



## **Learning About Teaching As If Communities Mattered: Strengthening Capacity Through Partnerships**

**Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships  
School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria**

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In a keynote address at the 1999 Conference of the British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, Grand Chief Edward John recalled how an ECE graduation ceremony in the village of Tache lifted the spirits of the people of the Tl'azt'en Nation:

*The way these women persisted, continued and persevered for the years they took these university classes — what they did is an honour to us, the Tl'azt'enne people. They are the hope for our future, because they will become the leaders in our community, and they will show others that education is the tool for surviving our tragedies, beginning to heal, and growing stronger.*

The partnership between Tl'azt'en Nation and the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria was the first successful post-secondary program in this remote community. A legacy of personal tragedy haunts the 800 Carrier people spread across three villages in northern British Columbia. Yet on the afternoon of June 30, 1999, hope was rekindled by the accomplishments of eight women. These graduates of the First Nations Partnership Program are now employed as managers and staff of the first child care program in the main community of Tache, B.C. They have established an Aboriginal Head Start preschool program, where they work with parents to introduce Carrier language and culture to young children. They work with infants and toddlers in conjunction with the community health nurse and the infant development worker in their area, and help preschoolers make a smooth transition to kindergarten.

## First Nations Partnership Programs

Through the 1990s to the present, ten partnerships between the University of Victoria and groups of rural First Nations in Canada have demonstrated a successful set of principles and way of sharing roles and responsibilities in order to deliver community-based, post-secondary education focused on early childhood care and development. The partnership programs began in 1989, when the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in central Canada decided that the economic and social development of their Cree and Dene communities could be secured if they invested in optimal care and development of their youngest members. They sought to build capacity among community members to start

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and operate child care and development programs. Frustrated with mainstream ECE training programs, members of the Tribal Council approached a faculty member, Alan Pence, at the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria about establishing an innovative post-secondary training program through partnership. Dialogue began on how a curriculum might be created to incorporate the language, cultural practices, and child care goals of the Cree and Dene communities around Meadow Lake.

Each subsequent partnering community has had a vision for its children and for their optimal development. A community's capacity to articulate child-centred beliefs and values has been identified by First Nations people as a key component in cultural healing and self-determination. The Meadow Lake Tribal Council, in their vision statement, stated: "It will be the children who inherit the struggle to retain and enhance the people's culture, language and history; who continue the quest for economic progress for a better quality of life; and who move forward with a strengthened resolve to plan their own destiny."

Nancy Anderson, a graduate of a partnership between the Treaty 8 Tribal Association and the University of Victoria, exemplifies the achievement of this vision. She credits the partnership program with enriching her knowledge of her own culture and helping her to integrate her First Nations identity and ECE skills. Nancy created an Aboriginal Head Start program in her home community of Saulteau on the edges of Moberly Lake in the far northern reaches of British Columbia. Nancy emphasizes the colours and symbols of the Medicine Wheel in the physical environment of the centre. Items are labeled in the traditional Cree language of the children as well as in English. She teaches native Cree songs to children and translates nursery rhymes, plays, and stories into Cree. She relies on Elders to introduce traditional stories, arts, and crafts to the children as a regular part of their daily experience. Children are introduced to traditional activities such as snowshoeing and making miniature snowshoes, teepees, and moccasins. At the same time, the children are introduced to reading in English and to computers. Nancy summarizes her program:

*From the program, I learned my culture and Elder teachings that will remain forever in my heart. I firmly believe that reserves need preschool programs to HELP children get ready for Kindergarten but also to form a foundation for a positive Cree identity. I really believe that the children in the Cree-ATIVE Wonders program are developing their social, intellectual, spiritual, and physical needs. They are learning their culture, and they love it.*

The need for child care programs, and trained community members to staff them, is particularly urgent in First Nations communities on federal reserve lands, where access to off-reserve child care is severely limited by geographic distances, social and cultural barriers, and eligibility regulations. In a comprehensive review of Aboriginal child care, Margo Greenwood (1999) notes that the absence of legislation specific to First Nations and policies in both federal and provincial jurisdictions has created a critical shortage and

disparity in quality child care services for Aboriginal people. Greenwood cites reports by First Nations groups which assert the importance of “child day care as a potential vehicle for social change and cultural transmission.”

## **Lessons Learned**

During this journey, new ways of teaching and learning emerged. We present here some of the things we have learned that accounts for the success of the approach. Subsequently, we present some general learning points for education initiatives as if the inherent knowledge, strengths and internally defined goals of communities mattered.

### **1. Community-wide participation in a community-driven process.**

Community partnerships are always community-initiated and community-driven. Once contacted by a community interested in partnering, the First Nations Partnership Programs are guided by a structure that is implemented by the partnering community. Band and tribal councils take the lead in recruiting students, instructors, Elders, program administrators and other community resource people. In most of the partnerships, communities have designated a community member as the intergenerational facilitator, with multiple responsibilities related to the involvement of Elders. In addition, community members are actively engaged in ongoing development of the training curriculum. Using the classroom as a venue, intergenerational relationships are strengthened and in many cases newly created between the students and the Elders who visit the classroom. The community’s children attend the program in which students do their practica, and each person in the program is someone’s daughter, niece, granddaughter, or cousin, reinforcing and strengthening community relationships at many levels.

### **2. Co-Constructing a Bi-Cultural Curriculum**

An approach to co-constructing a bi-cultural curriculum for every course was innovatively created by members of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and a team working with Alan Pence at the University of Victoria (Pence et al., 1993). This co-constructive process became called the Generative Curriculum Model (Pence & McCallum, 1994). In the Generative Curriculum Model, First Nations partners, university-based educators, and students engage in an intercultural process to bring together culturally relevant course materials and Euro-Western academic theory, research, and curriculum approaches. Course instructors are recruited from local communities whenever possible to generate curriculum grounded in cultural knowledge. Activities and questions for discussion are written into the curriculum to draw out community participation. For example, Elders usually contribute by sharing stories from their past as well as their views on many different aspects of contemporary child rearing practices, programs, policies, and values.

First Nations partners have consistently reported resurgence in the role of Elders in

all aspects of community undertakings as a result of their integral participation in the training program. A corresponding revitalization of cultural pride and traditional value systems was evident as well. Partners in subsequent deliveries of the program have also reported that Elders became conduits between the classroom and students' involvement in their cultural community. Overall, intergenerational rapport and communication has reinstated Elders' revered roles within many of the participating communities.

Few training models in the human services invite communities to develop a curriculum together wherein outcomes are not predetermined. But the unknown opens up the possibility of creating new knowledge (Ball & Pence, 2000). No one knows which mainstream child development concepts will fit with cultural knowledge and which will need to be dismissed or reconstructed. Within the Generative Curriculum Model, participants come together as both teachers and learners to consider what would be quality care and education in their particular First Nation (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).

Because each partnership program is shaped by the knowledge and experiences of participants and the cultural perspective of their particular tribal group, no two programs are identical. Nonetheless, all partnerships share the belief that First Nations people must have ownership of child care at all stages. Initially, federal funding agencies expressed the hope that the program, including the whole curriculum, would be portable to other First Nations communities and perhaps to other cultural communities. Meeting this expectation could end the partnership journey with a prescriptive, 'pan-Aboriginal' curriculum—a 'one size fits all' curriculum. Instead, the goal is to make the program process-oriented so that on-going co-construction of curriculum with new partner communities is possible.

### **3. Rediscovering cultural heritage through intergenerational teaching and learning.**

Community-specific cultural knowledge and practices become an integral part of what students learn in the partnership programs to prepare them to work effectively with families and children in their communities and beyond. Cultural practices become an important lens through which early childhood care and development is viewed and applied. In every partnership, for example, cultural identity was seen as the basic foundation for promoting child development and family life. At the request of First Nations partners, European-heritage knowledge from research and practice is another important lens through which students consider childhood and development.

Guidelines for culturally appropriate child care practices emerge through dialogue in class about: 1) unknown or forgotten cultural practices described by Elders; 2) contemporary social conditions and goals for children in the community; and 3) ideas and research found in mainstream texts and practicum observations. For example, in one program, all children and educators met together in "talking circles." When one of the children became disruptive, stories were told that conveyed, indirectly and implicitly, the

need for children to demonstrate self-control, deference to the authority of Elders, and cooperation. One student explained:

*We don't usually think of using "time out" with a child who is not doing what we want him to do. To many of us here, isolating a child from his community seems to be the opposite of what we want him to learn. Maybe the child needs to be brought in even closer within the circle of his community, and to hear talk from his friends about what they are trying to accomplish. Then he might see how he is needed to help the group.*

An important feature of most First Nations cultures is the extensive use of stories, rather than direct instruction or explicit feedback to teach about the norms, moral values, and behavioral expectations of their community. For example, in a discussion about managing challenging behaviors, a student noted: "We need to stay in close touch with a child . . . so that we can get a better understanding of his spirit—of who he is and what he is needing. Stories can be used to speak to the spirit of that child. More than anything we need to be patient with him."

#### **4. Education closer to home.**

In the partnership programs, students live and study in the familiar surroundings of their own community. Indigenous students often do not find their traditions and values represented in mainstream curriculum and they often encounter negative stereotypes in resource materials that are presented as authoritative. However, surrounded by daily reminders of the distinct cultural heritage of First Nation communities, the emotional well-being and learning capabilities of the FNPP students are enhanced. In familiar surroundings, students actively engage in an on-going process of articulating, comparing, and integrating Euro-Western and cultural knowledge in their teaching practices.

Another compelling reason to deliver post-secondary training in early childhood care and development in the community is that nearly all those with a keen interest in the program have been women, most of whom have extensive child-rearing and family responsibilities. Thus, going away to study is impossible and undesirable.

#### **5. Cohort-driven learning.**

Students enter and move through the two-year program as a group. Identity and self-confidence are fostered within a stable, cohesive cohort, particularly as they work through and contribute to the generative curriculum over an extended period. In both literal and symbolic ways, students have "found their voice" as a Tl'azt'en program instructor described:

*There was a lot more sharing as the course went on, because people became confident, they found a voice for themselves. I really remember the women coming into my classroom. They would speak with their heads down, and in a voice so quiet*

*that you couldn't hear it. And now, I can honestly say that every single student can speak out and say what they need to say.*

Most students are part of extended families and social networks that provide practical support and the emotional nucleus of their daily lives. Students soon find that they become a source of information and support for community members in matters concerning child-rearing, health, and development. As an Elder in Tl'azt'en Nation commented: "They know now they are gifted for this." Students' self-esteem increases as they are recognized by others for their leadership capacity in regards to children and families.

### **Program outcomes: Ripple effects.**

A program evaluation conducted after 7 partnership programs (Ball, 2000) found that this was the most successful post-secondary program in Canada in terms of Aboriginal students' retention and completion of a post-secondary credential. Nearly all program graduates achieve government certification as Early Childhood Educators. Completion of the full two years of university accredited course work leading to a diploma has ranged from 60 to 100% across the partner communities. More than half of the graduates (65%) initiated new programs in their communities, including out-of-home day care centres, family day cares, Aboriginal Head Start, youth services, infant development programs, school readiness programs, Indigenous language immersion programs, English language enhancement, and home-school liaison programs. Many other graduates took over staff positions in existing services for children and youth in their communities.

The benefits of the program ripple across the wider community. As a graduate of the partnership program with Cowichan Tribes said: "One stone was thrown in the pool, and now the effects are rippling to wider and wider circles of influence."

In evaluations of the programs, participants have noted that changes are slow and incremental, but revolve in all ways around what's best for children and families in the environments in which program graduates are preparing to work. New ways of teaching and learning undertaken in the classroom have led to positive changes in the students' own parenting skills which have rippled out through their families and friendships. Elders have brought their knowledge of traditional ways to students and instructors and new intergenerational relationships have rippled out through the community.

The training practica significantly contribute to increased awareness in the wider ECE community. Non-Aboriginal practicum supervisors have frequently commented upon the quiet manner that many students displayed with the children in their centres. One supervisor in Prince George remarked, "We learned so much from having the three students doing their practicum in our centre. They have a quiet, personal way which the children found very non-threatening, warm, and engaging. We found that although they were very non-directive, they soon gained a certain authority with the children that had a

very calming effect on the whole centre, including many of the staff!”

The practica contribute to bridge-building between neighbouring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, creating more understanding and trust among people involved in providing child care services in the same region. This has resulted in some of the first intercultural collaborations for sharing knowledge and resources. In one instance, program graduates in one First Nations community regularly provide consultation about the needs of First Nations children in a largely non-native centre, as well as visiting the centre to lead activities that enhance children’s appreciation of First Nations cultures and languages. In exchange, a child care specialist from the non-native centre provides consultation to the newly established child care centres on the reserve. Some program graduates are now serving on regional boards representing early childhood educators. Many have become members of the professional organizations in their province. Seventeen program graduates attended a recent annual convention of the Early Childhood Educators of B.C., where five gave presentations and several stood up to speak to First Nations issues in open forums.

The effects of community confidence and capacity on child development and family well-being were investigated in 2004 in a study that followed-up 35 graduates from 3 partnership programs. This study found that 95% of the graduates remained in their communities, and over 70% were working in professional and para-professional roles in fields relevant to their training program. Many have become managers of child care and development programs, and some are leading the development of community-based infra-structure for multi-service delivery. We don’t yet have data to show exactly how culturally appropriate child care will affect key indicators like language development, cognitive development, and social competence. But we do know that very young children rely on cues found in adult behaviours and environments for a sense of positive identity. As a program participant from a partnership program involving Nzen’man Child and Family services explained: “One of the things that’s been happening is that these families, the communities, the Elders, the whole culture is starting slowly to put ourselves back together.”

### **Recommendations for education that contributes to community capacity.**

In closing, we present three recommendations, derived from our experiences with the partnership programs, for enacting education as if the inherent knowledge, strengths and internally defined goals of communities mattered.

1) First, remain open to ways of knowing and being with children that students, children, and their families can tell us about. Our child development textbooks and the established lore in the ECD field have much to offer, but we are far from knowing everything and knowing what ideas and practices will fit in a particular cultural setting. Bridging cultures, gaining new insights, and deepening understandings are the rewards of engaging in bicultural teaching and learning partnerships as instructors, centre directors, practicum supervisors, and direct service providers.



2) Second, older community members may be able to contribute much to education and training, as well as to the design of community-based programs. They can bring traditional knowledge and language, memories of community life, arts, crafts, and teachings that represent a culture. However, meaningful Elder participation in a program requires preparation and respect for cultural protocols. An intergenerational facilitator who is familiar with the cultural community and with program goals can help involve Elders in significant ways.

3) Third, students, families, and children need support in relying upon and strengthening their own internal navigational system for reaching their own optimal development. The roots of this internal guide lie, in part, in each individual's culture of origin. Thus, celebrating culture in education, training and practice is much more than just acknowledging diversity. Rather, it reaches to the core values and goals that guide curriculum decision-making and interactional styles in everyday practice. It focuses on community, family, and child strengths, rather than deficits or problems. The more we can support students, children, and parents in expressing and consolidating their cultural identity, the more our educational and community development practices will embody and mirror the cultures of children and families whom we serve, and the more education can effectively strengthen community capacity to drive development initiatives.

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