CHAPTER TWO

Supporting First Nations’ Constructions of Early Childhood Care and Development Through Community-University Partnerships

By Jessica Ball

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This chapter describes an approach that involves First Nations in collaborative partnerships with postsecondary institutions to create and deliver a training program in early childhood care and development (ECCD). The curriculum is generated by both partners so that it is consistent with the contemporary and traditional Indigenous values, experiences and goals of the students’ communities, while also introducing students to a representative sampling of research, theory and practices in the Euro-western tradition. These First Nations Partnership Programs effectively move away from the conventional idea of professional training as the development of an elite class of ‘experts’ with an elevated claim to knowing what is ‘best’ for children and families (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Instead, the partnership programs demonstrate a postmodern, decolonizing approach that recognizes the need and desire for communities to develop local capacity to innovate their own programs, guided by their own cultural goals and community-centred models for supporting children and families (Ball, Pierre, Pence, & Kuehne, 2002). This chapter conveys what has been learned from breaking away from campus-based, mainstream training models and exploring community-centred, co-constructive ways of combining the strengths of cultural communities and postsecondary institutions.
Breaking the Mold of Prescriptive Training

ECCD training curricula embody and reproduce culturally conditioned aims and methods for stimulating child development and culturally accepted ways of knowing, teaching and assessing effective child care (Ball & Pence, 2000). In Canada, there is a popular call for ‘culturally sensitive’ child care programs. At the same time, there is a call for ECCD practitioners and programs to conform to preconstructed standards of ‘developmentally appropriate’ practices. These two directives can be contradictory, especially when cultural communities diverge significantly from middle-class, European-heritage lifestyles and goals for children. In most postsecondary education, students are expected to manifest adoption of the accepted canon of Euro-western theory and research about child development. In licensed child care facilities in Canada, practitioners are held accountable for upholding provided practice standards. Culturally responsive, community-supported child care advocacy and program delivery are not likely to flow from mainstream training programs that impart preconstructed knowledge about children or from ‘best practice’ standards in child care that are purported to be universally valid and desirable. This was the problem that led representatives of a group of Cree and Dene Nations in Saskatchewan in 1989 to seek a fresh approach to training community members in ECCD (Pence & McCallum, 1994).

ECCD in First Nations Contexts

Many First Nations in Canada are actively pursuing a vision of economic and social development and positive community health that includes a substantial measure of control through their own agency and actions (Government of Canada, 1996). Strengthening community capacity to mount and operate accessible, safe, culturally consistent care for children and youth has been a priority of First Nations within these larger social agendas. First Nations leaders have linked improvement of developmental conditions for children to the reconstruction of their cultural identity, revitalization of intergenerational transmission of culture and traditional language, and reproduction of culturally distinctive values and practices in programs for children and youth (Barman, 1996). In many First Nations, generations of people do not know their own culture of origin or their traditional language, and their identities as members of a cultural community have been fragmented and demeaned (Long & Fox, 1996). First Nations parents, children and communities have suffered as a result of enforced residential schooling, child welfare practices and other ‘helping’ services deemed by government and non-government organizations, at the time, to be in the ‘best interests’ of Canada’s Indigenous people. Although the long era of enforced residential schooling for First Nations children in Canada is over, its negative impacts on
self-esteem, mental health, parenting, social cohesion and the intergenerational transmission of traditional language and culture remain (Assembly of First Nations, 1994).

The First Nations Partnership Programs were created at the initiative of First Nations partners in the context of bringing together the worlds of university-accredited knowledge and Indigenous knowledge. The programs are delivered as part of a healing journey intended to reinforce cultural identity, literacy and pride among members of the partnering First Nations communities. They are also intended as a context for new learning on the parts of postsecondary partners, advancing the process of decolonialization and stimulating new ways of responding to the self-identified needs of communities.

A History of Disappointments with Education and Training

A long-standing problem in Canada has been the lack of qualified First Nations community members to staff child care and development programs. In 2004, at a gathering of 200 delegates involved in Aboriginal ECCD policy, education and programs throughout British Columbia, the need for ECCD training, as well as support for graduates’ transitions from training to work, were identified as top priorities. Delegates pointed out that small and remote communities have particular difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff for ECCD programs. Many families leave their communities to access the services they need for their children, contributing to the high mobility of young First Nations children. In larger communities, almost all qualified practitioners originate outside the cultural communities in which they practice, and they are not well prepared to advance locally specific cultural goals for children’s care and development (British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2003).

All of the First Nations that initiated a partnership program with the University of Victoria made many previous attempts to build capacity among community members through education and training. As has been the experience of many Indigenous people, they found neither cultural relevance in training curriculum nor cultural safety (i.e., freedom from racism and acceptance of cultural ways of being) on mainstream campuses (Archibald, Bowman, Pepper, Urion, Mirehouse, & Shortt, 1995). Although the number of Indigenous students enrolled at Canadian universities has increased over the past two decades, student retention and completion rates remain low (Barman, 1996).

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There is an especially poor record of achievement on the parts of mainstream postsecondary programs engaging First Nations from rural areas. Human service training and community
development programs conceived in middle-class urban centres, even when these have been made accessible through ‘community-based’ delivery, have tended to lack resonance and applicability to the cultures, rural circumstances, socioeconomic conditions, lifestyles, goals and resources of First Nations communities. Programs offering pan-Aboriginal curriculum content in an effort to be culturally sensitive fail to address the heterogeneity of several hundred First Nations in Canada, each with their own particular history, language, culture and social organization (Blanchet-Cohen & Richardson, 2000). The First Nations Partnership Programs have demonstrated success over the past 15 years in overcoming barriers to accessing and completing postsecondary education. The programs have built capacity for community members to design and deliver ECCD programs that are grounded in the cultures and responsive to the conditions of the children and families they are intended to serve.

Evolution of First Nations Partnership Programs

First Nations Partnership Programs originated in 1989 when the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in northern Saskatchewan approached Alan Pence at the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria (see Chapter 5 by Pence in this volume). They wished to collaborate in community-based delivery of a bicultural curriculum that would prepare Cree and Dene people to deliver effective, culturally relevant child care programs both on- and off-reserve and for both First Nations and non-First Nations families. The Tribal Council envisioned practitioner training and children’s programs in which “the richness of knowledge in our communities can be fully considered” (Ray Ahenakew, Executive Director, cited in Pence & McCallum, 1994). This vision became the springboard for an evolving and varied series of 10 community-university collaborations delivering ECCD training spanning 1989 to the present.

Partnering First Nations communities have been small, ranging from 75 to 1700 people. With one exception, they have been rural or remote, located not less than 300 kilometres from a major urban centre. Cowichan Tribe has been the largest community partner, with a population of about 3450 people located in a small urban setting. All of the partnerships have involved groupings of several neighbouring villages. Most of these groupings have brought together students from somewhat different First Nations cultures. Thus, there have been partnering at the community level embedded within the broader community-university relationship. Typically, one community initiates, coordinates and hosts the community-based delivery of the program in partnership with the University of Victoria. Three of the programs had three partners, including a second postsecondary institution.
The partnering communities commit to long-term plans for building community capacity to deliver their own services for young children and their families. The communities invest funds, facilities and human resources in a pre-program preparatory phase and in co-delivery of a two-year diploma level training program that involves many community members. The pre-program phase has ranged from one to five years. During this period, community champions of the idea of delivering the program work within their own communities to explore interest and rally support for implementation. They raise all the funds for program delivery. University-based team members are introduced by these community champions to the communities, and opportunities are found to build trusting relationships. This is the time when the community and university partners establish a shared vision of the partnership’s mission and the specific goals to be achieved. Agreements are made about core features of the program approach and curriculum content. Discussion culminates in a Memorandum of Agreement, which includes the guiding principles about the co-constructed, ‘generative’ curriculum, the courses to be delivered and the credentials that will be attainable.

Qualified instructors who live in or near the community are recruited and contracted by community administrators and screened and appointed by the university. Applications from candidates to take the program are solicited by the community and then reviewed and selected by both partners. Elders from each of the participating students’ communities are requested to join the classroom to share cultural knowledge on topics covered in all of the courses, as well as to mentor and support students. Geographically accessible practicum sites and culturally receptive practicum supervisors are found. The courses are delivered in one of the participating First Nations communities where the whole community can see, hear and take part in various aspects of the training process and later in the creation of children’s programs. Students enjoy the continuity of remaining with their families and in their own homes, in the cultural safety of their own community. When students complete their training, they are eligible to operate licensed child care and development programs. Certification requirements and levels of regulation vary across the provinces and territories; in the western provinces, graduates are eligible for Level 3 or, in British Columbia, Basic plus 2 Post-Basic Certifications. They also achieve a two-year diploma in child and youth care from the University of Victoria. The whole community celebrates their success and supports their transitions to work in their own community or elsewhere (Ball et al., 2002).

Establishing community agency in implementing program delivery in their own setting and involving as many community members as possible has proven to be one of the most effective components of the programs, as will be discussed subsequently. Institutional partners support the steps taken by community administrators. However, they studiously refrain from taking the initiative or offering assistance when community-driven action is needed to mobilize community-wide support to mount and sustain the initiative.
Program Evaluation

Research evaluating the First Nations Partnership Programs was completed in 2000 (Ball, 2000). Using a social participatory approach, accounts of program experiences were obtained from former students, instructors, Elders, community administrators and practicum supervisors in each of the first seven partnership programs between 1989 and 1999. One goal was to document retention and successful completion of postsecondary credentials by First Nations students. A second goal was to discover the kinds of outcomes that First Nations community members valued and how they saw the partnership programs measuring up to these criteria. A third goal was to identify effective components of successful training partnerships.

The evaluation research documented unprecedented high rates of First Nations student retention, program completion, application of training to vocational practice and delivery of new programs for children and families in First Nations communities. However, the First Nations participants emphasized that the most important measures of program effectiveness are the ways in which students and their communities experienced education in ECCD as a transforming, culturally revitalizing, community-building process. The research documented the personal and community transformations which resulted from grounding the training curriculum in a community of learners infused with the cultural wisdom of Elders.
Education and Vocational Outcomes

- 83.8% (114 of 136 students enrolled in the program) have completed one year of full-time, university-accredited study.
- 75.7% (103 of 136 enrollees) have completed a full two years to achieve a Diploma in Child and Youth Care.
- 95% (108) of graduates completing one or more years have remained in their own communities.
- 65% (67) of graduates completing two years of training have introduced new programs for children, youth and families.
- 21.5% (22) of graduates completing two years of training have joined the staff of existing services.
- 11.6% (12) of graduates completing two years of training have continued on the education ladder toward a university degree.

Student retention and completion rates significantly exceed those for students who either take distance education courses or who leave their home community to pursue education. In the evaluation of the first seven partnerships, a recurrent theme was the way the curriculum resonated with the realities of students’ daily lives, including their communities’ socioeconomic circumstances, readiness, goals and strategies for responding to the needs of children and families. Many graduates contrasted this with previous experiences in mainstream educational institutions, which they described variously as “totally white,” “impractical,” “culturally contradictory,” “spiritually bankrupt” and “foreign.”

As many evaluation participants noted, there are few, if any, benefits to the community when students go away to attend university and do not return – or come back, in the words of an Elder, “as strangers with alien ideas.” Most program graduates give back to their community by remaining and starting new programs, whereas many community members who leave to pursue their education do not return. Amelia Stark, community development director at T’az’t’en Nation, commented: “A training program where what is taught fits with what we believe and want for our children in this community, and where students stay right here with their families and stay on after the program to work for the community – that’s worth the dollar value.”

Personal Transformations

Positive psychosocial development, reported by 92% of graduates, was one way that participants gauged program effectiveness. Graduates described how they replaced internalized negative stereotypes of themselves and their cultural heritage with self-esteem
and cultural pride. A recurrent theme was the way they worked through trauma experienced in residential school, or from being raised without affection by parents who survived residential school, within a culturally safe, socially supportive and empathic learning community. Marie McCallum, administrator at Meadow Lake Tribal Council, gives this formulation: “The long-term benefits of offering a training program that takes the strengths, knowledge, and skills of individuals so that they begin to feel good about themselves, is worth whatever it takes.”

Many graduates described feeling more able to take control of their own lives and make valuable contributions to their families and communities. Over 80% of program graduates reported greater satisfaction and effectiveness as parents and/or grandparents. Two-thirds reported that community members frequently asked their advice about parenting and child development. They anticipated how the enhanced transmission of knowledge, skills and enthusiasm about child development and parenting will substantially impact the future of the community as a whole: “I feel like we are going to get back on track” (Margaret Lambert, graduate, Flying Dust First Nation).

**Community Transformations**

Community administrators usually agree that the program benefits far outweigh the costs, especially in comparison with mainstream training programs. As Martina Pierre, intergenerational facilitator in a partnership program at Lil’wat Nation, explains, the whole community benefits, not only the individuals who register as students:

_The Elders enjoyed themselves. They came every week and met with the students, and shared their stories and their knowledge about children. A lot of good came from that. Students got to know our Elders and develop strong relationships with them, which was good for them and for the Elders too. Students became supports for each other, and developed long-lasting friendships. They became role models for other parents in the community. Everyone was proud of what they accomplished and grateful for what they could do for our community. We all benefitted in some way from the training._

Among the community-level outcomes identified by First Nations administrators of the partnering communities were: (a) the capacity built for providing out-of-home care for children that, in itself, provides jobs for community members, enables parents to pursue education, training and employment, and provides developmental support for children’s well-being; (b) the preservation of Elders’ knowledge through their curriculum contributions
and teaching; (c) the reproduction of Indigenous ways of thinking about child care and development, as well as the specific preservation of culture and language through culturally informed child care programs in the community; and (d) community members’ completion of university-accredited education that provides an education reentry opportunity for those wishing to pursue a variety of human service careers. Overall, community administrators reported that the approach of the partnership programs supported self-determination in their communities through renewed capacity at the community level to provide quality child care and development programs that embody their own cultural traditions, values and practices.

Expanded Services for Children

A graduate from Saulteau First Nation, Nancy Anderson, declared: “I couldn’t wait to put into practice some of the ideas I developed during the program for integrating our values and our Cree language into my own program. The children at Cree-ative Daycare are developing their abilities to use our language and know our culture.” This graduate, like several others, has become a leader in the development of Aboriginal ECCD in British Columbia. Programs for children initiated or staffed by program graduates include:

- Out-of-home, centre-based daycares
- In-home family daycares
- Aboriginal Head Start
- Infant development programs
- Home-school liaison programs
- Parent support programs
- Individualized, supported child care for special needs
- Language enhancement programs
- Children’s programs in women’s safe houses
- Youth services
- School-based teacher assistance/learning support
- After-school care programs

Culturally Congruent Practices

Distinctive characteristics of the ways that program graduates approach caregiving, family support and early intervention are frequently noted by practicum supervisors and by the university-based team. For example, many graduates prefer flexible programming that enables them to respond readily to the needs of individual parents, children or caregivers, seasonal variations and unanticipated opportunities. They exhibit acceptance of a wide range
of individual differences among both children and their parents, including a reluctance to label children, for example, as having special needs, disabilities or giftedness. They prefer a non-authoritarian, family-centred approach to practice. They often look to Elders for guidance and assume that Elders and grandparents are the centre of family life. Program graduates demonstrate their commitment to transmitting and sustaining their community’s culture in songs, games, stories, life skills activities and outdoor recreation.

**Effective Program Components**

What accounts for the unprecedented successes of the First Nations Partnership Programs? A grounded theoretical analysis of research participants’ accounts of their experiences with the program led to the identification of four key program features that they perceived as important determinants for the program success:

1) Community-centred delivery that enables community inclusion in all phases of program planning, delivery and refinement.
2) Community of learners.
3) Co-construction of curriculum.
4) Partnership between willing community and institutional partners.

The critical role of these features has been confirmed in the three more recent partnership programs. The interweaving of these features – embedded in and actively supported by a community-driven agenda – enables the cultural “fit” and social inclusiveness of the training process and curriculum content. In turn, the programs result in outcomes consistent with community goals.

**Community-centred Program Delivery**

The programs are delivered entirely in the First Nations community that initiates the partnership. Students do not attend classes on the campus of the partnering postsecondary institution. The community is the host and co-delivering partner – the postsecondary institution does not establish a satellite campus in the community. Qualified instructors are recruited and contracted by each partnering First Nations community. Instructors are then approved by the partnering postsecondary institution. Thus, geographically, administratively and socially, the program reduces the distance between training and community.

For many people in rural settings, ‘distance education’ is really the opposite of how it is conventionally defined by educators who measure distance from where they sit on
mainstream college campuses. In rural communities, distance education occurs when students have to leave their families and the sources of knowledge in their communities—travelling geographical distances to access education. The generic education they receive is also distant, socially and culturally. Often it has little applicability to the migrant students’ realities back home. In the partnerships, students remain geographically, socially and culturally closer to home: "To ensure that our culture will be reflected in the structure of children’s services, we had to bring the training program to the community and bring the community into the training program. It was like a big circle" (Louise Underwood, intergenerational facilitator, Cowichan Tribe).

Community-centred delivery enables extensive community involvement and other program processes that combine to distinguish the partnership programs from other constructivist, participatory pedagogy. When the community is allowed entry into the education process and invited to play meaningful roles, the impacts of the training do not end inside the classroom. There is potential for community-wide transformations that could sustain and magnify the capacity built through the training, as community members share in the teaching and learning and carry emergent understandings with them into the broad ecology of children’s lives. As Amelia Stark, director of education at TI’atz’en Nation, commented: "Because they didn’t have to leave to take their training, the students never forgot that their community needed them to complete the program. And what they learned fit with the community, because they had the community right here to test out their ideas and get feedback."

**Community of Learners**

Graduates of the partnership programs often account for their personal and professional development with reference to the steadfast support they experienced from other students and community members. Regular meetings of a group of students moving through a full-time program together, alongside instructors-in-residence and Elders, creates several essential characteristics of the learning environment, including: (a) a climate of cultural safety for self-exploration and open debate about concepts of child care; (b) reliable support for students as they work through often painful memories of childhood and loss of cultural identity and venture out into practice; and (c) sustainable social and professional networks. Students, instructors, Elders, practicum supervisors and community administrators become the centre of a community of learners that is enhanced by familiarity, proximity and shared experiences. Students and instructors frequently compare their cohort and the broader community of learners to a ‘family.’ Louise Underwood, an Elder who served as the intergenerational facilitator for a partnership with Cowichan Tribe, explained: "There is a
real community feel about that program, with Elders and resource people coming and going and students going out to the community, which after all is the way it should be — a huge circle of learning and teaching and support.”

The fluid boundary between the training program and the community means that when program graduates assume roles as leaders in child care initiatives, community members such as Elders, parents and other resource people expect and readily agree to become actively involved. Eliciting community involvement and knowing how to integrate community members meaningfully into children’s programs are frequently reported challenges for ECCD practitioners. These challenges are amplified when the practitioner is not a community member or has completed training away from the community.

**Co-constructed Curriculum**

The knowledges held in both the university and the community inform course design and delivery in each partnership program, bringing multiple perspectives on ECCD. The role of the university-based team, and other postsecondary institutions that have been partners in the programs, is to support the desire of cultural communities to engage in a co-construction of ECCD curriculum. In the first exploratory partnership, dialogue between representatives of the University of Victoria and the Meadow Lake Tribal Council led to agreement to use the space between First Nations and Euro-western cultures metaphorically as a place to meet, hear, debate and engage in co-construction of curriculum.

Each partnership program brings people together in cultural communities to explore and debate varying constructions of child development and care. The vision and objectives of the partnering bands and tribal councils in the partnership programs are not identical, and no two programs look exactly alike. The common goal is to strengthen values, concepts and approaches to supporting children’s well-being that are grounded in the culture of the community and to strengthen community involvement in child-focused programs. There is considerable variability across communities in designs for serving children and youth because every community is culturally different. Each community is embedded in a host of varying socioeconomic and geographic conditions. The open architecture of the curriculum accommodates and responds to Indigenous knowledge and plans for ECCD generated by the community of learners. The curriculum generated in one partnership program is not passed along to subsequent partnerships. Doing so would result in the evolution of the kind of pan-Aboriginal approach which the instigators of the partnership program at Meadow Lake Tribal Council critiqued as fundamentally misguided. Arriving at culturally and
contextually appropriate understandings of child development and care is experienced in the partnerships as a process, rather than as a prescription or a product, setting the program apart from most postsecondary and training programs.

Imported knowledge and practices, represented in curriculum packages provided by a university-based team, are considered alongside Elders’ and students’ understandings of the needs of children and families in their own community. Each community creates their own curriculum by combining a partial curriculum for 20 courses provided by the university-based team with culturally specific knowledge and practice provided by community resource people, especially by Elders. The founder of this university-accredited diploma-level program, Alan Pence, called this co-constructive approach to curriculum the ‘Generative Curriculum Model’ (Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood-Church, & Opekokew, 1993). By bringing together the worlds of Western academy and First Nations, the Generative Curriculum Model opens a door to an inclusive, postmodernist paradigm for developing culturally situated understandings of children, their families and their locally situated ECCD program needs. As Christine Leo, Community Advancement Director at Lil’wat Nation, describes: “The Generative Curriculum Model meant that our values and language are integrated into the daycare program, so that the children’s capacity to use our language and know our culture will be stronger.”

**Elders’ Involvement**

In First Nations communities, Elders are typically the source of knowledge of traditional ways of supporting children and families. Each First Nation varies in how they acknowledge a member as an Elder. Generally, Elders are older adults who have demonstrated to community members that they are keepers of traditional knowledge and have a wise perspective on the community’s cultural identity and history. While the extent of Elders’ participation has varied across the partnership programs, in all of the programs Elders have contributed portions of the content of each course. They have also modeled ways of storytelling, listening and learning that are themselves expressions of First Nations culture. The Elders who engage with students form a bridge between academe and Indigenous knowledge and ways of teaching and learning. Elders’ participation in curriculum development and teaching is also a catalyst for both new and rekindled intergenerational relationships and for reinstatement of traditional social structures that ensure cultural transmission. The Intergenerational Facilitator in a partnership with Cowichan Tribe, Louise Underwood, reflected upon the reinstatement of the role of Elders: “This program was the very first time we had Elder teachings going into classrooms. We have developed an open dialogue with the community – the doors are open both ways.”
Instructors

Instructors agree not to replicate the 'expert-driven' framework of most mainstream training and development assistance programs. They work alongside Elders. The curriculum from the university suggests questions and activities that may become opportunities for instructors to ask for Elders' knowledge about topics covered in each course. An instructor in the program with Tl'azt'en Nation underscored the value of involving Elders:

A non-First Nations instructor can never really know what the experiences of the students have been like, or the experience of living in the community, either as a child or as someone caring for children. You can visit, you can work there every day and still not have awareness of many things. It is really important to be aware of not knowing and open to learning from the students and the Elders.

Working with Elders within an inclusive community of learners, and with an open-ended curriculum, is new and challenging for all instructors. Not only does the teaching take place in the community, but a whole component of the curriculum is introduced by elder community members. The instructors' ability to control the informational input from community members is minimal, and the input from Elders and others is typically "foreign" to the instructor. As one instructor noted, such a change was like "being an experienced rookie ... sitting backwards in my desk."

Intergenerational facilitation

The passing of wisdom from one generation to another – even in a First Nations context where this is a tradition – does not happen automatically. Most community partners recruit an intergenerational facilitator who is able to invite the active involvement of a network of Elders to participate in the program. In two partnership programs, this individual was an Elder herself and was knowledgeable about cultural ways of understanding and caring for young children. The intergenerational facilitator plays an important role in helping some students, and sometimes instructors, overcome their initial resistance to the unfamiliar practice of putting Indigenous knowledge at the core of curriculum development. Some students and instructors are receptive and welcoming of Elders as co-constructors of the curriculum. But others express strong doubts about whether the "old ways" could have any value or relevance to themselves, their families or their future careers in child and youth care. Many students and instructors have described the importance of being able to discuss Elders' contributions with the intergenerational facilitator, who has helped them to accept the ambiguities in the Elders' often indirect method of teaching through storytelling and role modelling.
The intergenerational facilitator serves as a kind of sociocultural informant for instructors who are not from the community, and they help to introduce instructors and Elders to one another. A strong and stable cultural identity and positive self-esteem are important foundations for working effectively with children and youth. The involvement of Elders, with the support of the Intergenerational Facilitators, brings even the most disenchanted students into a circle of belonging to a healing cultural community.

**Partnerships**

**Community will**

The partnering cultural communities must have the public will and social cohesion to take the initiative in a program that depends on community participation and a long-term investment. The First Nations that have initiated the partnership programs have shared certain characteristics that favoured partnership success: (a) a preexisting identification of quality of life for children and families as a priority for community development; (b) an openness to bicultural or multicultural approaches; (c) a prior commitment to strengthening capacity to promote well-being among children, youth and families in the community; (d) geographic proximity to other First Nations communities and willingness to collaborate with them to recruit at least 10 prospective students to form a cohort, and (e) effective community leadership and infrastructure to manage community-based delivery of the program. Not all cultural communities have these characteristics or would be prepared to take on partnership roles.

**Institutional will**

The institutional partners must be willing to: (a) make changes in policy and procedures to accommodate the First Nation; (b) include community members in key planning and delivery decisions; (c) promote relations of reciprocity between the institutions and the community; and (d) recognize that members of partnering cultural communities offer unique and valuable contributions to curriculum development and that no university-based team could effectively contribute this knowledge.

**Strategic focal point of engagement**

One of the enabling conditions of the partnerships is agreement at the outset that the purpose is limited in scope to building community capacity for ECCD. The institutional partners are not engaged in addressing all the goals and challenges of First Nations community development. Paradoxically, a strategically limited scope of activity may account, in part, for the far-reaching effects of the program.
Partners in teaching and learning
A salient characteristic of all the partnerships is that no partner assumes they have a more legitimate claim to 'truths' or 'best practices' regarding the nature of child development or effective ECCD. Community members frequently express their appreciation that the university-based partners do not behave as ultimate authorities on what should be learned or present themselves as experts. Participants’ descriptions of the partnerships emphasize trust, teamwork, reciprocity and mutual learning. Each training program is seen as a new process of coming together as a generative community or a community of learners made up largely of cultural community members, but including the institution-based partners as well. All participants in each generative community are in some ways teachers, and all are learners. “Everybody walks a lot taller because of this program. The partnership was a true partnership, and I can’t think of a better way, as far as an institution to a First Nations community” (Brian Opikokew, administrator, Meadow Lake Tribal Council).

Reciprocally guided participation
Adapting a term used in sociocultural analyses of child development, the partnerships can be said to develop through an ongoing process of reciprocally guided participation in a mutually valued sociocultural activity. For the institution-based teams, there are new learnings with each new partnership about how to act in ways that would support each community’s identified goals for capacity building. Similarly, each community has unique requirements and styles of partnering, as well as different ways of understanding the institution’s roles and resources. Accountability in the partnerships is as much about the process of engagement as it is about the content of the training curriculum.

Institutional Change
The First Nations Partnership Programs have broken new ground for the University of Victoria. Although community-based programs are not new to the university, the co-construction of curriculum is a new approach. The university has gained credibility with many First Nations as a responsive institution and is proud to have supported an unprecedented number of First Nations students in completing programs of study that have led to Ministry of Health certification, increases in First Nations labour force participation, services for young children and laddering of students into the third year of university degree programs. The associate vice-president academic of the University of Victoria, Valerie Kuehne, commented:
The partnerships have demonstrated a new kind of outreach from the university to communities, especially remote communities, and they have been very effective. Do I think there are challenges that remain? Absolutely! There is the matter of making the successes of these partnerships more visible, and therefore more likely to be supported and expanded. There are funding issues and questions of the applicability of this type of partnership program, and this type of curriculum model, to other fields of professional training. Overall, though, I think the School of Child and Youth Care and the university have benefited tremendously from the opportunities to partner with First Nations in this way.

It can be argued that it is not First Nations communities who have the most to learn from the insights yielded by the experience of the partnership programs, but rather the educational and development assistance institutions, policy-making bodies and agencies – both First Nations and non-First Nations – which are involved in establishing and enforcing criteria for funding and delivering training and services for children. Can similar kinds of socially inclusive, generative approaches to education and capacity development be sustained and extended?

**What does it take to be a responsive institutional partner?**

Being responsive to Indigenous communities means more than letting community members voice their concerns or preferences, more than acknowledging diversity, and more than arranging a welcoming environment on mainstream campuses to accommodate Indigenous students who are able to come to them. We need to open up the foundations of how training programs are conceived and delivered by postsecondary institutions, how optimal child care and development is defined, and how communities can play leading roles in capacity-building initiatives. In research on the partnership programs, First Nations administrators were asked to offer advice about how institutions considering this type of community-university initiative need to prepare. They addressed a set of attitudes and forms of interpersonal engagement:

1) Tolerate high levels of uncertainty and shared control of the program.

2) Clarify and confirm informally, and later formally, agreement about the partnership’s mission and the program’s core elements.

3) Make a long-term commitment and persevere.

4) Respond to expressions of community needs regarding program implementation with a high level of flexibility. Postsecondary partners need to be self-critical and willing to jettison the “excess baggage” of their institutions and work around some of the constraints of their institutions.
5) Become familiar with the priorities, practices and circumstances of the community without becoming involved in them. (In the First Nations Partnership Programs, the postsecondary partners did not seek or presume to become experts or insiders of the cultures or social life of the community partners.)

6) Assume an encouraging, non-directive stance while waiting.

7) Avoid ‘doing’ when non-action would be more productive of community agency and, ultimately, capacity building.

8) Be receptive to what the community brings to the project, although these contributions may come in unfamiliar forms and at unexpected times.

Conclusions

The First Nations Partnership Programs demonstrate the benefits that can flow when partners recognize the need to anchor capacity-building initiatives deeply within the context of local people, their existing social organization and cultural strengths, their potential for transformation and their will to move ahead on internally articulated agendas. An administrator at Meadow Lake Tribal Council, Marie McCallum, conveyed how postsecondary education in ECCD needs to be conceptualized as part of a development process in which the whole community is necessarily involved:

*Children are precious gifts. They are the future strength of our communities. We see them as a responsibility of the whole community, not just of parents. So when we delivered this program to develop our child care capacities, it made sense that it was an open classroom, where many people from the community were allowed entry into the education process and asked to contribute. The whole community enjoyed it, and the whole community benefited.*

One of the postsecondary institutions that has taken the journey alongside the University of Victoria has been the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT). At the conclusion of the first partnership program, the Meadow Lake Tribal Council granted rights to the concept and the initial curriculum to this diploma-granting institution. SIIT has continued to deliver the program with First Nations partners throughout Saskatchewan. As well, SIIT was involved in a three-way partnership with Onion Lake First Nation and the University of Victoria. Collaboration between SIIT and the First Nations Partnership Programs team at the University of Victoria has continued over a decade through sharing funding for course development and revisions, exchanging course materials and sharing learning about program liaison roles. SIIT has gained a new program offering, as well as a new approach to serving their First Nations constituencies, as Dennis Esperanz, an administrator of SIIT, describes:
We educators have to be visionaries, and when we talk curriculum, there has to be a view to what our communities are envisioning – what their goals are. The Generative Curriculum Model contains a larger vision of how to bring these two different visions together – the one that academics see and the one that guides people out there in the communities. So we’ve learned a new approach to making what we do here [in this institution] meaningful and effective for all parties. People are just starting to understand what this is all about.

Findings about the effective components of the First Nations Partnership Programs can be used to inform other initiatives intended to stimulate social inclusion and cultural revitalization while strengthening community capacity to support positive child development outcomes. Too often, human service and development assistance initiatives at both individual and community levels proceed on the basis of the assumption that the more oppressed or needy a group of people seems to be, the more one must bring to the situation to be helpful. The record of First Nations Partnership Programs shows the opposite. To be supportive of community efforts to strengthen capacity, institutional partners and community leaders themselves must be scrupulous about not being preemptive and not overwhelming the community with imported ‘goods and services’ from outside their own context and out of step with their own internal rhythm and pace. Rather than evoking the potential in any community for passive – and eventually dependent – adoption of imported concepts and practice models, capacity-building initiatives must capitalize upon the community’s agency and build on the existing cultural foundations. Partnerships based on trust, reciprocity and the will to act on behalf of locally specified goals can sustain cultural knowledge and contribute to healthy social ecologies in which children and families can thrive.

References


