

Through the looking glass

Cross-cultural early childhood education



The following article is an excerpt from a presentation delivered at an international early childhood education (ECE) conference held in Hawaii in 1999. Alan Pence's presentation at the conference focused on ECE partnerships with Aboriginal peoples in Canada throughout the 1990s. He likened his learning through those partnerships to a 'through the looking glass' experience.

The particular 'mirror' I stepped through to end up on 'this side of the looking glass' is cross-cultural early childhood care and development (ECCD). And more specifically, it was through an invitation by a Tribal Council in north-central Canada to work with it on developing a community and culturally appropriate training program for its people on-reserve, that the door—or the 'looking glass'—to this other world appeared.

Anyone familiar with Canada will realise that it is a long way—more than 1500 kilometres—from Victoria (where I live on the west coast) to northern Saskatchewan (where this Tribal Council is located).

So why did the Executive Director of the Tribal Council want to meet with me at the University of Victoria? I discovered that they had gone to educational institutions closer to northern Saskatchewan, but were not satisfied with what these institutions could provide for them.

In essence, the Tribal Council was told, time and time again: 'Here is our curriculum, we would be happy to deliver it for you ...'

However, closer examination would reveal that it had simply been presented with the institution's basic ECE program, with a few 'add-ons': '... bits of Mohawk, Haida, and other tribal groups ...' Unfortunately, the add-ons were completely unrelated to the Tribal Council!

When Ray Ahenakew, Executive Director of the Council, contacted me, I told him we didn't have an Aboriginal program, and, in fact, we didn't even have a history of working with First Nations people. But I did have an interest in being supportive.

So my involvement began and, as I talked to the people at Meadow Lake Tribal Council over the next couple of years, I realised they had rejected other partners because the standard curriculum did not leave any room for them. In essence, the Council's question to the institutions was: 'What of us is in this curriculum?' And the truthful answer was: 'Nothing'.

Most curriculums do not reflect, embody or include the people they address—nor the beliefs they hold

And that is true of most curriculums, which often do not reflect, embody or include the people they address—nor the beliefs they hold. The end point, as well as the journey, is typically pre-determined. Indeed, Ralph Tyler's still influential curriculum development prescription from 1949 is decidedly 'one way' in its conceptualisation: from teacher to learners. Most curriculums are still 'one-way'. It is not about dialogue; it is about dictation.

Meadow Lake did not want this—they sought a 'fair exchange' of information, and a level playing field of respect. They did not want to be *the* voice, but *a* voice in the dialogues and discussions that would ultimately impact on their children, and their children's children.

While I was very aware of the 'cultural penetration' issue, I had not really thought much, at that time, about how ECE training helps to perpetuate a power imbalance and facilitate such penetration. After all, aren't we just promoting 'best practice' and 'appropriate practice'? Had my own research not contributed to the identification of factors associated with 'quality' care? How 'different' could quality be?

It was about that same time that a different First Nations program we were working with used the Harms-Clifford

ECERS scale to assess their program quality. They had used the measures some months before they had a major meeting about the 'aboriginal appropriateness' of their program. Following the meeting, and weeks after the changes, the scale was used again to assess the program, and the scores were lower!

I was intrigued by this change, for I felt the discussions they had undertaken had deepened their commitment to and understanding of the program and the community. I believe the changes had to do with creating, in their eyes, a less 'cluttered' and a less 'busy' environment. I began to think more actively that perhaps quality is different?

Western 'best practices' in religion, in schooling, and in social services had all but destroyed them as a people

Some members of the community wondered if they would be able to survive the West's 'best practices' in early childhood care and education, on top of everything else they had endured. Indeed, Western 'best practices' in religion, in schooling, and in social services had all but destroyed them as a people.

The Council's history of working with the dominant white society could graphically be understood as one culture ensnared in and being absorbed by the other. What they wanted was a respectful relationship between each culture, and an approach to post-secondary early childhood education that enabled both to exist and both to be heard.

If this curriculum were to be supportive of community and culture, then the voices of that community and culture must be brought into the curriculum—not via Western intermediaries, like myself, but by those the community respected as having the appropriate knowledge. The model that evolved was not about 'either/or', or 'best/second-best'. It is about 'both/and'. It is about using the space between the two cultures, the two communities, as a place to meet, to hear, to debate, to engage. It is about learning from and hearing from each other.

As this work evolved, I came to call it the 'generative curriculum model': a model of education that emphasises process and inclusion. A place where new ideas and new perspectives are generated through respectful interaction. The generative curriculum model is not post-secondary education as most early childhood education students have experienced it. It forces one to think about one's actions, both as the instructor and the instructed.

Students and instructors were seeing things differently through using this approach

I also observed that it was not just our students and instructors who were seeing things differently through using this approach—it was also those who came in from the community to share their ideas and perspectives. In many

cases, it was the Elders who were the teachers from the community.

Towards the end of our first partnership in 1993, the Tribal Council asked an Elder, from a different tribal group but familiar with Meadow Lake, to do an evaluation. Her words, and the words of those she interviewed, changed my understanding of what our different approach was all about.

The involvement of the Elders in the Indian Child Care Program and subsequently into all community events and undertakings has led to a revitalisation of cultural pride and traditional values ... Unless there is a healthy community environment, there cannot be healthy community members (Debbie Jette).

There is much more talk in the communities 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 (Marie McCallum).

Up to that point I had understood our work as curriculum development. From then on, with the six other tribal groups we have worked with, I have understood it as a form of community development, that employs early childhood education as a tool for that development. It is an example of what can happen when we step outside the box, when we adopt an indeterminate position of 'not knowing', and when we truly listen to and engage with the voices of others.

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