

From the Inside Out

A Profile of Mount Currie First Nation Aboriginal Child and Youth Care Program

by Jessica Ball, Christine Leo and Martina Pierre

In 1997, the Chief and Band Council of Mount Currie First Nation, located in the coastal mountains northeast of Vancouver, shared their ideas for setting up an ECE training program with roots in First Nations culture and traditions with the First Nations Partnership Programs (FNPP). The stated goal was to prepare early childhood educators to staff a new child care centre that was to be housed in a multiplex then under construction. The Band Council was



Program graduate and her family.

committed to an educational process that a program administrator aptly described as community development "from the inside out":

We need our own community members to be leaders in the changes to come here. And when we get our daycare up and running, we need them to be staffing that service. We can't rely on outsiders to come in here. They won't know how to approach our families, what some of the things are that parents are facing. They won't know our elders and what the elders want to have happen here. And that's why we need this training program. So that we can do it ourselves, and we can do it our own way.

As it turned out, the Band Council was able to recruit three qualified training instructors from the five Stl'atl'imx communities they represented: Martina Pierre, the director of the local cultural centre; Felicity Nelson, an experienced teacher and counsellor in the independent school on the reserve; and Jeanette Joe, the head preschool teacher in the community and an early childhood specialist. Fifteen women enrolled in the FNPP program. Fourteen students were Stl'atl'imx people, whose traditional language is Lil'wat. One student was non-native whose partner was a member of Mount Currie First Nation.

All of the women identified specific vocational goals involving services to children. Anticipating the opening of a new child care centre in their community, most hoped that successful program completion would lead to their employment as staff at the centre. A few women wanted to work with children as teacher assistants and after-school care providers at the independent, band-operated school on the reserve. One woman's goal was to become a speech therapist, and another's was to work with children with special needs. Both students were motivated by the challenges they faced in parenting their own children with special needs.



Fostering pride in a First Nations identity.

Nearly all of the women cared for their own or others' children at home, and hoped that the program would increase their confidence and skills in dealing with the specific issues they faced in their parenting or guardianship roles. As they learned more about the program, they became excited about the potential to learn more about Lil'wat approaches to child care

and how they could incorporate these into both their professional practice and their family lives. All the students were very clear that they could not have pursued post-secondary ECE training if they had to leave their community, where they held important child care roles and necessary social supports.

For nearly two years, FNPP worked in collaboration with the Band Council, these instructors, community elders and other local resource people to create new ways of teaching and learning. Martina Pierre used her training in linguistics to help students uncover the cultural roots of child development concepts conveyed in the traditional Lil'wat language. Elders and other community resource people met weekly with program participants to discuss and model traditional customs, language and values related to children's stages of development. At the same time, instructors and students examined child development theories and curriculum approaches taught in mainstream ECE training programs. A student describes "having the best of both worlds.

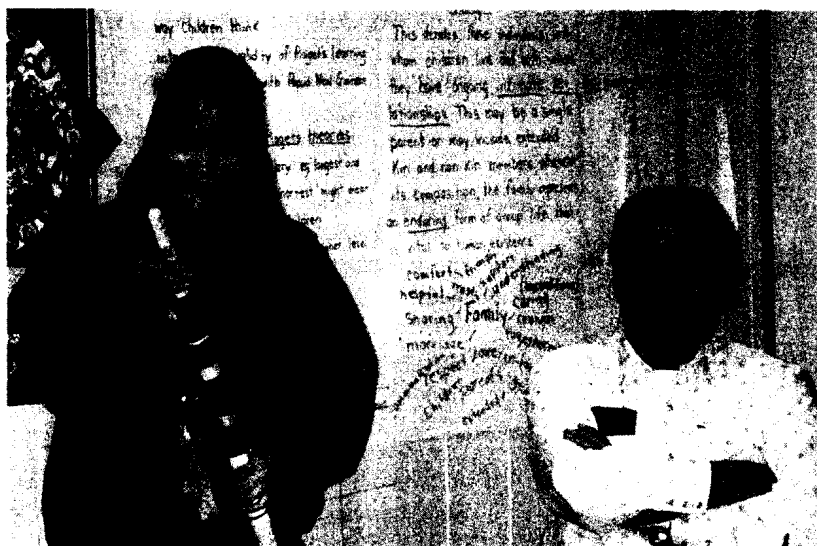


Children at the grand opening of the community centre. Pqusnalcw.

We love to learn about what researchers have found out about child development and such from our textbooks, and we love to learn more about our own culture and how we can use it to help the children of our community."

This participatory approach generated an ECE training program built around the culture of the Stl'atl'imx people and the daily lives of children and families in Mount Currie First Nation. The program strengthened the well-being of families by providing quality child care, bringing new jobs to the community and offering an education career ladder for a B.A. in Child and Youth Care. Drawing upon their experiences of teaching and learning within the program, participants also identified both personal and community changes.

New intergenerational relationships were forged. The dialogue that began in the classroom between the elders and program participants renewed respect in the community for the cultural knowledge and heritage preserved in the wisdom of elders, and generated pride in their



A student discusses her "talking stick" project in class.

First Nations identity. A student in the program summarized her experience: "This program is unique in giving me the chance to learn from my elders what I need to know about who I am and my culture's ways of being with children. I couldn't learn this from any textbook, and I couldn't reach out to the children in my community... without knowing what the elders can teach me."

For Martina Pierre, the training program responded to the community's goal of "reclaiming our heritage, our cultural traditions, rituals and ceremonies." She added that students "wanted this experience, so that as caregivers they will be more balanced in their lives, in their own self-concept and identity." Reclaiming a cultural heritage was especially significant for the generation of Mount Currie band members who had been taken away from their communities and confined at residential schools, where their own languages and cultural practices were banned, even punished. Martina Pierre explains: "When we began as new instructors, we began to rediscover ourselves. We looked at the things that were missing in our lives and said, 'This is what we want for our children.' So this program was very important."

A multiplex opened on the Mount Currie First Nation reserve on May 7, 1999, known in the Lil'wat language as *Pqusnalcw*, meaning Eagle's Nest. It houses the Mount Currie Health Centre and a 32-space child care centre. The day before the official opening, the gymnasium reverberated with the timbres of drums of all sizes and shapes as the 15 students who had completed the community-based, university-accredited program were honoured by Mount Currie First Nation. It was a day of ceremony and celebration, bridging the old and the new ways of the Stl'atl'imx people. For the



Circle time: "the best of both worlds"

children and families of Mount Currie, it was a new beginning — from the inside out. ♦ © CCCF 2001

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Martina Pierre, a member of Mount Currie First Nation, has a Masters in Education and was the lead instructor and intergenerational facilitator in the First Nations Partnership Program at Mount Currie. She is director of the Mount Currie First Nation Cultural Centre.