

ALLYING WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: THE PRACTICE OF OMANITEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

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**The Alberta Centre for
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and

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(AASCF)**

Submitted by

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In early 2012, the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF) created an Advisory Group to discuss the training needs of human service workers who work with Indigenous children and families. Based on recommendations from the Advisory Group, it was decided to pilot a four-day experiential learning opportunity, a modified version of the five-day University of Calgary Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) course entitled “Social Work with Indigenous Peoples”. Twenty-two individuals from a variety of agencies across the province participated in the experiential learning opportunity from October 30 – November 2, 2012.

Curriculum, Tools, and Resources

The four-day experiential learning opportunity began and ended in ceremony. Examples of ceremonies and protocols included an opening ceremony and feast, smudging, pipe ceremonies, circle process and sharing circles, closing ceremony, and closing feast. Due to weather conditions, the sweat lodge ceremony originally scheduled as part of the four day experience was rescheduled. Participants were invited back in April 2013 to experience a traditional sweat lodge ceremony.

The course content included historical information regarding colonization and the cross-generational impact of residential schools; viewing of the documentary film “Gently Whispering the Circle Back”; the importance of language and protocol; Indigenous kinship concepts, turtle lodge teachings, and family development; the role of story-telling; human services and Indigenous people; Indigenous governance; working in an Indigenous context; relational accountability; and presentations and personal stories about the impact of trauma, attachment, brain development, addictions and traditional healing practices.

Participants were also provided with tools to help support their work with Indigenous children and families. These tools included questions to help assess Indigenous Identity and Social Inclusion. For more information about the tools and resources used to support the delivery of the course, including the film, Gently Whispering the Circle Back, please contact Blue Quills First Nations College at 1-888-645-4454 or visit their website at <http://www.bluequills.ca>.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

A seven-member Evaluation Advisory Team was established to provide oversight and direction for the evaluation. The evaluation plan was developed collaboratively through discussion between members of the team, and the overall approach to the evaluation reflected a blend of Indigenous and Western methodologies. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to find out what difference, if any, the experiential learning opportunity had made in practice. Data collection methods included group sharing circles and individual one-on-one interviews with participants and course facilitators. Participant feedback was audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. Responses were sorted into categories based on the overall evaluation questions, and transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify key themes. Transcripts were shared with the members of the Evaluation Advisory Team for review and comment, and members of the team gathered for an in-person opportunity to collectively reflect on emergent themes and findings from the evaluation.

Evaluation Findings

Who were the participants?

A commonality between many of the participants was the extent of their experience as human service professionals working with Indigenous children and families. The majority of participants reported between 10 and 25 years of experience in the human service field. Participants currently served in a mix of front-line, managerial, supervisory, and administrative roles.

Why did they participate in the four-day experiential learning opportunity?

Participants engaged in the four-day experiential learning opportunity for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, they chose to participate. A key message to emerge from their feedback was that they had chosen the experience willingly, seeking a deeper level of understanding and connectedness. Participants expressed a desire to learn more about the history and culture of Indigenous people, and a curiosity and interest in experiencing, and learning more about, the ceremonies that were very much integrated with how the program was delivered.

What, if any, difference did the experience make for participants? To what extent did the experience impact participants mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and/or physically?

Feedback from participants was clear. The experience made a difference. Words used to describe the experience included “reaffirming”, “empowering”, “intense”, “profound”, and “transformational”. Participants reported a variety of impacts at all levels: mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically/behaviourally.

Mentally: What did participants learn during the four-day experiential learning opportunity?

Participants described many examples of learning and achieving a deeper understanding of concepts they may have heard before but in some cases didn't fully understand. The key difference was that the learning occurred experientially and in ceremony. Many participants indicated that they had heard much of the information before, but not in the way it was delivered over the four days. The sharing of information was integrated in ceremony, in a gentle way, and with great respect. This helped to create an open space for learning and dialogue. One participant, upon reflecting on why the experience was so valuable to her despite having heard much of the information before, provided the following explanation:

“I think so many of us, we have so many hours of training in Aboriginal history, or Aboriginal Awareness is what it's typically called through our own accreditation bodies, that each year we have to have eight hours of Aboriginal training, and that often begins with an understanding of the residential school system and the impact of that. And depending on the organization we participate in different ways around learning about Aboriginal culture. But this has been a far more valuable experience than my thirteen years of doing that every year. Just having the time and participating in the way that it was delivered. I definitely got more out of that than all of the years of training I've done...And I would think that many other people felt the same way.”

This example is illustrative of what other participants shared during the evaluation, and it also illustrates the challenges of categorizing the data into “mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical

change". Everything was connected. The way that the program was delivered, the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical components of the program, made a difference in what participants learned and what they took away from the experience.

Examples of new learning and increased understanding were provided in the following areas: the historical context and current circumstances of Indigenous peoples (including the process and impact of colonization, and the cross-generational impact of residential schools); traditional Indigenous practices and ceremonies; Indigenous culture, teachings, and worldview; the use of language (influenced shift in using new language such as "being an ally", "ambassadors of knowledge", and "Indigenous"); and trauma, attachment, brain development, addictions, and traditional healing practices.

Spiritually: What impact did the experience have on a spiritual level? What did participants experience during the spiritual and ceremonial elements of the program?

Participants were given the opportunity to experience ceremonial and spiritual practices with the freedom to choose whether or not to participate, and an open, respectful space for asking questions.

The spiritual component was very much integrated in the delivery of the four-day experiential learning opportunity. On one level, participants were able to learn about Indigenous spiritual beliefs by participating in the ceremonies. On another level, some participants also described profound, personal spiritual experiences, a deeper connection to their own spirit, and an appreciation for the healing power of ceremony.

"...I think the training, because it was done in ceremony, touched me at a spiritual level, and...any time you can do training that touches you at a personal level, a professional level, and at the core of your being, wow, like what more can you say? So that's what that training meant for me."

"I think there was great importance to the ceremony part of the training that we took. And I give great credence to that. To the prayers and the spirituality that surrounded it. And feel quite strongly that that affected me in a way that I can't explain, but it had a great impact on me...I think what happened in the workshop is something that cannot necessarily be quantified in words. I do believe that the prayers and the spiritual aspects had a profound effect, and one can talk about it in some way, but really I don't really understand. I don't have to understand, but I know it had a profound impact on me."

Emotionally: What impact did the experience have on an emotional level? How did participants feel during the four-day experience, and how do they feel now?

Emotionally, participants experienced a range of feelings as they listened to and shared stories about colonization, residential schools, trauma, inter-generational trauma, addictions, and lateral violence. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how they were feeling about the information and stories being shared. Every morning began with a ceremony and a sharing circle. This provided the space for each participant to share and process their thoughts and

emotions. As a result, feelings of hope and connectedness were commonly expressed at the end of the four day experience.

“Emotionally – very cathartic, I felt at peace, as weird as that sounds. It was very peaceful to know that it wasn’t up to me or others like me, who are do-gooders, to fix things. This isn’t a fixable problem. It’s something we approach as an ally. Not that I felt patriarchal but it’s something that’s part of our culture. Whether we felt we were, we were. To realize I’m not the parent in this endeavour, but to realize that I’m a brother or sister. It took the burden off my shoulders. Not that I carried the burden of the province but just trying to figure things out. I’ve had many, many in-depth conversations with people in the sector, just trying to figure things out. It’s daunting. To understand it, and also to realize it’s not something that needs fixing. It’s about relationships. And stopping the othering. And stopping looking at things like a parent. So that was very freeing. That would I guess be the emotional.”

Many participants reported strong emotional impacts as a result of viewing the documentary film, *Gently Whispering the Circle Back*. The film included three main themes: Confronting the Historical Trauma, Understanding the Trauma, and Transcending the Trauma. In many ways, the four-day experiential learning opportunity, “Allying with Indigenous peoples: the practice of omanitew” paralleled these themes. The result was a very powerful experience that began with confronting historical trauma (acknowledging the history of colonization and residential schools), understanding the trauma (how trauma affects us mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically), and ultimately transcending the trauma (through a spiritual journey of healing and ceremony).

One of the fundamental aspects of the way the film was presented during the omanitew experience was the opportunity to reflect on and share thoughts and feelings after viewing the film. Relationships were built over the four days, and a safe space was created for sharing personal reflections. The potential for change was enhanced by the opportunity to collectively share feedback and to discuss implications for practice.

“When you watch somebody in pain, and see the impacts. The one particular story about his face being brought into the urine, and the treatment of people. Leona’s story. I’ve repeated it many, many, many times about the posters that were on the walls of little native children with feathers falling down to hell, while in heaven was the little blondies. How impactful, and what does that do to your psyche and who you are as a person? That to me was an incredibly powerful thing to witness. I think very few human beings can turn away from that and not be impacted at a more root level.”

Physically: What are participants doing differently now, if anything, as a result of the experience?

Participants emerged with either a renewed sense of commitment or transformative realization about the need to do things differently in their work with Indigenous children and families. Reported changes in practice included increased sharing of information, changes in overall approach and language (more emphasis on working collaboratively as allies), use of new tools and methods of engagement, and increased efforts to connect Indigenous children and families with their culture and family histories.

"It helped me wrap up how I was going to present our 8-hour training. There were pieces I was stuck on...It wasn't until after that thought process, after taking that workshop, and experiencing and hearing some of those words, I think helped me put it together, to get people to carry it with a certain drive, and they do... They want more information. Where we would have the history section...there was a lot of burden to bear, where now it's empowering, it's knowledge, it's about history, it's about our history. Not just Aboriginals. It's about Canadian culture. Canadian society. And now they want more of that section which we don't have time for! Yeah, it was a great experience, it helped me find words. And I also agree with (my colleague). I think more should experience the four days."

"There's multiple things that I do differently...One of the things, because I know that at the end of the day that I still work in a large agency that, you're still at the end of the day a business. You've got to be able to not just propose ideas or thoughts or concepts, you have to be able to come with information, data, and things to support it. So I had fabulous conversations with Leona and Ralph regarding outcomes. Outcome measures. Outcome pillars. And was able to bring that back...On one hand I could share this with my director and say, we're missing things here. This is profound what we're missing. I was able to bring it back to our research department and propose to do satisfaction surveys. I was able to say you need to incorporate A, B, C, and D from these outcomes, because we're missing something for our Indigenous clients, and I was able to take it as a blueprint back to my own individual program and say this is what we need to do differently here."

"...the first thing I did when I got back was to do a survey for our Indigenous, First Nations children, and to see how much of their culture was being honoured in the foster home, and whether or not Children's Services had asked that that happen, that an Elder be connected, or that they be connected with some aspect of their culture. And so the survey was following that up, and looking at those statistics... Well I found out that we were not nearly doing enough... I looked at what everybody was doing within the homes, and what percentage of the families were doing something, and what percentage were doing nothing. And, yeah, I felt it was quite a good eye-opener, particularly at that point in time when I did that, we had 65% of our clients...had some First Nations background, some cultural background, and I think what I came away with was we certainly weren't doing enough. And I think it just opened my team's eyes as well as, mostly I think it opened my team's eyes into what more we could do."

How did participants characterize the differences and similarities between "Allying with Indigenous Peoples: the practice of omanitew" and other types of training/learning opportunities?

The four-day experiential learning opportunity was characterized as significantly different from other types of training and learning opportunities. There were reported similarities related to some of the course content and the PowerPoint presentation component; however, more differences than similarities were reported.

Differences included the course delivery methods (ceremony, circle process, personal stories, experiential); diversity and number of facilitators; lack of hierarchy among facilitators and participants; diversity and breadth of teaching methods (stories, video, PowerPoint, sharing circles); participant characteristics (openness, willingness to share, no anger, blame or defensiveness); opportunity for sharing every day; and level of respectfulness (no speaking over each other or interrupting).

From the perspective of participants, what key elements of the experience should stay the same? What could be improved?

Participants reported that the following key elements should be kept the same: the ceremonial aspects (starting and ending in ceremony, circle process, opening and closing feast); the content (information, colonization, trauma, addictions, historical documents); viewing the film, *Gently Whispering the Circle Back*; group size (approximately 22 people); duration and immersion experience; diversity of facilitators; diversity of teaching methods; flexibility/adaptability; having a colleague attend (two per agency); and participant characteristics (willingness, not forced to participate, shouldn't be mandatory).

Participants offered the following suggested improvements: use of language to describe the experience ("maybe it's not training", it's an experiential learning opportunity); include the opportunity to participate in the sweat lodge as part of the same week; build in opportunity to come back together several months later (to share and reflect on change in practice); provide access to PowerPoint slides and written materials/resources; seek alternate facilities (e.g., somewhere with everything on site, including sweat lodge); and provide similar experiential learning opportunities for more people (agency staff, department staff, foster parents, and others).

To what extent does the learning opportunity have the potential to impact change in practice in Alberta?

Participants indicated that the learning opportunity had tremendous potential to impact change in practice in Alberta. Contextual factors that might facilitate or hinder change were also described. For example, supportive contextual factors included an emerging level of openness to change, elements of synchronicity, and a readiness to do things differently in organizations and across the province. Reported barriers included organizational structures and resistance to change.

Closing Comments and Recommendations

Continue to offer the experiential learning opportunity. Feedback from participants strongly supports the conclusion that the learning opportunity was successful and should continue to be offered as widely as possible. Participants expressed hopefulness that the opportunity would be available to their colleagues, other agency and department staff, foster parents, and other individuals who work with Indigenous children and families. The experience was quite unique, unlike other "training programs" participants had undertaken. Participants walked away feeling empowered, reaffirmed, and in some cases, transformed. They were equipped with new knowledge, greater understanding, and tools to support how to do things differently back in their agencies and in their interactions with Indigenous children and families.

Continue to emphasize voluntary participation, including a mix of participant roles and experience levels. Regardless of participants' level of experience, there was still much to learn, and an openness to this learning and understanding. The opportunity should continue to be

available to individuals with a range of experience, including recent graduates and those with many years in the field, as well as to individuals with varying decision-making roles including front-line, supervisory, management, and executive. Participants learned from each other as well as learning from the facilitators, and were open to share their stories and experiences. The course would not work as well if participants were coerced to be there; participation should remain voluntary.

Establish a mechanism for previous participants to reconnect. It would be beneficial to provide an opportunity for participants to reconnect several months after the experience to nurture relationships as well as to reflect on changes in practice. Other opportunities for ongoing networking and relationship building would also be valuable.

Maintain the key elements of success. What was it about the learning opportunity that made such a difference for those involved? It was delivered in ceremony, by diverse facilitators, and with a broad range of teaching methods. There was a respectful, open atmosphere. The experience touched people at a spiritual and emotional level, and because of this there was readiness and openness to learning new information.

Why was this experience so different from other experiences or other training programs? It was different because of how it was delivered (in ceremony, circle process, range of teaching methods) and by whom (combination of facilitators, more than one facilitator, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, male and female, and the credibility of those facilitators). The unique contributions made by the team of facilitators were critical to the successful implementation of the experiential learning opportunity.

Above all, it was different because it came from a different world view. And it allowed people to experience the world from the perspective of this world view, without asking them to give up their own world view but to be aware that other view points exist and are very real. It helped to reinforce the importance of connecting children and families with their culture, identity and language, by walking the walk, and experiencing the value of looking at the world from a different perspective. Not just reading about it, but experiencing it mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically, and creating in the process, stronger allies on the human journey.