

History Matters: United States Policy and Indigenous Early Childhood Intervention

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“Is there not something worthy of perpetuation in our Indian spirit of democracy, where Earth, our mother, was free to all, and no one sought to impoverish or enslave his neighbor?”

Ohiyesa

Introduction

This article discusses the degree to which early childhood practitioners in the United States attend to cultural differences and social injustice in their pedagogy, with a particular reference to Indigenous Peoples. The paper has 3 major sections. The first describes an Indigenous perspective regarding ‘improvement’ ‘quality’ and early childhood programs. Included is a review of United States policy developments regarding Indigenous Peoples (including an examination of relevant aspects of the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and a discussion of the impact of those policies on Indigenous families. The second section discusses the impact of contemporary early childhood policies and practices on Indigenous communities. The third section is a review of the dominant research literature and theoretical beliefs.

History of Indigenous Early Childhood Intervention and Improvement

In early 2007, a historical account of Dr. Carlos Montezuma was published in the Arizona State Government Newspaper (see Hoxie, 2005). Dr Montezuma (also known as Wassaja) was enrolled in the Yavapai tribe located fifteen miles east of the greater Phoenix metropolitan area (Fort McDowell Indian reservation) and also a medical doctor. He told the following story that relates to the dominant worldview of quality or improvement in Indigenous communities:

“As Dr Montezuma told the story, a doctor would walk down a particular street to visit a patient – a few times per week. On his way, he passed by the home where a friend of the patient lived. Each time he passed her door on the way back from his house call, she would be sitting outside, and she would ask how her friend was doing. “She’s improving,” the doctor always said. After this had gone on for many weeks, there came a day when he had a different

answer: "I'm sorry, she's dead." The woman went inside and conveyed this news to her husband. "What did she die of?" he asked. "I don't know," said the woman. "I guess she died of improvement."

When Carlos Montezuma told this story, (before the United States Congress about the condition of tribal members) he used it to warn his audience that Indigenous Peoples and their unique cultures were in danger of dying from "improvement." Dr. Montezuma's story highlights an ongoing crisis occurring with Indigenous children. Since the 1960s, "improvement" of child outcomes in general, and the early childhood intervention programs that are credited with this "improvement" in particular, have been based on evidence gathered from the dominant world perceptions of risk and most of this evidence has been guided by theoretical foundations that have remained almost unchanged since their emergence decades ago.

What is not explained in the risk-based research is that dominant world conceptualizations of improvement (i.e. increase in reading scores, etc.) in child outcomes for Indigenous children in the United States are not very promising. A recent longitudinal study of early childhood programs found that Indigenous students enter kindergarten with significantly lower reading, mathematics, and general knowledge achievement scores than other students (Demmert, 2004). In 2003, Indigenous 3rd- and 6th-grade students scored lower on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics assessments than other students (Demmert, 2004). Part of the explanation for these poor results, occurring despite attempts to use "best practices" in ECI programs with Indigenous communities can be understood by looking through a historical lens of ECI development in the United States in general and this history for Indigenous families in particular.

A Historical Perspective of Indigenous Early Care and Education in the United States

When the explorers arrived in the world now known as the United States, they encountered

tribes of Indigenous people. From the earliest days of this encounter the question has been; what is the authority of the Tribes and if they have any authority how do we deal with it? In the beginning, the British Crown dealt with the Tribes formally as foreign sovereign nations. But as the colonies grew and began encroaching upon Indigenous lands the Crown assumed a position of protector of the Tribes. During the colonist's revolt from Britain, nearly all of the Tribes allied themselves with the British. After the colonist won their independence from England, they immediately claimed ownership of all Indigenous lands west of the Appalachians by right of conquest. The new nation, however, found itself with the same problem of non-Indigenous aggression and threatened Indigenous retaliation. Continued encroachment by non-Indigenous peoples would certainly result in new Indigenous wars that the new nation was not in a position to fight. Indigenous affairs were therefore placed in the hands of the federal government, primarily through the Department of the Interior – Commission of Indian Affairs (now the Bureau of Indian Affairs - BIA). While the central government was determining its Indigenous policy, it began to deal with the tribes by treaty. Treaties were agreements between sovereign nations that granted special peace, alliance, trade, and land rights to the newcomers. Indigenous tribes used treaties to confirm and retain rights such as the sovereign right of self-government, fishing and hunting rights and jurisdictional rights over their lands. Treaties did not, as is commonly assumed, grant special rights to Indigenous people.

When the United States constitution was written, it specifically recognized the sovereignty of Indigenous tribes. Article 1, section 8, clause 3, of the constitution states that “*The Congress shall have the power to regulate Commerce with foreign nations and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes*” [Italics added]. The constitution specified that there were three governmental entities within the United States with forms of sovereignty – Indigenous tribes,

state governments, and the federal government. In essence, Indigenous tribes have inherent sovereignty, which is not derived from any other government, but rather from the people themselves. Tribal sovereignty existed before the U.S. constitution and not because of the constitution.

The Supreme Court of the United States reaffirmed this legal and political standing of Indigenous nations in a set of three court decisions known as the Marshall Trilogy (see Fletcher, 2006). These cases *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823); *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831); and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) are the cornerstones of Indigenous sovereignty in the U.S. political system. In *Johnson v. McIntosh*, the Supreme Court concluded that tribal sovereignty, although impaired by European colonization, cannot be dismissed. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall stated, “In the establishment of these relations [between Europeans and Indigenous people], the rights of the original inhabitants, were in no instance, entirely disregarded. They were admitted to be the rightful occupants of the soil, with the legal as well as just claim to retain possession of it and to use it according to their own discretion.” *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* ruled that Indigenous tribes were “a distinct political society, separated from others, capable of managing [their] own affairs and governing [themselves].” In *Worcester v. Georgia* Chief Justice Marshall concluded that the Cherokee Nation is a distinct community, occupying its own territory, with boundaries accurately described, in which the laws of Georgia can have no force.

However, even though the above rulings reinforced the sovereignty of Tribes, forced removal of Indigenous Peoples was still accomplished. The journeys were often imposed with extreme hardship and suffering. All but a few Tribes east of the Mississippi were removed from their traditional lands and forced on to reservations. It was believed that if Indigenous people were confined to one particular geographical setting they could become “civilized” and

assimilate into the non-Indigenous society. Most however fought to maintain their culture and traditions and today continue to exist as distinct political societies.

In 1889, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Thomas Morgan, made recommendations for what was to become the boarding school era for Indigenous People. During the boarding school era, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes to be placed in government boarding schools (including pre-primary ages) or in Christian mission schools. The idea behind this removal and assimilation policy was to integrate the Indigenous children by severing them from their culture (i.e. restricting the use of tribal language, traditions, customs, and spirituality), as early as possible. Indigenous families suffered from educational and assimilation policies which resulted in removals of Indigenous children for social reasons at extremely high rates when compared to other children. Indigenous children were also separated from their families by being placed, (typically away from their tribal community) in boarding schools. Collectively, such actions often led to the loss of individual tribal languages and customs. In boarding schools children were frequently beaten severely with whips, rods, and fists, chained and shackled, bound hand and foot and locked in closets, basements, and bathrooms.

Role of the United States Federal Government and Education for Indigenous Education

The above history of the U.S. government's role in Indigenous early education has its roots in Eurocentric thought (i.e. colonization activities, universalism, and linear views of research practices) (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Henderson, 2000; Little Bear, 2000; Smith, 1999). How this history relates specifically to early childhood programs can only be accurately understood through a focus that is inclusive of the broader historical context of federal and tribal relations. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was formally adopted as United States policy. This policy

called for the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples into mainstream American society (Provenzo & McCloskey, 1981). Although there were many methods used to accomplish this policy of assimilation, early education played a central role. Through schools, it was hoped that Indigenous children could be assimilated into the majority's social system by stripping them of their native languages and cultures (Reyhner & Eder, 2004; McKellips, 1992; Provenzo & McCloskey, 1981). By 1887, more than 200 "Indian schools" had been established under federal supervision, with an enrollment of over 14,000 Indigenous students (Reyhner & Eder, 2004; Pevar, 1992; Utter, 1993). Pevar (1992) notes that the history of these schools' "authoritarian rule is notorious; for example, students were severely punished if they spoke their native language or practiced their traditions" (p. 4). By the turn of the century, almost half of the Indigenous schools under federal supervision were such boarding schools, and Indigenous children were routinely forcibly removed from their families to be placed in them.

Today, Indigenous children are served by several different types of schools (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). There are Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding and day schools, now increasingly under local control but still tied up with countless government regulations; tribally controlled schools operated under contracts and grants from the BIA; and mission schools operated by various religious groups. Public schools serve the largest number of Indigenous students and "tend to look like public schools anywhere, even when they are located on reservations" (Reyhner, 1994, p. 17).

The BIA is part of the Department of the Interior and is charged with the responsibility for the administration and management of 55.7 million acres of land held in trust by the United States for Indigenous, Indian tribes, and Alaska Natives. The BIA also has responsibility for Indigenous education. Currently, this role is fulfilled by the Office of Indian Education

Programs (OIEP). OIEP is a service organization charged with providing quality education opportunities for Indigenous people. Established in the latter part of the nineteenth century to carry out the federal government's education commitment to Indian tribes, it has become the only national education system for Indigenous children and adults.

The BIA's entry into the field of early childhood education was based on a responsibility to aid in the educational efforts of Indigenous children. This was done mostly through the Head Start and Follow Through Programs that had explicit focus on Indigenous children in the 1960s. Added impetus for developing plans for preschool-age children was provided by the Indian education conference in November 1966 entitled, "Indian Education - The Early Years," sponsored by the National Committee on Indian Education of the Association on Indigenous Affairs, Inc.

In March 1968 an additional research conference brought together BIA administrators, representatives of Tribal groups, state departments of education, United States Office of Education, Indian Health Service, the Office of Equal Opportunity, Head Start, and numerous colleges and universities to provide an overview of a comprehensive early childhood program and opportunity for critical analysis and recommendations for its development. The primary goal of this conference was to explore ways to coordinate services for Indigenous children. As a result of this meeting, those communities where Tribal Head Start programs were in operation, early childhood programs (typically known as Bureau kindergartens) were planned to strengthen the operation by making it possible for Head Start to redistribute education funds, which had previously been released by the BIA to serve five year olds, to extend services to three and four year olds. Seventy kindergarten units were requested in the Fiscal Year 1969 Appropriation.

There were in addition, nine kindergartens operating with funds provided under the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which had been established prior to this school year. As of September 1969, 34 new kindergartens or 69 units were established to serve approximately 1400 children during the school year 1969-70. Due to the national shortage of trained personnel, the BIA provided intensive pre-service and in-service training for all staff, geared to professional development and accreditation of Indian teachers, through a contract with the National Association for the Education for Young Children (hereafter NAEYC) and Bank Street College of Education, both representing national leadership in the field.

In 1968-69, the NAEYC provided two to eight weeks training for all BIA personnel responsible for the new kindergartens; public school personnel receiving Johnson O' Malley funds, Head Start and Follow Through workers, on a selected basis, as well as personnel from colleges and universities. Indian leaders were involved as NAEYC staff members and representatives of the BIA National Indian Education Advisory Committee were active participants. A preliminary draft of "A Kindergarten Guide for Indian Children" was developed as part of the contract. The Bank Street College of Education provided training institutes for BIA personnel responsible for supervision of the kindergartens and for teachers, aides, and administrators. Indian leaders were involved in the latter as staff members and college credit was given. The construction of 59 new kindergartens with indoor and outdoor space, in 1970, represented the first BIA facilities constructed specifically for kindergartens - the previous 69 were developed in converted classroom space. As of 2008, the Head Start Bureau provides funding to 157 tribal grantees in 28 states. These programs often differ from traditional Head Start programs in that they tend to be located in rural, remote locations. Programs in these areas are often affected by challenges associated with their geographic location, such as limited transportation, limited resources (e.g., the pool of qualified teachers may be small), and relatively

small numbers of children to enroll in preschool. Although an extensive body of literature exists on Head Start, only a small part of this literature is program impact research and almost none provides insight about the impact of the program for Indigenous children. Not only is the number of studies examining Indigenous communities small, but most of the studies focus on cognitive outcomes, leaving such areas as culture and context almost completely unevaluated.

Even as the evidence about the short and long-term benefits of many early childhood programs continues to grow, Indigenous children and their communities have seldom been the direct beneficiaries of this knowledge. Very little evidence has been systematically gathered from early childhood programs that serve Indigenous children (Niles, Byers, & Krueger, 2008a; Niles, Byers, & Krueger, 2008b). Programs such as Even Start, Early Head Start, and other two-generational programs (i.e. programs involving both parents and children) have received considerable attention in the public and academic media. Yet despite the growing volume of these voices, most seem to converse using the voice of dominant world pedagogy of what is – and is not – success and quality of care. Not only is it often literally the same language, as English becomes ever more dominant in the worlds of business, culture, science, technology, and research, but it shares the same vocabulary. Terms and concepts such as “high quality,” “normal child development,” and “evidence-based practice” are examples. How these terms relate to Indigenous populations remains unclear however. The postmodern research literature on Indigenous populations makes evident that each Indigenous community has its own indicators of quality, history, culture, traditions, and norms (see Nsamenang, 2007; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005). One discussion – in one language (i.e. English) - of linear “child development” and one definition of quality in early care and intervention clearly does not fit all.

The Impact of Contemporary Early Childhood Policies

United States federal early childhood policies have impacted Indigenous families and their tribal governments throughout the history of the United States in the name of “improvement.” The early history of the United States contains numerous examples of European colonial values impacting relationships with Indigenous peoples and shaping policies that later affected how tribes would be governed. As a federal early childhood system developed, important lessons learned from interactions with the tribes were often overlooked and ignored. One example of this is drawn from the cultural view of children and their relationships with family and community and how these views differed between tribes and the developing federal early childhood values and policies. This is demonstrated from conflicting worldviews of whether the larger community or “the state” should educate young Indigenous children. In Etienne & Leacock’s *Women and Colonization* (1980), this cultural clash was evident during early colonial contact between the French and the Montagnais-Naskapi. Jesuit values influenced French efforts to convince the Montagnais-Naskapi that relationships between children and their tribe should be limited only to parents. However, this biological limitation was not the Montagnais-Naskapi cultural value as expressed by one of the tribal fathers: “*You French people love only your own children, while we love all the children of our tribe.*”

United States’ contemporary early childhood policies and practices continue to undermine Indigenous cultures, although perhaps in more subtle ways than their predecessors. Examples can be found in contemporary early childhood care and practices. The “mandating of dominant world best practices and definitions of quality” is insensitive to Indigenous-based early childhood intervention. Terms such as “promoting development”; “school readiness”; “cost effectiveness”; “regulations and standards”; and most pervasive of all, “evidenced-based”

practice are commonly used in early childhood research literature. Even though these concepts are part of the dominant early childhood discourse, little is known about how these and other terms relate to and are consistent with the unique traditions and strengths of Indigenous communities.

Moreover, mainstream developmental theories of child development completely ignore Indigenous cultural factors such as kinship networks and other tribal customs in determining attachment and resiliency as phenomena in child development. Tribal practices of extended family and the “*significance of cultural attachment (not merely attachment to biological parents) are ignored, as is loss to the collective tribal community that results from a child’s removal from his or her culture*” (Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Day, Poupart, & Scharnberg, 2000, p. 19).

Developing and implementing truly culturally competent early childhood programs is a significant challenge in today’s policy environment. Although not discussed in detail here, policies and laws relevant to early childhood programs include the English Language Unity Act of 2007 – H.R. 997, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 - Public Law 107-110, and the Indian Education Act of 1972 – Public Law 92-318.

Historical Overview of Early Childhood Intervention, Child Development, and the Response to Poverty in the Dominant World

Since its inception, the intent of early intervention was to build the best possible foundation for future health, and for future academic and social functioning (Karoly, Greenwood, Everingham, Hoube, Kilburn, Rydell, Sanders, & Chiesa, 1998; Reynolds, 2000). The dominant world considers early childhood intervention as being compensatory; that is, they are designed to prevent or mitigate poor child development in at-risk families – with risk usually being defined as high poverty levels (Reynolds, 2000). Since the early 1940s dominant world research has

suggested that families living in poverty did not perform as well on cognitive aptitude tests when compared to non-poor families (Condry, 1983). By the 1950s there was also evidence that children of low-income families were more likely to perform poorly on many types of academic achievement tests (Anastasi, 1958). In the 1960s, the United States Office of Education agreed to conduct a nationwide study of the educational achievement of diverse ethnic groups (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, & York, 1966). This study became known as the Coleman Report. The report found that sixth-grade African-American children were more than two grades behind the average white child in variety of subjects (Coleman, et al., 1966). This gap expanded to five years or more by early adolescence (Coleman, et al., 1966). Klaus and Gray (1968) termed this “progressive retardation.” Deutsch (1967) called it “cumulative deficit.” Although later questioned, these findings were of particular interest to policymakers because other research at that time suggested that the level of academic success was a function of the child’s environment rather than genetic deficits (Brazziel, 1969).

In the 1960s, social-class comparison research was extended to the investigation of social-class differences that could be applicable to child development (Condry, 1983). Dilemmas fundamental to this research were also revealed. There was an almost predictable confounding of socioeconomic status (SES) and race, although attempts were made to separate the two later (see Condry, 1983; Palmer, 1983). Despite mounting evidence for the impacts of neighborhood composition over and above family-level influences taken as a whole, most research of the era “suggested that neighborhood composition is confounded with family characteristics, and when family characteristics are controlled, neighborhood effects are fairly weak” (Coulton, 1996, p. 91). Even so, there was significant disagreement about how and why

poverty affects child development.

In his seminal book, *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics* (1964), Benjamin Bloom suggested that the effect of the environment is greatest during the period of most rapid normal human development and its effect is least in the periods of least rapid normal development. Although acknowledging the relative scarcity of evidence on the effects that changing the environment can have on intelligence, he argued, at a practical level, “that to ameliorate the effects of poverty, steps should be taken as early in the individual’s development as possible” (p. 89). This supported what dominant world social theories would later maintain; that early social environments, including home, school, peers, and neighborhoods, influence children’s social and emotional development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1985; Wilson, 1987).

Still, there was little agreement. In the book, *The Other America* (1962), Harrington maintained that poor families grow up with a language of poverty, a psychology of poverty, and a worldview of poverty that is different from the dominant society. This was later called a “culture of poverty.” This notion of a “culture of the poor” resonated with theories and research on environmental disadvantage taking place at this time (Coleman, et al., 1966). The terms cultural deprivation and cultural deficit were broadly accepted by dominant world social scientists in the 1960s as a concise expression of the critical interaction between poverty and child development. Once it became generally accepted (by most Western early childhood researchers) that child development could be influenced by environmental factors, the term “cultural deficit” was gradually eliminated from research, although not completely.

A Dominant World Perspective: Risks to Child Development of Children Living in Poverty

As suggested in the research presented above, Western researchers have accumulated a large amount of “evidence” to justify the implementation of early childhood intervention (ECI)

programs in minority communities (i.e. primarily with inner-city black children). The above research notwithstanding, there is little evidence about whether rural Indigenous communities would experience the same or even similar results. Western research also attempts to answer the fundamental question – how and why do the threats of poverty manifest themselves in early childhood? Several “articles of evidence” have emerged. However, it is important to note that this evidence has not been verified with Indigenous communities.

Articles of evidence from Western Research: The Concept of Risk

First, dominant world researchers have hypothesized that the financial and environmental stressors associated with poverty pose a substantial risk to parenting behaviors and the early identification of health problem, thus having an impact on child development (Lyons-Ruth, Alpern, & Repacholi, 1993; Lyons-Ruth, Easterbrooks, & Cibelli, 1997; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Shaw & Vondra, 1995). Second, poverty poses a significant risk to parental ability to provide a supportive and stimulating early home learning environment that can lead to problems with subsequent school readiness in children (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Liaw, 1995; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). Third, parents who are poor have been observed to have interactions with their children that are characterized by lower overall ratings of parental sensitivity and by more hostile, intrusive, and erratic responses (Pianta & Egeland, 1990; Shaw & Vondra, 1995). Such parenting styles in turn place children at risk for the development of insecure or disorganized/disoriented attachment strategies (Lyons-Ruth, Connell, Grunebaum, & Botein, 1990; Lyons-Ruth et al., 1997; Zeanah, Boris, & Larrieu, 1997), as well as at heightened risk for maltreatment (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). This high incidence of negative parent-child interactions, which compromise the positive child

development of poor children, may be linked to a variety of parental difficulties associated with poverty status.

Fourth, the stressors of living in poverty may severely tax and limit parents' emotional and coping resources when interacting with their children (Halpern, 1993; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Watson, Kirby, Kelleher, & Bradley, 1996). Fifth, parents living in poverty have also been found to be at higher risk for mental health difficulties, including depression, alcohol, and substance abuse (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993), all of which can severely interfere with parenting quality and child development. Moreover, parental depression has been found to co-occur with poverty status at elevated rates and may be the "most significant mediator" of child development in poor families (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993). Sixth, the early home learning environment matters. The quality of the early home learning environment has been found to partially mediate the effects of poverty on the development of young children's cognitive attainment (Reynolds, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). Specifically, a number of studies of low birthweight premature (LBW-PT) infants, born in poverty that were part of the Child Health and Development Program (1990), found a strong association between a parent's ability to provide important developmental cognitive achievement in the first 3 to 5 years of life (Reynolds, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000).

Seventh, poverty also affects young children via its impact on their immediate environment both directly through physical characteristics, such as increased risk of lead exposure and illnesses associated with crowded household conditions, for example, and indirectly through social characteristics, such as the chronic strain imposed on families by community disorganization and violence. Thus, such characteristics of the immediate environment operate both directly (via physical characteristics) and indirectly as moderators (via social

characteristics) of the impact of risks (poverty and its correlates) on developmental outcomes for poor children (Reynolds, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000).

Limitations of Risk-Based Research in Indigenous communities

As detailed above, the concepts of risk and resilience are cornerstones of Western research findings (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Oetting, Edwards, Kelly, & Beauvais, 1997; Steinberg, 1991). However, five critical differences between this Western early childhood literature and how concepts and conditions of ‘risk’ apply to Indigenous communities are worth noting. First, risk in Indigenous communities is not well defined and levels of poverty in Indigenous communities might, but not always as suggested by the above research, be considered a deficit and a threat to children’s growth. Although there is little doubt that for many children growing up in poverty a host of specific risks such as limited access to health care, economic stresses on the family, increased exposure to environmental hazards, and limited opportunities for employment are apparent (Steinberg, 1991). Whether these can be applied to Indigenous populations needs further exploration. A second limitation of a risk-based approach as applied to Indigenous communities is that the study of risk and resilience tends to take a broader view, focusing on larger issues of adjustment and adaptation rather than on specific developmental milestones in isolation from other aspects of development (Kaplan, 1999). Third, and perhaps the most important limitation of the risk and resilience approach in ECI programs, is that although a fairly substantial research-based literature has emerged in the past 40+ years (see above) that has identified numerous risk and protective factors related to common developmental problems, there is little information about how such risk and protective factors affect Indigenous populations (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). A fourth limitation of this approach is that it tends to be deficit-oriented, emphasizing problems (Benson, 1997; Pittman & Cahill, 1991) and

leading people to focus on what is wrong with children, youth, and families rather than on what is right. From an Indigenous perspective, this can be problematic because of the potential to stigmatize these populations, continue colonizing efforts, undermine their motivation, or discourage them from becoming involved in developing ECI programs relevant to their unique community. Finally, there is little recognition in the ECI literature that a hypothesized risk or protective mechanism may not apply equally to all persons within unique (e.g., Indigenous) populations. As O'Connor and Rutter (1996) suggest, a risk mechanism may or not may apply to a subgroup of at-risk populations, and a protective factor may be more effective for some individuals (e.g., tribal members vs. non-tribal members) than for others. If we accept Rutter's (1987) supposition that protective processes are linked to risk processes, then the dominant world literature must be more thoughtful about the protective processes that occur naturally in Indigenous communities. Thus the need to redefine what these concepts mean in Indigenous and other diverse communities becomes all the more significant because risk-based theories largely ignore cultural strengths that are often unique to minority populations.

Conclusion

This article provides a brief evolutionary history of United States' early childhood policies and challenges the traditional concepts of 'best practice' and 'evidence-based' in their applicability to Indigenous communities given the lack of Indigenous specific research to substantiate such claims. By questioning the dominant world's concepts of universality of child and social development, and programs designed to promote these understandings, it is hoped that a productive dialogue, involving listening and respecting alternative perspectives can be established. A key principle guiding the discussion in this article is that increased critical thought is needed in the decolonialization of United States early childhood policy and its demand

for “best” and “evidenced-based practices.” This begins with acceptance on the part of the policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, to participate meaningfully and centrally in the design, implementation and evaluation of early childhood programs that are inclusive of disenfranchised or marginalized cultural populations, such as Indigenous communities (Evans, McDonald & Nyce 1999; Haig-Brown 1995; Smith, 1990).

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