First Nations Early Childhood Care and Education: The Meadow Lake Tribal Council/School of Child and Youth Care Curriculum Development Project

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Cet article décrit le processus de collaboration impliqué dans le développement du programme éducatif de garde à l'enfance pour un service du conseil de Tribu de "Meadow Lake."

In 1989, Alan Pence was approached by the Executive Director of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC), and asked if the School of Child and Youth Care (SCYC) would work with the MLTC in developing a First Nations Child Care curriculum. This was the beginning of a fascinating and unique cooperative relationship between the Tribal Council, based in northern Saskatchewan, and the SCYC, located on southern Vancouver Island in British Columbia. This article briefly outlines the historical development of this promising project.

The MLTC Initiative

The Meadow Lake Tribal Council, composed of nine Cree and Dene member bands, had a history of interest in developing early childhood services for their people. In the mid-1980s the MLTC had initiated several development projects, only to be frustrated in their efforts by conflicting federal and provincial jurisdictional issues concerning financial support for on-reserve programs.

In 1988 it appeared that a window had opened which might allow the MLTC to realize their hopes. That window was the Child Care Initiatives Fund (CCIF) of Health and Welfare Canada. In 1988, supported by a grant from CCIF, the MLTC began an assessment of childcare needs throughout the nine member communities. This assessment concluded that family daycare homes, staffed by trained personnel, were critically needed across the MLTC communities. Additional child and youth care services were also discussed as important to the future of the communities. A partnership with SCYC was then established to provide training for future child and youth caregivers and for members of the local childcare committees.

SCYC Participation

When the SCYC was approached by the MLTC it had not, at that point, developed a First Nations or a cross-cultural component to its curriculum, although several individual faculty members did have cross-cultural or First Nations experience. SCYC responded positively to the MLTC initiative and undertook a working draft review of the literature on First Nations ECCE programs on MLTC's behalf (Greenwood-Church and Pence, 1990).

Several important issues emerged from the literature review, among them an evolving philosophical approach to educational programs for First Nations peoples. Until the late 1960s, Canada assumed an assimilationist approach to Native groups; First Nations peoples were to be integrated into the dominant society with little or no regard for their primary culture (The Assembly of First Nations, 1989). Since then, however, recognition of cultural disadvantage and the importance of pluralistic and bicultural education have come to the fore (Greenwood-Church and Pence, 1990). While many educational programs have been based on these philosophies and others have included cultural components, they often take a "beads and feathers" approach (Whyte 1982), which simply attaches cultural sections to existing curricula. In contrast, initiatives based on a bicultural philosophy emphasize culturally-based childrearing practices and their effects on children's development, differences in ways of learning between First Nation peoples and dominant North American cultures, consideration of student needs and teacher preparation, and community involvement in the development and presentation of integrated curricula and materials (Swerhun, 1981).

In the fall of 1989, MLTC and SCYC jointly submitted a proposal to CCIF to fund a MLTC Indian Child Care Education and Career Ladder Project. The funding was approved in August and development commenced in September 1990. A team of part-time

project staff (the authors of this paper) began to meet weekly to plan the curriculum project.

Planning and Developing the MLTC/SCYC Curriculum Project

Throughout September, October and early November the project team wrestled with the problem of how to proceed. They wished to avoid the "beads and feathers" approach. By the end of October, some elements of a philosophical foundation were beginning to emerge through extensive group discussion. The roles that SCYC and MLTC could most effectively play in the project and important philosophical elements were emerging:

(1) The importance of community-initiated and community-based education was reaffirmed. The MLTC communities did not want more centralized institutions or administrative structures and programs developed by and for people with different values and traditions. They were requesting assistance in developing systems that would work for them, and the partnership with SCYC was intended to provide that support. Both partners recognized that it would be up to the communities to use the knowledge and skills acquired to develop locally the appropriate ways of caring for their children and youth.

(2) An integrated and continuous step-on, step-off education and career ladder model was designed to provide trained First Nations staff for a variety of Early Childhood, and child and youth care positions at differing levels. The model offers, in steps, a brief introductory course, such as a Family Daycare Provider course, and moves through a one-year college/university certificate for an Early Childhood Care and Education Assistant (ECCE Level 1); a two-year college/university diploma for an Early Childhood Care and Education Supervisor (ECCE Level 2); to diploma level course modules, and a four-year, university baccalaureate degree in Child and Youth Care (ECCE Specialist Level 4 or CYC Specialist Level 4).

(3) Since its establishment in 1973, the SCYC has promoted a broad definition of child and youth care (Denholm, Ferguson and Pence 1987). Although the primary focus of MLTC's initiative and funding proposal was child daycare, the broader scope of child and youth care services was also a pressing need for the Meadow Lake community. To develop a degree-granting program that combined cultural values with fundamental child and youth care techniques was of tremendous interest to the First Nations in their movement towards self-government and control of services for their families and children.

The above points were explicitly understood in the original partnership, and each point could be supported by a body of literature to justify its inclusion as an element in the philosophical foundation of the project. Less evident were certain other elements that emerged over the fall; they were tested, shaped and reshaped through a consultative process involving the SCYC, MLTC, and a group of invited advisors. In December 1990, three additional foundation element emerged. They were:

(4) The necessity for a bicultural approach to educational programming and curriculum development, which would provide students from the MLTC communities with knowledge and skills that would allow them to work effectively in their own culture and in the dominant North American culture (Swerhun, 1981).

(5) The need for an empowerment model based on the definition of empowerment developed by Cornell University's Empowerment Group:

> 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 (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989, p. 2).

MLTC and SCYC strive to facilitate an equal partnership by focusing on the strengths of the students, MLTC families, and the nine communities to provide a strong foundation for the project work.

(6) Both partners have adopted an "ecological" perspective that views children in terms of the environments in which they grow and develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such a perspective emphasizes the dynamic, interactive relationship between children, their families, various settings in the community and beyond. The role of this philosophical component in the MLTC/SCYC curriculum development project is evident in the comments of MLTC elders:

> If we're going to provide a good childcare program for alternate care, it would be really good to support the parents and the community. We will be able to teach children how we used to live and it's easier to teach small children. I feel it is the right time...In our communities, we practice our roles as elders...I can see a lot of importance of this daycare program for our communities today. The parents can go further in their education, and it will help working parents, too. (MLTC/SCYC Elders Meeting, 1990, pp. 3, 6, 8)

As was the case with foundational elements one, two, and three, elements four, five, and six, though not without their critics, have substantial support in the professional literature. The six elements, however,

have never before been used collectively to guide and shape a curriculum development project.
We believe the final foundation element of the MLTC/SCYC project is original. Whereas the six other aspects of the foundation are utilized primarily in a philosophical manner to inform, guide and evaluate the project, the seventh element is used as a process model critical to the implementation of the project. Known as the generative curriculum model, it addresses the question of *how* the curriculum development and instructional process might work:

(7) The underlying philosophy of the generative curriculum model is that both the First Nations and the traditional educational institution have important contributions to make to a bicultural, post-secondary education project. A professional university program embodies mainstream educational processes and content deemed crucial to informed professional practice in dominant North American culture. The graduates of university-based schools are accepted as knowledgeable professionals throughout Canada, and the world. However, the knowledge of First Nations traditional and contemporary approaches to raising children and youth and their understanding of their own family dynamics lies with the First Nations peoples, not with a university program. The generative curriculum model is designed as a cooperative process that develops and builds curriculum over time. It will generate the appropriate information specific to First Nations issues, which can then be incorporated into any curriculum addressing First Nations child, youth, and family issues.

The generative curriculum process may be envisioned as a spiral, where it is hoped successive revisions of a course will continually build stronger and clearer components of content, specific to the First Nations group participating in the project. The instructional process and learning environment in such a generative model differs from typical university courses, in that the instructor becomes a facilitator for elders, students and other members of the First Nations communities who contribute to the information base. All participants become learners in the generative curriculum environment; all have a role to play in creating the next level of the evolving curriculum.

Conclusion

The MLTC/SCYC Curriculum Development Project is now at the halfway point of a three-year, CCIF-funded grant. The challenges involved with such an innovative approach to cross-cultural, post-secondary education have been substantial, but progress has been steady. A remarkably patient and supportive group of fifteen Meadow Lake students completed their first term of course work in March 1992, and much was learned from the experience. The model, the courses, and the necessary instructor training materials are being strengthened and refined. While the ultimate determination of the success of the project lies in the future, it is clear that only through such new and innovative approaches to post-secondary education can we make advances in providing better educational opportunities to members of First Nations communities. □

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