

Facing Our Challenges *Community, Commitment, and Change*

by D. Lark Gamey, Kathy Jenson, and
Julyda Lagimodiere

Cet article discute du développement des programmes d'accès qui existent à Thompson au Manitoba. Ces programmes ont été établis afin de fournir un soutien académique, personnel

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et financier - des garderies, par exemple - aux personnes qui normalement n'auraient pas la chance d'avoir accès à une éducation post-secondaire.

We came together as concerned educators to reduce student attrition rates by addressing the child care needs of post-secondary students. It was our belief that adult students would be more able to concentrate on their studies if child care was readily available, and culturally appropriate. This was our initial challenge.

We approached this experience with a linear view common to most educational institutions; that the realization of our goal would come from each individual's commitment to the task. Along the way to our goal, however, a series of challenges altered our concept of how people gather together to create change.

Conventional hierarchical board structures did not work for us. Task accomplishment did not come from the assignment of roles or division of power typical of most boards. It came from giving voice to our differences, and accepting a fluid leadership directed by the requirements of each situation faced.

We began as representatives of post-secondary Access Programs located in Thompson, Manitoba. Although each program offered a different career direction, their intent was to develop northern human resources. The original focus of this development was the structuring of opportunities for success by providing academic, personal, and financial supports to people who traditionally had been unable to access post-secondary education. Although changes have taken place in the career options and program resources available, the student population and their needs have remained primarily the same. Factors like social, economic, and cultural differences, lack of academic preparedness, and relocation from remote areas all

contribute to a needs profile that interferes with entry into, and success in post-secondary education.

Access Programs were designed to address those needs. The various kinds of supports provided within the programs could not duplicate resources available in the community or through other government structures. Unfortunately, the resources which existed, in particular child care, were not always able to meet student, and program needs. The idea to create a more culturally appropriate and readily accessible day care arose out of this context.

The Access student population is primarily Aboriginal. The majority of Access students who relocate to Thompson leave behind a sense of community as well as an extended family that supports, protects, and cares for one another. Relocation to a new environment means more than leaving a place; it is also a loss of connections. This translates into a loss of freedom that comes from the support those connections provide, and the comfort of shared values and beliefs. For students with children, this loss is significant. Students are faced with the challenge of finding alternate support systems that respect their cultural identity while offering protection and care for their children.

Although Euro-Canadians form a minority of our student body, their cultural orientation tends to dominate the system. Day care policies and regulations reflect this culture's values, beliefs, and behavioral maps, making it difficult to offer programming that is culturally sensitive to the majority of our students.

The day care we hoped to create needed to more accurately reflect an Aboriginal perspective and affirm the heritage of Aboriginal children and their families. But we also wanted all our students using the day care to be comfortable.

Children learn from their parents, caregivers, and early teachers how to behave in culturally distinct ways. Consciously or not, we work to make the children we care for, and teach into the kind of people who fit our culture. It is vital that this process reach the level of awareness. (Gonzalez-Mena xi)


As this goal was being defined, we approached the challenge in a conventional fashion. Roles and tasks were assigned to individuals and committees. Board structure included a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and several committees. This division of labour, common to hierarchical systems, was familiar to us. We held the belief that work could be subdivided easily, and that this method of task accomplishment was both efficient and effective.

To ensure all views were represented, a wide base of

individuals were invited to participate on the board. Students, post-secondary program staff, community service providers, and resource people with expertise pertinent to project development and day care delivery responded. A concept paper was written, and a proposal was submitted to obtain funding. Appropriate space was identified and plans for renovations were detailed. Our initial name, Ma-Mow-Opi-Ki-Wak/Growing Together Child Care Centre Co-op Inc., spoke of our intent to create a culturally sensitive day care centre that would encourage children to grow together in harmony.

Things started to go wrong. Work did not get done in

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time. The commitment for space was withdrawn. A reorganization to part of the post-secondary delivery structure brought new stakeholders. Board members were lost, people moved away from the community, and others were placed in conflict of interest due to the restructuring. A quorum was impossible; therefore, we were forced to dissolve. A new board complete with another name was required.

The remaining board members felt overwhelmed. There was confusion and lack of clarity concerning the work to be done. Unsure of our roles, we had reached a stalemate. It seemed our positions did not fit within the hierarchy.

When we were working in separate committees, we were unaware of how vital our differences were to the formation of the whole. Our task was not meant to be divided; it needed to evolve from our differences.

Knowing it was important to get beyond the inertia, we asked, "What can we do to support one another, and regain momentum?" At first, we helped the others do their task. In the doing, we became conscious that the task did not belong to just one person. When we worked together and listened to our differences, we began to hear and see concepts we could not see alone. Our perspective began to change.

The absence of a hierarchical structure and predefined roles worked to our advantage. There was a greater sense of alignment with what we were trying to achieve for the day care. The definition of the task was growing out of the community we were developing together. Each person's input in communion with the others was integral to defining the shape, texture, and flavour of our task.

We went beyond the focus of the task to include a focus on the person. Sharing experiences was creating our community, and helping us discover our balance. We needed to trust our judgment. The task was important,

but our personal relationships with each other were becoming just as important.

The demands and obligations of job, family, and community were balanced simultaneously with the tasks involved in the realization of our day care. When frustration, anger, and confusion interfered with the task at hand they were acknowledged and accepted as natural reactions. These feelings are the beginnings of our collective voice. Giving recognition to the feelings and accommodating the demands of outside responsibilities freed us to move forward. The result was empowering!

By sharing our personal feelings, thoughts, and struggles, we became conscious of our cultural differences. To learn about each other was to learn about ourselves. Gonzalez-Mena states that, "the way you find out about your own system is by contrasting it to other systems. You can find these contrasts when real-life situations trigger a reaction in you" (82-83). We were reacting.

At various points, each of us asked ourselves, "why does this bother me? What's my discomfort with this?" We would have ignored our discomfort, except for our commitment to hear and learn from the differences. Someone in the group would encourage us to explore these feelings.

By using our differences to define and accomplish the task, we evolved from individual independent interactions prescribed by a role to dynamic interdependent transactions defined by the needs of the situation and those involved. We were discovering that change happens when people are just as committed to one another as they are to getting the task done. The concept of community became clearer. From community comes commitment and commitment builds community.

Our structure had flattened out. There were no predefined roles with neat beginnings and clear endings that we could remove ourselves from. Individual accomplishments were difficult to measure. At times, it was frustrating not knowing what roles to play or how to measure our contribution. Frequently, this left us feeling that individually we were not doing our part.

I left the [day care] meeting with a splitting headache. What don't I like?—the lack of concrete info, the agenda that wanders from pillar to post, and back again. What role do I play—what do I offer... what have I contributed? I feel like I'm just using up valuable time without contributing. (Board Member, personal communication, April 13, 1993)

But it was difficult to quit. We were encouraged to stay. The presence of each person was important to provide balance.

Achieving consensus was important to decision making. Differences needed to be understood to ensure they were represented. Learning not to act until we had explored our discomforts and our hesitations made decision making slow. If we chose to act expediently we often had to retrace our steps.

None of us were willing to accept the position of leader. Initially, each person had reasons for their resistance. Later we realized that a single leader could not take us where we needed to go. Leadership was not a position that belonged to any one person; it arose out of the needs of the situation, and the knowledge, and skills required. When the focus was on understanding the difference, the person expressing that difference provided the leadership. Leadership flowed from one to the other as each person's unique perspective and distinct contribution moved the task forward.

There were no existing day care models that addressed the needs of our student population. Focusing on our intent to create a readily available, culturally sensitive child care resource that would appropriately encourage all northern children to grow together in understanding and harmony helped us move away from frames of reference and cognitive maps developed for other situations. Covey states that, "we often don't know what the terrain ahead will be like or what we will need to go through it: much will depend on our judgment at the time" (101). Giving voice to our differences and accepting a fluid leadership helped us become familiar with our terrain. Individually, we were culturally different, as a group we needed to learn to use our differences to accomplish our task. Through our relationships with one another we learned that we could work toward a common destination without surrendering our differences.

The day care, Keewatinowi Awasisak Opikiwak Inc., opened in April 1993. Each of us entered this project prepared to commit to a role, do our job, and leave. As we came together to meet the challenge, and create change, we were challenged to change ourselves. We gave up linear frames of reference that did not move us forward. New dimensions were added to our relationships. Challenge requires change yet changing is a challenge. From community comes commitment while commitment builds community. They work together each balancing, each shaping the other, and no one had to compromise her position to hear someone else.

D. Lark Gamey is the Centre Coordinator of Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP) in Thompson. Kathy Jenson is the Director the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Social Work at Thompson. Julyda Lagimodiere is the Student Support Counsellor at Keewatin Community College.

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Home Day Care in Nunavik

Kuujjuuaq—The Pairitsivik of Nunavik Home Day Care Agency project was first started in 1988 with the support of Kativik Regional Government. This project in Kuujjuuaq is a complement to the child care offered to the Nunavik Region. The agency wants to offer Home Day Care mainly for children aged 0 to 12 years, to the smaller communities that do not have any project going on child care.

So far we have chosen a provisional Board of Directors made up of volunteers interested in this undertaking. We expect after one year of operation to have an official Board of Directors consisting of members from the Nunavik region who would represent the concerns of their communities. The agency is in the process of incorporating and we expect to officially begin operations in the fall of September 1994. As for the name, the Board of Directors has decided to keep the name of Pairitsivik of Nunavik, which was the original chosen name when the project was first started in 1988. The logo was illustrated by Sammy Kudluk.

All documents that have to be submitted to obtain the official permit and funding have been sent to the Office des services de garde à l'enfance (OSGE) in Montreal. We will start with 50 spaces which, for now, will be sufficient with four communities. If the project continues to meet standard and adhere to the regulations, we will be allocated more spaces to expand to the other communities.

During the month of May and June 1994, we have been conducting interviews on interested applicants to be Home Day Care providers in the selected communities. The accredited providers were given the basic general training in the month of September 1994, we expect the official operation of the Agency this fall 1994. So the main forecast of the Agency is the day to day operation and the financial aspect.

For the first year of operation we must adapt to this new service by working together. It is another way of having a quality child care in the Nunavik region. If anyone has any questions, comment or needs information concerning Home Day Care, you can contact me at Kativik Regional Government office or call (819) 964-2620. If I can be of any help, I will be glad to do so.

Daisy N. Saunder
Project Coordinator Trainee
Pairitsivik of Nunavik Home Day Care Agency.

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