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**Two Sides of an Eagle's Feather: Co-Constructing ECCD Training Curricula
in University Partnerships with Canadian First Nations Communities**

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Introduction

*The First Nations' 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, adapted by the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, served as the starting point for an innovative approach for co-constructing a program of culturally-appropriate ECCD training. The model evolved through a sequence 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 cultural and institutional differences and distances up to 2,000 kilometres, this participatory approach to elaborating and delivering ECCD training has thrived and gained nation-wide attention as an accessible, effective way to increase the capacity of First Nations communities to staff programs for children and families with their own community members.

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.

The Generative Curriculum Model as the approach came to be called, represents a radical departure from the established and familiar paths of modernist post-secondary education in North America which promote knowledge transmission and prescribed practices based on assumptions of their universal validity and desirability. Formative evaluation studies of this new approach have shown that it has immediate positive impacts on student achievement, self-esteem, care-giving, and development of programs for children, as well as unanticipated, far-reaching impacts on community capacity, empowerment, and revitalization of cultural and social structures. The success of this partnership approach has meant stepping outside of expected and typical institutional relationships to **identify** a common ground of caring, respect, flexibility, and an orientation towards action **from** which co-construction of curricula and collaboration in program delivery can flow.

This chapter highlights some features of the processes **that** shape this First Nations/ University partnership approach, and draws attention to some broader implications of this departure from the mainstream for reconceptualizing ‘cultural sensitivity’ and ‘quality’ in ECCD training and services. After seven pilot partnership projects with First Nations tribal organizations, we have become convinced that the popular demand for programs 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 culturally 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.

By describing the Generative Curriculum Model of training through partnerships, we are not advocating wholesale adoption of a new 'best practice.' Rather, we hope to encourage and support the elaboration and extension of an "alternative discourse" to the largely exclusionary, western, modernist agenda of ECCD that seeks to identify singular 'best practices' rather than a more differentiated appreciation of many 'good and appropriate practices' in varying contexts. The Generative Curriculum Model is an exploration of the post-modern as it applies to a tertiary level, ECCD training program. 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 forebearers. Starting with the training of ECCD practitioners, rather than with programs 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, 1993). 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 which 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 to 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. Our pilot partnerships demonstrate that the dialogue of what constitutes effective and desirable approaches to child care and other work with children, families and communities can fruitfully become part of a broadly inclusive discourse within and among individuals, community groups, and institutions, and should not be limited to academia and credentialing bodies, thereby reinforcing the division between ‘expert’ and ‘other.’

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 extendedfamily **system; to promote** the healthy growth and development of our children and to develop community based programs conducive to the realization of these goals ” (p. 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 (Recommendation 39). The need for child care 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 'Generative Curriculum Model' involves communities in mutual learning, sharing of skills, and collaborative construction of concepts and curricula needed to initiate new programs that foster the well-being of children and families within their communities. By supporting the skills and processes required for effective, community-supportive and community-involving practices, the Generative Curriculum Model has had demonstrated impacts on community commitment, confidence, and capacity to improve conditions for children and families.

Theories and methods of ECCD offered by most universities and colleges in North America are predominantly grounded in largely Euro-North American developmental theory and research. First Nations people are increasingly vocal about the many aspects of mainstream programs that they see as not transferrable or perhaps simply not desirable within their cultural value systems and circumstances (Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood-Church, & Opekokew, 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 homogeneic picture belies the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal societies.

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

Regardless of who asks the question “what of us is in here?“, modernist education is focused on what learners are presumed to lack, rather than what they bring to the enterprise (‘what of me is in here?’). The intent of modernism, be it in ECCD training and service delivery, or in other educational enterprises, is the transmission of pre-established ideas and of knowledge that is presumed to be immutable and of universal significance, as well as the prescription of parameters permitted to guide the creation of “new knowledge” and the establishment of new ‘best practices.’ Operating from a position of disregard for either individual or group voices and experiences, modernist education is a powerful vehicle for shaping u&dimensional rather than multi-dimensional understandings of the world. Yet singular notions of ‘truth’ and ‘the best’ are inadequate for understanding a world of multiple, reciprocally influencing causes and effects rooted in an infinite array of historical and cultural specificities (Lather, **199 1**).

When the Meadow Lake Tribal Council proposed the first partnership, they sought an innovative ECCD training program 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 program 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 & 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 pre-determined. Yet, reflecting on the evolution of the Generative Curriculum Model, what was perhaps most critical was an acceptance of the powerful potential of not knowing • of 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 upon a set of general principles that can serve as navigation points in uncharted waters.

- (1) Support and reinforcement for community initiative in a community-based setting;
- (2) Maintenance of **bi/multi-cultural** respect;
- (3) Identification of community and individual strengths as the basis for initiatives;
- (4) Ensuring a broad ecological perspective and awareness of the child as part of families and community;
- (5) Provision of education and career laddering for students such that credit for this course work will be fully applicable to future study and practice;
- (6) 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 a position that multiple “truths” must be respectfully represented in this program 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 program 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 Generative Curriculum Model 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 Generative Curriculum Model 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 program 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 program 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 the 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, p. 144). The principles of respect and voice that guide the work of the partnership within a caring, supportive and inclusive educational environment approximates Benhabib’s “conditions of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 105).

A basic assumption of the Generative Curriculum Model, consistent with recent critiques of developmental psychology by Burman (1994), Cole (1996), and Nsamenang (1992), is that there are no empirical or logical bases to assume the validity of theories and research findings about child development across cultures, socio-political 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” (p. 9). A growing number of leaders in ECCD in various countries have argued that the objectives and methods of child care embody and reproduce or change the culture in which children and caregivers live and work (Bernhard; 1995; Pence & McCallum, 1994; Lubeck & Post, in press; Penn, 1997; Woodhead, 1996). Hence, there may be significantly different, equally useful and valued ways of encouraging and responding to children across diverse communities and cultural groups. Pence & Moss (1996) have argued that definition of ‘quality’ must be arrived at through an inclusionary process.

Although students in a training program using a Generative Curriculum Model 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 post-modernist educators and psychologists (e.g., Green, 1993; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Lubeck, 1996, 1998; Scheff & Gayle, 1995), 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 program, rather than necessarily to adopt ‘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 construct of ‘distributed knowledge’ elaborated by Lubeck & Post (in press), students in the training program, 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 program 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 Generative Curriculum Model celebrates variation. As Kofi Marfo remarked when asked to critically review the program 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 ” (1993).

The Generative Curriculum Model focuses on building an ‘open’ curriculum that sits ‘between’ the two cultures, allowing both the message and the medium from each to enter the training process. One community-based instructor of the program 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 GCM as “*two sides of an eagle feather,*” pointing out that “*both are needed to fly.*”

As a partner, the University of Victoria brings to the training program a representative sample of theory, research, and practical approaches to ECCD from the largely middle-class, **Euro-North** American mainstream. A community-based instructor of the program involving a partnership with the Treaty 8 Tribal Council in northern British Columbia remarked: “*The course material really supports the instructor by giving ideas to explore and suggestions of activities and resources. But it’s also flexible enough to allow us to adapt it to the needs of this particular group of students and the communities and cultures they are part of*”

As a partner, 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 program pointedly remarked: “*We can consider what mainstream*

theories say and if we chose to believe them and use them in our work, that doesn't make us less Indian. And if we chose 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 child care have surfaced or been created, some of which build on each other, stimulating additional changes and new directions throughout the generative curriculum process. Thus, there is a synchronous, mutually stimulating co-occurrence of learning, developing and teaching the curriculum, and formulating culturally resonant programs for children and families in the community where students are likely to live and work. Greater understanding of the potential 'fit' and utility of alternative constructions comes in **part** from an appreciation of the different contexts from which different concepts, 'findings', and child care models emerge as well as greater sensitivity to the history, sociopolitical positioning, conditions, and evolving goals of the communities in which trained ECCD practitioners are likely to work. It is the process, the recursive consideration of these different views, the seeking out of what Friere (1997, p. 192) would call "new knowledge", that represents the heart of Generative Curriculum Model. 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 Generative Curriculum Model 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 programs 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, 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 & McCallum, 1994). In the words of one student in the partnership program 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 culture's 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 program at Mount Currie noted that: *"Our weekly meetings with students helps 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 program 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 inter-generational relationships • between Elders and students, and between Elders and young children • have been consistently reported in the communities where this program has been delivered (Riggan & Kemble, 1994). A student in the program 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 program 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 program delivery. Hearing diverse voices and views **from** Elders, other community members, instructors, classmates, and texts, the students in the program become more fully aware of their own voices, their own views and how these relate to the views of others. 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. Thus, like **Rogoff**'s description of a "community of learners", in the GCM process, 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 we're 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 in the School of Child and Youth Care 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 program using the Generative Curriculum Model 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 the Generative Curriculum Model is a process that is deeply contextual, valuing variable understandings emerging from community, rather than laid on it, in no two partnerships has the program delivery or the curriculum generated looked exactly the same.

What has emerged from the partnership pilot projects is an approach to generating ECCD curricula that project team members have referred to as ‘Community and Culturally Appropriate Practice’ (CAP²) - an approach that truly embodies the values, choices, and goals that a community has for caring for its children. As one of the program 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 & 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 program 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 program 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 program (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, that unless there is a healthy community environment there cannot be healthy community members, and that traditional values and ceremonies have a rightful place in the modern world. " (Jette, 1993, pp. 58, 59).

Evidence of the far-reaching, unanticipated positive impacts on individuals and community social structures, such as the role and functions of Elders, has shown us that the collaborative development and delivery of ECCD curricula is simultaneously a community development initiative. Because the latent and manifest strengths of the community are reinforced and utilized centrally in conceptualizing and delivering the training program, the circumstances of life enjoyed by children in the communities are enhanced.

Definitive evidence of the processes and impacts of this unique approach to ECCD training will be gathered in a comprehensive program evaluation now underway. Nevertheless, early successes with the GCM strongly suggest that the means exist to make training programs and resultant child care services the very embodiment of culture and to create inexorable links between training, services, and the community of which these are a part by interweaving all of these elements in a cohorts-driven, community-based, generative curriculum approach to training.

Our explorations of the Generative Curriculum Model 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

programs, 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 programs are conceived, and how optimal developmental outcomes are defined, to let communities co-construct programs 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, Vem Bachiu, put it: *“What we are trying to do is turn the world upside down.”*

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