

# i d e a s

Emotional Well-Being in Child Care



## Training in First Nations Communities: Five "Secrets" of Success

by Jessica Ball and Alan Pence

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

The Tl'azt'en partnership with the First Nations Partnership Programs (FNPP) at the University of Victoria was the first post-secondary program to achieve a high degree of success in this remote community. A legacy of personal tragedy haunts the 1500

Carrier people spread across three villages in northern British Columbia. Yet on an afternoon in June 1999, hope was rekindled by eight women's accomplishments. These FNPP graduates are now employed as managers and staff of the first child

care facility on the reserve centred at Tache, B.C. Further, they established an Aboriginal Head Start preschool program, working with parents to introduce traditional Carrier language and culture to young children.

### First Nations Partnership Programs

In 1989, frustrated with mainstream ECE training programs, the Meadow Lake Tribal Council of northern Saskatchewan approached the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria about establishing an innovative ECE training program and



Martina Pierre, Mount Currie intergenerational facilitator with Jessica Ball and Alan Pence, First Nations Partnership Program coordinators.

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. The Tribal Council made it clear that they would be in the driver's seat, steering the development of a training program, with the university a desired and necessary passenger. During the 1990s, through partnerships between the university and other First Nations communities, a framework for community-based ECE training was built. Seven Aboriginal bands and tribal councils across western Canada have now worked with a university-based team to deliver ECE training in their own communities.

Each community has a vision for its children's 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 vision statement of the Meadow Lake

Tribal Council 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 the Treaty 8 partnership program, exemplifies the achievement of this vision. She credits the FNPP with enriching her knowledge of her own culture and helping her to integrate her First Nations identity with her ECE skills. Nancy created an Aboriginal Head Start program in her home community of Sauleau on the edges of Moberly Lake in far northern British Columbia. Nancy emphasizes the colours and symbols of the Medicine Wheel in the physical environment of the centre. Items are labelled 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:

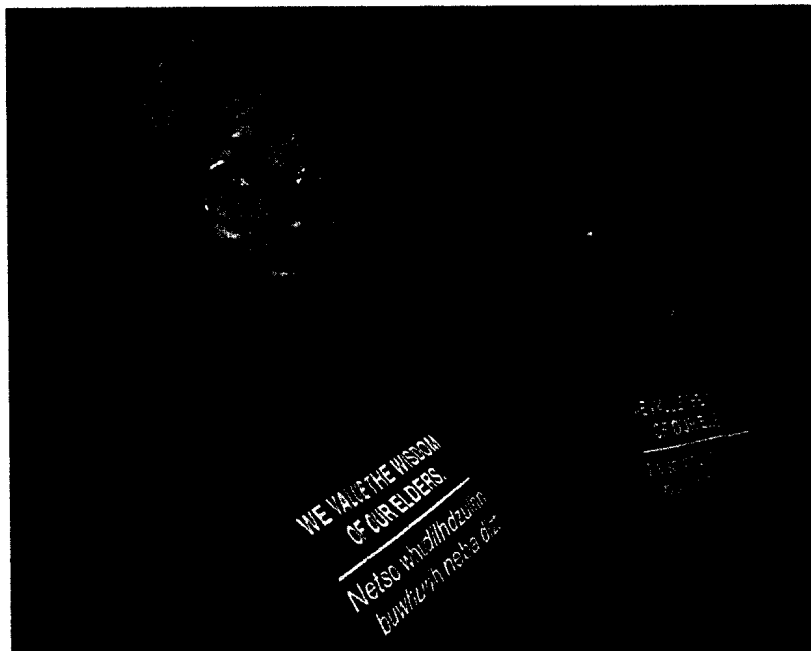
*From the program, I learned my culture and elder teachings that will remain forever in my heart. I firmly believe that reserves need preschool programs [not only] for Kindergarten but also to form a foundation for a positive Cree identity. I really believe that the children in the Cree-active Wonders program are developing their social, intellectual, spiritual and physical needs. They are learning their culture and they love it.*

### **Lessons Learned: Five "Secrets" of Success**

We continue to receive enquiries from different cultural communities interested in adapting the FNPP training model to their own needs for ECE training and community development. We present here five "secrets" of success that illustrate the development of the FNPP approach — from an innovative idea to community-based ECE training to improved child care services. During this journey, new ways of teaching and learning emerged. Communities and program participants changed as well-being, capacity, confidence and efficacy in creating new child care services was enhanced.

#### **1. The whole community participates in the program**

The need for child care programs and trained community members to staff them is particularly urgent in First Nations communities on federal reserve lands. There, access to off-reserve child care is severely limited by geographic distances, social and cultural barriers



Elders are integral to training programs



Onion Lake program graduate with her son on a cradle board

and eligibility regulations. In a comprehensive review of Aboriginal child care, Margo Greenwood notes that the absence of legislation and policies specific to First Nations 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 that assert the importance of "child day care as a potential vehicle for social change and cultural transmission."

For these reasons, the structure of FNPP training is guided by the community. Band and tribal councils take the lead in recruiting students, instructors, elders, program administrators and other community resource people. In five of the seven partnerships, communities designated a community member as the intergenerational facilitator, with multiple responsibilities related to the involvement of elders. In addition, community members were actively engaged in on-going development of the training curriculum. Core curricula consist of 20 courses equivalent to those offered in mainstream university programs, leading to a two-year university

diploma. Students travel to nearby communities to complete five practica in licensed child care settings. Over its development, the training curriculum became called the Generative Curriculum Model.<sup>TM</sup>

***Generative Curriculum Model***

Although not conceived originally as an explicit anti-bias model, the Generative Curriculum Model embodies "an anti-bias approach for early childhood education" (Corson, 1998). Our educational model incorporates three interconnected anti-bias concepts of students' learning needs—self-discovery, cross-cultural understanding and critical thinking skills. By adopting a community-based partnership approach, undertaken at the initiative of First Nations communities, FNPP also put into action the anti-bias principle of "inclusive education" by ensuring that Aboriginal people occupy "the driver's seat" on a journey of change.

In this model, First Nations partners, university-based educators and students engage in a bicultural 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. Specific activities are written into the curriculum to draw out community participation. For example, elders contribute by sharing stories from their past and their views on contemporary child rearing practices and values.

Leaders in the Cree and Dene communities around Meadow Lake reported a 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. Subsequent partnerships also reported that elders became conduits between the classroom and students' involvement in their cultural community. Overall, intergenerational rapport and communication brought about the reinstatement of elders within the communities. Elders both transformed the program and were themselves transformed.

Few training models in the human services invite communities to



Tl'azt'en Nation program leaders and Jessica Ball (centre)

develop a curriculum together wherein outcomes are not predetermined. But the unknown opens up the possibility of creating new knowledge. No one knows which mainstream child development concepts will fit with cultural knowledge and which will need to be reconstructed. Within the Generative Curriculum Model, participants come together as both teachers and learners to consider what will be quality care and education in their particular First Nation community.

Because each training program is shaped by the knowledge and experiences of participants, no two programs are identical. Nonetheless, all partnerships are grounded in the belief that First Nations people must have ownership of child care at all stages. Funding agencies expressed the hope that the program 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. Thus, the goal is to make the Generative Curriculum Model process-oriented so that on-going collaboration with partner communities is possible.

## **2. Program participants rediscover their cultural heritage**

Community-specific cultural practices become an integral part of the attitudes, knowledge and skills that the students need to learn to work effectively with families and children. Cultural practices become the lens through which ECE training is viewed and applied. In every partnership, cultural identity is elevated as the basis for promoting child development and secure family life.

Guidelines for culturally appropriate child care practices emerge through

dialogue in class about: unknown or forgotten cultural practices described by elders; contemporary social conditions and goals for children in the community; and ideas and research found in mainstream texts and practicum observations. In one program, when a child exhibited challenging behaviours, all children and educators met together in "talking circles." 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 Canadian Aboriginal cultures is the extensive use of stories, rather than direct instruction or explicit feedback, to teach about norms, moral values and behavioural expectations of their community. In a discussion about managing challenging behaviours, 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."

## **3. Students live and study in familiar community surroundings**

Aboriginal students do not find their traditions and values represented in

mainstream ECE 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 their First Nation community, 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. For example, after elders discussed the tradition of the cradle board (a decorated board designed to hold a swaddled infant), one of the authors observed children wrapped in beaded cradle boards and placed in cribs. After nap time, the cradle boards were placed near where the children were crawling and climbing. The cradle board became both a functional and visual object within the environment, bringing together old and new traditions. Familiar and culturally relevant environments were both maintained and transformed as students gained a new awareness of the ways in which they — as professional educators — effect children's emotional, physical, social and cognitive development.

Another compelling and eminently practical reason to deliver ECE training in the community is that nearly all those with a keen interest in the program have been women, most of whom have parenting responsibilities. Thus, leaving the community to study is seen as both impossible and undesirable.

## **4. Students become role models in the community**

Most students who enter the training programs have completed high school. They live on reserves in extended families and social networks that provide practical support and the emotional nucleus of their daily lives. ECE students

soon become a source of information for community members. As an elder from Tl'azt'en Nation eloquently said: "They know now they are gifted for this." Students' self-esteem increases as they became recognized by others for their ECE leadership capacity. Self-identity and self-confidence are fostered within a stable, cohesive student group, particularly as they work through and contribute to the generative curriculum over an extended period. A Tl'azt'en program instructor described how, in both literal and symbolic ways, students "found their voice":

*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 she needs to say.*

An extensive program evaluation (1998-2000) found increased student retention and program completion. In B.C., nearly all students achieved ECE certification compared to a national average completion rate of 40 per cent or below among Aboriginal students in other post-secondary educational program. In addition, 65 per cent of graduates initiated new programs including out-of-home day care centres, family day cares, Aboriginal Head Start, youth services, infant development programs, school readiness, language enhancement and home-school liaison programs. Others took over staff positions in existing services for children and youth in their communities.

### 5. The program benefits the wider community

"One stone was thrown in the pool and now the effects are rippling to wider and wider circles of influence" (Graduate of the Cowichan FNPP).



Stories speak to the spirit of a child

Program participants' comments suggest 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 lead to positive changes in the students' own parenting skills which ripple out through their families and friendships. Elders bring their knowledge of traditional ways to students and instructors, and new intergenerational relationships blossom throughout the community.

Training practica significantly contribute to increased awareness in the wider ECE community about what First Nations practitioners can bring to our field. Non-native practicum supervisors frequently remark on the quiet manner that many students display with the children in their centres. A Prince George supervisor 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 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 native and non-native communities, introducing an atmosphere of greater understanding and trust between native and non-native people involved in providing child care services in the same region. This results in some of the first collaborations for sharing knowledge and resources. In one instance, program graduates in one First Nations community regularly provide guidance about the needs of First Nations children in a largely non-native centre, and visit the centre to lead activities that enhance all children's appreciation of First Nations cultures and languages. In exchange, a child care specialist from the non-native centre provides help to the newly established child care centres on the reserve. Some program graduates now serve on regional boards representing ECE. Many have become members of the professional ECE 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 broached First Nations issues in open forums.

The effects of community confidence and capacity on child development and family well-being will need to be investigated further. In a number of communities, data collection is just beginning. We cannot know exactly how culturally appropriate child care will affect key indicators like language development, cognitive development and social competence. We do know that very young children rely on cues from adult behaviours and environments for a sense of positive identity. A program participant from the Nzen'man' partnership 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."

### **Lessons for Mainstream Training Institutions**

Three lessons were reinforced in our experience with the First Nations Partnership Programs.

1. *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 our ECE profession 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. *Older community members may be able to contribute much to ECE training and to child care programs.* Elders bring traditional knowledge and language, memories of community life, arts, crafts and lore that represent a culture. However,

meaningful elder participation in a program requires preparation and respect for cultural protocols. An intergenerational facilitator familiar with the cultural community and with the goals of the program greatly enhances elder involvement.

3. *Students, families and children need support as they learn to rely on and strengthen their own "internal navigational system" for reaching optimal child development.* The roots of this internal guide lie, in part, in each individual's culture of origin. Thus, celebrating culture in ECE 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 support students, children and parents to express and consolidate their cultural identity, the more our care and educational practices will embody and mirror the cultures of the children and families we now serve and the more we will

strengthen the capacity for optimal child development. ♦ © CCCF 2001

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