

## Adaptive Programming for Indigenous Early Learning: The Early Years Model

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**Abstract :** Context: The ongoing effects of colonialism continue to be experienced through paternalistic policies and funding processes that cause disjuncture between and across Indigenous early childhood programming on-reserve and in urban and Northern settings in Canada. While various educational organizations and social service providers have risen to address these challenges in the short, medium and long term, there continues to be a lack in nation-wide cohesive, culturally grounded, and meaningful early learning programming for Indigenous children in Canada. Indigenous-centered early learning programs tend to face one of two scaling dilemmas: their program goals are too prescriptive to enable the program to be meaningfully replicated in different cultural/ community settings, or their program goals are too broad to be meaningfully adapted to the unique cultural and contextual needs and desires of Indigenous communities (the “franchise approach”). There are over 600 First Nations communities in Canada representing more than 50 Nations and languages. Consequently, Indigenous early learning programming cannot be applied with a universal or “one size fits all” approach. Sustainable and comprehensive programming must be responsive to each community context, building upon existing strengths and assets to avoid program duplication and irrelevance. Thesis: Community-driven and culturally adapted early childhood programming is critical but cannot be achieved on a large scale within traditional program models that are constrained by prescriptive overarching program goals. Principles, rather than goals, are an effective way to navigate and evaluate complex and dynamic systems. Principles guide an intervention to be adaptable, flexible and scalable. The Martin Family Initiative (MFI) ’s Early Years program engages a principles-based approach to programming. As will be discussed in this paper, this approach enables the program to catalyze existing community-based strengths and organizational assets toward bridging gaps across and disjuncture between Indigenous early learning programs, as well as to scale programming in sustainable, context-responsive and dynamic ways. This paper argues that using a principles-driven and adaptive scaling approach, the Early Years model establishes important learnings for culturally adapted Indigenous early learning programming in Canada. Methodology: The Early Years has leveraged this approach to develop an array of programming with partner organizations and communities across the country. The Early Years began as a singular pilot project in one First Nation. In just three years, it has expanded to five different regions and community organizations. In each context, the program supports the partner organization through different means and to different ends, the extent to which is determined in partnership with each community-based organization: in some cases, this means supporting the organization to build home visiting programming from the ground-up; in others, it means offering organization-specific culturally adapted early learning resources to support the programming that already exists in communities. Principles underpin but do not define the practices of the program in each of these relationships. This paper will explore numerous examples of principles-based adaptability with the context of the Early Years, concluding that the program model offers the adaptability and dynamism necessary to respond to unique and ever-evolving community contexts and needs of Indigenous children today.

**Keywords :** culturally adapted programming, indigenous early learning, principles-based approach, program scaling

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