

EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

theory, policy and practice



edited by

HELEN PENN

*This book is dedicated to my grandson
Mothibi 'Tiger' Kekana*

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2 Two sides of an eagle's feather: University of Victoria partnerships with Canadian First Nations communities

Alan Pence and Jessica Ball

Introduction

The First Nations¹ of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council believe that a child care program developed, administered and operated by their own people is a vital component to their vision of sustainable growth and development. It impacts every sector of their long-term plans as they prepare to enter the twenty-first century. It will be 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.

(Meadow Lake Tribal Council Vision Statement 1989)

The above statement, adopted by the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, served as the starting point for an innovative approach for co-constructing a programme of culturally appropriate Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) training. The model evolved through a series of pilot partnerships, first with the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, and subsequently with six other tribal organizations in rural areas of western Canada. Although distributed across vast distances, and in very different cultural and institutional contexts, this participatory approach has thrived.

The Generative Curriculum Model (GCM), as the approach came to be called, represents a radical departure from the established and familiar paths of training and education in ECCD in North America, which promote knowledge transmission and prescribed practices based on assumptions of their universal validity and desirability.

After seven pilot partnership projects with First Nations tribal organizations, we have become convinced that the popular demand for programmes to be 'culturally sensitive' cannot be met through established

education and professionalization practices. In order to respond meaningfully to the goals and practices that define cultural communities and the children and families within them, we must acknowledge the cultural specificity of mainstream research, theory and professional practices, and forge new understandings of how we might better prepare ECCD practitioners for work in specific cultural communities.

We hope to encourage and support the elaboration and extension of an alternative discourse to the largely exclusionary, Western, modernist agenda of ECCD. Our First Nations partners have initiated partnerships with us at the University of Victoria with an understanding that the ways to enhance conditions for the well-being of children in their communities might not match either the best practices of the West or the traditional practices of their aboriginal forebears. Starting with the training of ECCD practitioners, rather than with programmes for children, our partnerships with First Nations communities highlight the many entry points that can be used to advance alternative discourses.

Context of the partnerships

In Canada, First Nations people have been subject to every kind of colonial assault, ranging from overtly genocidal practices to assimilationist requirements and practices (McMillan 1995; Ross 1997). Reams of poignant testimony have been collected describing the suffering of parents, children and communities as a result of the infliction of Western best practices – including enforced residential schooling, child welfare practices that undermine extended family support systems, and other helping services – all deemed, at the time, to be in the best interests of the subjected children and families. As the First Nations have begun to regain greater political control over their futures, they have adopted a path of caution in considering best practices and improvements from the dominant society. Many First Nations people seek training that enables practitioners to understand and contribute both to mainstream and to aboriginal settings, using approaches that have multiple roots and traditions but that are controlled by their own agency and actions. Unfortunately, even the history of partnerships has been problematic for aboriginal people, with more and less dominant cultures attempting to work together and, over time, the less dominant being required, implicitly or explicitly, to accommodate the more dominant culture and to act as if assimilated. This dynamic is one that neither the First Nations with whom we have partnered nor we at the university have wanted to repeat.

As expressed in a 1992 Aboriginal Committee Report on Family and Children's Services Legislation in British Columbia, many First Nations are prioritizing ECCD training and services as a prerequisite for economic development and as a way of protecting and enhancing the physical and psychosocial health and cultural identities of children and families: 'Our

main goals are to preserve and strengthen our culture; to support and maintain the extended family system; to promote the healthy growth and development of our children and to develop community based programs conducive to the realization of these goals' (Aboriginal Committee, Community Panel 1992: 9).

The Assembly of First Nations (1989), representing aboriginal peoples across Canada has urged that caregivers be trained to deal with the burgeoning population of aboriginal children needing comprehensive care in a culturally appropriate manner (1989: Recommendation 39). The need for childcare facilities and trained community members to staff them is particularly urgent in First Nations communities located on federal reserve lands.

Grounding ECCD training in culture and community

The GCM involves communities in mutual learning, sharing of skills and collaborative construction of concepts and curricula needed to initiate new programmes that foster the well-being of children and families within their communities. Theories and methods of ECCD offered by most universities and colleges in North America are predominantly grounded in Euro-North American developmental theory and research. First Nations people are increasingly vocal about the many aspects of mainstream programmes that they see as not transferable or perhaps simply not desirable within their cultural value systems and circumstances (Pence *et al.* 1993). Some post-secondary institutions providing ECCD training take pride in producing culturally sensitive curricula by introducing pan-aboriginal information, wherein generalizations are made about the ways of life and beliefs of a conglomerate of aboriginal peoples. Such a homogeneous picture belies the diversity and complexity of aboriginal societies.

When administrators at the Meadow Lake Tribal Council reviewed available ECCD programmes, they were dissatisfied with such superficial reflections of difference, asking, in essence, What of us – our Cree and Dene cultures – is in these programmes? How are the particular needs and circumstances of our remote communities going to be addressed in these programmes? These questions were the original stimulus for initiating a collaborative approach to constructing curricula that relies on significant input from community members who can help to ensure that students' training is informed by the culture, spirituality and history of specific First Nations communities.

When the Meadow Lake Tribal Council proposed the first partnership, they sought an innovative ECCD training programme that would reflect themselves, incorporating and advancing cherished aspects of their Cree and Dene cultures, languages, traditions and goals for children: 'We must rediscover our traditional values – of caring, sharing, and living in harmony – and bring them into our daily lives and practices' (Ray

Ahenakew, Executive Director of Meadow Lake Tribal Council, personal communication).

The importance of letting each constituent community involved in the programme at Meadow Lake speak for itself, bringing in its own unique sets of priorities and practices, was a guiding principle: 'The prime focus of this project was ultimately to develop 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' (Opekokew and McCallum, personal communication).

In the initial stage of each of the seven partnership projects, no one could anticipate exactly what the generated curriculum would include. Few practitioner training models in the human services invite students, much less communities, to engage in an activity of co-construction wherein the outcome is not predetermined. Yet, reflecting on the evolution of the GCM, what was perhaps most critical was an acceptance of the powerful potential of not knowing: not knowing where exactly the work of the partnership would lead; not knowing what aspects of mainstream theory and research on child development would fit and what would need to be reconstructed by community participants; not having the answers for what would constitute quality care in the context of First Nations communities; and not being poised with vats of knowledge to be poured into the empty vessels of ECCD trainees' minds.

Guiding principles

While agreeing that there is no need to achieve consensus on what is of value in curriculum content or activities, our First Nations partners and we have agreed on a set of general principles that can serve as navigation points in uncharted waters:

- support and reinforcement for community initiative in a community based setting;
- maintenance of bi/multicultural respect;
- identification of community and individual strengths as the basis for initiatives;
- ensuring a broad ecological perspective and awareness of the child as part of family and community;
- provision of education and career laddering for students such that credit for this coursework will be fully applicable to future study and practice;
- awareness that while the immediate focus is on early childhood care and development, this training should provide the basis for broader child, youth, family and community serving training and services.

These principles articulate the belief shared among partners that the cooperative and co-constructionist approach is not only desirable, but

necessary. Through these principles we commit ourselves to the position that multiple truths must be respectfully represented in this programme and that such knowledge is not disembodied but must come through the people who live that truth.

There are some constraints within which the partnerships operate, for example the need for the programme to be viewed as academically credible and rigorous, and the need to meet provincially legislated licensing and accreditation criteria. Meeting these expectations without reverting back to the mainstream road to formalizing a pre-emptive, prescriptive, pan-aboriginal curriculum has provided one of several reasons to make the GCM highly process oriented, using an open architecture capable of incorporating input from different cultures and communities.

Co-constructing quality through dialogue and praxis

A key characteristic of the GCM is that it is open to and respectful of information from the community, from academia and potentially from other sources as well. The elaboration of curriculum for each course in the training programme involves members of the community and the university working together to incorporate knowledge from the mainstream of theory, research and practice pertaining to early childhood, and from the communities represented by the First Nations tribal organization. A student in the programme at Mount Currie, in southwest British Columbia put it succinctly: 'Being in this program is like having the best of both worlds. We love to learn about what researchers have found 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.'

By contrast, most post-secondary education requires two bodies of participants to commence the activity: students and representatives (instructors, administrators) of the post-secondary institution. The approach envisioned in our partnerships with First Nations requires the addition of a third participating body: the students' community(ies). 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).

The principles of respect and voice that guide the work of the partnership within a caring, supportive and inclusive educational environment approximates to Benhabib's conditions of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity (Benhabib 1992: 105).

A basic assumption of the GCM, consistent with recent critiques of

developmental psychology by Nsamenang (1992), Burman (1994) and Cole (1996), is that there are no empirical or logical bases to assume the validity of theories and research findings about child development across cultures, sociopolitical conditions or geographic contexts. Thus, we cannot presume the goodness of fit of strategies for promoting the growth and development of children that may have been demonstrated as effective in settings very different from First Nations communities on reserves. As Woodhead (1996) contends, 'It seems to me that trying to pin down 'quality' is a bit like trying to find the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow . . . the "crock of gold" exists only as a cultural myth' (1996: 9).

A growing number of leaders in ECCD in various countries have argued that the objectives and methods of childcare embody and reproduce or change the culture in which children and caregivers live and work (Pence and McCallum 1994; Bernhard 1995; Woodhead 1996; Penn 1997; Dahlberg *et al.* 1999; Lubeck and Post, in press). Hence, there may be significantly different, equally useful and valued ways of encouraging and responding to children across diverse communities and cultural groups. Pence and Moss (1996) have argued that definition of quality must be arrived at through an inclusionary process.

Although students in a training programme using a GCM learn about mainstream theories, research and practice pertaining to early childhood care and development, the curriculum does not rest on modernist assumptions about universally shared goals for children or caregivers or about common pathways towards optimal developmental outcomes. Rather, in the manner called for by postmodernist educators and psychologists (for example Kessler and Swadener 1992; Green 1993; Scheff and Gayle 1995; Lubeck 1996), students explore diverse possibilities regarding the meaning and implications of development for caregivers within the context of their own histories, cultures and communities (Cook 1993). They are routinely asked to engage with questions of goodness of fit of various conceptualizations of ECCD throughout the programme, rather than necessarily to adopt the best practices and criteria for determining quality provided by outside agents, who are unfamiliar with the exigencies and goals of students First Nations communities.

Illustrating the construction of distributed knowledge elaborated by Lubeck and Post (in press), students in the training programme, their instructors, community supporters and the university based team work collaboratively, and in the context of each community's particular visions for children, towards the goal of elaborating curricula and programme designs that address the community's particular needs and goals for nurturing children. Thus, rather than reducing variation, as quality control experts advise or imply, the GCM celebrates variation. As Kofi Marfo remarked in 1993 when asked to review critically the programme at Meadow Lake, 'The curriculum model acknowledges the limits of the knowledge base the principal investigators bring to the project, while appropriately respecting and

honouring the tremendous contributions that Elders, students, and community members at large can make to the program'.

The GCM 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. One community based instructor of the programme at Mount Currie 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.'

One of the Elders at Meadow Lake described the bicultural, community specific features of the curriculum as *two sides of an eagle's feather*, pointing out that both are needed to fly.

The University of Victoria brings to the training programme a representative sample of theory, research and practical approaches to ECCD from the largely middle-class, Euro-North American mainstream. But as partners, the First Nations community brings their knowledge of their own unique culture, values, practices and sometimes their language, and their vision about what optimal child development looks like and how to facilitate healthy development. One community based administrator of the programme pointedly 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.

By bringing together the different worlds of Western academia and tribal communities, plausible alternatives to Euro-North American, modernist ways of conceptualizing child development and childcare have surfaced or been created, some of which build on each other, stimulating additional changes and new directions throughout the generative curriculum process. It is the process, the recursive consideration of these different views, the seeking out of what Friere (1997: 192) would call 'new knowledge', that represents the heart of the GCM. The goal is not to progress forward towards a state of group consensus, with the risk of formalizing an ossified curriculum similar to those on offer in most educational institutions.

Rather, the ongoing, dialogical, process-driven approach of participatory praxis that is the essence of the GCM has the potential for creating a new generation at each delivery – a living, responsive, evolving curriculum.

Culturally grounding curriculum through Elders contributions

In the seven partnership training programmes to date, Elders and other respected community members have played a particularly significant role in bringing cultural content, historical knowledge and years of experience with generations of the community's children and families into the classroom on a regular basis. Each tribal organization identifies a number of Elders in its constituent communities. Elders are older people who are venerated carriers of cultural knowledge and historical experiences, and often of traditional language as well. They help to reinforce and extend students' positive identifications with their cultural heritage and roles as caregivers (Pence and McCallum 1994). In the words of one student in the partnership programme at Mount Currie:

This program is unique in giving me the chance to learn from my Elders what I need to know about who I am and about my cultures' ways of being with children. I couldn't learn this from any textbooks, but I couldn't reach out to the children in my community and help them to become who they are without knowing what the Elders can teach me through this program.

An Elder who participates regularly in the programme at Mount Currie 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 reminds us of the ways of our culture in raising our children and how we want them to grow and who they will become'.

The Elders and other respected community members become participatory conduits between the classroom experience and the community experience, and they themselves, as participants in both worlds, become part of the transformational process. One student from the programme at Meadow Lake remarked, 'Students who took this program have learned a lot about how our cultures think about children, and what they have learned will make a difference to our children and grandchildren. I believe our children, our future, are going to get back on the right track.'

Rekindled intergenerational relationships – between Elders and students, and between Elders and young children – have been consistently reported in the communities where this programme has been delivered (Riggan and Kemble 1994). A student in the programme at Tl'azt'en Nation in North Central British Columbia remarked, 'Having the Elders coming 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 Elder Coordinator in the programme at Meadow Lake observed an enhanced role of Elders at a systemic level: '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 community programs. In the past we seldom involved Elders. The child care training program is where it all started.'

Learning all ways

One of the attributes of the GCM approach is that learning occurs all ways, with university based partners positioned to learn as much as community based partners in programme delivery. Instructors in the community and the curriculum resource team at the university hear about experiences and viewpoints they may not have previously heard and are often similarly challenged and stimulated. Hearing diverse voices and views from Elders, other community members, instructors, classmates and texts, the students in the programme become more fully aware of their own voices, their own views and how these relate to the views of others. Thus, like Rogoff's description of a community of learners, all become active in an ongoing process of learning and teaching. One community based administrator succinctly stated a sentiment often expressed by the First Nations community partners: 'I hope you people at the university are learning as much from us as were learning from you. 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.'

From the outset, the First Nations Partnerships Team at the University of Victoria has seen its role as developing a model for generating curricula in collaboration with communities in a way that could be used in partnerships with other communities around the globe. The ECCD programme using the GCM currently exists as 18 university-level courses that are equivalent to those offered in the mainstream university courses, but they are delivered in and by communities, where they are uniquely enriched by the cultural teachings and experiential wisdom of Elders and other community based resource people. Each course includes a structure of activities and assignments, including weekly sessions in which students meet with Elders and other carriers of the First Nations culture and experience, to discuss specific areas related to child and youth care and development.

Because it is a process that is deeply contextual, valuing variable understandings emerging from community, rather than laid on it, in no two partnerships has the programme delivery or the curriculum generated looked exactly the same. As one of the programme administrators at Meadow Lake asserted, 'Curricula that are not respectful of cultural diversity, that do not acknowledge that there are many trails that lead up the mountain, cannot expect to generate the pride and self-respect necessary to develop caring caregivers'.

Evaluation: generating ECCD curriculum, developing communities

Three formative evaluations of both the curriculum aspect of the project and the community services component of the project have been conducted to date (Cook 1993; Jette 1993; Riggan and Kemble 1994). Across all of these reviews, positive impacts of the partnership initiative upon community life as a whole have been recorded. For example, because of the high level of involvement by community members in the programme as it was being delivered right on their own doorsteps, communities have shown heightened awareness of the challenges faced by children and families and increased motivation to meet their needs. As a programme administrator 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.'

Leaders in the constituent Cree and Dene communities around Meadow Lake reported a revitalization of the roles of Elders in all aspects of community affairs as a result of their pivotal and effective roles in the ECCD training programme (Jette 1993).

The involvement of the Elders in the Indian Child Care Program and subsequently into all community events and undertakings has led to a revitalization of cultural pride and traditional value systems. These individuals are those that hold the fabric of community life together. They have increased the awareness of the need to work together, to have self respect and respect for others. Unless there is a healthy community environment there cannot be healthy community members. Traditional values and ceremonies have a rightful place in the modern world.

(Jette 1993: 58, 59)

Our explorations of the GCM of co-constructing ECCD curricula in partnership with communities support the view that when we really do grasp the full significance of responding to community needs and being sensitive to culture, we can no longer engage in the business as usual of delivering mainstream early childhood education programmes, no matter how adequately they respond to research and theory reported in mainstream literature and lecture halls about the developmental needs of children studied by Western psychologists and educators. Being responsive to communities and being sensitive to culture means more than letting community members voice their concerns or preferences; more than acknowledging diversity. It means opening up the very foundations of how training programmes are conceived, and how optimal developmental outcomes are defined, to let communities co-construct programmes of training and services that will further their own, internally identified goals. It

means engaging in dialogic construction of 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 pre-packaged, 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'.

Note

- 1 First Nations are among Canadian aboriginal peoples, who also include Inuit, Aleut and Métis. Groups of First Nations are often organized for administrative purposes into Band 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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