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Searching Together: A Model for Community-Driven Research in Remote First Nations

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Introduction

Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, the North-South Partnership for Children, is a unique and developing partnership established collaboratively between First Nation chiefs, elders, youth, and community members living in remote communities in northwestern Ontario, and individuals and voluntary organizations based in southern Ontario. The building of a viable structure, with increasing membership in the south and the engagement of self-identified communities in the north, is an evolving process. The collective goals are to work toward trust, commitment, and, ultimately, genuine reconciliation. The depth of exchange, unique to the partnership, promotes and strengthens immediate and long-term solutions to urgent conditions and challenges faced by children, youth, and families in northern First Nation' communities. This paper will explore the guiding principles and the work of Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-wi, as a model that inspires respectful and trusting working relationships between First Nations and non-Aboriginal peoples in a way that heals, endures, and facilitates resource exchange and development.

Background

On remote northern Ontario First Nations reserves, accessed only by winter roads over frozen lakes or flying in on small aircraft, children, youth, and their families live in conditions of extreme poverty of which most Canadians are not aware. A recent report described the deplorable conditions that are a reality for many children and families in these communities (Silversides 2007). With unemployment rates as high as 90% (Brubacher 2007), most families live well below the poverty line, with social assistance as their sole source of income (North-South 2007a, 2007b). Yet the cost of groceries is three to four times higher than it is in southern Ontario. Children are hungry and many are not adequately clothed for the harsh northern temperatures. Most communities face severe housing shortages with up to eighteen people sharing a small, often rundown, two-bedroom house that is not designed to withstand the harsh weather conditions. Moreover, many dwellings have serious mould problems. Education facilities and services are similarly inadequate, with schools lacking basic necessities such as textbooks.

There are no special education services or trade programs available (North-South 2007a, 2007b). The long history of oppression, government dependency, and residential schools has eroded traditional strengths, culture, and dignity (Brubacher 2007; Silversides 2007), leading to high rates of alcohol, drug, and solvent abuse; mental health problems; and suicide, particularly amongst children and youth (North-South 2007a, 2007b; Silversides 2007). Nonetheless, First Nations have clear aspirations and plans for the rebuilding of their communities.

In Canada, the federal government's apology to Indigenous peoples on June 11, 2008, was an important event that is relevant to the rebuilding of First Nations communities, and to the development of new and significant ways of working together with First Nations people. Metaphorically, the apology signalled a new beginning in relationships, which Dockstator (1993) referred to as "negotiation and renewal." Canada is emerging from a recent past during which a variety of methods were employed in an attempt to systematically destroy First Nations cultures (Neu and Therrien 2003). These methods included relocations and confinement, the banning of cultural practices, forced attendance at residential schools, and the "60s scoop," during which many children were removed from their communities and adopted into non-First Nations homes (*ibid.*). Although oppressive and ultimately harmful in nature, it is important to note that these practices were not successful at undermining social values or a sense of distinctiveness among First Nations peoples. It is the admission of the failure and wrongfulness of these deeds that marks a symbolic beginning of a new relationship between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples; it is a reminder of a desire and need to move forward together. The work of Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, which exemplifies respectful and trusting working relationships between First Nations and non-Aboriginal peoples, may serve as a healing, enduring, and facilitating model of resource exchange and development for the future.

The Partnership

In the past, we have seen outsiders come into our communities with good intentions, only to leave behind more broken promises. The most critical aspect of a helping partnership is having an attitude of humility and respect for a different culture, of being willing to listen and learn. (Brubacher et al., 2006, 231)

There is no road map that captures the evolutionary nature of Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win (the partnership). The depth of the relational process represents social innovation at its core. Each partner is committed to building the organization one step at a time, meeting each challenge and opportunity with integrity and determination. This is its strength. At this time in the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada, the partnership marks out a critical path that signals fundamental

change. The relationship forged between thirty remote northern First Nations communities and over one hundred southern individuals and organizations is truly unique. This relationship is built on respect, meaningful knowledge exchange, and a “giving back with no expectation of a return.” Thus, through a process of “searching together,” north and south work to strengthen relationships and develop immediate and long-term solutions to urgent conditions and challenges faced by children, youth, and families in northern First Nations communities.

The governance structure of the partnership, although evolutionary, is built to cultivate this integral relationship-building process. It consists of two co-chairs (one from the north and one from the south), six northern First Nation representatives including one elder, and five southern representatives. The existing staffing model also replicates this north-south relationship with one northern/First Nation coordinator (based in Sioux Lookout) and one southern coordinator (based in Toronto). Each year, the partnership reports to the annual Chief’s Assembly and seeks approval for the strategic plan for the upcoming year. The thirty chiefs of the assembly nominate four chiefs to participate in the Governance Circle. The southern partners include individuals and organizations that offer networks of influence and resources. These are critical to both the sustainability of the organization and credibility of its public profile.

Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win’s policies, practices, and culture are defined by guiding principles of awareness, long-term commitment, and non-partisanship, as articulated by the organization’s First Nations partners. The first principle, awareness, speaks to the idea that Canadians need to better understand the dire needs and “third-world-like” conditions experienced in remote First Nations communities. This can be achieved through increased public awareness, education, and accountability. The second, long-term commitment, addresses the concern of First Nations communities that are increasingly skeptical of well-intentioned visitors who witness the “lived experience” of the communities, and then leave behind broken promises. This pattern was established historically and persists today. A requirement of membership in the partnership is a commitment for a period of a decade. This promotes enduring relationships that lead to change. Finally, the third guiding principle is that of a non-partisan approach. The day-to-day reality of First Nations people living on-reserve is based on layers of complex and often ineffectual intergovernmental policies and actions. Although the partnership cannot divest itself from these political realities, it makes every effort not to be encumbered by them. The partnership attempts to move its agenda forward, while at the same time avoiding bureaucratic and inter-jurisdictional entanglements.

Research Consortium

To enhance the building of credibility and to ensure empirical validation of process and outcomes, Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win has also incorporated a collaborative

research initiative as an integral part of the partnership. The proposed Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win research initiative has been ratified by the Governance Circle, and the research consortium is co-chaired by a northern and a southern partner. The goals of this diverse and interdisciplinary group include designing a culturally appropriate and empirically valid model of First Nations research and community capacity building, and assisting in the evaluation of the partnership. The development of the model will be directed by First Nations people and will utilize the resources provided by the southern partners. Ultimately, the work will draw on a consortium of university researchers from across the province. Participants in this consortium include the School of Child and Youth Care, Ryerson University; the Department of Psychology, University of Toronto at Scarborough; the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University; the Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario; and Aboriginal Studies, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

Traditionally, research with First Nations communities has been conducted in a context where directive research institutes take charge, and First Nations people are seen as useful or interesting subjects (WHO 2003; McNaughton and Rock 2003). In essence, First Nations communities have had little representation or influence on research design and process and, ultimately, little control over interpretation or ownership of data. This model has been problematic on many levels, as evidence suggests that it may serve to further marginalize First Nations and reduce the well-being of the people within these communities (McNaughton and Rock 2003). Fortunately, recent papers articulate an essential paradigm shift in the framework of research involving First Nations people, where communities are seen as equal partners in process and outcome (Chrisman et al., 1999; Macaulay et al., 1999; McNaughton and Rock 2003; Smylie et al., 2006; Stephens et al., 2006; WHO 2003).

It is readily acknowledged that such a process must ensure an “equitable and respectful approach to research” (McNaughton and Rock 2003, 15). However, First Nations working groups are also debating whether such work should play an obligatory role in decolonization and reconciliation for past wrongs committed throughout Canada’s history (see North-South Partnership 2007a and 2007b for review). In this context, it is necessary to ensure that the concept of partnership includes provisions for a new and innovative acknowledgement of rights and self-worth, allowing working groups to continually move forward (McNaughton and Rock 2003).

Although basic frameworks for participatory research do exist and are being espoused by the North-South Partnership, the current models are comprised of very general guidelines and principles for the management of participatory research (e.g., WHO 2003; Macaulay et al., 1999), rather than a framework to facilitate community assessment and long-term change. Ethics policies reflecting these values are also being developed (e.g., Corbiere et al., 2003). Although there is evidence to suggest that the participatory research practices alone may facilitate

community empowerment and reduce inequities (Travers 1997; Labonte 1994; Plough and Olafson 1994; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1994), a model to facilitate reliable and valid long-term community assessment and holistic community-based intervention specific to the needs of remote First Nations communities in Ontario (and created by these communities) is required.

Indeed, it has been acknowledged in the literature that facilitative models must address the particular needs of distinct communities, organizations, and individuals within those communities (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1994). As an example, SSHRC's recent dialogue paper on research and Aboriginal peoples (McNaughton and Rock 2003) focuses on a promotion of knowledge opportunities and corrective action to ensure that research directly benefits Aboriginal communities while respecting culture and knowledge traditions. It also suggests a shift in focus to a more positive epidemiological emphasis, ensuring adequate representation of community interests. Thus, work that focuses on the resilience of the people, despite deplorable living conditions, would be most appropriate.

In addition, given the prevalence of serious and often life-threatening psychological and physical health issues in northern First Nations communities, it is important to note that macro-level approaches to health assessment have been found to be deficient (see Smylie and Anderson 2006; Stevens et al., 2006), both in terms of accuracy and bureaucracy. Indeed, many studies have found compilations of data from sources such as censuses, health surveys, and surveillance systems to be inaccurate (Smylie and Anderson 2006). Furthermore, data is often collected, but not compiled and disseminated to the communities that it could benefit (Smylie et al., 2006). Thus, bureaucratic, top-down approaches to health management may further marginalize the most vulnerable populations (Smylie et al., 2006; Stevens et al., 2006).

Overall, there are systemic issues that may be addressed through the use of culturally specific, locally relevant, reliable, and valid assessment tools. For example, locally designed, culturally relevant measures that utilize First Nations teachings around health and healing will be very useful for planning subsequent holistic, community-based interventions and for enhancing representation and reconciliation. These teachings consider the health of the whole community and its surrounding environment (Smylie et al., 2006). Moreover, this type of framework is consistent with international ideas around Indigenous self-determination, which includes the right of the people to "construct knowledge in accordance with self-determined definitions of what is real and what is valuable" (Castenello 2004, as cited in Smylie et al., 2006, 2030).

As suggested in the introduction above, the needs of the thirty remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario are vast, and the potential solutions to the issues they must address are complex; therefore, efficacious, valid, and reliable holistic needs assessments and subsequent action plans, designed by the people, are required to elucidate and prioritize the community issues to be addressed. In partnership, the academics who work with this process must also utilize an inter-

disciplinary framework, rather than a model whereby the thinking of one narrow discipline prevails. A departure from mainstream work in the field, collaboration is particularly important when addressing socially related conditions such as suicide, and alcohol and drug use that may be related to social disadvantage and displacement from traditional land and life (Stephens et al., 2006). Thus, issues such as poverty, education, substandard housing, and unemployment, along with the resultant psychological distress and progression of illness must be considered. Moreover, issues of specific importance to First Nations people such as a loss of language, marginalization, and the impact of traumas inflicted by the residential school system, must also be determined by the people themselves. Collaboration from a holistic perspective will ultimately bring a richness to the research and the knowledge acquired.

What We Have Accomplished Thus Far

In the three years since its creation, Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, the North-South Partnership for Children, has worked hard to create a sustainable structure to shape the work of the organization. The members of the partnership are determined to incorporate flexibility and the ability to grow incrementally, provide form for the principles set out by the First Nations partners, honour established relationships, and facilitate the building of new relationships. This, to date, has been achieved through ongoing dialogue, knowledge exchange and development, and through a unique decision-making process that is a convergence of decisions of the northern partners with the actions of the southern partners. The structure of the organization, albeit malleable, will emerge from this continued process.

Importantly, the partnership has also engaged in a number of community capacity building initiatives that have since begun to merge with the above described research goals. Through an initiative called “Mamow Nana-da-we-ki-ken-chi-ke-win—Everyone searching for the answers together,” the partnership documents the needs, strengths, challenges, existing resources, history, and story of individual communities, as told by members of the communities themselves. Often used as a starting point, these exchanges begin the process of understanding and learning from each other. The information is used to direct southern efforts and to ensure ongoing accountability to the First Nation. The process also provides First Nations with some detail as to the resources available in the south. By understanding community needs, the partnership is able to make links and broker with southern supports, including funding agencies, volunteers, training resources, and donations.

To date, initiatives in three communities—Mishkeegogamong, Webequie, and Pikangikum—are well established with visible outcomes. Several more community assessments, together with the research components, took place in 2009. Each “Searching Together” initiative is moulded by the leaders and the

members of the participating community. Thus, the nature of the support received from southern partners is also determined by the community.

Regardless of the composition of each individually tailored response to community needs, they must all be sustainable and holistically focused. The community assessment outcomes thus far (see North-South 2007a, 2007b) suggest deeply rooted and profound social determinants of health are at play. The outcomes are dire. For example, in Webequie, which has a population of 690, 27 young people have committed suicide since 1997. Pikangikum, with a population of just over 2,000, lost 8 young people in the months of July and August 2007 alone. As a result of overwhelming need, service providers in these communities are often exhausted, fractured in their efforts, and subsequently ineffectual. Nonetheless, First Nations have clear aspirations and plans for the rebuilding of their communities—some, such as Webequie, have already begun. This resiliency, despite adversity, motivates the work of the Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win project.

Complex needs and rebuilding plans also necessitate ongoing assessment and validation of the Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win project itself. Thus, through the research consortium and the emerging culturally appropriate research methodology, evaluation of the Searching Together process will be undertaken. More specifically, through a further examination of existing literature and relevant models, and through an analysis of the past work of the partnership in the community assessment process, challenges and “lessons learned” will be identified. In the future, First Nations communities in northern Ontario that are willing to engage in community consultation processes relevant to the creation of culturally appropriate research methodology will engage in a pilot project that will be used to validate both the models of community assessment and community mobilization. Thus, guidelines for ethical and culturally relevant research methods, based on the relationships sustained by the partnership, will also be framed and tested. Consistent with the values and guiding principles of Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, it is predicted that the pilot project itself will facilitate empowerment and the building of respectful relationships that will allow First Nations perspectives (in remote northern Ontario) to shape the “searching together”/research process (Travers 1997; Labonte 1994; Plough and Olafson 1994; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1994). It is hoped that validation of the work of Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win will also help to further solidify and describe the mandate of the organization. Through the process of developing an organizational structure and continuing the ever-evolving “searching together” initiative in remote communities, clarification of the mandate will emerge. Thus, a tested plan for long-term sustainability will evolve from these dialogues, and the Governance Circle will undertake the development of a financially sustainable model of community assessment and capacity building that is consistent with the emerging mandate and structure. Collaborative dialogues will be sought with other organizations on a similar pathway, such as those affiliated with the Gordon Foundation, the Temagami Group, the Sage

Foundation, and others. Lessons learned across other social innovations will assist the Governance Circle with model development.

Long-Term Goals

Ultimately, there are a number of long-term goals held by Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win. Consistent with the values and principles of the organization, visibility and awareness to the circumstances, conditions, and life experiences of the First Nations people in the remote north is primary. Public awareness will promote accountability and change. This will be achieved through the systematic collection of stories and oral histories, and through the documentation of “searching together” initiatives and outcomes.

Another long-term goal involves the promotion of change through the clarification of systemic issues. This can be achieved in a number of ways, including the building of networks and coalitions to influence policy development and the building of resource-sharing opportunities, the modernization of Aboriginal rights (i.e., land claim rights) in a manner that incorporates economic development, and the promotion of housing policy that builds on local resources and capacity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the partnership seeks to continue the modelling of new relationships with First Nations people. This is done in order to influence public funders and governmental and non-governmental sectors as they negotiate relationship and resource development.

Conclusion

In summary, the organizational goals of Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win are vast, but manageable and sustainable. These goals include:

- Providing support to and building enduring partnerships between southern organizations and thirty remote First Nations in northwestern Ontario
- Increasing public awareness and understanding of First Nation realities
- Building First Nations community capacity for economic, social, and cultural wellness through validated assessment and capacity-building initiatives
- Increasing opportunities for the voluntary sector to resource First Nation communities
- Laying down the foundation for respectful knowledge exchange, which is central to meaningful reconciliation
- Advancing the equitable distribution of programs, services, and entitlements for children in remote northern communities
- Providing a model for new relationships with First Nations people for government, philanthropic, and non-governmental sectors

Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win's policies, practices, and culture are defined by guiding principles of awareness, long-term commitment, and non-partisanship, as articulated by the organization's First Nations partners. Thus, through a process of "searching together," north and south work to strengthen relationships and develop immediate and long-term solutions to urgent conditions and challenges faced by children, youth, and families in northern First Nations communities.

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