



## Introduction to *Transitions for Urban Indigenous Children and Families: Documentation and Partnership Development Project*



Figure 1. Drumming at Singing Frog Aboriginal Head Start. Photo courtesy of BCACCS

*As the field of Indigenous early childhood development and care continues to mature, Greenwood... emphasizes the centrality of programs and policies coming from a place where Aboriginal ways of knowing and being form the basis of development and delivery (Archibald & Hare, 2016).*

### **Who is involved with this project?**

The *Transitions Documentation and Partnership Development Project* is an Indigenous-led pilot research project founded in Indigenous rights to self-determination in developing cultural institutions and is a partnership of the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, Singing Frog Aboriginal Head Start, the Vancouver Aboriginal Early Years Network, the Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council, Vancouver Island University and the Vancouver School Board. This project is funded by the generous contributions of the City of Vancouver's Social Innovation Program, the Vancouver Foundation and is hosted by the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society.

### **Why is this important?**

Past research (see Reference links, below) about Indigenous early learning and transition experiences have identified gaps in supports for maintaining and strengthening Indigenous

cultural identities, which can have detrimental impacts upon a child's motivation or ability to learn. These cultural support gaps are most clearly seen in transitions from Indigenous-led pre-schools and daycares (e.g. Aboriginal Head Start) to public schools. These gaps are particularly detrimental in a society where Indigenous children still face bullying and stereotyping due to racism, or discrimination within social, economic, education or health systems. According to Statistics Canada (2009), 12 per cent of off-reserve Indigenous children in BC, in 2006, aged 6 to 14, occasionally or constantly had problems with their teachers. Children facing gaps and challenges during their primary years become strong candidates for poor educational outcomes, and many drop out of school.

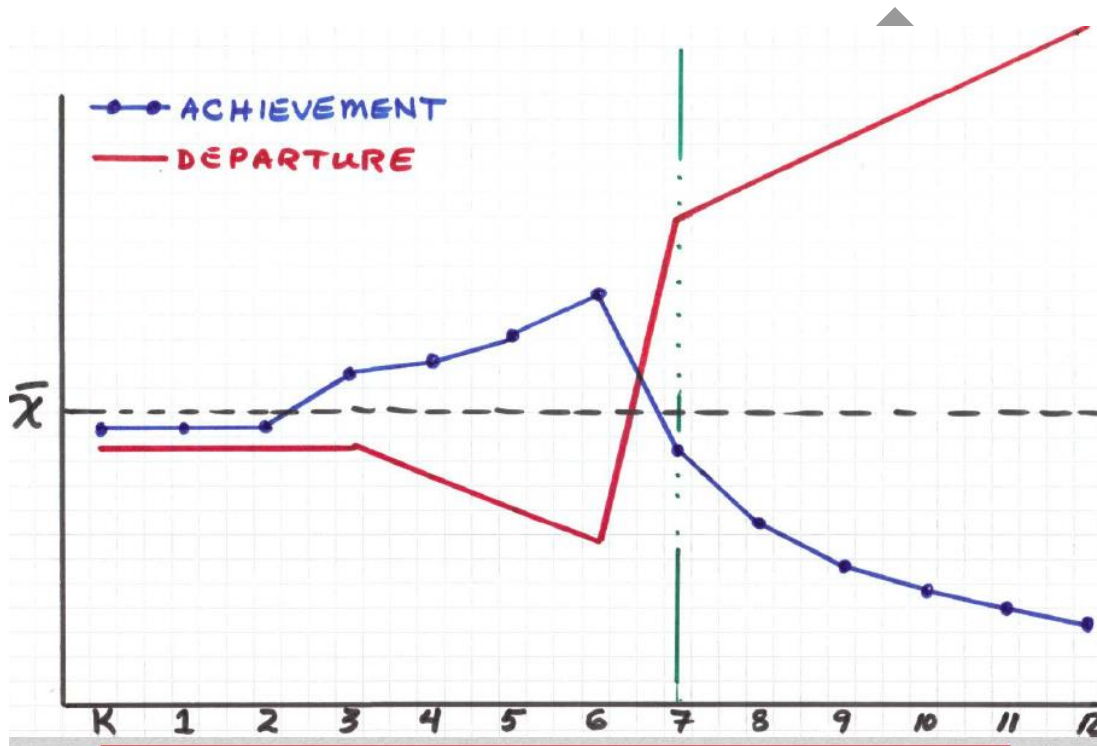


Figure 2. Graph of Indigenous student achievement and departures in schools, per grade (Brokenleg, 2015).

Statistics Canada reported that in 2012, 41% of off-reserve 18-24 year olds reported they did not finish high school by 18 years of age, plus 29% reported that they left school before finishing; that's 70% of off-reserve Indigenous youth that aren't completing, or are delaying completion. In 1996, The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples made the following recommendations to improve Indigenous education outcomes:

- *All schools, whether or not they serve mainly Aboriginal students, adopt curriculums that reflect Aboriginal cultures and realities;*
- *Governments allocate resources such that Aboriginal language instruction can be given high priority, where numbers warrant;*
- *Provincial and territorial schools make greater efforts to involve Aboriginal parents in decision making (Canada, 1996).*

Nineteen years later, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada made similar recommendations, including new legislation and funding for:

- *Developing culturally appropriate curricula;*
- *Improving education attainment levels and success rates;*
- *Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses;*
- *Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability;*
- *Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children (TRC, 2015).*

In summary, Indigenous people have been calling – for decades – for culturally appropriate curricula, Aboriginal languages, and parental and community involvement as a pathway towards improved education success rates. Transitions from early learning experiences into public education are a critical time for determining the success of Indigenous children, and Indigenous parents and communities should be involved in troubleshooting the challenges, visioning best case scenarios, and brainstorming strategies for achieving them. Many questions remain to be explored:

1. What are child and parent challenges, visions and strategies for improving children’s transitions into and through the public education system?
2. How can we measure successful transitions, in ways that are relevant to Indigenous children and parents?
3. How can Indigenous education partners and leaders address the challenges, and support the visions and strategies for successful transition?

### **How will the project proceed?**

The *Transitions* pilot project is dedicated to documenting the experience of urban Indigenous children and families during transitions into formal schooling, exploring existing supports, and from that knowledge, developing capacities and partnerships to enhance future transitions. Through Indigenous methodologies and innovative community development, this project will begin with the voices of those most affected, and move toward the promotion and support of Indigenous leadership and partnership for the benefit of Indigenous children, their families and communities.

### **What’s happening now?**

In 2018 and 2019 *Transitions* will be documenting the views and experiences of Indigenous children, families and school staff in the Vancouver School district, about expectations and experiences of moving from the relative cultural safety of Aboriginal Head Start to formal K-12 schooling. Relevant Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from communities, institutions and non-government agencies will also be involved. Many of the areas of interest have already been identified in the *Transitions* Documentation Plan developed under the leadership of Graham Giles. How and when these areas can be explored with children, families and school staff is under discussion and will be developed into a *Transitions* Implementation Plan, for delivery over 2018 and 2019.

*Transitions* documentation and partnership processes are being developed using participatory action research and Indigenous research methodologies including invitations to ceremony, use of gifting and tobacco (when appropriate), good hosting, informal conversations, circle talk, storywork, responsive and Indigenous art curricula, photo-journaling, surveys, partnership and relationship building, informed consent, grounded theorizing, analysis of themes and vetting of conclusions and recommendations by participants.

### **How will *Transitions* make a difference?**

Research with Indigenous people is much more than simply gathering information. It must support capacity development, create new modes of Indigenous-led research at the intersection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge, and involve the co-development of plans for the future. During the *Transitions* project, new indicators of success will be developed and tested with Indigenous participants, to complement current outcome measurement systems and ensure Indigenous school experiences and transitions are happening as planned. This will lead to resources, partnerships and practices that continue to develop, especially during transitions into formal schooling. Thereafter, as children and families move through the system, new types of care and support can be developed and made available to them, to maintain and strengthen their cultural identities, while lessening the effect of social, economic, education and health challenges.

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