

# A postmodernist approach to culturally grounded training in early childhood care and development

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*This article describes a unique approach to involving cultural communities in elaborating curricula for training early childhood educators. This 'Generative Curriculum Model' (GCM) has been demonstrated in partnership programs between the authors and seven Canadian aboriginal communities. Indigenous experiences and culturally-valued knowledge are articulated by tribal Elders and considered alongside mainstream research and theory about child development and care. Ongoing evaluation research has documented the success of this model in facilitating completion of post-secondary training and career development among aboriginal students. The training resonates with the students' own culture, and community members are involved throughout the training in dialogue and planned actions for delivering services for children and their families based on their own cultural constructions of childhood and effective care. The process and impacts of this training model in seven aboriginal communities in Canada are discussed in postmodernist terms. The legitimacy and potential utility of indigenous knowledge are acknowledged and multiple perspectives are brought to bear in elaborating effective praxis in community-driven early childhood care and education.*

Children reproduce the culture of their primary caregivers, peers, and the media with which they interact from their earliest years. Caregivers and teachers are continuously engaged in the perpetuation and modification of their own cultures of origin through modelling, encouragement, and direct instruction of particular response styles, forms of interaction, ways of understanding events, and enactments of implicit beliefs (Cole, 1985; Greenfield, 1994; Rogoff, 1990).

Far from being culturally neutral, training curricula for early childhood educators are cultural constructions grounded in the world views, beliefs, and norms of those who conceptualise and teach the curricula. Training experiences that shape caregiving practices may influence which culture and what aspects of culture are reproduced through subsequent design and delivery of programs for children. In turn, training curricula may significantly shape the cultural identity, competence, and allegiance of the children. When a 'one size fits all' approach is taken to training, all too often the result is an homogenising, monocultural, colonising approach to caring for

children in ways that are inappropriate to the children's social ecologies. We need to recognise the potentially acculturative effects of mainstream training curricula, and to explore new ways of being responsive and accountable to the cultural communities whose children come to out-of-home centres for care and education.

*Bringing culture into focus.* The reproduction and modification of culture through education curricula and human service programming has been problematised by many aboriginal community representatives in Canada (Battiste & Barman, 1995). Most aboriginal people in Canada, many of whom refer to themselves ethnically and organisationally as First Nations, have experienced several generations of cultural holocaust. One of the main avenues for subjugating aboriginal peoples to colonial culture and government has been through the imposition of child care and education that has denied the legitimacy of thought, lifestyles, religions, and languages of First Nations people. Most First Nations communities in Canada are now actively engaged in efforts to revitalise their cultures, assert the legitimacy of their culturally-

based values and practices as integral to the fabric of Canadian society as a whole, and foster among First Nations children positive identities with their aboriginal cultures:

*We must be able to feel confident that our world view is clearly understood by our own children, and that they will know that their culture has value in modern times as it did in the past. We must be able to teach our children appropriate skills and understanding, and control how our children are taught (Barnaby, 1992, p.43).*

Throughout the world, specific cultural groups are similarly seeking ways to ensure the survival, revival, or re-envisioning of their cultural beliefs, values, and practices, while at the same time wanting to ensure that their community members have access to and are prepared to work in the dominant culture settings.

*A 'both worlds' approach to curriculum.* This was the stance taken in 1989 by representatives of one First Nations organisation in central Canada, the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, when they initiated a partnership with one of the authors, Alan Pence, at the University of Victoria in western Canada. They sought collaborative development of curricula for training early childhood educators in a way that was grounded in their own Cree and Dene cultures, and that afforded a central place to input from representatives of their nine constituent communities (Pence & McCallum, 1994).

These First Nations visionaries imagined the co-creation of a unique, community-based, university-accredited program of training that prepared community members to 'walk in both worlds' as early childhood educators, to develop and deliver programs that met the needs of children in their own remote, native communities as well as in 'mainstream', non-native communities. The 'both/and' position taken by our First Nations partners, and their appreciation that the way forward might not match either the 'best practice' of 'mainstream' Canadians of European descent or the 'traditional practices' of their forbearers, is an expression of postmodernism as it applies to tertiary education and to child care. We have called the collaborative, syncretic approach that emerged from this initial partnership the *Generative Curriculum Model (GCM)* (Ball & Pence, 1999; Pence & McCallum, 1994).

*Postmodernist foundational assumptions.* The GCM resonates with an increasingly influential shift in the

field of education from essentialist to feminist and constructivist ideologies (Lather, 1991; Wertsch & Toma, 1995), in developmental psychology from logical positivist to deconstructionism (Lubeck, 1996) and critical social theory (Burman, 1994; Kessen, 1983), and in early childhood education from modernist 'criteriology' (Schwandt, 1996) to a postmodernist contextualism (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Singer, 1996; Woodhead, 1996). The hegemony of Euro-Western pedagogical practices, including unilateral claims to the right to signify certain knowledge and viewpoints as essential elements of a required canon of knowledge and to deny the legitimacy of other (usually non-Western) knowledge, is gradually being eroded. Increasing numbers of theorists and investigators are construing development, and curriculum about development, as the storying of lives, as dialogical process, and as sociocultural construction (Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Singer, 1996; Woodhead, Faulkner & Littleton, 1998).

Although the GCM was not conceived within the crucible of scholarly postmodernist discourse, we and our Canadian aboriginal partners share a 'postmodernist' valuing of multiple voices and insistence upon situating alternative constructions of experiences with reference to their historical, cultural, political, and personal contexts. We accept as a starting point that non-native educators based in universities and colleges are simply not positioned to be solely responsible for making valid and useful decisions about how to extend the reach, relevance, or appropriateness of early childhood education training and program development in aboriginal communities.

In the decade since the initial partnership, we have partnered in early childhood education practitioner training programs with six other tribal organisations. These organisations have represented more than 30 different rural First Nations communities in western Canada. The programs, guided by the GCM, have yielded unprecedented high rates of successful post-secondary completion by the aboriginal students (from 60–100 per cent) and subsequent employment in child care related fields. The GCM has gained nationwide attention as a uniquely effective approach to increasing the community's capacities to deliver relevant services to children.

*A university-accredited ECE training program.* During our partnerships, the core curriculum that has been developed consists of 18 university accredited courses.

These courses cover topic areas and skills common to most programs of training for early childhood educators, including: (1) child development; (2) ECE program development and delivery; (3) communications and professional ethics; and (4) practica. Some instructors have been aboriginal community members, while others have been non-native educators who have lived near or moved to the community for the duration of the program. Students are accepted into the program as a community group and are registered with the university as 'off-campus' students. A university-based project team provides part of the curriculum and ongoing consultation-liaison support to community-based instructors and administrators. All of the course work occurs in the community, where students meet together in regularly scheduled classes to complete the university courses that lead to a two year diploma. In addition, students travel to nearby communities to complete five practica in licensed early childhood care settings.

*Generative teaching and learning.* Scripted courses and supplementary materials developed at the university are not 'final' when they are offered to the communities; rather, they are just beginning their 'generative life.' Each subject is structured using an 'open architecture', leaving room for voices from the students and the community to enter into the active, constructivist teaching and learning process. Throughout the two years of the program, a community member in the role of 'Intergenerational Facilitator' organises the participation of Elders and other respected community members in regular meetings with students and instructors. These 'co-instructors' share their knowledge and experiences of cultural traditions and community history pertaining to various aspects of child care and development covered by each course unit. The community-based part of the curriculum is thereby generated. Trainees are then invited to discuss historical, political, and cultural factors affecting children with individuals who best understand these contexts. Thus, as one instructor underscored:

*The wisdom of the Elders, the experience of the students who grew up in this community—these are not just adjuncts to a western-oriented course; they are intrinsic building blocks.*

An instructor in one of our partnership programs offered her perspective on how the GCM differs from the 'cookie cutter' approaches to training offered at some mainstream colleges and universities:

*When the classes started... I felt like an experienced 'rookie'. I had never taught generatively before and I felt like I was sitting backwards in my desk. I would present the materials found in textbooks that represent North American majority culture. These ideas and approaches would be assessed by the students and Elders for their appropriateness and fit with Cree and Dene perspectives.*

A student summed up the bicultural co-construction of childhood and child care in the training program:

*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.*

Through its community-involving process, the GCM has the potential to uncover and focus on elements of the social ecology of the First Nations community, how community members construe these elements, and their perceptions of the implications for child care and development. Across the seven partnership programs, a wide range of elements of the social ecology of the community has been the subject of extensive dialogue and debate. These have included: roles of parents, siblings, other children, grandparents and other Elders; historical experiences with school; literacy; culturally influenced learning styles; culturally appropriate instructional processes; traditional language; approaches to problem-solving; impact of social relationships on cognitive performance; indigenous definitions of intelligence; cultural goals of maturity and their influence on guided participation; communication with children; interaction between children and adults; and children's social partners. Cultural activities led by the Elders during the training program often include traditional ceremonies and practices, and the collection of items and documents of cultural importance.

*Generated concepts of child care.* Students explore diverse possibilities for interpreting the meanings and practical implications of 'development' and 'quality care' in the context of their own culture and community and with reference to their own experiences as children and as caregivers. This approach has support from a growing number of postmodernist educators and psychologists (e.g. Dahlberg et al., 1999; Moss & Pence, 1994; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Green, 1993; Lubeck, 1996; Singer,

1996). Guidelines for culturally desirable child care practices emerge through dialogue in class about: (1) the cultural reconstructions and experiences elaborated by Elders in the community; (2) contemporary social conditions and goals for children in the community; and (3) ideas and research found in mainstream texts and practicum observations. In one partnership program, one example of such new constructions of culturally fitting, community-appropriate practice was bringing all children and caregivers together in 'talking circles' when one child has been engaging in challenging behaviours in the child care centre. During the talking circles, stories were told that implied 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.*

A salient feature of most Canadian aboriginal cultures is the extensive use of stories, rather than direct instruction or explicit feedback, as the preferred medium for 'teaching' children about the norms, moral values, and behavioural expectations of their community. For example, in a discussion of managing challenging behaviours, a student explained:

*We need to stay in close touch with a child who is not doing what we have asked him to do 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 else we need to be patient with him.*

*Construing 'success': Summary of research findings.* Evidence accumulating from the ongoing research evaluation of the seven partnership programs shows that the positive impacts of this approach to ECE training include but go far beyond benchmark credentials that students receive (provincial ECE Certification and a university Diploma in Child and Youth Care). From the perspectives of students, their 'success' is measured with reference to: (a) learning about their own ability to create and share knowledge;

(b) learning to evaluate critically alternative conceptual frameworks, forms of interacting with children and families, and alternative ECE program models; (c) learning to synthesise knowledge and experience from a variety of sources within and outside of their own cultural communities; (d) becoming better parents; and (e) articulating their own goals for children vis-à-vis their culture and the larger social ecology in which they are embedded. One First Nations community member who was also an instructor said:

*We have a strong cultural foundation, and we must place culture at the heart of every service delivery model, rather than treat it simply as a distinct component. We believe that true understandings of culturally embedded values and knowledge start with a personal vision of who we are and what we could become as First Nations people.*

From the perspectives of other community members, the program helps to achieve some internally identified community goals, including: (a) enhanced confidence and involvement in community roles; (b) increased commitment within the community as a whole to providing for children's wellbeing; (c) enhanced inter-generational relationships; (d) integration of Elders and traditional knowledge into everyday community life; and (e) innovation of necessary services for children and families. First Nations scholars in Canada have pointed to the critical role of community healing through cultural reconnection as a foundational element in ECE training and practice:

*... The identity and well-being of aboriginal children and their families is inextricably bound with the identity and well-being of their aboriginal community' (Schouls, Olthuis & Engelstad, 1992).*

*Co-creating culturally situated understandings of early childhood.* Our experiences have led us to doubt seriously whether the contemporary North American call for 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice' which is 'culturally sensitive' (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997) can be realised through established, mainstream training programs that typically aim to impart pre-constructed knowledge about children and 'best practices' in child care that are purported to be universally valid and desirable. The GCM shifts away from a persevering search for universals to a celebration of the reality and richness of diversity. By bringing together the two worlds of western academe and aboriginal communities, the GCM steps outside

of a modernist approach and opens one door to a more inclusive, postmodernist starting point for developing culturally situated understandings of children, their families, and their ECE program needs in varying ecological contexts.

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