

Published in E. Lowe (Ed.) (1999). Linking Research to Practice: Second Canadian Forum. Proceedings Report. Ottawa: Canadian Child Care Federation and Canadian School Boards Association. ISBN 0-9685157-5-4.

Evaluation of Community Involving ECCD Training in Seven First Nations Communities

by Jessica Ball, Sandrine Definney and Alan Pence

The development of community capacity to support optimal development of children and youth in culturally congruent ways has been the primary mission of seven First Nations Partnership Programs over the past decade. Using principles of the generative curriculum model for developing curricula, seven First Nations community partners engaged with a university-based team to co-construct, deliver and evaluate community-based, bi-cultural course work leading to a diploma in Child and Youth Care.

This training approach was initiated in 1989 when Saskatchewan's Meadow Lake Tribal Council asked Alan Pence to collaborate in developing a bi-cultural curriculum that would prepare Cree and Dene community members to deliver effective child care programs both on and off reserve, in aboriginal and non-aboriginal settings. Evaluation of this initial partnership led to the formulation of the "generative curriculum model" in which cultural knowledge about child development, child-rearing practices and community life are considered alongside samplings of Euro-Western theory, research and practice.

The precise form, structure and content of the Child and Youth Care training program is purposefully indeterminate at the beginning of each partnership and each program is a unique co-creation of the particular partners. At the same time, all of the partnerships have been guided by general principles:

- community initiative and involvement in all aspects of program delivery;
- bicultural respect;

- co-construction of curriculum (Euro-Western tradition and community specific tradition);
- community development through partnership;
- child as focus within an ecological context;
- university accredited Child and Youth Care education ladder; and
- broad scope of Child and Youth Care applications and career preparation.

An ecologically comprehensive, multi-method program evaluation is nearing completion. Research objectives include:

1. to elucidate criteria for defining 'success' in training early childhood educators in our partnering First Nations communities;
2. to assess the impacts of the training program across all constituents in each community; and
3. to determine the effective components of this innovative training approach that might be applied in other settings and across disciplines.

The research method is based on a constructivist epistemology that seeks to understand the family, community and larger societal context of the program and the students from the perspectives of community participants, university-based partners and the research team.

The seven partnership programs to date, located in rural British Columbia and Saskatchewan include: Cowichan Tribes; Meadow Lake Tribal Council; Mount Currie First Nation; N'zen'man Child and Family Services; Onion Lake First Nation; Tl'azt'en Nation; Treaty 8 Tribal Association. The program evaluation research involved data collection in the partner communities and in three post-secondary institutions: Malaspina University College; Saskatchewan Institute of Advanced Skills and Training; and Nicola Valley Institute of Technology. At the beginning of the research process, three of the partnerships were in progress and by mid-1999, all seven partnerships were completed. This enabled investigators to assess longitudinal program impacts in these communities.

Data were collected from eight groups of people involved in the partnership programs: elders*; intergenerational facilitators; instructors; students; students' family members; community administrators; administrators of partners post-secondary institutions and a comparison sample of other post-secondary institutions where First Nations students have enrolled in ECE courses; and partnership program funders. Data collection used in-depth, semi-structured, individual and group interviews, questionnaires, focus groups involving community administrators and other community members, and record review. Statistical analyses interpreted quantitative data. Content analysis, using an inductive, grounded,

theory-building approach, was used to interpret 290 transcribed interviews and supporting documents.

This assessment of the Generative Curriculum Model has yielded evidence of the positive impacts of involving the community in every step of program development and delivery. The research supports the value of delivering the program in the community and grounding the process and content of the training curriculum in intergenerational relationships, community-collaboration and considerations of the real and immediate needs of children and families in the trainees' own communities.

Former students emphasized being able to remain with their families throughout the program. They described being able to try out methods of child care in the community settings where they plan to work, giving them opportunities to assess their "fit" and effectiveness and to create new approaches to stimulating children's development in culturally desired ways. Former students reported that the program increased their cultural identity, self-esteem, parenting effectiveness and confidence as community leaders.

Students who enrolled in the program show nearly twice the rate of program completion (60-100 per cent) compared to the national average for First Nations post-secondary students (below 40 per cent).

Community Capacity Building

Program graduates have a much greater tendency to remain in their own communities to work than First Nations students in other post-secondary programs. Ninety-five percent of program graduates have remained in their home communities, compared to the "brain drain" that many rural First Nations communities experience when students attend training programs in urban centres. Student retention not only in the training program but also in their own communities is a critical aspect of the outcome of the partnerships. Communities gain immeasurably when graduates remain in their communities to work, initiate new programs, serve as role models and share their knowledge and skills.

Five months after three of the partnership programs ended in June 1999, 65 per cent of program graduates across the seven partnering communities are employed in a human service-related occupation. Many have created new programs while others have taken on supervisory and staff positions in existing programs. Because the participatory training model involves the community in all phases of program planning, delivery and evaluation, graduates report few of the difficulties commonly encountered when soliciting community support in mounting new programs for children. Program instructors and community administrators

have repeatedly pointed out the tremendous potential for cultural healing and more broadly-based advocacy for children and youth as a result of mobilizing the whole community in explorations of childhood and how to support the development of children in their own community.

A recurrent theme across the accounts of students and other community members was that their training took into consideration the culturally conditioned goals, family needs, geography, socioeconomic circumstances of the community. “Best practices” in Euro-western child care strategies and program designs were studied but not necessarily adopted if they were not feasible or did not fit the developmental goals, level of readiness or family life within the community. During their training, students gained knowledge and skills relevant to the community.

Cost Benefits

Comparing costs per student per term across a variety of postsecondary institutions in western Canada, average costs across the seven partnership programs were in the middle range (\$4000-\$5000 per student per term). Nearly all participants underscored the significant cost benefits of the partnership program to the community as a whole, pointing to such things as the high rates of student retention and program completion, and the application of relevant training to community service development.

In each partnership, at least 80 per cent of the program costs remained within the community. Communities delivered the program in their own facilities, provided their own administrative and support services, contracted with instructors who were either community members or were recruited to the community for the program. University partners provided some curriculum materials for each course, enrolled and monitored students at the University of Victoria, and were available to the communities as needed.

Personal and Community Transformations

The evaluation research showed significant positive psycho-social impacts on program participants, resulting in healthier family environments and positive role models for children. Over 90 per cent of program graduates reported that their parenting and grandparenting improved as a result of taking the program. Many graduates reported that they kindled or rekindled mutually supportive relationships with older people in their community, many of whom contributed to teaching and learning in the program. Graduates who suffered ill effects of residential schooling reported significant psycho-social healing, recovery of cultural identity and pride, and became community leaders as advocates for children and youth.

Transferability of the Generative Curriculum Model

The seven pilot partnerships demonstrate a viable approach to supporting community initiatives aimed at improving developmental conditions for children. In particular, these partnership programs point to the tremendous positive potential of involving the community in every step of program development and delivery, and grounding the development of human service practitioners in intergenerational relationships, community collaboration and cultural revitalization.

A question of interest to many leaders of a diverse range of cultural communities in and outside of Canada pertains to the scope of applicability of the generative curriculum model. Because of the post-modernist values and constructivist methodology of the generative curriculum model, each partnership program has been unique, embodying aspects of the particular First Nation culture, locale, historical experience and future orientation of the community of individuals involved. Despite the indeterminate, open-ended and flexible framework of the model, its ecological, community-supportive and bi-cultural principles have guided each partnership.

Program evaluation results show that the manifestations of these core principles are critical determinants of the success of each program. Thus, it can be anticipated that this model has wide applicability across a range of community and cultural settings where there is a commitment to building capacity and enhancing conditions to support and stimulate optimal child development. Exploring this potential with new partners is an exciting next step in our program of linking research to practice.

Extending partnerships

Another important question to be addressed is how mainstream institutions, such as universities, colleges, funders and credentialing bodies, can become better positioned to support the development of capacity to meet the needs of young children in small, often vulnerable, cultural communities in which mainstream training programs and best practices have often failed to benefit.

Findings of the research on the First Nations Partnership Programs suggest that yielding a central place to community input in all aspects of program decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation is an important first step in the journey of learning how to partner. Training programs, standards of practice, program designs and evaluation criteria in early childhood care and development are embodiments of culture. Community involvement in collaborative construction of these structures can be a richly rewarding process of bi-cultural

learning, building relationships and innovation of community appropriate, culturally grounded, accountable practice.

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This project is funded by Child Care Visions, Human Resources Development Canada, the Lawson Foundation and the Vancouver Foundation.

**Elders are Aboriginal citizens who pass down traditional cultural traditions. They are often, though not always, senior citizens or elderly.*

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