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# **Promoting Healthy Environments for Children and Youth Through Participatory, Bicultural, Community-Based Training Partnerships**

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## **Putting Community- Identified Needs, Knowledge and Initiative First**

**I**ncreasingly, cultural groups around the globe are seeking programs for enhancing their capacity to design and deliver services that are congruent with their culturally based values and practices and the unique matrix of social, economic, spiritual, political, geographic and historical factors that condition the lives of children and families in their communities. In response to this call for elevating considerations of culture and community characteristics and the goal of enhanced community-based capacity, a slowly increasing number of educators have been exploring the use of partnership or collaborative approaches that emphasize mutual learning and extensive involvement of community members. Diverse examples of these

crosscultural initiatives across disciplines have in common an overarching motivation to (a) assign priority to goals and resources identified by the community, (b) reinforce and encourage community initiative and involvement and (c) ensure the incorporation of traditional and contemporary cultural knowledge and values.

This paper describes a postsecondary training program, Early Childhood Education/Child and Youth Care (ECE/CYC), that responds to the challenge from First Nations<sup>1</sup> communities in Canada to (a) provide a central place in program planning for community consultation about culturally based values, needs and conditions; (b) empower community members to take a leading role in program delivery; and (c) invite respected community members into the training activity to share their knowledge, experiences and mentoring support. This community-focused, culturally

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responsive approach to ECE/CYC has come to be known as the Generative Curriculum Model (GCM) (Pence et al. 1993; Pence and McCallum 1994).

Growing numbers of First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities in Canada are indentifying ECE training and services as top priorities for protecting and enhancing the physical and psychosocial health and well-being of children and their families. The need for childcare facilities and trained community members to staff them is particularly urgent in First Nations communities located on reserve lands. For families living on reserves, access to childcare services off-reserve has been limited by geographical distances, social and cultural barriers, and eligibility regulations. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in Canada has urged that caregivers be trained to deal with the large pool of Native children needing comprehensive care in a culturally appropriate manner (Recommendation 39, AFN 1989).

Many First Nations community representatives have pointed to the inappropriateness and, more often than not, the disappointing outcomes of post-secondary training models that require community members to move away to urban centres in order to access mainstream, prescriptive training programs. Students headed for on-campus, centre-based programs must leave behind their support networks, disrupt their family life and discontinue their roles (often as leaders) within community organizations. In most postsecondary institutions, the theories, methods and professional skills that are taught, however well grounded in Euro-American research, tend to be seen by First Nations people as not being transferable, relevant or even desirable within the context of their

unique cultural enclaves, historic experiences, socioeconomic conditions and often remote geographic settings. With reference to ECE/CYC, our challenge has been to find a culturally and community-appropriate way to bring university resources and accreditation to rural First Nations and other cultural communities that want to increase their capacity to elaborate and use culturally resonant ways of enhancing the quality of life for children and families.

This was the challenge presented to the University of Victoria by the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC) in Saskatchewan in 1988. Representing nine Cree and Dene communities, MLTC sought an innovative ECE training program that incorporated and furthered Cree and Dene culture, language, traditions and childcare goals: "We must rediscover our traditional values—of caring, sharing and living in harmony—and bring them into our daily lives and practices" (Ray Ahenahew, MLTC executive director). MLTC proposed a joint venture with the university aimed at creating something quite different from what available mainstream training programs had to offer. Specifically, MLTC wanted a community-based program, and a curriculum that was built on individual family and community strengths that was focused on the child. The priority placed on community involvement was summed up by the past and current directors of the MLTC training program, Mary Rose Opekokew and Marie McCallum: "The prime focus of this project was developing childcare services at the community level, which would be administered and operated by the communities. As Tribal Council staff, we could not make the error of walking into any of communities to

show them the correct and only way of doing things." The Meadow Lake Tribal Council also wanted courses that could lead to a university degree and that could dovetail with other services to children and families.

The collaborative venture undertaken by MLTC and the University of Victoria began with a mutually agreed upon set of guiding principles and objectives for the training initiative:

- A commitment to maintaining community initiative and involvement
- A commitment to principles of empowerment
- A respect for *all* cultural beliefs and values
- An understanding of the child in ecological context
- Movement toward a broad scope of training and services for children and families
- Creation of an education and career ladder for participants

Subsequent iterations of the program of training that originated through this partnership have been delivered in six other First Nations community groups through partnerships with the University of Victoria. Across the seven partnership programs to date, the same six principles have been the foundation upon which the curriculum has been repeatedly revised, and the delivery approach has been flexibly adapted in each First Nations community. In many respects, these principles are in opposition to established educational and professional approaches. However, as the MLTC's Programs and Policy Director Bern Bachiu put it: "What we are trying to do is turn the world upside down." There have been great challenges for the First Nations and University-based partners in pursuing this approach, as well as

great benefits. However, the frequent failure of established approaches to meet the needs of Aboriginal children, families and communities provides strong justification for taking risks and recreating our *modus operandi*.

### ***Community Initiative and Involvement***

Representatives of the First Nations communities that have initiated ECE/CYC: GCM training partnerships with the University of Victoria are acutely aware that the history of partnerships has been problematic for Aboriginal people. When more- and less-dominant cultures have attempted to work together, over time the less dominant has tended to be required, implicitly or explicitly, to accommodate to the more dominant culture and to act as if assimilated. That dynamic is one that the University of Victoria Partnership Team and the First Nations community partners have not wanted to repeat. The partnership between MLTC and School of Child and Youth Care (SCYC) began with an acknowledgment of the poor record of educational and social program imposed on Aboriginal peoples in North America by agencies external to Aboriginal communities and lacking in Aboriginal representation. The springboard for the new partnership was the shared vision that core elements of the ECE curriculum and the delivery of the program itself would come from within the communities represented by MLTC, and not primarily from the university. The First Nations community was in the driver's seat.

In ECE/CYC: GCM, the program is delivered, for the most part, by the First Nations community. Groups of students gather regularly for classes and practical training activities with instructors and

elders. The community takes the initiative in recruiting and proposing to the university the community members who they think are suitable candidates for becoming students in the program. The community mounts a search for qualified instructors either in or outside the community, and the instructors and other support staff are employees of the First Nations community. The community provides the classroom and other instructional facilities and resources, and arranges for students to complete practicum requirements in suitable programs either on- or off-reserve. The community initiates and maintains receipt of funding to support the program. In this model, most of the funds for the program remain in the community. The university-based partners provide a portion of the curriculum for each course and supporting materials from which the instructor and students may select. Students are registered at the university and they receive university transcripts. The university-based partners provide support and assistance as requested by the First Nations community.

### **Community Empowerment and Capacity-Building**

The University of Victoria Partnership Team at the subscribes to Cornell University Empowerment Group's (1989, 2) definition of empowerment: "Empowerment is an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over these resources." In contrast to the assumptions of community deficiencies that underlie many expert-driven approaches to professional

training and service delivery, an empowerment approach assumes that "all families have strengths and that much of the most valid and useful knowledge about the rearing of children can be found in the community itself—across generations, in networks, and in ethnic and cultural traditions" (Cochran 1988, 144).

### **'All-Ways' Respectful of Cultural Beliefs and Values: The Generative Curriculum Process**

The central role of the community extends to the elaboration of curriculum content and activities that embody the culture of children and families who will be served by the training program. In this Generative Curriculum Model (GCM), elders and other respected community members contribute locally relevant specific knowledge and perspectives. They help to ensure that instructors and students develop practical objectives and methods that are informed by the culture and appropriate to the community where most of the trainees will work.

The GCM focuses on building an open curriculum that sits between the mainstream academic culture and the First Nations culture, allowing both the message and the medium from each to enter the training process. As a partner, the University of Victoria brings to the training program a representative sample of theory, research and practical approaches to ECE/CYC from the largely middle-class, Euro-North American mainstream. The First Nations community, as a partner, brings knowledge of its own unique culture, values, practices and sometimes their language and vision, about what optimal child development looks like and how to facilitate healthy development.

Using the GCM, the curriculum develops and builds over the life of the training program. All participants, including students, instructors, elders, other respected community members and the university-based curriculum team share in dual roles as contributors and learners. This approach emphasizes process over product. Rather than the transmission of knowledge and prescriptions for action, a primary value is placed on intense engagement among learners about questions. The pedagogical approach is constructionist and teaches strategies that are guided by the principles of active and interactive learning and discovery, necessitating and celebrating dialogue among various perspectives. Students become involved in an ongoing process of articulating, comparing and sometimes combining these perspectives contributed by members of their own community and by the mainstream, university-based curriculum team. In the curriculum, the intent is to lead with the community whenever possible (students, elders, community leaders, children). Thus, for example, a class meeting might begin with a reflection on the words of an elder who had visited a previous class.

### ***An Understanding of the Child in an Ecological Context***

Throughout the seven partnership training programs, the focus has consistently been on the well-being of children, while keeping the social-ecological context of family and community in perspective. The potential impact of the program has been seen as extending from individual children's development, through improved services to children and families and on to support for the identification and transmittal of

cultural and community values and practices.

### ***Movement Toward a Broad Scope of Training and Services for Children and Families***

The intention of the ECE/CYC: GCM curriculum is to encompass the full scope of needs and services for the care of children and youth. The training program is intended to prepare successful graduates to assume positions in developing and delivering services the enhance that well-being of children and their caregivers both on- and off-reserve, in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal settings.

### ***Creation of an Education and Career Ladder for Participants***

This principle is primarily structural and characterizes the vision of partners in the training program for students' prospective employment opportunities and professional trajectories. Successful completion of this program enables community members to meet requirements for Ministry of Health certification in early childhood education in British Columbia, Canada. The program also leads to an Aboriginal Diploma in Child and Youth Care from the University of Victoria, which enables students to move on in a career ladder fashion to more advanced postsecondary education. Some partner communities see themselves as preparing for self-government in all matters pertaining to education, health and welfare for children and youth in their communities. They intend the training program to open up and out into a wide spectrum of career paths for participating community members. One of the partnerships has recently been extended, through First

Nations initiative, to third- and fourth-year training in child and youth care, leading to a university baccalaureate degree.

### **Program Impacts: Community Development Through Curriculum as Process**

Three formative evaluations of this training approach have been carried out (Cook 1993; Jette 1993; Riggan and Kemble 1994). An ecologically comprehensive, formative and summative evaluation of all seven demonstration partnerships is currently under way. Findings to date show higher rates of postsecondary educational attainment and career development among students than have been reported for most postsecondary initiatives involving First Nations students. More importantly, there is accumulating evidence of many kinds of personal, interpersonal and community transformation. The nature and degree of community engagement in program delivery and curriculum elaboration seem to account in large part for the unprecedented success of this innovation in ECE/CYC training.

Community-based program delivery creates the conditions for students to remain in their communities while pursuing their postsecondary education and training. Equally importantly, the community has a clear sense of ownership and involvement in the process of curriculum design, program delivery and program outcomes. When a program is delivered in, by and for the community, it achieves a high level of visibility that is not possible when students are required to leave their community to

attend programs elsewhere. Community-based delivery means that there is a tangible dimension to the community's commitment to increasing the quality of life among children and families. For example, the director of the training program at MLTC, Marie McCallum, commented on heightened community awareness of the challenges faced by children, youth and families: "There's much more talk in the communities these days about improving the environment for children. There's definitely a ripple effect. And it took a program like this to get things rolling." Debbie Jette, one of the First Nations evaluators of the program at MLTC, commented: "Before this program, kids were left out of everything. But now they are coming back. This is like it was before." The impacts of community initiative and involvement are particularly striking along dimensions of revitalization of culture and traditional language, community resolve and efficacy in supporting healthy families, mobilization of resources and organization of services that benefit children and families.

Community-based delivery means that students can continue to rely upon their support networks for social and emotional sustenance as well as practical help such as childcare. MLTC Elder Coordinator Louise Opekokew commented on enhanced intergenerational rapport and communication: "The students, recognizing the special wisdom of the elders, began to consult them on personal as well as course-related matters. . . . Today we have elders involved in most MLTC programs. In the past we seldom used elders. The childcare training program is where it all started."

The "all-ways" culturally respectful nature of the curriculum and the

involvement of respected community members in elaborating curricula increase the capacity of First Nations community members to meet the developmental and service needs of children and their caregivers in ways that are both culturally and community appropriate. One of the six evaluators of the program that evolved at MLTC, Kofi Marfo, a Ghanaian-born specialist in early childhood care and development, commented: "The curriculum model acknowledges the limits of the knowledge base the principal investigators bring to the project, while appropriately respecting and honoring the tremendous contributions that elders, students and community members at large can make to the program." Roland Tharp, a cross-cultural education specialist who was also a member of the team evaluating the program at MLTC, commented: "The placing of elders at the origin of each [curriculum] unit, and the recursive reconciliation of the Native with the professional concepts, are both philosophically and technically an outstanding example of educational empowerment." The apparent success of the Generative Curriculum Model of training suggests one way to make child and youth care training programs and resultant child care services the very embodiment of culture and to create mutually reinforcing links among training, services and the community.

### **Concluding Comments: Lessons Learned**

This paper has described an innovative approach to postsecondary level training for community development that (a) keeps students and the training program itself in, by and for the

community; (b) involves the community centrally in delivering the training program, in partnership with a mainstream university; (c) invites respected community members and students themselves to elaborate culturally and community relevant curriculum content and training activities; and (d) works collaboratively with community members to evaluate whether and what aspects of the program are/were effective in meeting the community's needs for culturally informed providers of community appropriate childcare services. The principles of the GCM model are potentially applicable to any motivated and resourceful postsecondary training institution and cultural community seeking a joint venture in education and professional training and a reciprocal learning experience.

Our experiences with First Nations communities in Canada suggest that when we grasp the implications of really "taking community and culture into consideration" and put this often-heard good advice into practice, we can no longer engage in the business-as-usual delivery of mainstream postsecondary education and professional training programs, no matter how adequately they embody the findings of mainstream, Western empirical research and modernist notions about best practices. Opening up our education and vocational training programs to significant input from the end-users of our training programs, namely, the communities where our graduates will work, means, minimally (a) engaging at unprecedented levels of receptivity in dialogue with community representatives about curriculum design and content, (b) sharing the floor with community members in delivering courses and (c) letting

communities determine the desired end-products of training. It means transforming our education and training programs from prepackaged, unidirectional, didactic performances into open-ended, bidirectional, interactive processes. One of the MLTC elders described the process of mutual engagement and creation between university-based partners and First Nations community partners as "two sides of an eagle feather," pointing out that "both are needed to fly."

## Note

1. First Nations are among the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, along with Metis, Inuit and Aleut peoples. Several different First Nations often organize together for administrative purposes into Band Councils or Tribal Councils representing several communities that are usually clustered together geographically. Constituent communities may or may not share the same cultural and migration history, language and customs.

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*The elders, in those days, we held in great respect. Whatever they told us, we would listen very carefully, trying not to make mistakes when we listened, because we respected them so highly, because they knew so much more than we did. . . .*

—Mary Muktoyuk, Yupiaq Nation

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