



**Evaluation of the Indigenous Early Childhood  
Development Training Program**

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All of the Indigenous students who dedicated their time and energy to lifting the spirits of the community, through their studies in Early Childhood Education.

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## 1. Introduction

Although there are many Indigenous programs and services offered at Canadian colleges and institutes, the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples persists (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005, Wotherspoon, 2008). Some of the obstacles that hinder Indigenous learners' participation in post-secondary education include: historical barriers due to the residential school system in Canada and the assimilation education policies of the federal government (Greenwood, Leeuw 2007); social barriers, such as family responsibilities, lack of role models, social discrimination, unemployment and poverty; as well as cultural barriers due to differences in traditions, values and learning styles that are not typically reflected in post-secondary institutions. These are compounded by the detrimental personal barriers faced by Indigenous students who are often coping with low self-esteem, poor health, low motivation, and frustration (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005).

In order to address these issues, Mothercraft and Native Child and Family Services of Toronto collaboratively developed and implemented an Indigenous-focused, three-phase Early Childhood Development training program in the community of Gabriel Dumont, an 87-unit Indigenous housing complex located in Toronto's east end which offers subsidized housing to Indigenous persons. The program's first phase, which was completed in June 2007, enabled participants from the community to receive a certificate after completing a 12-session course in Home Based Child Care. The second phase, completed in April 2008, provided training in the Early Childhood Education Assistant (ECEA) certificate program with an Indigenous-focused curriculum. The final phase, which was completed in June 2009, was the completion of an Early Childhood Education (ECE) Diploma for participants. All three phases of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program were funded by Miziwe Biik, an employment and training program assisting Indigenous men and women in preparing for and entering the work force.

Throughout each phase, the program combined academic study with holistic Indigenous healing to allow participants to build strength in their spirits as Indigenous men and women, which is often described as the key to success for Indigenous learners (Antone, 2003; Bowman, 2003; Ball & Pence, 2001). This format allowed participants to heal from considerable academic failure and the psychosocial issues that accompany low education levels (Ball & Simpkins 2004). In addition, the program offered participants the opportunity to feel accomplishment and pride in modeling a healthy lifestyle to their children and families. This type of behaviour is viewed to be crucial in fostering the positive development of future generations within the Indigenous community (St. Denis, 2007; Fearn, 2006). The program's holistic training approach centred on the teachings of the medicine wheel and addressed the mental health needs of the entire family, while allowing each participant the opportunity for success.

The following report describes and evaluates the three phases of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program. A review of current literature pertaining to Indigenous learning and participation is provided, along with a profile of similar Indigenous programs currently offered in Canada. The evaluation also provides an Indigenous framework and tools for conducting evaluations of other Indigenous

programs. The findings outlined in this evaluation will be used to inform ongoing work, including further refinement of the holistic training approach, and will contribute to the overall successes of the project in the future.

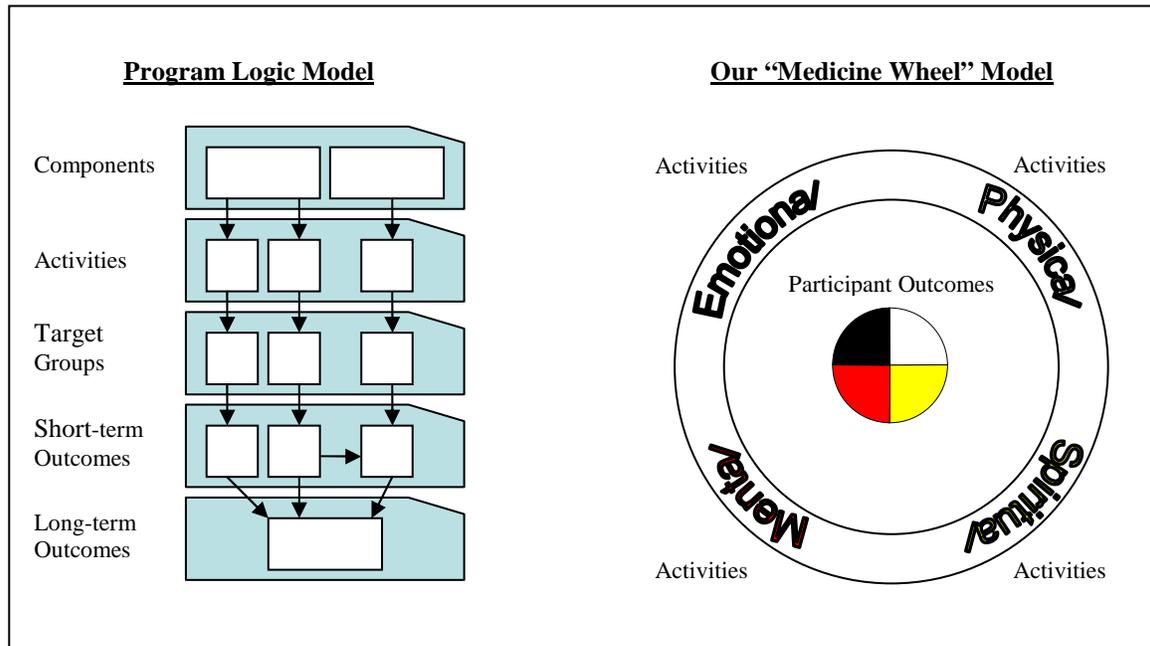
## 2. Method of Evaluation

In the past, Indigenous social research and evaluation has generally been a one-directional examination by non-Indigenous researchers of Indigenous children, individuals or communities (Ball, 2005; St. Denis, 2007). Moreover, the Indigenous community has been viewed as the subject rather than partner. This approach to research has typically included minimal consultation with the Indigenous community and has in turn left them with little to no control over research methods or processes (Ball, 2005). Subsequent suspicion from the Indigenous community with respect to motivations of non-Indigenous researchers is now changing the environment in which Indigenous research is being conducted. As Ball (2005, 81) noted “nothing about us without us expresses the principle of participation around which considerations of ethics in research involving [Indigenous] people in Canada now pivot.”

A growing body of literature exists regarding the ethics and methods of conducting research and evaluation involving Indigenous Peoples and communities. For example, Ball (2005) provided key learning points derived from recent scholarly debate and experiences conducting research in Indigenous communities in British Columbia. Her work suggests ethical and research guidelines that may be used to help promote a two-way process of mutual learning and sharing. Castellano (2004) similarly proposed a set of principles to assist in the development of ethical codes for conducting research in and with Indigenous communities and organizations. In addition, Indigenous communities and organizations are developing and advancing new ethics in research, in which terms such as “respect”, “inclusion”, “participation” and “partnership” are prevalent (Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics, 2003; University of Victoria, 2003; Policy Research Unit, 2003; First Nations Centre, 2007). The majority of this emerging research stresses the need to acknowledge Indigenous values and ownership in research design and to use open, direct and transparent methods. “Research must respect the privacy, protocols, dignity and individual and collective rights of [the Indigenous Peoples]” (First Nations Centre, 2007, 5).

The goal of this evaluation was to develop and use methods that are culturally appropriate and respectful of the Indigenous community, and their accompanying beliefs and traditional knowledge. As such, this evaluation does not use more traditional “western” models of evaluation such as a program logic model, as this type of framework does not work well in an Indigenous context (Patton, 1997; NAHO, 2007). As illustrated on the left side of **Figure 1**, program logic models are linear, and attempt to isolate program components or domains and show causal direction between them; whereas an Indigenous approach is holistic in nature. The Indigenous model acknowledges that all domains overlap and interact and show no preset direction (i.e. good or harm) but rather view all movement as growth (NAHO, 2007). The right side of **Figure 1** shows the holistic model that is used to describe and explore the relationships between the program’s activities and the outcomes identified by program participants. Moreover, it shows that program

activities (located around the outside of the medicine wheel) can address one or more of the four elements of self: spiritual, mental, emotional and physical.



**Figure 1:** “Western” Model (left) and the Medicine Wheel Model Used by the Evaluation to Describe Program (right)

The evaluations of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program were conducted using the social participatory approach and incorporated learnings from the literature and from other Indigenous evaluation models such as the Waawiyeyaa Evaluation Model<sup>®</sup> (Johnson, 2004). Both of these types of approaches to evaluation and research have been well-received by the Indigenous community (Ball & Pence, 2001; Jackson, 1993; First Nations Centre, 2007). A social participatory approach teaches participants the rudiments of research and evaluation methodology so that they can assume collaborative roles. It engages participants in all aspects of the process, which includes determining evaluation questions, interpreting results, and determining how the results should be used to benefit both themselves and their community (Patton, 1997; Ball, 2004). The Assembly of First Nations also recognized the benefits of a social participatory approach to research to include: providing a receptive environment for collaboration between the Indigenous community and researchers; richer and culturally-appropriate contextual information and more meaningful conclusions through community participation in data interpretation; and greater engagement from participants (2007). Therefore, it was pertinent that this evaluation meet the needs of the participants for it to provide rich and significant feedback. In addition, it was understood that the evaluation approach must respect the principles of Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) as sanctioned by the Assembly of First Nations (2007).

### **3. A Profile of Indigenous Training Programs Currently Offered in Canada**

Numerous training programs exist across Canada intended to support Indigenous people in obtaining employable skills and maintain long-term, sustainable employment, particularly in occupations that are in labour market demand. These programs have used different models or approaches to training and have met with various levels of success within the Indigenous community.

British Columbia provides a number of innovative and successful examples of publicly funded institutions that deliver ECE training specifically for Indigenous communities. The University of Victoria follows a *generative curriculum model* when providing Early Childhood and Youth Care training (Ball, 2005). The guiding principles of this model include drawing from community and individual strengths, ensuring a broad ecological perspective and an awareness of the child in the context of the family and community, providing career support for students, engaging in the construction of a bi-cultural curriculum in which elders and community resource individuals play a key role, and supporting the community initiative in a community-based setting. Initially, course content adopted a spiral structure, in which material was generated through student-instructor interaction and through the contribution of elders. However, it became apparent through feedback and evaluation that the curriculum development focused too narrowly on knowledge creation as an output. As a result, a more circular representation of the training program was adopted, which involved coming together as a generative community (First Nations Partnerships, 2008). This program has the highest level of completion by Indigenous students in Canada. Almost all (95%) returned to their community to work, and most (87%) started new programs in the field or took over existing programs (Indigenous ECD Roundtable, 2004).

A second successful ECE program is offered at the University College of the Caribou. Here, facilitators have attributed their success to the availability of a transition program that eases students back into school (Indigenous ECD Roundtable, 2004). This transition program allows students to upgrade their skills in various areas (i.e. English and computer skills) before beginning the ECE program. A First Nations Advisor is also present at the University, and instructors work with the community to integrate and include Indigenous cultural perspectives. The success rate of students completing this program is also high, with more than three-quarters (76%) graduating, and with several students making the Dean's list (Indigenous ECD Roundtable, 2004).

Satisfaction and success rates are also very high at the Northwest Community College, where an ECE program was piloted in two Indigenous communities using a work-based, mentorship approach. After a survey was completed by participants upon completion of the pilot, some changes were made to curriculum and delivery. Currently, the program is still work-based, as students must be employed, or attached to a child care program where they can volunteer ten to twelve hours of work per week. However, the program is now better suited to the region's geography and demographics as it allows Indigenous students to remain in their communities and continue working. Students also have the option of working during evenings or weekends. Furthermore, instructors provide training in the

workplace, using a curriculum derived from real life experiences and challenges (Indigenous ECD Roundtable, 2004).

Indigenous-specific ECE programs are also offered at the University College of the Fraser Valley. Although it is a relatively new program, the certificate programs have a high retention rate. This may be accounted for by the strong student supports provided by the college. For example, a psychologist is available twice a semester to talk to students about health, wellness and prevention of burnout, and is also available for one-on-one sessions to address personal issues. Elders are also available to provide cultural guidance, and tutors are accessible for students who require extra help with courses (Indigenous ECD Roundtable, 2004).

In partnership with the Vancouver Community College, the Native Education Centre also has an Indigenous-specific program, and hires Indigenous instructors to teach courses. An Elder-in-Residence is also available to teach traditional skills such as music and drumming. In addition to these services, the Centre offers specialized courses on Human Growth Development focusing on history, social issues, residential school, and traditional parenting. Approximately seven to ten students enrol in this program each year, and almost all (99%) complete it (Indigenous ECD Roundtable, 2004).

Ontario provides fewer examples of ECE programs with an Indigenous focus; moreover those that exist show lower completion rates than their counterparts in British Columbia. A number of Ontario colleges offer ECE courses with an Indigenous focus; however few provide ECE programs that are delivered in one, full academic session. The Indigenous ECE programs that do exist are offered by Indigenous Institutes in partnership with Community Colleges. These programs have met with some success; however, success rates in the mainstream are much higher in comparison. For example, the Anishinabek Educational Institute in Ontario offers a native ECE program, which incorporates Indigenous specific components throughout the curriculum and recognizes the uniqueness of the Indigenous culture and language. A Student Services Counsellor is also present to provide ongoing support and encouragement to all students in order to facilitate the retention and successful completion of courses. Furthermore, field practica are offered at the student's place of employment, under the condition that it is in a child care setting. The four semester program involves two 2-week intensive classes that alternate with a five week return to the workplace, where students continue to complete assignments. This enables students to retain their jobs while being trained (Union of Ontario Indians, 2008). The difficulty with this program is that it was originally offered in the community to help Indigenous women working in child care centres to obtain professional training. However, when this initiative was transformed into a college program, it was not as well-received.

Other ECE programs offered in Ontario are based on an Apprenticeship model. For example, the Northern College of Applied Arts and Technology in Ontario offers an Indigenous Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship that lasts three to four years and leads to certification as an Indigenous Early Childhood Educator. In-school training can be delivered in a part-time format, and can also be community-based. Courses on Indigenous culture, customs, and beliefs, Indigenous languages, and Indigenous family and community are also offered. The apprenticeship is based on competencies through

demonstrated skills rather than a fixed number of hours on the job (Northern College of Applied Arts and Technology, 2008).

#### **4. Mothercraft's Foundational Theories**

“Mothercraft values diversity and strives to create an environment that is welcoming and inclusive. At Mothercraft, we are committed to ensuring that all students regardless of their home country receive the best possible early childhood education. In Canada, some Aboriginal peoples, First Nation, Metis and Inuit, have had challenges in achieving success in education due to a myriad of social and economic situations” (Mothercraft, 2009b).

“Mothercraft recognizes the unique placement of Indigenous peoples within our society...and understand[s] the importance of incorporating Indigenous thinking into all aspects of the work we do. ... It is our goal to continuously provide quality programs, services and resources to help create learning opportunities for First Nation, Metis, and Inuit students, as well as people from all other nations. It is only through the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge that we are able to assist in strengthening the Indigenous community, generate greater awareness and create strong hand in hand, eye to eye partnerships with our country's first cultures” (Mothercraft, 2009a).

All programs at Mothercraft are based on four theoretical foundations. The first is Developmental Theory, wherein a child's development is a product of both their inborn qualities and experiences. Second is Attachment theory, which stresses that it is within the emotional relationships between infant and primary caregiver that the young child's cognitive and emotional sense of self and others is developed. Third is Relational Theory which posits that people, institutions and systems grow through relationships with others. Traditional Aboriginal teachings align well with Mothercraft's holistic approach to early childhood development: the focus on each individual child; that each child is a part of a family; and that the family is part of the community (Mothercraft, 2009b).

One last theory used as a guiding theory for this program, although not one of Mothercraft's theoretical foundations is Historical Trauma Theory, characterized by individuals exhibiting a set of behavioural and/or psychological responses formed in reaction to something they or generations before them have endured. This historic trauma creates breakdowns in social functioning so pervasive that its effects can last as long as generations. Descendants of those who have suffered the effects of colonialization, for example, may identify with their ancestors and may emotionally re-experience it in the present. Often times, this can result in perpetuating suffering in their own lives- a result of maladaptive socially learned behavioural patterns. The types of responses to the trauma may vary but can include 'elevated suicide rates, depression, self-destructive behaviour, substance abuse, identification with the pain ancestors endured, fixation to trauma, somatic symptoms, anxiety, guilt, and chronic grief' (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004, 54). With respect to the break down in the social functioning of Indigenous families Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1999, as cited in Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004) describes it as:

With the break-up of the extended family, many indigenous women found they had no role models to teach them parenting skills. As many Native

people were raised in boarding schools, the traditional roles and ways of parenting by both Native men and women were lost. The attitudes and norms, which then sprang up in parenting styles, such as harsh physical punishment, emotional abandonment, lack of parental involvement, and insensitivity to children's needs added to imbalance in the family. As generations continued with these ways of parenting, the trauma was passed down until many believe it has become a cycle of despair and desperation (1999:70).

These five theories will help us better understand and put into context the historical, social, and cultural barriers that may be encountered when working with and developing an Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program. Although there are many Aboriginal programs and services offered at Canadian colleges and institutes, the education gap between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people persists (The Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005). The barriers to Aboriginal learners' participation in post-secondary education include: historical barriers due to the residential school system in Canada and the assimilation education policies of the federal government; social barriers, such as family responsibilities, lack of role models, social discrimination, unemployment and poverty; cultural barriers due to differences in traditions, values and learning styles that are not typically reflected in post-secondary institutions, and; personal barriers faced by Aboriginal students with low self-esteem, poor health, low motivation, and frustration (The Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2005).

In order to address these issues, The Canadian Mothercraft Society and Native Child and Family Services of Toronto collaboratively developed and implemented an Aboriginal-focused, three-phase Early Childhood Development training program in the community of Gabriel Dumont, an 87-unit Aboriginal housing complex located in Toronto's east end which offers subsidized housing to Aboriginal people.

## **5. Phase One: Course in Home Based Child Care**

The first phase of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training program, the 12-session course in Home Based Child Care, took place between April and June 2007 within the community of Gabriel Dumont. Courses were delivered in the parent rooms at the Waabinong Indigenous Head Start location. This provided a comfortable and familiar environment for participants already in attendance. Classes were held from 9:30 am to 11:30 am to ensure that child care was available during training, and nutritional snacks were provided.

Modeled after the University of Victoria's successful training and Indigenous community development work in British Columbia, the training approach recognised the success of a participant to be dependent in part on addressing the mental health needs and wellness of the entire family. The approach allowed students to grow at their own pace and to be given the opportunity to have a voice in the classroom. As previously noted, the completion rate for Indigenous training programs in Ontario is historically low; in contrast, 19 of the 20 students who began the course successfully completed it. These

successes garnered the attention of Minister Mary Anne Chambers from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, who presided over the course graduation in support.

The program's instructors felt the course was successful because participants were interested in investing in their futures. Attending classes each day, participating in group work, and encouraging other students to commit to the program became a daily practice for participants. Participants formed their own classroom contract, whereby they determined the atmosphere of the classroom and the boundaries that were set in their learning environment. On completion of the course, students understood basic early childhood development terminology and were comfortable participating in the interviews for the Early Childhood Education Assistant certificate program (the program's second phase).

## **6. Phase Two: Early Childhood Education Assistant Program**

### **6.1 Introduction**

Students who completed the Home Based Child Care Program (Phase One) were given the opportunity to continue their studies in the second phase of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program which would result in certification as Early Childhood Education Assistants (ECEA). Based out of the Native Child and Family Services 'House of Geshig' location in Scarborough, this phase built upon the basic knowledge and training that had been acquired in the Home Based Child Care Program. The following sections describe the components of the ECEA program and also outline the successes and those areas where improvement may be made in the future.

### **6.2 Description**

The ECEA program was comprised of both academic study and holistic Indigenous healing to allow participants to learn in a culturally appropriate environment. The program's holistic training approach centred on the teachings of the medicine wheel model (as described in section 2) and it incorporated these teachings into all of its activities. Many mornings, for example, classes began with a smudge<sup>1</sup>.

The majority of course directors involved in the program were Indigenous, and those who were not had extensive experience in the community, working with diverse families. Diane Longboat, an Elder from the Indigenous community was also available to provide the students with spiritual guidance throughout their time in the program. In addition,

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<sup>1</sup> Smudging, in which Aboriginal people commonly participate, is the spiritual preparation to create balance. The practice of the smudge involves all elements of the medicine wheel. Preparing the medicines (e.g. tobacco, sweet grass, sage, etc.) allows for the participants' spiritual growth, as each medicine is used for a different spiritual purpose. The act of breaking up the medicines and the smells created from their burning create a physical reaction in participants. The participant's emotional reaction to the smudge can also be very strong, as it allows for clear thoughts and balance in their lives. The smudge allows participants to have clear mental abilities throughout the day, as during the smudge, the prayers often ask for support in the areas of their lives in which they hope to grow. NB: Smudging is an Indigenous ceremony that is respected as an oral tradition. As such, it is not uncommon for this act to be referenced throughout the literature.

Indigenous culture was also incorporated into several aspects of the curriculum. For example, students visited First Nations communities, attended sessions taught by Diane Longboat, and studied Indigenous novels such as *In Search of April Raintree*, and *Keeper 'n Me*.

Based on the teachings of the medicine wheel model, students were provided with books and school supplies on their first day of classes. Lunch was also provided on a daily basis. Originally this meal was prepared by an external party; however, after the participants expressed a desire to take this on themselves, they were given the option to use the budget to make their own meals. As a result, the students took turns making meals for the entire class. The group enjoyed this experience, as it fostered growth in all areas of the Medicine Wheel by increasing self esteem, contributing to physical health and nutrition, and allowing students to work together, and build relationships with one another.

The 18 program participants who took part in the second phase came from marginalized backgrounds and suffered from both the intergenerational effects of residential schools and years of oppression as Indigenous persons. Four individuals left early in the program, before participating in the opening circle, due to personal life circumstances, addiction issues, and mental illness demonstrating some of the symptoms of Historical Trauma Theory. The remaining 14 participants consisted mostly of single mothers with multiple children. Eight of these students graduated from the program, and four continued on to the third phase, the Indigenous focused ECE program at Mothercraft College.

### **6.3 Participant Outcomes**

In order to evaluate the program and measure its successes, the medicine wheel model (as described in Section 2), was used in discussions with program participants to explore the relationships between program activities and participant-identified outcomes. In addition, the model allowed participants to express how they personally defined the successes of the program, outside of whether or not they completed the program. The discussion took place both at the beginning and end of the program, as part of the personal development circle. Weekly talking circles were also implemented, which focused on the teachings of the medicine wheel. These discussions also provided participants with an opportunity to learn about their origins, and to identify future goals.

#### ***Opening Personal Development Circle: Participant Expectations***

The program outcomes are specific to individual participants. Students defined their own outcomes and expectations as to what they believed made the program successful for them. The first *Personal Development Circle* session, which involved a discussion on what participants expected to get out of the program, was held on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The discussion that ensued followed the four directions of the medicine wheel (i.e., their emotional, spiritual, mental and physical expectations).

Notably, during the discussions students identified expectations that involved the “building blocks” of learning, rather than the more direct learning and achievement

outcomes that would be identified using a Western model of evaluation (as described in Section 2). The expectations identified by students included those that would foster a positive and healthy learning environment in which they could study and grow as individuals. The students considered connecting with their classmates as one of the most important elements that they hoped would occur throughout their time in the program. Through the incorporation of Indigenous content, they hoped that the program would help them to deepen their compassion and empathy for one another. As a group, it was indicated that developing friendships and subsequent support systems would also be instrumental in helping them to succeed academically— a sound example of Mothercraft’s Relational and Holistic theories. The students recognized that each one of them played a role in helping their classmates to succeed (i.e. by providing emotional support, as well as by supporting each other in group projects).

The group also expected that the program would allow them to become more aware of and able to identify conflict as well as aide in the resolution of conflict both in their academic and personal lives. Similarly, the students hoped that the program would give them the strength to express any anger that they harboured in healthy ways and they expected the program to be a place where they felt safe expressing these and all other emotions relating to their studies. Overall, the students expected that they would be given the opportunities to learn from each other and share their gifts with the class as a whole.

### ***Closing Circle: Self-Identified Outcomes***

The final Personal Development Circle Session was held on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2008, and involved a discussion of students’ accomplishments and their perceptions about what the program had offered them. This evaluation allowed the facilitators to gage the success of Phase Two more specifically, with respect to how the program met the expectations of the students overall. Similar to the opening circle, this discussion also followed the four directions of the Medicine Wheel.

### ***6.4 Areas of Success: Phase Two***

The majority of the outcomes that the students discussed were consistent with their initial expectations expressed during the opening circle. Moreover, several outcomes were identified that extended beyond these expectations. The strongest theme that emerged from the closing circle discussions with participants was an increased sense of Indigenous self-identity that was cultivated by taking part in the talking circles and discussions that were held each week. This spiritual progression can be viewed as an important stepping stone for improvement and growth in other areas, as it is essential to the development of self-esteem, and self-confidence (Antone, 2003; St. Denis, 2007).

A second salient theme that emerged was improvement in the physical health and well-being of participants. Students enjoyed preparing and having lunch together, and indicated that they learned how to take care of themselves and make healthy choices. Many also expressed their enjoyment when interacting and engaging in physical activities with the children. For example, one student stated that *“the kids kept me going and gave me energy to want to be there.”*

The majority of students also voiced their pride and sense of accomplishment after completing the program, acquiring ECEA certification, and moving towards their goal of becoming a teacher. Interestingly, several students who did not complete the program also returned for the closing *Personal Development Circle* to share their thoughts and contribute to the discussion. They were grateful for the experience and for the relationships that they had built with their classmates, and stated that the program brought them to a safe place. As many facilitators have indicated, this emphasizes that success should not be measured by the number of students continuing in the field, but by the energy that students bring to the program.

Course directors also noticed that students became more open and receptive to others feedback while participating in activities, and that this contrasted their behaviour in the community. Throughout the program, and especially post-internship, students acknowledged that they may be able to positively affect their communities if they were to extend this new behaviour from the classroom and into their personal lives.

### **6.5 Areas for Improvement: Phase Two**

Both students and facilitators indicated that the biggest challenge faced by participants was managing home life and academics. In the closing circle, several students stated that they had difficulty balancing their responsibilities as a parent with their academic responsibilities. They found this process to be mentally, emotionally, and physically challenging and exhausting, and subsequently expressed a need for more support. Many of the students withdrew from the program after the academic portion of the course ended, and internships began. Some students stated that they were more comfortable working at Indigenous daycares, as opposed to mainstream daycares, and suggested that placing students in culturally appropriate child-care centres may improve retention rates. Still, most students indicated that distance from internship sites and travel time were the main reasons for not attending. In an effort to address this problem, facilitators worked with placement sites and with students in order to accommodate needs, and make schedules more flexible and feasible. However, facilitators also experienced difficulty in being sensitive, understanding, and supportive of students without negatively enabling them.

Facilitators also identified the students' English literacy skills as a challenge, and indicated that it would be important in the future to provide students with reading, writing, and literacy training in order to prepare them for the program. To address this issue, some facilitators suggested that students who have been identified as in need (scoring low on literacy skills during the entrance interviews, for example) be encouraged to make use of open-book and verbal tests in the Third Phase of the Program.

### **6.6 Course Evaluations**

Course evaluations of the ECEA Indigenous program revealed that students were generally very satisfied with the education they received. The evaluations consisted of a series of 10 questions concerning the quality and content of each course, and the average student rating across a total of 9 courses was 3.5 out of 4. More importantly to this program evaluation, participants also offered comments as part of the course assessments.

Qualitative analyses of these responses revealed that most provided positive evaluations of their courses and directors, with the exception of a few students who expressed their discontent with a particular instructor. For a majority of the subject areas, students felt that courses were well organized, and that they received relevant knowledge and skills. They described their teachers as patient individuals and good leaders, who delivered information very effectively. They also stated that course directors frequently provided interesting and useful supplementary materials, such as handouts, visual presentations, and pamphlets, which added to the course content and made for an enjoyable learning experience. Students were particularly happy with the hands-on learning that some teachers provided them with. In general, students also thought that discussions were appropriate and relevant to class content, and felt comfortable expressing their opinions.

## **7. Phase Three: Early Childhood Education Program**

### ***7.1 Introduction to Phase Three***

The third and final phase of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program moved the students from the Gabriel Dumont community and into the classroom at Mothercraft College. The objective of the Third Phase of the program was to build upon the knowledge and training that the students acquired while completing the Home Based Child Care and ECEA phases of the program. Acceptance into the Third Phase was contingent on the strength of the students' applications and their success in completing an entrance interview with a panel of program facilitators. The following sections describe in detail the components of Phase Three, its successes, possible areas for improvement, and directions that the program is moving toward in the future.

### ***7.2 Description of Phase Three***

The Third Phase of the Indigenous Early Childhood Development Training Program consisted of a year long intensive curriculum that would result in students' accreditation as an Early Childhood Educator. This phase differed from the previous two as the students were integrated into a mainstream classroom for the first time. In an effort to prepare the Indigenous students for the rigorous academic program, facilitators introduced a week long Development Session. During this time, the students were provided with success plans for academic achievement. They participated in talking circles, and met with Elders. An important component of this week was the seven grandfather teaching contract that the students decided upon. The teachings, which include: Love, Respect, Humility, Honesty, Trust, Courage and Wisdom, were to guide the students throughout their time in the ECE program. As such, the students agreed that they would act in accordance with the teachings at all times.

Throughout the year, the students attended classes and completed three internships at childcare centres throughout Toronto. Students were given the option of doing their placement at an Indigenous childcare centre if they wished. Access to the Indigenous Resource Centre at Mothercraft College was offered to the students who frequently used it as a space to relax, take a break from studying, and to talk with the Indigenous Programs Coordinator and the Indigenous Student Liaison. Elders were on site for guidance whenever needed, and the students took part in various cultural ceremonies such

as attending a Sweat Lodge and the Anishinaabemowin Learning Community which is an Ojibwa immersion camp.

The ECE Program began with ten students, four of which were continuing on from Phase Two. One student was forced to withdraw early in the program due to personal life issues, addiction problems, and mental illness and one student was hired at a childcare centre. The remaining eight completed the program and are currently completing their final internships in the community.

### ***7.3 Participant Outcomes of Phase Three***

Similar to phase two, the success of the ECE component of the program in meeting participants' needs and expectations was measured using the medicine wheel model of evaluation (as described in section 2). The evaluation's questions and discussions were directly related to the seven grandfather teachings contract that the students decided upon during the Development Session prior to the academic program beginning. This allowed the facilitators to gauge the program's success from a holistic point of view. Two separate program evaluations took place, the first in the form of a group discussion midway through the program and the second conducted with each student individually once the program had been completed.

#### **Mid-term evaluation**

The first Phase Three evaluation that took place was midway through the school year. Facilitated by an Elder, the evaluation took the form of a group discussion wherein students were given the opportunity to voice their perceptions of the program up to that point. All of the seven grandfather teachings were displayed and students were asked to identify how the program was meeting their needs and expectations with respect to each theme.

#### ***Areas of Success: Mid-Term Evaluation***

The results of this evaluation indicated that the program was successful in fostering a strong group dynamic through the pre-program development week that brought the Indigenous students together to better prepare them for the program. Students indicated that it was much easier to stay positive through the stress of the program with the encouragement from the rest of the group and that reminding each other of group and individualized goals was also an important factor in maintaining a positive outlook with respect to the academic workload.

Students also expressed their appreciation for the support and encouragement from the Indigenous Student Liaison. During the time that the mid-term evaluation took place there had been some staff turnover in this position. The students qualified their appreciation of having the support from the liaison with a desire to see a consistent figure in this role. Since the time of the mid-term evaluation, a new Indigenous Student Liaison has been secured and has been well received by the students.

#### ***Opportunities for Improvement: Mid-Term Evaluation***

The challenges that the Indigenous students faced in the first half of the program were strongly related to an overarching lack of trust and comfort that they felt in a formalized educational institute, which is common among Indigenous peoples (St. Denis 2007).

Subsequently, issues surrounding confidentiality and honesty were indicated as strong barriers to learning within the group. Some students were concerned that personal information was not kept confidential and that this affected the level of trust and comfort they had in sharing feelings with other students in the program as well as their instructors. Being successful and productive in group work settings was indicated as one of the hardest struggles to overcome. Individual life circumstances compounded by differing learning styles were viewed to be the elements that most negatively affected this aspect of their studies.

Facilitators noted a challenge that stemmed directly from the evaluation taking place in the form of a group discussion. As mentioned in Section 5, participant outcomes are unique to each individual student, with some students dealing with specific issues that others may not. This is also the case with negative feelings towards the program. Some students' comments and feelings may have subsequently been overshadowed by the views and opinions of students with strong personalities who may have been more vocal during the group discussion. This in turn, may have biased the results of the mid-term evaluation.

### **Final Evaluation**

A second evaluation was conducted on the final day of classes in an effort to gauge the students' overall perceptions of the Third Phase of the program. The issues that arose in conducting the mid-term review as a group led the facilitators to interview the students individually in the Indigenous Resource Centre where they were given the chance to speak openly and honestly about their experience during the year. The evaluation questions and subsequent discussions were consistent with the standards set out in the Waawiyeyaa<sup>©</sup> holistic Model of Evaluation (Johnson, 2004). Interviews were semi-structured which allowed for open dialogue between the student and the facilitators and also left room for the student to voice any feelings or concerns that were not in direct reference to any of the interview questions.

### ***Areas of Success: Final Evaluation***

An especially salient theme that emerged from the interviews was the pride and enthusiasm that the students felt towards their Indigenous heritage and culture after having completed the program. Having come from backgrounds that did not foster or nurture their Indigenous ancestry, some students indicated that they were now more aware and knowledgeable not only about the culture, but also the importance of their language and spirituality. Other students who did have previous knowledge of the culture and language indicated that the program had served to strengthen their pride and awareness of its importance. The students credited having access to Elders for guidance when needed and the cultural components as the strongest contributors to the growth that they experienced.

More importantly, perhaps, was the students' enthusiasm to instil this new found knowledge of the Indigenous culture into the children that they will care for. One student commented, "I now have the courage and confidence of programming the Native language and culture into all of the activities that I provide the children". Other students made reference to the program's ability to inspire them to help give Indigenous children

the education that they deserve from an Early Child Educator who understands the situations that they come from.

Many students also expressed their pride in being accredited in educating young children. Particular interest in working within the Indigenous community was compounded by a desire and newly acquired ability to help guide and nurture the future generations of Indigenous children. Students were enthusiastic to have a hand in breaking the cycle of Indigenous children growing up coping with the intergenerational effects of residential schools and oppression. Many students who had grown up in similar circumstances indicated that they were forced to deal with these issues on their own, and expressed a subsequent desire to give Indigenous children the opportunities to succeed that they did not have when they were young. Students indicated that they now felt prepared to positively influence children and contribute to their healthy development, especially those who may not have such influences at home. Particular students who had previously worked with at risk youth expressed their relief at the thought that they may now be able to influence children at a young age before they reach the point of actually being “at risk”. Other students expressed their appreciation for the program in allowing them to become better functioning individuals and subsequent Early Educators.

The majority of students expressed their appreciation for having access to the Indigenous Resource Centre, with a specific emphasis on the supports from the Indigenous Programs Coordinator and the Indigenous Student Liaison. Many students expressed that they would not have been successful in the program without these supports, indicating that the Resource Centre was a safe place to go in times of stress. Students also felt that personal issues were more easily shared with the Student Liaison rather than approaching the teacher. This was directly related to the Resource Centre being an environment where students felt comfortable expressing their needs and challenges.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement: Final Evaluation***

The areas of success outlined in the previous section were also met with areas where students indicated that there may be room for improvement and growth within the program. Students’ suggestions on ways in which the program may be improved fell into certain themes, much like the program’s successes.

The majority of the students in this group suffer from the intergenerational effects of residential schools and years of oppression as Indigenous peoples. Many of the students have had to deal with related trauma and abuse both during their childhoods and in present relationships as well. Students indicated that because of this shared history, classes that dealt with child abuse and residential school stories were extremely painful to deal with. Some students revealed that they were forced to deal with repressed memories as well as feelings of anxiety and sadness after having taken part in these classes. The majority of the group indicated that having an Elder to guide them through these sensitive topics may have alleviated some of the negative feelings that had resulted. Some expressed that it may have been beneficial to have taken these specific classes separately as a group with an Elder present where they could speak freely and openly about their experiences and feelings.

The students spoke candidly about the stereotyping that they believed to plague their group since being integrated into the mainstream classes. They also expressed a sense of

resentment that they felt the mainstream students held towards them because the Indigenous group was funded in order to complete the program. The Indigenous students expressed that it would have been beneficial to discuss at the beginning of the year with the rest of the class why they were being funded to complete the program. They indicated that it is important that the mainstream students understand that the Indigenous students have an entitlement to education and that this should not be thought of as a 'free ride' for this group.

It was also suggested that the current policy of integrating Indigenous content into all of the classes was not ideal as it caused a sense of resentment towards the Indigenous group. This was thought to have occurred due to the fact that the mainstream students did not understand why their cultures and heritage could not have been incorporated as well. According to Relational Theory, non-Indigenous students may have had a hard time relating to the information as well as the experiences of the Indigenous students. This may have contributed to the perceived resentment towards the Indigenous students from those students who felt that they would be working with many other diverse groups in addition to the Indigenous community. From a holistic perspective, many of the students may have had a hard time integrating the Indigenous content into their future role as Early Childhood Educators. This was supported by the students' suggestion to have a class dedicated solely to Indigenous culture as well as to have more multiculturalism throughout the program beyond just the Indigenous culture.

Moving forward, it would be beneficial to note in further detail the students' experiences in order to better support future Indigenous ECEs as well as to further lower the attrition rate of the students. In documenting the creation of a new program at Mothercraft, it is apparent that a phased training approach has worked well with the Indigenous community versus having students enter directly into a full time ECE program.

## **8. Closing**

The Indigenous Childcare Training Program has spanned over a two year timeframe, and has positively changed the lives of many Indigenous men and women who have participated. The program has successfully mobilized a group of marginalized young Indigenous men and women, who now have the ability to work and thrive as Early Childhood Educators. As a testament to the program's success, steps are now being taken in preparation to welcome the next group of students into the ECE program at Mothercraft College. Prospective students have been invited to the college to take part in entrance interviews and the second cohort of the Indigenous focused ECE program will begin their studies at Mothercraft College during the Fall, 2009. Further papers should examine the experiences of those Indigenous ECEs who entered directly into the full time ECE program.

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