First Nations Partnership Programs: Incorporating Culture in ECE Training

BY JESSICA BALL

Good advice to early childhood educators is to take stock of the community in which they are working, learn about the cultural values and goals for children's development among the parents who bring their children to programs, and involve parents as much as possible in programs. This article describes the ongoing evolution of a unique training program in British Columbia that was initiated by First Nations that helps early childhood educators put this advice into practice during their training program. It is called the First Nations Partnership Programs. To date, 126 First Nations community members, mostly living in rural and remote communities in B.C., have completed or are currently enrolled in the two-year, university-accredited training program.

The program is delivered through university-community partnerships involving an initiating First Nation, which hosts and particpates in the delivery of the program in their community, and a curriculum development and community liaison team based in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. The program includes 15 classroom-based courses and five practica courses. The curriculum is university-accredited and approved by the Ministry of Health. It meets requirements for the Ministry of Health ECE Basic Certification, Post-Basic Certifications in Caring for Children with Special Needs and Caring for Infants and Toddlers, as well as a University of Victoria Diploma in Child and Youth Care.

Two-thirds of the graduates of eight completed First Nations Partnership Programs in BC and Saskatchewan are now working in their own communities, delivering a range of culturally rich services to young children and their families. This is a success story that has gone beyond good advice, beyond the books, and beyond training classrooms, to support First Nations goals for community development with a vision for the well-being of young First Nations children as the driving force.

Strengthening Community Capacity for Early Childhood Education

All of the First Nations initiating the training programs had the same goal: to strengthen the capacity of community members to meet the developmental needs of young children, youth, and families. Diane

First Nations Partnership Programs

First Nations Partnership Programs is celebrating 10 partnerships to date, listed below:

Meadow Lake Tribal Council & University of Victoria (1989-1993)

Cowichan Tribes & University of Victoria & Malaspina University College (1993–1995)

Nzen'man' Child and Family Services & University of Victoria & Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (1995–1997)

Onion Lake First Nation & University of Victoria & Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology (1996–1998)

Tl'azt'en Nation & University of Victoria (1996–1999)

Treaty 8 Tribal Association & University of Victoria (1997–1999)

Mount Currie First Nation & University of Victoria (1997–1999)

Little Shuswap Indian Band & University of Victoria (2000 – 2002)

Little Shuswap Indian Band & University of Victoria (2002–2004)

Penelakut Tribe & University of Victoria (2003–present)

Bigfoot, the Treaty 8 administrator, explains, "We have a real need in our communities for more support to families, to provide safe and stimulating places for the children to go to, where they can learn and develop and get together with other children, and learn their culture, all within the context of child care programs run by our own community members."

Some First Nations emphasized the community's capacity to offer a regular program of centre-based, high-quality child care in order to enable parents to further their personal healing and development, pursue education and training, or join the labour force. Christine Leo, the Mount Currie First Nation, employment and training officer, says, "Capacity increased in our community not only because all but one of the students finished the whole program, but also because parents will be able to take advantage of employment and training opportunities now that there is a good daycare right here."

Incorporating Cultural Knowledge in ECE Training

Like many Indigenous people around the globe, the First Nations partners sought an approach to training that would both honour knowledge passed down through generations and sustain and revitalize cultural concepts and practices. At the same time, they wanted training that included knowledge from child care and development research. As the late Louis Opikokew, who was an intergenerational facilitator for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council that took a leading role in the first partnership program explained, "It's like two sides of an eagle's feathers. Both are needed to fly."

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Lois Andrews, a graduate of the Mount Currie First Nation Partnership Program, spoke about the importance of learning from Elders: "We can't learn everything from our books. We have to learn from our Elders too as to how to raise our children, and then they'll learn how to raise their children, and it goes on from there. So it's like applying two worlds as one."

A Bicultural, Open-architecture Training Curriculum

A unique approach to curriculum design, delivery, and application in practice evolved over the course of the partnership programs. All of the 20 university-accredited courses in the two-year diploma program are designed with an "open architecture," requiring community input into course content and community involvement throughout the teaching and learning process. Instructors and Elders who teach the program facilitate talk with community members about their own contemporary and historical child care practices and about European-heritage theories, research, and practice models for early childhood education. Alan Pence, the founding coordinator, First Nations Partnership Programs, worked with Meadow Lake Tribal Council in Saskatchewan to pioneer this approach and coined the term *generative curriculum model* to describe it. As he explains, "The curriculum involves respecting diverse knowledge bases and seeking to understand their sources. The emphasis is on the process of learning, rather than the transferral of information. When we innovated the generative curriculum model, we came to understand all participants as learners, and all as teachers."

One example of the partnership process is that instructors in this training program meet University of Victoria criteria for instructional appointment, but they are recruited and employed by the members of the First Nation community that is taking the lead in community-based program delivery. About 20 percent of the instructors to date have been First Nations. Although half of the curriculum for each course is provided by a university-based team, there is no requirement that students will adopt the ideas and practice models contained there. At first, non-Indigenous instructors find many aspects of the program a challenge. As a former instructor from the Meadow Lake Tribal Council explains, "When the classes started, I felt like an experienced rookie. I had never taught generatively before, and I felt like I was sitting backwards in my desk."

Elders' contributions and the students' own experiences as First Nations children and caregivers are a critical source of knowledge about childhood and ideas about community-appropriate practice. Liz Burtch, a former instructor with the Tl'azt'en Nation Partnership Program says, "A non-First Nations instructor can never really know what the experiences of the students have been like, or the experience of living in the community, either as a child or as someone caring for children. You can visit, you can work there every day and still not have awareness of many things. It is really important to be aware of not knowing and open to learning from the students and the Elders."

The open-ended, co-constructed curriculum model encourages and accommodates variations from one community partner to another with

regard to the assumptions, goals, ideas, and circumstances that shape child care. The bicultural and open-ended curriculum model successfully responds to the First Nations partners' search for a culturally specific alternative to prevailing "pan-aboriginal" training programs' cultural add-ons to mainstream curriculum. Elders' involvement in co-constructing the training curriculum results in a good fit between the attitudes and skills reinforced through the training program and the specific goals, needs, and circumstances of the children and families in the particular cultural communities represented by students in the program.

Closing the Gap: Community-based Delivery

No one needs to leave his or her community in order to access the training program. The program is operated by First Nations administrators and instructors in the partnering community. Because the training program is delivered in the community, many community members in addition to the registered students can participate in program delivery processes. Evaluation research on this training program has shown that this leads to the consolidation of an inclusive, enduring, mutually supportive community of learners.

Louise Underwood, an intergenerational facilitator for the Cowichan Tribes Partnership Program, explains, "In order to ensure that our culture would be reflected in the structure of children's services, we had to bring the training program to the community and bring the community into the training program. It was like a big circle."

Students enjoy high levels of social support and practical assistance as a result of remaining with family and friends. They do not experience the family disruptions and culture shock that often deter First Nations students from seeking or completing post-secondary education. Because the community is actively involved in co-creating and delivering the program, the First Nations students experience high levels of community support and participation in programs for children and families that they initiate following program completion. Amelia Stark, administrator of the Tl'azt'en Nation Partnership Program says, "Because they didn't have to leave to take their training, the students never forgot that their community needed them to complete the program. And what they learned fit with the community, because they had the community right here to test out their ideas and get feedback."

Building Bicultural Bridges

Each partnership involves students from several neighbouring First Nations who come together to form a cohort sufficiently large (10 to 20 students) to support classroom-based instruction and to make the program cost-effective. In many cases, the consortium approach needed to make program delivery feasible stimulates unprecedented forms of collaboration among neighbouring First Nations communities. They work together to pool funding, call upon participation by Elders from each student's community, and actively support each community member who is sponsored to take the training, and to plan career-relevant work opportunities for students when they complete their training. Lisa Sterling, a former instructor with the Nzen'man' Child and Family Services explains, "This program didn't give students their Indigenous voice. They already had that. What it gave them was an opportunity to use that voice and, as a group of Indigenous people, to hear each other and to learn together. To evaluate Western ideas and explore Indigenous values and what those could mean for child care practice. And then to decide and create for themselves how to bring their Indigenous viewpoints into models that combined many viewpoints on how to promote children's development and cultural identity."

During the program, searching out, placing, and supervising students in a number of practicum settings in the local area also stimulates new relationships, often between First Nations and non-First Nations programs and practitioners. In this way, community-based program delivery builds or fortifies bridges between cultural communities. Formal and informal regional networks of ECE practitioners and related professionals are also strengthened by increasing representation by First Nations practitioners. Indeed, many of the graduates of the First Nations Partnership Programs can regularly be seen as participants and presenters in the ECEBC Annual Conference, the Early Years Biannual Conference, and ECD forums, as well as in conferences and meetings held by the Aboriginal Child Care Society and Aboriginal Head Start.

A Healing Journey

In addition to the joy of succeeding in a challenging post-secondary diploma program, most graduates have described major personal transformations and healing that

Education and Vocational Outcomes

- 83.8 percent (114 of 136 students enrolled in the program) have completed one year of full-time, university-accredited study. For students in BC, this results in eligibility for Early Childhood Education Basic certification by the Ministry of Health.
- 75.7 percent (103) have completed a full two years to achieve a Diploma in Child and Youth Care. This contrasts sharply with a national completion rate of 40 percent and below among First Nations students in other diploma-level post-secondary programs.
- 95 percent (108) of program graduates completing one or more years have remained in their own communities.
- 65 percent (67) of program graduates completing two years of training have introduced new programs for children, youth, and families.
- 21.5 percent (22) of program graduates completing two years of training have joined the staff of existing services.
- 11.6 percent (12) of program graduates completing two years of training have continued on the education ladder toward a university degree.

they attribute to being in a program that:

- Developed a range of practical skills.
- Enjoyed broad community attention and support.
- Reinforced their cultural identities.
- Resonated with their social realities, including the impacts of residential schools, their extended family life, and their rural or remote community situation.

Community Development through Child Care Capacity Building

Community administrators usually agree that the benefits of the program far outweigh the costs, especially in comparison with community experiences with mainstream training programs.

Student retention and completion rates significantly exceed those for students who either take distance education courses or who leave to pursue their education. Marie Leo, an Elder with the Mount Currie First Nation, recalls what it used to mean to pursue higher education, "For so many years now, we've sent so many of our young people away for further education, and we're *still* waiting for them to come home."

Most program graduates choose to give back to their community by remaining and starting new programs, whereas many community members who leave to pursue their education do not return. Amelia Stark of the Tl'azt'en Nation Partnership Program says, "A training program where what is taught fits with what we believe and want for our children in this community, and where students stay right here with their families and stay on after the program to work for the community – that's worth the dollar value."

The whole community benefits, not only the individuals who register as students. Martina Pierre, an instructor and intergenerational facilitator for Mount Currie First Nation explains, "The Elders enjoyed themselves. They came every week and met with the students, and shared their stories and their knowledge about children. A lot of good came from that. Students got to know our Elders and develop strong relationships with them, which was good for them and for the Elders too. Students became supports for each other, and developed long-lasting friendships. They became role models for other parents in the community. Everyone was proud of what they accomplished and grateful for what they could do for our community. We all benefitted in some way from the training."

Meeting the Needs of Children and Families in First Nations Communities

Programs for children initiated or staffed by First Nations program graduates include:

- Out-of-home, centre-based daycares
- In-home family daycares
- Aboriginal Head Start
- Infant development programs
- Home-school liaison programs
- Parent support programs
- Individualized supported child care for special needs
- Language enhancement programs

- Children's programs in women's safe houses
- Youth services
- School-based teacher assistance/ learning support
- After-school care programs

Culturally Sustaining Child Care Practices

As Nancy Anderson, a program graduate from the Treaty 8 Tribal Association Partnership Program says, "I couldn't wait to put into practice some of the ideas I developed during the program for integrating our values and our Cree language into my own program. The children at Cree-ative Daycare are developing their abilities to use our language and know our culture."

Secrets of Success

Ongoing evaluations of this approach show that the *combined effects* of the following program elements, embedded in a community-driven agenda, are causally related to positive program outcomes.

1. Partnership, involving reciprocal guided participation of willing community and institutional partners.
2. Community-based delivery that enabled access and community inclusion in all phases of program planning, delivery, and follow-up.
3. Student cohort involvement in capacity building that was always accountable to — and supported by — the community.
4. Open architecture curriculum that depended upon cultural input by community members.
5. Intergenerational facilitation of cultural teaching and learning involving Elders.

The key learning from the experience of 10 First Nations Partnership Programs is that ECE training and child care programs that are serving specific communities need to understand a community's sense of itself and its goals for supporting child and family development. What students learn, and the skills they develop, must fit with the communities' understanding of childhood, and their goals for the development of their children. Training and services need to build on existing strengths and respond positively to the desire of parents and community leaders for child care program to reflect and reinforce their children's cultural identity, pride, and knowledge. The role of instructors who partner with communities is to support communities to strengthen their capacity to push forward their own agendas toward self-identified goals.

Mount Currie

Our work at Univeristy of Victoria with First Nations Partnership Programs has taught us that being responsive to cultural communities such as First Nations means more than letting community members voice their concerns or preferences, more than acknowledging diversity, and more than arranging a welcoming environment in mainstream ECE programs of training or services to accommodate indigenous participants. We need to open up the foundations of what ECE practitioners learn in their training programs about culture and community development, how optimal child care and development is defined, and how communities can play leading roles in strengthening community-driven capacities to support the well-being of young children and families.

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For more information about the First Nations Partnership Programs, see http://www.fnpp.org. Program information, updates, and a full evaluation report are available on the Web site.

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