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An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

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### Article abstract

This article describes the learning that took place in the context of a provincial family enhancement unit within an Aboriginal child welfare agency. Many benefits were identified for the workers, the families, and the relationship to the community. Most notable were the positive effects on non-Aboriginal government staff who were immersed in a more traditional Aboriginal agency. Key learnings include the importance of relationship in child welfare practice, the desire of child welfare workers for greater creativity in their responses to children and families and the need for more supportive leadership in the creation of the conditions necessary for this to happen. Recommendations are made to provincial officials to assist in the creation of such an environment.

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## Co-location of a Government Child Welfare Unit in a Traditional Aboriginal Agency: A Way Forward in Working in Aboriginal Communities

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### Purpose and Objective of Study

The purpose of the project was threefold: 1) to explore effective collaboration between agencies in child and family services with aboriginal families, 2) to compare and contrast differences in organizational contexts of a traditional non-government organization (NGO) and government agencies and 3) to discover new ways of providing child and family services that combine traditional worldviews and western theories of child and family practice that support Aboriginal communities. The project used Participatory Action Research methodology to create an on-going dialogue between Bent Arrow Family Support staff (local Aboriginal NGO), Edmonton and Area Child & Family Services Region 6 Family Enhancement Unit staff (government agency), both co-locating at Bent Arrow, and the Southeast Neighbourhood Centre Child and Family Services (government agency) concerning effective collaborative processes within their organizational contexts. This research is unique in that a relative equal partnership between government and non-government agencies for research purposes can be unusual. The aim of the research project was to provide the opportunity for all three groups to explore the above purpose in a supportive environment that allows for creative thinking concerning the improvement of child and family practices

### Abstract

This article describes the learning that took place in the context of a provincial family enhancement unit within an Aboriginal child welfare agency. Many benefits were identified for the workers, the families, and the relationship to the community. Most notable were the positive effects on non-Aboriginal government staff who were immersed in a more traditional Aboriginal agency. Key learnings include the importance of relationship in child welfare practice, the desire of child welfare workers for greater creativity in their responses to children and families and the need for more supportive leadership in the creation of the conditions necessary for this to happen. Recommendations are made to provincial officials to assist in the creation of such an environment.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal worldviews, child welfare practice, leadership, learning environment, creativity, relationship building, Participatory Action Research.

within Aboriginal communities. Once enough knowledge was gathered, action plans were developed to disseminate the information to all groups involved so that implementation of the findings could begin. In particular child welfare policy-makers, senior management of the government and non-government agencies involved and child welfare practitioners will be targeted when the findings are disseminated. The project was funded by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research, a provincial funding agency specifically looking at child, family and community research and supported by Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services, Region 6. Front line workers and supervisors were given three hours a month, for one year, to be part of the project. The facilitators for the project were two University of Calgary professors, one who had close connections with Edmonton and Area Child and Family Services as well as Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and the other who has been involved in Participatory Action Research locally as well as in Africa.

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## Literature Review

Although there is much literature on effective collaboration in agencies, few focus on system management between agencies, similarities and differences between organizational contexts, working relationships (subjective components of partnerships) and outcomes (quality of service) (Horwath & Morrison, 2007). The Bent Arrow Traditional Society has offered staff the opportunity to work collaboratively in providing effective services for Aboriginal children and youth in Edmonton. We were interested in learning how this collaboration has met the challenges of dealing with philosophical differences in organizational contexts that call upon the participants to learn and accept another worldview. Creating space for future thinking around service provision is rare but a valuable process in any organization (Lafrance & Bastien, 2007). By creating space, we mean negotiating time away from work where by front line workers and supervisors could come together to look at practice issues without being distracted by work. Creating space also means providing an environment by which the participants feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings with repercussions. This research project brought together three staff groups, all of who were interested in delivering effective services to Aboriginal children and youth, to reflect upon organizational and working relationships surrounding present child and family practice. It provided a space to critically examine the inherent challenges to effective collaboration in such a setting. Ultimately we hoped to encourage the development of effective practice tools, change existing practice where needed and create new and improved levels of practice for families and youth. It allowed space for reflection on new ways of providing child and family services that combined traditional worldviews and western theories of child and family practice. It was hoped that the project would support on-going communication with these groups in order to encourage an atmosphere of collaboration and growth. In December 2003, an evaluation was completed concerning this co-location collaborative venture. This project built upon these recommendations and sought to continue exploring and implementing practice issues identified in this evaluation. These include building trust, understanding roles and responsibilities and resource issues (Indesol, 2003).

## Current Child and Family Issues

Existing research suggests that there is an interesting congruence between worldviews and theories of family resiliency. However, Aboriginal oral tradition and the other theoretical literature both suffer from a lack of application in child welfare systems (Lafrance & Bastien, 2007). In fact the hope for a child welfare system that works for Aboriginal youth is strewn with overt obstacles, hidden dangers and lack of

communication. These obstacles and hidden dangers include the lack of communication about and explanatory discussions of oppression, colonialism, Euro-centrism, domination and exploitation (Battiste, 2000; Henderson, 2000). The loss of traditional ways of living through colonialism, modernization and education (Battiste & Henderson, 2000) and the impacts of systemic poverty and racial discrimination are well known and require little elaboration. Meanwhile, Aboriginal communities continue to lose their most precious resource, their children, to child welfare systems often destroying their affiliation with their people. Interventions seem to only too rarely create happy, healthy, and productive adults. Some appear well on the surface but end up not belonging anywhere or to anyone, disconnected from their communities of origin and no longer part of their adopted community (Sinclair, 2007).

The effects and implications of colonization have had, and continue to have, major impacts in Indigenous societies worldwide. Indigenous peoples have been in a political struggle to defend themselves and their resources since first contact with colonizers. After initial colonization and the industrial revolution, most surviving Indigenous peoples lost their political independence, and now only have limited control over their resources (Bodley, 2000). For centuries colonialism and the imposing states have sought to methodically extinguish Indigenous ways of being and seeing the world through policies and persecution that prohibited the practicing of spirituality, the speaking of languages, the removal of children, and essentially the way of life (; Weaver & Congress, 2009; Wilson, 2004) and this is the greatest weapon of imperialism. Thiong'o (1986) describes that weapon as a cultural bomb: something that is dropped onto a culture with devastating results. He states, "The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (p. 3). The entire system was imposed to "civilize" the Indigenous peoples, and allow for "progress". This was needed in order to fulfill the colonizer's mission; had Indigenous values and ways been treated as relevant and equal, the colonialist practices would have been impossible to sustain (Wilson, 2004).

Briskman (2007) outlines widely accepted values for Indigenous peoples. They include: the earth is our Mother; preservation and conservation; sharing and caring; each other's keeper; group-based society; decision-making by consensus; harmony between people, and between people and land; knowledge to be sought, acquired, given and used in a proper way; and importance of oral tradition (Briskman, 2007). Aboriginal communities that are grounded in their culture and traditions can provide a community environment that is far

more conducive to child, youth and family wellness (Blackstock, 2009; Bodor, Lamoureaux & Beggs, 2009; Simpson, 2008; Smith, Burke & Ward, 2000; Weaver & Congress, 2009). One way to ensure this can be found is in the way that services are established, administered, and delivered. The way in which organizations are established and managed has a direct impact on the leadership in human services. Indigenous-serving organizations have a responsibility to uphold the values and culture they aim to strengthen. Indigenous peoples have a long history of being spoken for, and acted upon, without meaningful discussion or collaboration from those who will directly be impacted by the service. If Indigenous human service organizations only seek to maintain the status quo and work from a mainstream perspective, there is the potential to do harm to the Indigenous population they serve. Too often, however organizations, while they are Indigenous run and focused on serving the Indigenous population, operate from a Western set of values and ways of organizing, giving into dominant norms and values. Providing an environment that is focused on Indigenous ways reinforces to Aboriginal clients the value that is placed on being proud of Aboriginal ways of being. By recognizing the colonized systems that are present in our communities, and seeking ways to work differently, organizations can contribute to decolonizing the attitudes and ways within our communities. For example, our observation and discussions around Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society showed that the agency was a group based agency with decision-making by consensus. There was a welcoming atmosphere to anyone entering the building and relationships between clients, staff and government staff was the most important part of running the agency. Not only was relationship building important but ceremonies were a part of life in the agency, often conducted on Aboriginal lands. When entering the agency, Aboriginal worldview, values and beliefs appeared in writing, visual artistic material, and eating together, both client and staff, in a lunch room area. These examples are a form of decolonizing organizations. When Aboriginal values and beliefs are implemented, organizations can create an atmosphere that will directly challenge the mainstream way of providing services. bell hooks, (as quoted in Graveline, 1998) said "even in the face of powerful structures of domination, it remains possible for each of us, especially those of us who are members of opposed and/or exploited groups... to define and determine alternative standards, to decide on the nature and extent of the compromise" (p.11). This means that as Indigenous organizations, even though living in a colonized world, and having to meet certain imposed standards for funding requirements, it is possible to change various aspects of the way in which indigenous organizations provide services and operate their organizations. This project was in no small part intended to sensitize front line, supervisory and administrative

staff to the intentions of Aboriginal people to achieve greater self-determination and to create helping systems that serve to counter and even reverse the consequences of this clash of values and worldviews.

## Collaboration

Grace and Coventry (2010) define collaboration in human services as "services that plan together to address issues of overlap, duplication and the gaps that exist in service provision, each working towards the same outcomes" (p. 159). Due to similar situations described above effective collaboration between agencies with similar goals is being recognized as an important way forward when caseloads are stretched to the limit, resources are minimal and communication between agencies is increasingly difficult to maintain (Grace & Coventry, 2010; Ragan, 2003). Grace and Coventry (2010) point out the benefits of a co-location model "it not only benefits those directly exposed to increased contact with others, but because co-location can result in a range of benefits for clients and the service delivery system alike" (p. 160). These benefits include: "1) convenience to service users; 2) enhanced client outcomes; 3) enhanced inter-agency knowledge; 4) improved inter-agency communication; and 5) reduced costs and increased efficiency" (p. 60). Understanding the organizational contexts of agencies and their similarities and differences can enhance our understanding of successful collaboration between agencies. Horwath & Morrison (2007) provide a framework for collaboration and integration in children's services, identifying issues and ingredients for effective collaboration. They identify different levels of multiagency collaboration: 1). "communication (individuals from different disciplines talking together); 2) co-operation (low key joint working on a case-by-case basis); 3) co-ordination (more formalized joint working, but no sanctions for non-compliance); 4) coalition (joint structures sacrificing some autonomy) and 5) integration (organizations merge to create new joint identity)" (pg. 2). They identify important components of collaboration to explore including 1). Pre disposing factors or the history of agency relations and informal networking; 2) mandates, such as legislative directives and funding specifications that encourage and offer direct collaboration. A shared recognition of the need to collaborate is important as well as political support and incentives and shared meaningful goals; 3) appropriate membership and leadership is important including addressing power issues among agencies and having effective leadership that encourages others to commit to this type of partnership; 4) policies and lines of accountability within the partnership. There may be a need to change the physical location in order that the partnership can work effectively as well as a commitment to sharing resources for the partnership; 5) the processes of the

partnership include values, interdisciplinary training, trust, role, clarity and communication. Often in partnerships, people bring their different values and philosophies. This can bring about tensions regarding practice but can also be an avenue for growth. Understanding and talking about these different worldviews is important and time needs to be given to reflect on these similarities and differences and 6) "effective communication is a key component for establishing trust" (pg. 12) and without this component a lack of understanding of others' roles or mistrust for other professional's perspectives can destroy partnerships. These processes are extremely important to explore and this research project allowed staff the opportunity to explore these components in relation to their work in child and family services. Co-location can support Howarth & Morrison's (2007) framework for collaboration. As Grace and Coventry (2010) state: "co-location is best understood as one of many potential strategies that can be used to further the complex and sophisticated work that is inter-agency collaboration. In the physical realm, co-location can help to construct user-friendly space. Politically, it can contribute to service system reforms towards integration and pragmatically, local issues can be addressed. In short, benefits can be achieved for clients, service providers and the service system alike, without causing the difficulties that traditionally accompany a full-scale merger or amalgamation of services" (p. 161). To further the co-location model, Ragan (2003) describes how co-location has turned into a service integration centre of many government and non-government agencies in one building so that clients can access a range of services without going to many different agencies.

## Research Methodology

### Introduction

The research methodology used for the project was a qualitative methodology called Participatory Action Research (PAR). By using this methodology, researchers are able to create an environment by which workers are able to dialogue and critically reflect upon issues concerning their work. PAR allows for groups of people to come together and has clear rules around power and safety. The methodology requires a non-hierarchical approach to research which in turn can produce a safe environment by which all co-researchers and share their thoughts and feelings without repercussion. Ideally, the findings are disseminated and action plans are then implemented in order to change the situation for the benefit of all. It is concerned with the dialogical process of knowledge production. "It is coming to recognize our own knowledge while valuing the knowledge of others in mutually respectful dialogue, coming to share openly while openly sharing with others" (Pyrch & Castillo, 2001, p. 384). According to Lincoln (2001) PAR

emerged as an alternative to social science research that lacked the ability to address persistent social problems such as "racism, maldistribution of social, economic and material goods... illiteracy, crime, environmental degradation, resource waste and ineffective public education practices" (p. 124). Riecken, Strong-Wilson, Conibear, Michel and Riecken (2005) support this thinking. In their study concerning health and wellness with Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal youth, they used PAR because it went beyond conventional research, promoted equality of relationships and had "openness to multiple forms of representation" (p. n.p.). Wilson (2008) introduces indigenous research methodologies through ceremony. The stages of ceremony ie. living a congruent lifestyle to research principles, preparing space to learn, working and thinking together as one and incorporating the findings into a lifestyle are conducive to the principles of PAR. McCalman, Tsey, Baire, Connolly, Baird and Jackson (2009) found using PAR with Aboriginal men's groups and youth programs to be empowering as well as action orientated. "PAR provides a way forward for implementing intra- and/or inter-community knowledge sharing and further documenting the extent to which it can support empowerment" (p. 4). Marshall & Batten (2004) found in their cross-cultural research that PAR addressed power issues more effectively than conventional research, something important to address particularly with groups that have experienced colonization. PAR allows for these issues to surface and be reflected upon in a meaningful way. The PAR process "incorporates valuable knowledge acquired from the collective experiences of the people and with the people (Fals Borda, 1988, p. 53).

### Principles of PAR

Susan Smith (1997) and Dorothy Henderson (1995) give a comprehensive understanding of the principles and assumptions behind PAR. They are as follows: 1) The full participation of the people being studied in all phases of the research process; 2) A non-hierarchical dialogical consensus decision-making process; 3) All forms of knowledge are valuable including scientific knowledge, experiential knowledge and popular knowledge, culture, history and the lived experiences of the people involved in the research process; 4) Focusing, challenging and balancing power relations within the research group and focusing on the importance of empowerment; 5) Active consciousness-raising of all of the researchers, including the outsider researcher in order for a mutual educative experience to take place; 6) An avenue by which political and social action can take place. Fals Borda (1988) the father of PAR describes this type of research as 1) collective research incorporating both quantitative and qualitative knowledge gathering techniques, 2) recovery of history, 3) valuing and applying indigenous folk culture and

values and 4) the production and diffusion of new knowledge (Fals Borda, 1988).

This type of research methodology was appropriate in relation to this project for the following reasons:

1. It provided a space, not normally provided in working time, to identify effective collaboration practices between different agencies. The research group was able to look at child and family issues in relation to communities and to look at beliefs and values governing these issues. It provided continuing education and self-reflection on practice issues so important to social workers. This type of research supported the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society's philosophy, which encourages reflection (Jobin, 2005).
2. The level of reflection and dialogue was conducive to a group research experience to a greater degree than many other methods.
3. It provided the opportunity for different people to come together that would not normally happen in individual interviews.
4. The data was analyzed as a group process and offered a wide range of people the opportunity to analyze knowledge generated throughout the process.
5. It offered the opportunity to disseminate the findings that reflected the knowledge generated from the group process. Implementation of the findings will be the responsibility of the organizations involved.
6. Learning was reciprocal and an atmosphere of mutual concern, caring trust and friendship was created during the project (Lincoln, 2001).

### **Gaining Entry**

In 2005, the authors met with Shauna Seneca, Co-Director of Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society on several occasions to plan a research project that would look at the model of co-location used by Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and Child and Family Region 6 staff as well as a regional office that was not co-located but worked with Aboriginal families. Included would be a discussion of best practice for Aboriginal families in Edmonton. The concern that more and more Aboriginal children were being taken into care (65% of children in care in Alberta are Aboriginal) was the basis for the research and both government and non-government agencies were concerned about these statistics. It was also quite clear that Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society was a strong Aboriginal agency that was successful in working with Aboriginal families in Edmonton and that the co-location of a government organization within the Society has had a positive effect on work with Aboriginal families. Once a preliminary plan

was discussed, an advisory group was created to help prepare the proposal. At this point it should be mentioned that Shauna Seneca passed away in December 2006 and Cheryl Whiskeyjack took her place in the project.

### **Advisory Group**

The advisory group was made up of two University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work researchers; two Child and Family Region 6 managers; one supervisor (Child and family region 6 involved in the co-location project); one Bent Arrow senior manager; one executive director – Human Resource Management, Children's Services; one Board member of the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society; one social policy manager; and one research assistant in the Master's of Social Work program at the University of Calgary, Central and Northern Region. The role of the advisory group was not only to help prepare the proposal but to advise the research facilitators concerning issues arising from the research and to participate and encourage the dissemination of information after the findings were determined.

### **Research Group**

The research group consisted of two University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work professors, one social planner, two supervisors and six front line workers from the different agencies. The team changed over time, particularly with the government staff, due to the high turnover in jobs in government agencies. By the end of the project the research group had one supervisor, three front-line workers and two facilitators.

### **Knowledge Gathering**

Brennan & Noffke (2001) state that the point of knowledge generation "is to further the communicative action of the members of the group; their understanding of themselves and others, the setting and their capacity to act" (p. 26). They identify three types of data collection: a) information gathered concerning the topic under discussion, b) information gathered through the group process of dialogue and interaction, and c) data concerning the action research process. Our first meeting as a group was in December 2007 and was a one day workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to establish relationships with each other, understand the PAR process and looking at the purpose and objectives of the research. The workshop was video recorded for use in a later DVD production. Following this meeting, there was movement of research group members, a few deciding that it wasn't for them and wished to withdraw. Other people were added in the next few months to replace these people.

The group met once a month for three hours at Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society for the next year. Different ways to

collect data were used including exercises challenging one's own viewpoint (map exercise), and guest speakers. Each group member was given a digital recorder so that journals could be orally recorded outside the meetings for further reflection. The reflection/action process aimed to raise the critical consciousness of the individual and group in order to define issues. By the third or fourth meeting the group identified four questions, out of ten proposed, that they could concentrate on for the rest of the research. These questions were as follows:

- What organizational factors support effective collaboration practice?
- What organizational factors constrain the implementation of effective collaborative practice?
- How has co-location made a difference with this partnership and is it possible for partnerships to flourish without co-location?
- What beliefs, values and philosophical orientations have affected the way in which child and family services are practiced in Edmonton among Aboriginal youth?

Each meeting started with the sharing of reflections from the last meeting or something group members had thought about between meetings. This is in part to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding as well as creating a safe environment for people to speak their minds and to think critically about their own practice. As one participant explained: "Initially, the researchers stated that this would be a safe environment for discourse and they really have made that happen. I've never felt the need to worry about something that I've needed to say in this group, which is wonderful to hear." As the group progressed, analysing the data became part of the group process.

### **Data Analysis**

Each meeting was tape recorded and after each meeting, transcripts were typed and sent to each group member. They were encouraged to read the transcript and begin to themize what had been said at the meetings. Both facilitators themized the transcripts during the project as well. However, due to the transcripts being quite lengthy and overwhelming for the participants, a decision was made by the group that each group member would take one transcript and themize it, thus all transcripts were themized by the facilitator and one group member. To support credibility and reliability a third person transcribed the transcripts and sent a summary to the group. Once the transcripts had been themized we planned a weekend retreat to code the transcripts at the first, second and third levels. The retreat for the group was the highlight of the project. After creating knowledge for a year they were finally able to see the

results of their work. The group looked at the summaries of the themized transcripts and then themes were identified and put up on the wall. They were then categorized under sub-themes and finally three themes emerged that represented the work of the group. The feeling of accomplishment at seeing the findings and seeing how they reflected the understanding of the group was immense and well worth the time and effort. At the retreat, the work of the group was video recorded for use in a DVD production at the end of the project.

### **Positives and Challenges to the PAR Process**

Reflecting on the PAR process, issues of time, changing of jobs and fear were important to address. Positively speaking after a few people decided not to continue with the research process, the group felt that the research had created a safe environment by which issues could be raised. Within the space of one year, most people in the group had changed job positions, reflecting the nature of the work and movement in employment. Changing of jobs meant that some of the group members had to withdraw from the project and letters to new supervisors were sent asking for permission for the worker to continue with the project. Although committed to the end of the project, initially we said one year for the project but we underestimated the time needed and therefore the project was given a one year extension by the funder and the University of Calgary ethics committee. This one year extension meant that some of the group members had to leave the project. Another concern was the fact that the two of the Aboriginal group members were unable to continue with the project for various reasons and there was a feeling of imbalance as the balance of people from each organization was very important to the process. One person felt that being involved with the research project might jeopardize their job prospects in the future and thus decided to withdraw from the project. Nevertheless, the project had six committed group members prepared to give their time for the dissemination of information in the next few months following the end of the project.

### **Findings of the Research**

Three major themes came out of the research process. They are 1) relationships, 2) creativity and 3) leadership. These themes reflect the similarities and differences we found when looking at Child and Family Services regular local offices and the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and the co-location project.

#### ***Relationships***

Relationship is key to good social work practice. Not only is this important between social workers and clients but also important between staff, staff and policy makers and staff and managers. The time and energy for building these relationships

seems to be increasingly seen as less important in many Child and Family Services settings. Not only is more time spent on paperwork, but less time is being spent on building relationships. One group member stated: "If you don't have a relationship with people, it really is a mess, and to have a relationship with people can be quite harm reducing. That we know so what do we do about it?" There seems to be an atmosphere of fear in many government offices and in Child and Family Services at large and this fear is having an impact on the effectiveness of frontline workers with Aboriginal families. Organizational prerequisites for healthy relationships are 1) supportive peers; 2) supportive agencies; 3) support from supervisors; 4) respect for each other; 5) time spent together; 6) safe environment to challenge differences, pre-conceptions and assumptions; 7) trust; 8) openness; 9) keeping it real; 10) keep the child at the centre of the work. One group members states: "It was very clear to me, one, the importance of relationship and really getting to know the youth and you would see them, obviously three, four, sometimes five days a week and so you get to know them so well and in a short time, they didn't care whether you were from Child Welfare or what your authority was, they just wanted connection and they wanted relationship and that was true of myself and a lot of the other team members that ... The other thing was just being very connected into the community and how little we're really able to accomplish when we're working in isolation and you just can't do our job working in isolation". Some of these are happening in offices but the people feel these are eroding with more policies and regulations. It was noted that the difference between walking into an area office was very different than walking into Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society. The former gave off an atmosphere of fear and violence while the later felt more welcoming and open. It seemed that having a child welfare office within Bent Arrow helped to build relationships and maintain a positive atmosphere between the organizations.

### ***Creativity***

The present system in Child and Family Services can be very rigid at times. Behind this rigidity is a lack of recognition from senior and mid-management staff concerning the skills by frontline workers and a lack of communication to front line workers of the complexities of policy and politics that the senior management has to deal with on a regular basis. There is a need for better communication between the different levels of staff concerning best practice and more attention paid to the pressures of frontline work. One group member stated: "Many of us are overwhelmed by administrative duties that could be amalgamated and with repetitive approval levels that are a drain on precious time that could be spent with our families. We believe that such changes can benefit children, families, workers, leadership team,

policy makers and legal staff". Another explained: "I started to see a pattern evolving and the part that bothered me was that it seemed every time there was some kind of crisis that got media attention, the response invariably was to try and nail things down a bit tighter and this trend has continued leaving less and less freedom and room for creativity and room for movement... we end up depriving clients of things because of this reactive mode." Another responded to this reality: "Adapt to the specifics and doing what's right rather than just politically correcting everything." What ways can we give frontline workers the ability to be creative in their work? Are there ways to assist workers to share fresh ideas and perspectives without assuming anything new can't be accomplished? Can we respond in a more flexible fashion to the needs and strengths of communities and families? One of the more stressful situations for workers is the importance that paperwork has over relationships with families. It seems this takes precedence over building relationships with families. Workers are finding their creativity stifled by paperwork, tightening of regulations and having less time to build relationships. It was noted that in a co-location setting, building relationships was part of the everyday activities and workers felt freer to work more creatively with their clients. " This is strengthening my view around how much better co-location projects are with respect to Children's services because when you have workers and supervisors working with community agencies and the actual families under one roof or in one very small area, you get to understand the perspective of the families, the geographic location, the ethnicities that lie in that location and so if you can get a perspective that the families are coming from, then I think you automatically provide better service delivery to those families and probably help deal with their issues better". Finally, another group member states: "So I think when you're around a bunch of people who want to do different service and let's be creative, it lights a spark in your own creativity that will allow you to develop further creativity, whereas if you're in an environment that's not that conducive to thinking outside the box and trying new things, it deadens that flame because that's something that I've struggled with since I left the agency name because it is very much focused on relationship".

### ***Leadership***

There seems to be a lack of solid/effective leadership and this is attributed to an over-emphasis on cost-effectiveness rather than families. Higher management needs to be in touch with front line workers and to get their perspectives on issues and policy development. This lack of communication and interaction is creating a sense of chaos in the system and is restricting the capacity to meet commitments. According to participants, the current reality is as follows: "From our vantage point, leadership needs to shift, as it seemed to be currently clogged. We believe that this kind of change can have a positive



impact and that our leaders are capable of change when they can see the legitimacy of our perspective. We hope that our leaders will not be afraid to make such changes for solely political reasons. We believe that we can make the case that this can be an effective strategy to address some of the issues that have bedevilled the ministry for many years". One group member suggested: "Staff should invite their senior and mid-level leaders to their work; to reconnect with them and to support staff and help set the tone to better assist families...their priority should be on supporting healthy relationships and freeing up staff for more creative work." The importance of a mentor was also discussed. "Something that leads to good practice that Shawna taught me was that the ability to have a mentor and the ability to be a mentor are really critically important in this field because I think the people in our lives have an impact on us". There needs to be greater willingness to listen to each other, create a win-win environment and to get rid of the 'cover your ass' mentality. Another theme that came through was the need for leaders to be trained appropriately for their jobs and the need for wise counsel.

### ***Co-location Model***

The co-location model between one government agency and an Aboriginal agency seems to have enhanced the above findings. Certainly, the government agency staff felt that relationship was important in the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and government staff were invited to all relationship building activities with Bent Arrow staff. This included team building activities and regular lunches together. The non-hierarchical way that Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society ran its agency made the atmosphere in the agency freer to work together. The clients felt that when entering the building, there was a feeling of friendliness and peace. Creativity to do innovative projects were encouraged through collaboration with both agencies. The idea of the co-location model of working with Aboriginal families was seen as a positive move with Child and Family Services. Not only did it promote good relationships with clients and with colleagues but it saves time, money and serves families well. Not everyone wanted to work in that type of setting but most in the group felt it was a positive approach to practice. One group member stated: "I've only really, in terms of social work, worked with Children's Services and only worked with Children's Services for eight years with only a portion of that being part of a co-location project although I have a great deal of passion for co-location projects." Other comments: "Part of the benefits of the co-location project is seeing the families, seeing the people we work with, getting to know them, getting to know extended families, getting a real sense of what the issues are." Not only has Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society been a co-location partner with Child and Family Services, but other co-location projects have been created and some in the

group had been part of these. One group member shares her experience: "I also agree with the whole idea of a co-location project. I think it's very cool in the differences in the way you approach practice because I've worked in the Agency name that is involved in co-location for about two years. I worked in a Traditional Neighbourhood Centre before that and back in the Traditional Neighbourhood Centre; there is a huge loss to case practice when the clients are not there. You need to see them, you need to know them, you need to know their extended families, and you need to know all of this to be able to create solid case plans. The co-location projects you can just get stuff done, people are right there, you see them daily, hourly, sometimes they're just there eight hours a day. You get so much more done so I'm really a big proponent of co-location and I don't like the whole way government offices are set up. I think we need to be very cautious as a society, that we don't destroy our ability to form relationships and our ability to interact with people on every level because that is, in essence, our humanity and if we strip that from ourselves, we lose so much more than what we've already lost. Different cultures, I think, are even secondary to the fact that we're all human; we all have the same basic needs for belonging, for nurturing and to ensure that this is intact." Co-location projects may not be the answer for all government offices but certainly the feeling amongst the group was that it was a positive change and a pleasant environment to work in.

### **Discussion and Implications**

It was noted several times during the project that decreasing time to build relationships and work creatively and a gap in communication between frontline workers and senior management was seen to have a direct relationship to job satisfaction. One participant states: "It is interesting to me to have noted that of all of the people who have maintained themselves as part of this group over the course of the six months, Bent Arrow staff have stayed consistent, the Seven Generation staff have basically stayed consistent but the staff from the government office have all changed in the course of this project...I find a hundred percent job turnover at the office compared with limited or little turnover in the other offices intriguing". These are statistics that no organization wants to deal with. However, as the project shows, if organizations don't provide an environment that is supportive of relationship building between staff and their clients, managers and their workers and better communication between senior management and frontline workers, don't provide an environment where creativity is encouraged and don't provide wise and experienced leadership then one of the consequences is a high turnover of staff. Much attention was paid to present policies stifling good practice and the need for more flexibility. As one group member states: "It's a very interesting dynamic for me because I don't think our policies work at all for

these (high risk) kids, in any way at all. I think our policies cause more dysfunction because we are labelling them high risk and we are trying to, I don't know, nail them down, tighten up what's going on so that they are not at risk, so that they're not harmed and that may be contributing to their high risk behaviours”.

These themes are not new to social work and there is a growing awareness that work with children and their families, and in particular Aboriginal families, has to change. Good practice has been experienced by staff through the co-location project and more of these projects should be promoted. The following are recommendations for change from this project that were agreed upon by the research group members and facilitators.

### **Recommendations for Policy, Education and Practice Change**

**Issue:** The importance of the relationships between social workers and their clients was the most important that arose. This was encouraging and frightening. Encouraging because the workers intuitively recognized how important this is – it is a fundamental part of social work practice. Frightening because of the extent to which they feel limited in being able to engage in such relationships that are so important to the success of their interventions. It must be stressed that their feelings are well supported by research studies that demonstrate how the relationship between the workers and their clients and between the clients and others in their lives account for 80% of the change that occurs in their lives. This leaves a minimal amount that can be attributed to various therapeutic approaches and procedures.

**Recommendation:** That the ministry review the extent to which policy and programs administration support the development of positive and sustained relationships between child welfare workers and those they serve, and the extent to which they can support and enhance client relationships with their natural support networks.

**Issue:** It seems clear that there is a significant gap between the aspirations and desires of front line staff and the constraints of procedurally oriented policy. Front line workers are frustrated by their inability to engage children and families in a relational and creative fashion.

**Recommendation:** That the Ministry of Child and Youth Services review policy and procedures with a view to eliminating redundancy and freeing up child welfare workers to do social work.

**Issue:** Front line staff continues to be fearful of negative repercussions when things go badly wrong in a specific case, especially when the media is involved. While senior management claims that the punitive responses of the past are no longer practiced, this has not yet pervaded the belief system of the workers – they are still afraid – as are their supervisors,

and managers. This is reinforced by case review process that still seem to be overly focused on finding and punishing the guilty, at least in their minds

**Recommendation:** While the intentions of senior management are surely sincere, managers need to take time to shift their attitude and practice from one of fear to one of support. This will call for even greater sensitivity in the handling of such situations and in de-briefing activities.

**Issue:** Staff has become increasingly burdened over time by the accumulation of ‘knee jerk’ responses to real or perceived crises of confidence in child welfare. This is a trend throughout all of the Anglophone countries of the world – a fear based over-reaction that give the illusion of correcting problems that are in effect too deep to be corrected by procedure alone

**Recommendation:** Try to resist the impulse to deal with the optical illusion of always being able to predict and prevent the death and/or abuse of a child in care or under the supervision of child welfare. Workers worry about this as well, but state that over time the accumulation of such responses make their jobs more difficult and can even create more of these kinds of situations from occurring as they spend less time with clients and more time with computers.

**Issue:** Professional non-Aboriginal staff continue to be largely uninformed about Aboriginal culture, values and history. They, not surprisingly, bring in the biases, stereotypes and collective ignorance to their work. This can be exacerbated by practices that are unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) racist). This cannot be addressed by the 2-day mandatory training on Aboriginal people. The Bent Arrow experience and other projects have provided some valuable learning about what happens when the work environment is changed to a more open and community oriented setting. To date such arrangements are fully dependent on the vision and force of personality of the leaders in both the Aboriginal and government sector, and are very vulnerable to administrative and organizational changes.

**Recommendation:** That the Ministry review the lessons learned from these experiences with a view to broadening and formalizing their implementation. It seems clear that there are important benefits to these experiences that can assist in the establishment of practices that are fully aligned with the legislative and policy intents of the government with regard to our relationships with Aboriginal agencies, families and communities.

**Issue:** It seems clear that the Ministry wishes to have practice governed by sound social work principles as can be implied by the implementation of such approaches as the Casework Model and the Family Enhancement approach. We were puzzled by the dearth of social workers with formal academic training in our project. We were also intrigued by the comment of one senior

manager that the considerable detail and paperwork in models such as these was necessary in part to compensate for the lack of social work training that child welfare workers bring with them. There have been some attempts and at times abortive efforts to examine the issue of training and education for child welfare practice. Most recently, this has been examined under the auspices of the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium, but with a change in players, has been left in abeyance. We have anecdotal information that the quality of staff hired into child protection services is at low ebb. One supervisor mourned that they were “scraping the bottom of the barrel”.

**Recommendation:** Child welfare deals with the most vulnerable group in society. The tendency to address their issues in an insular fashion does not serve the families and their children well. Nor is it fair to place individuals in such critical decision making roles without a sound clinical background and a professional discipline upon which to draw. While we were impressed with the dedication and competence of the staff who participated in this project, we were struck by some comments that arose informally that were not part of this study, but that call for some acknowledgement. We would be remiss if we did not recommend that the Ministry develop a comprehensive plan with the Faculty of Social work that would include the following dimensions:

- The inclusion of a child and family services stream at the undergraduate and graduate level in the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work.
- A renewed emphasis on social work with Aboriginal people in academic courses and for continuing education.
- A determination of what roles in child welfare require social work preparation and which can be met by other disciplines such as Youth and Child Care.
- The development of standards of practice over time that can be met by qualified staff with a BSW at the front line level and a clinical MSW for supervisory levels.
- Executive development for senior managers in the macro areas organizational development, policy and program development, program evaluation, search methods, and state of the art reviews.

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