groups are gradually reclaiming their children's education. One example is the Mnidoo Mnising Anishinabek Kinoomaage Gaming (MMAK) program on

Manitoulin Island. According to Morcom and Roy (2019), “There is an emphasis on graphic arts, traditional Indigenous arts and activities, and cognitive, social, and language development. The children play an active role in learning and are encouraged to ask questions and make discoveries” (para 3). This approach not only promotes the learning and use of language, but also emphasizes the holistic and participatory nature of education and helps to foster the personal development of students. Furthermore, to foster a conducive language environment, the program includes an immersion language room and employs teachers who are native Anishinaabemowin speakers. At school, communication occurs exclusively in Anishinaabemowin. This immersion program seeks to enhance Aboriginal children's proficiency in both their traditional and mainstream languages, thus reclaiming their language and culture while broadening their future employment and educational prospects. It can be shown from the following table and graph that the percentage of students correctly identifying colors increased from 45% to 87%, and the ability to identify numbers rose from 58% to 78%. Additionally, the overall score saw a notable rise from 37% in the first year to 77% in the second year. Other skill areas also saw improvements, further demonstrating the comprehensive effectiveness of the program.

	Identifying colours	Identifying numbers	Labeling body parts	Completing sentences	Naming objects	Overall score
First year average	45%	58%	29%	39%	52%	37%
Second year average	87%	78%	67%	78%	78%	77%

Table. Anishinaabemowin Formal Assessment Results by Year (Morcom & Roy, 2019)



Teacher-assessed Linguistic Proficiency (Morcom & Roy, 2019)

Building on the research of Morcom and Roy (2019), it becomes clear that “immersion holds even greater promise for First Nations children. Data from research in many Indigenous communities, as well as data from the children in the MMAK, clearly indicate this” (para 9). This education underlines the effectiveness of early immersion as a key strategy for the revitalization of language and culture.

Challenges and Strategic Solutions

Replicating the project's success poses significant challenges, including expanding project access. Furthermore, offering region-specific education that preserves the diversity of local Indigenous cultures also presents difficulties.

i. Extension program for the project

According to CBC News (2022): “In the 2021 Budget, the federal government proposed to invest \$2.5 billion, over five years, to support development of “an early learning and childcare system that meets the needs of Indigenous families, wherever they live” (para

11). The allocated funds could be used to build educational facilities in areas where Aboriginal people in Canada need them most. Despite time and financial constraints, this amount could be sufficient to start providing online education. Considering that not all families have internet access (Shaw 2023), one possible solution could be for the government to set up an area nearby communities equipped with large-scale projection technology to facilitate regular online classes.

ii. Enhancing community participation and framework flexibility

As the Government of Canada (2022) has mentioned, “Better documentation of children’s experiences and learning, alongside community-based review or evaluation, is necessary to address data gaps, provide evidence for planning and create greater accountability to children, families and other partners” (para 11). To bolster the Government's strategy, immediate communication with local communities and flexibility in updating the education framework are vital. Engaging with local teachers and parents will enhance the understanding of children's requirements and increase parental confidence in the educational system. Teaching and learning programs are adjusted in response to feedback to ensure they remain adaptable and aligned with changing needs and cultural specificities.

Conclusion

As highlighted in this report, it is crucial to address the generational trauma and cultural challenges inflicted on Aboriginal communities by residential schools. Early childhood education is identified as a key instrument for cultural revival and healing. The government's commitment to providing funding and actively engaging with Indigenous groups to create appropriate programs is a notable advancement. This essay has highlighted the success of the Mnidoo Mnising Anishinabek Kinoomaage Gamig

(MMAK) program on Manitoulin Island as an example. With this case study paving the way, the next objective should be to expand similar programs nationwide. Despite existing challenges, the essay explores feasible strategies, suggesting a gradual shift towards improvement. While early childhood education might not solve all existing concerns, early family-inclusive education programs represent an important starting point. Equipping children and young families with pride in their heritage and fostering positive early experiences sets them on a path to become the strong pillars of their community. This journey starts with one step: ensuring every child can proudly acknowledge their identity.

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