



Beyond Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Developing Community and Culturally Appropriate Practice

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Good advice to students in early childhood education training programs is to take stock of the community in which they are working, consider the cultural values and wishes of parents who bring their children for care, and involve parents as much as possible (Bredekamp & Copple 1997). No one would argue with that. But are we willing to take our own advice by yielding a place in curriculum development, program design, and even the training of early childhood education providers to knowledge that resides within the community? Are we willing, in our pedagogical delivery, to yield floor time to respected community members

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Photos courtesy of the authors.

speaking out about the needs, practices, and goals of their cultural constituency?

This article describes the evolution of the generative curriculum model, an early childhood education training program that takes seriously the challenge to include community and culture. Originating through a partnership between the University of Victoria, a mainstream Canadian university, and the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, an Aboriginal tribal council in northern Canada, the generative curriculum model seeks to ensure that early childhood students receive "knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live" (Bredekamp & Copple 1997, 9) from individuals whom Native communities feel best understand those contexts. These carriers of community knowledge include elders and other respected community members, professionals in the community, and the students themselves.

In the words of a student in our partnership program with Mount Currie Band in southwest British Columbia, "This program is unique



in giving me the chance to learn from my elders what I need to know about who I am and my culture's ways of being with children. I couldn't learn this from any textbook, and I couldn't reach out to the children in my community . . . without knowing what the elders can teach me through this program." An elder who participates regularly in the Mount Currie program noted that "our weekly meetings with students help us all to remember and pass along the knowledge of our culture before the White Man came and remind us of the ways of our culture in raising our children and how

we want them to grow and who they will become."

The generative curriculum approach can be seen as complementary to the approach advocated in the revised *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, but it goes beyond developmentally appropriate practice to embrace community appropriate practice and culturally appropriate practice. A student in the Mount Currie program put it succinctly: "Being in this program is like having the best of both worlds. We love to learn about what researchers have found out about child development and such from our textbooks, and we love to learn more about our own culture and how we can use it to help the children of our community."

This student's enthusiasm goes straight to the heart of the generative curriculum model: recognition and respect for diversity and realization that one size, one approach, cannot fit all. In the manner called

for by a growing number of post-modernist educators and psychologists (e.g., Kessler & Swadener 1992; Green 1993; Lubeck 1996; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999), students in this program explore the meanings and implications, for caregivers, of *development* in the context of the children's and families' cultures and community. Following the community's vision for its children, the students, instructors, community members, and university-based team work collaboratively to elaborate curriculum and program designs that address the community's needs and goals for nurturing children.

Our practical intent in telling this story is to stimulate discussion as well as suggest guidelines for generating and delivering training programs in communities to achieve community goals, rally social support for children and families, and increase the capacity for child care services.

Developing a culturally appropriate training model

How can universities and colleges work with First Nations* and other cultural communities that want to increase the capacity of community members to use culturally appropriate and developmentally appropriate approaches to nurturing children?

In 1988 the Meadow Lake Tribal Council presented this challenge to one of the authors, Alan Pence, at the University of Victoria. Representing nine Cree and Dene communities, the tribal council sought an innovative early childhood education training program that would incorporate and further Cree and Dene language, traditions, and child care goals. The executive director of the tribal council, Ray Ahenakew, emphasized, "We must rediscover our traditional values of caring, sharing, and living in harmony and bring them into our daily lives and practices" (personal communication 1988).

Letting each constituent community involved in the Meadow Lake Indian Child Care Program speak for itself and bring to the program its unique priorities and practices was a guiding principle: "The prime focus of this project was developing child care 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 the communities to show them the correct and only way of doing things" (M.R. Opekokew, & M. McCallum, personal communication 1994).

** First Nations are comprised of populations of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, excluding Inuit and Aleut peoples. Groups of First Nations are often organized for administrative purposes into band councils of 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.*

The Need for Community-Based Early Childhood Services

Increasing numbers of First Nations and Inuit communities in Canada identify early childhood education training and services as priorities for protecting and enhancing the physical and psychosocial health and well-being of children and their families. The need for child care facilities, and trained community members to staff them, is particularly urgent in First Nations communities on reserves. For families living on reserves, access to child care is limited by geographic distances, social and cultural barriers, and eligibility regulations. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in Canada has urged that caregivers be trained to deal in a culturally appropriate manner with the large pool of Native children needing comprehensive care (AFN 1989).

At the same time there is growing recognition among First Nations of the ineffectiveness of sending community members away to mainstream early childhood education training programs. When administrators at the Meadow Lake Tribal Council reviewed available early childhood education programs, they asked, "What of us—our Cree and Dene cultures—is in these programs? How are the particular needs and circumstances of our remote communities going to be addressed in these programs?" The theories and methods of early childhood education taught in most universities and colleges, however well grounded in developmental theory and research, are often seen as not being fully transferable to, relevant to, or perhaps even desirable within the cultural enclaves, socioeconomic conditions, and sometimes remote geographic settings of many First Nations and Inuit communities.

The tribal council also wanted courses that could lead to a university degree and dovetail with a variety of services to children and families. The training program that originated through this partnership has been delivered in six other First Nations tribal organizations through partnerships with the University of Victoria.

A history of ineffectual programs

The partnership between the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and the School of Child and Youth Care (SCYC) at Victoria University began with an acknowledgment of the poor record of educational and social programs imposed on Aboriginal peoples in North America by external agencies lacking in Aboriginal representation. Historically, even partnerships have been problematic for Aboriginal peoples, with dominant cultures attempting to work together with Aboriginal cultures and over time requiring them, implicitly or explicitly, to accommodate themselves to the dominant culture, as if assimilated.

Some First Nations students succeed academically in mainstream early childhood education programs emphasizing child development and appropriate child care practices based on serving populations dissimilar to their own. However, First Nations communities and students continually lament the futility and frustration of such training, which is divorced from the cultural context and circumstances of the children served. Neither the First Nations nor the university-based partners in our programs want to repeat this dynamic.

The generative curriculum model evolves from a new partnership

Our new partnership grew from a vision in which core elements of the early childhood education curriculum and the delivery of the program

come from within the community at Meadow Lake. In contrast to the many expert-driven approaches to professional training and service delivery, with their underlying assumptions of community deficiencies, 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).

The central role of the community extends to the elaboration of a "generative" curriculum model that embodies the culture of the families served. In this model, elders and other respected community members contribute locally relevant specific knowledge and perspectives and help to ensure that trainees develop practical objectives and methods informed by the culture and appropriate to the community where the trainees will work.

The curriculum draws from two cultures

The generative curriculum model focuses on building an open curriculum that sits between the two cultures, allowing both the message and the medium from each to enter the training process. The University of Victoria brings to the training program a representative amount of theory, research, and practical approaches to early childhood education from the largely middle-class Euro-North American mainstream. A community-based instructor from the program's partnership with the Treaty 8 Tribal Council in northern British Columbia remarked, "The course material really supports the instructor by giving ideas to follow and suggestions of activities and resources. But it's also flexible enough to allow us to adapt it to the needs of this particular group of stu-

dents and the communities and cultures they are part of."

The First Nations community brings to the program its unique culture, values, practices, and sometimes its language, and its vision of what optimal child development looks like and how to facilitate healthy development. A community-based instructor in the Mount Currie program noted, "We don't have all the answers. In a generative program, we can enjoy learning about what research on child development has shown and what methods seem to be helpful in certain situations. And we can delve further into our own history and traditions and see how these can help us with our children."

Participants are contributors and learners

More pointedly, a community-based administrator remarked, "We can consider what mainstream theories say, and if we choose to believe them and use them in our work, that doesn't make us less Indian. And if we choose to assert the importance of our cultural traditions and ways of raising children, that doesn't make us wrong. This program recognizes



and encourages this give-and-take, pick and choose. It doesn't cage us and expect us to act like Europeans—to act as if we're assimilated."

Using the generative curriculum model, the curriculum develops and builds over the life of the training program with all participants, including students, instructors, elders, community members, and the university-based curriculum team, as contributors and learners. One community-based administrator succinctly stated a sentiment often expressed by the First Nations community partners: "I hope people at the university are learning as much from us as we're learning from them. It's important for university lecturers and theorists to listen and learn what they don't know about what being Indian means—in this case, what being Indian means for parents and children growing up in our communities."

The emphasis is on process

The generative curriculum model emphasizes process over product, encouraging among learners intense engagement about questions rather than primarily valuing prescriptions or answers. The pedagogical approach is constructionist, and teaching strategies are guided by the principles of active and interactive learning and discovery, necessitating and celebrating dialogue among the various perspectives. Students become actively 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. The authors saw evidence of such new constructions of good practice during a visit to an on-reserve infant care program: Children wrapped in beautifully beaded cradle boards were sleeping soundly in the middle of their cribs; the cradle boards were hung on the walls after naptime.

In the curriculum the intent is to lead with the community whenever possible (students, elders,

community resource people, and children). For example, an early childhood education class meeting might begin with a reflection on the words of an elder who visited earlier. One elder discussed children with special needs: "We kept our children at home, we did not send them away to special homes." This statement opened the door for a discussion of why facilities were developed for children with special needs.

The result: A flexible and widely applicable training program

From the outset the First Nations partnership team in the School of Child and Youth Care has seen its role as developing the curriculum model piloted at Meadow Lake so it can be used in partnerships with other First Nations communities across Canada. The training program has grown into 18 courses embodying the generative curriculum model, each 1.5 academic units in length, leading to a two-year diploma in child and youth care that is fully transferable to the university's four-year degree program.

The courses are equivalent to mainstream university courses, but they are uniquely enriched by the cultural teachings and experiential wisdom of elders and other community-based resource people. They include activities and assignments, with weekly sessions in which students meet with elders to discuss specific areas related to child and youth care and development. One Meadow Lake Tribal Council elder described the bicultural, community-based features of the model as "two sides of an eagle feather," pointing out that "both are needed to fly."

As a result of elders' regular participation in classes, not only do students learn more about the traditions and values of their culture, but they also forge relationships with older members of their community. A student in a current part-

nership program between the University of Victoria and the Tl'azt'en Nation, in north central British Columbia, remarked, "Having the elders come to the program on a regular basis is really a good idea because we are learning their knowledge and we are also getting to know them. Now I can walk with the elders and we can continue to talk about the old ways and how these can still be used to help us with our children today." The Meadow Lake Tribal Council elder coordinator, Louis Opikokew, commented on enhanced intergenerational rapport and communication in terms of more systemic community change: "The students, recognizing the special wisdom of the elders, began to consult with them on personal as well as course-related matters. . . . Today we have elders involved in most community programs. In the past we seldom involved elders. The child care training program is where it all started."

Conclusion

Based on early indicators of program impact illuminated in three formative program reviews (Cook 1993; Jette 1993; Riggan & Kemble 1994), as well as feedback from ongoing programs in four First Nations communities, we believe that culturally appropriate practice and community appropriate practice should be central tenets of early childhood education training programs and services specifically, and of community health and development policies generally.

Definitive evaluative evidence is being gathered in a comprehensive program evaluation now underway. In the meantime, early successes with the generative curriculum model strongly suggest that the means exist to make training programs and resultant child care services the embodiment of culture and to create inexorable links among training, services, and the community of which these are a part by interweaving all of these

elements in a cohorts-driven community-based generative curriculum approach to training.

At Meadow Lake, heightened community awareness of the challenges faced by children and families resulted from community members' high level of involvement in the program as it was being delivered right to their doorstep. The director of the Indian Child Care Program at Meadow Lake observed, "There's much more talk in the community 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."

Our experiences with First Nations communities in Canada suggest that when early childhood teacher educators fully grasp the significance of taking community and culture into consideration and put this good advice into practice, we can no longer engage in the business-as-usual delivery of mainstream early childhood education programs, no matter how adequately they embody developmentally appropriate practice.

Opening up our training programs to significant input from the end users of those training programs, namely the communities where graduates will work, means engaging in dialogues about designing curricula, sharing the floor in delivering courses, and moving over to let communities determine the desired end products of training. It means transforming our training from a prepackaged didactic process to an open-ended participatory process. As the Meadow Lake Tribal Council programs and policy director, Vern Bachiu, put it: "What we are trying to do is turn the world upside down."

Through the generative curriculum model, early childhood education trainees can learn to engage in practices that are developmentally appropriate and in dialogues and collaborative partnerships with communities to assess the appropriateness of such practices for the children and families served. This approach ensures that the voices

of the community are heard and the values and needs of the community are embodied in child care services that are community and culturally appropriate.

A student in the Meadow Lake program remarked, "Students who took this program have learned a lot about how our cultures think about our children, and what they have learned will make a difference to our children and grandchildren. I believe our children—our futures—are going to get back on the right track."

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