'Creation Stories:

Creating Strong Families Through Our Stories'

A

CASE

STUDY

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Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network Atlantic Research Centre (UAKN Atlantic)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Background and Context

The 'Creation Stories: Creating Strong Families Through Our Stories' project is designed to help parents understand their own stories, education, and traditions in order to support their children. The project is facilitated through (for example) Friendship Centres, Early Childhood Education Centres, or Pre-natal/Midwifery organizations.

The community-based research of the original 'Creation Stories' project focuses on personal interviews with community members from the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre and later paired with knowledge from community Elders and Knowledge Keepers so expectant or new parents/guardians can learn from each other.

Storytelling is a foundational component of Indigenous life and culture. Traditional stories play an important role in providing direction and insight into the daily lives of individuals and groups by making connections to a broader community and a wider vision. Combining this traditional way of knowing and teaching (i.e. storytelling) with relevant cultural experiences from the recent past and the daily lives of current community members allows for the possibility of unifying the old and the new. Such an approach can provide the opportunity for expectant and new parents to reframe their life stories, and the life stories of their communities, to help support concepts of cultural identity through a positive lens.

The importance of prenatal and early years education programming is well established. Expectant and new parents participating in parental education programs learn how to create positive environments for children through which they can gain a strong sense of self and cultural identity. With that formative background, children can experience success during formal schooling. Although federal, provincial, and territorial governments have introduced numerous policies and programs advocating increased early childhood education, care, and accessibility for the general Canadian population, Indigenous Peoples have not obtained equivalent opportunities to participate in and benefit from these programs and services (Preston, 2008). Friendly and Beach (2005) expressed the urgent need for Aboriginal early learning programs when they highlight the fact that Aboriginal groups have larger than average child populations which makes early childhood education and care within these groups an especially important issue. Establishing this project in your community is just one way to help support such important concerns.

Introduction to the Project

Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to provide a guide for the development of a 'Creation Stories: Creating Strong Families Through Our Stories' community-based research project in one's own community. This project is grounded in our stories and embraces intergenerational learning so that new families are empowered as they create their own stories.

Creation Stories are learning stories. The purpose of such stories might be to teach the young, preserve history and rituals, preserve culture and values, entertain, challenge thought, or stimulate creativity. Creation Stories can be about Aboriginal Peoples, history, culture, my story and yours', the story we wish for our children, the story of our life span, and of our relationship to each other.

Note: English is the language used in this case study and supporting documents however, communities have the option to translate and deliver the content in their Indigenous language depending on their capacity to do so.

Rationale

The 'Creation Stories' project is an attempt to offset the legacy of colonization in Canada. In order to empower ourselves we have to work together and learn as we go, which can be supported through sharing our stories. It is important to realize that we all have choices and that these choices have an effect on our families. As individuals and as a community, we have the knowledge and skills needed to live the lives we choose for ourselves, our families, and our community.

Goal

The goal of this project is to be an urban Aboriginal based catalyst to help parents, communities, and service providers create a sound start for new parents and their children.

Aim

Key components of a successful project are ensuring cultural appropriateness and respecting Indigenous culture and beliefs (Bucharski, Brockman, and Lambert, 1999). Successful projects for Indigenous Peoples recognize the importance of having community Elders and Knowledge Keepers involved in the entire process and engaging in dialogue and evidence-based research to improve prenatal care and early education in the Indigenous population (Smith and Davies, 2006). Established projects address culture and language, prenatal care, labour and delivery, breastfeeding, baby and mother care after delivery, infant growth and

development, education, health, nutrition, social support, and parental/guardian involvement. However, a key element in processes of education and the transition to incorporate new learning into one's life is the readiness and openness of the target clientele.

Lead Team and Clientele

This project can be led by organization members and/or educators, or by university and/or college students to use as a community-based research project for academic credit.

As David Newhouse and Trice McGuire-Adams write in the preface to *Well-Being in the Urban Aboriginal Community*, over 54 percent of Aboriginal Peoples live in urban areas. As a result, there is a significant need within the urban Aboriginal population for prenatal and early childhood parenting education, and a need to establish a context through which delivery of such material can be more productive by facilitating the learners' readiness. We view our program as the first step in helping individuals move toward this readiness. We hope to support this readiness by using the collected stories of a group of urban Indigenous Peoples to help frame traditional Aboriginal teachings in a manner that will stimulate thoughtful reflection and discussion in reference to recent history, contemporary society, and daily living. Through this, participants in this project may take steps to create a personal story that brings strength and leads to an openness to learning and change in themselves and others.

Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre's 'Creation Stories: Creating Strong Families Through Our Stories'

Project History

The project took our team over five years to finalize with many false starts; it was a learning process based on trial and error. The step-by step-guide included in this case study outlines how the final product was achieved, meaning that steps presented do not reflect our process of trial and error but when re-assessing the process, we agreed that the step-by-step guide of this case study is most helpful to others who want to initiate this project for their own community.

We understand that communities cannot be put into a 'one-size-fits-all' constraint. After reading through the step-by-step guide, please read our published Handbook (UAKN) attached, select the content that applies to your goals and objectives, and ultimately, decide what will work best for your own community.

Cost

You do not need a consultant to do this work. Your community will more than likely already have all the human resources and skills necessary to manage this project from start to finish. The only word of

warning I would give is around ensuring that those you hire or who volunteer have the experience and skill necessary to complete their assigned role (outlined below). For example, with transcripts, depending on how many interviews you collect and the length of the stories in each interview, transcription can take a long time, therefore is could be more cost effective to pay for transcription services. These decisions are up to the community as you know your own situations best.

Ownership

In order to properly engage your community in a safe and transparent manner, the community must maintain ownership of their stories and the final product. To ensure this, the First Nations 'Principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession' are followed (for more details, see https://fnigc.ca/ocap), which maintain that: i) Ownership and Possession: First Nations have ownership and possession over their personal stories and how their information is used; and ii) Control and Access: First Nations control the data collection of personal stories that are shared through an interview process. Community members have access and control over their own stories, which means the contributors can edit, add, or delete any part of their interview; permission must be gained to use their words in a printed booklet; and the final product is owned by the community.

Project Process

A. Background Information for the Lead Team

 i. a) Before beginning your community 'Creation Stories' project, please read the attached Handbook (Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network 2019) and 'Step-by-Step Guide' included in this case study;
    b) Prior to establishing a Lead Team and initiating your interviews, please take time to research the protocols specific to your community/nation for engaging Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members in your project.

 ii) The Lead Team establishes a project plan specifically for their community and ensures that all protocols, permissions, and any other requirements are adhered to.

iii) This project is based on:
    a) the collection of personal stories gathered through one-on-one interviews with community Elders and Knowledge Keepers, followed by;
    b) individual families being encouraged to create their own stories with their guidance.

B. Step-by-Step Guide for the Project

The following is a step-by-step guide outlining the process of developing and implementing this community-based research project.

Each of the following steps are detailed below:

1. Establishing a Lead Team
2. Assign Roles
3. Research the Traditional Territory
4. Conduct Interviews
5. Transcribe Interviews
6. Data Analysis of Interviews
7. Booklet Assembly, Publication, and Distribution

Step 1. Establishing a Lead Team

This is an excellent group project that will help bring together a community. Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and families share their stories; Elders and Knowledge Keepers can provide guidance and support; educators, students, and community members can come together to assist the Lead Team in developing the project.

For our team, we had Dr. Greg McKenna, Research Consultant with Holland College, Sharon O'Brian, Director of the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre, and Neil Forbes, Education Director for Lennox Island First Nation. Each member of our team brought a number of skills to the project and our team created a final product that we are proud of and that far exceeded our individual abilities.

Lead Team members are from within your organization or educational institution who will recruit others for the roles listed below (under Step 2). As the Lead Team for this project, scan your community and organization to assess what skills are available before looking elsewhere for assistance.

Step 2. Assign Roles

Once your Lead Team has decided on the format of your own community project and has a sound understanding of the path to be taken, assign the roles identified below:

Researcher of the Traditional Territory: _____

Interviewer(s): _____

Transcriber(s): _____

Data Analysis of Interviews: _____

Handbook Assembly: _____

Step 3. Research the Traditional Territory

At some point in the process, someone can be responsible for researching traditional knowledge, stories, poetry, songs, dance, and art from your community and territory. Our project took place in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and even though the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre serves all urban Aboriginal Peoples, Charlottetown sits on unceded Mi'kmaq territory. Therefore, we used traditional knowledge from the Mi'kmaq community. We used poems from Rita Jo, quotes from traditional Mi'kmaq leaders, Senators, and Elders. You want to find anything that rings true to your community and creates a context of who your people are and how they got there. Please read through our Handbook for further examples.

Step 4. Conduct Interviews

Interviews should be conducted by a person who the community feels comfortable with and who has the type of personality that can draw the best out of people. Being interviewed is an odd experience, so you want to create an environment that is comfortable and open. The questions provided in this case study are open ended, so it is ok to ask follow-up questions. Let the interview become a conversation and let it go wherever it needs to.

The interviews need to be conducted in a quiet place because they will be recorded. All smartphones have the ability to record audio or you can buy or rent a wide range of recording devices. Again, whatever best suits your community's situation. Once an interview is completed, it is important to upload and save your audio file to a computer. Saving and sharing the audio files is a good way to prevent the loss of an interview. For recording and saving audio files, it is best to have the help of someone who is comfortable with technology.

Below are sample questions and prompting statements we used when we interviewed parents from the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre.
   1. What stories did your parents tell you about their school experience?
   2. Tell us the story of your earliest learning memories before starting school.
   3. Tell us a story about your early school days.
   4. Tell us the story of your greatest challenges in school.
   5. Tell us the story of your greatest success in school.
   6. Are there any other stories you would like to tell us about school?
(Please see Step 7, below, for more details on questions used in our Handbook).

Step 5. Transcribe Interviews

For our project, we initially hired community members to do the transcriptions. We wanted to support the community we were working in and wanted to build capacity. Because the community members had no experience transcribing interviews, they quickly became overwhelmed and were only able to finish a few interviews and at a slow pace.

Transcription is important so this is where you may want to pay for transcription services, whether it be a university student looking to make a few extra dollars or the use of a professional service. We eventually hired an Aboriginal university student who had experience in transcription. She was fast and accurate which is important. Companies like https://www.transcribeme.com offer transcription services where you upload an audio file and it returns as a word document. At this point you will be swimming in a lot of content; this volume of stories can be overwhelming. Make sure you take steps to make sure all your work is saved and backed up. The worst thing is to lose someone's story.

Step 6. Data Analysis of the Interviews

This process can be done in a number of ways, but for simplicity, I will explain the process we did. After all of your interviews have been transcribed, you need to go through and read all the interviews. As you are reading, highlight lines that seem to be repeating a lot. Does residential school come up a lot? Highlight all the sentences that discuss residential school in yellow. Does loss of language come up a lot? Highlight any passage that talks about loss of language in blue. Once you have read through the interviews a few times, you can flip through the pages and take note of which colours are coming up the most. These colours are your themes.

The themes are a representation of your community's perspectives on education. Are the themes mostly positive or negative? If mostly positive, your community is in a good place. Use this as a chance to celebrate your community's strengths. Your community members' success can be an inspiration for those who are struggling. If there are a lot of negative themes, this can be the focus of your Handbook.

For context, below are the themes we discovered from analyzing our interviews:

1. attendance at residential schools was present in the family history;
2. family history included losing language and culture to greater or lesser degrees;
3. experience of racism and bullying at school;
4. feeling alone, a lack of belonging, and of being caught between two cultures (e.g. white and Aboriginal) and not fitting well with either;

5. not seeing the relevance of education, for example, the importance of finding a place for oneself through a skill in one academic area (e.g. math) being recognized, or receiving support of a teacher who highlighted the relevance of school learning;

6. importance of having someone (e.g. parent or grandparent) who placed importance on school;

7. the important role of grandparents, particularly grandmothers, in supporting cultural learning.

Step 7. Handbook Assembly, Publication, and Distribution

The Lead Team is responsible for the final assembly of the community's stories into a Handbook to share with those involved in the project. Publishing and distribution are up to the Lead Team and the community to decide (see First Nations OCAP guidelines above).

For photographs in the Handbook we used photos taken at First Light St. John's Friendship Centre and Fredericton's Under One Sky Friendship Centre. We used these pictures because of their quality and because we had immediate access to them. However, this was a mistake. We missed an excellent opportunity to bring in someone to the Mi'kmaq Family Resource Centre and capture the families in their element, visually connecting the interviews with the Handbook. We did not realize this mistake until it was too late in the design process, but it is a mistake I regret. Finally, with regards to design and layout, we had funds available to hire a professional designer. We used Ryan Hutchinson (http://www.ryanhutchinson.ca). This is not necessary as the community interviews are the essential aspect, but it did add a beautiful sheen that was appreciated.

For our Handbook, there are seven sections that follow the Mi'kmaq's Seven Sacred Gifts of Life: Love, Honesty, Humility, Respect, Truth, Patience, and Wisdom. According to the teachings of Mi'kmaw Elder Dr. Murdena Marshall, the Seven Sacred Gifts teachings has been passed down to help us in our lives and empower us in our journey as we each work on creating our own stories. Each section in the Handbook has three parts: i) a quote from a Mi'kmaw Elder or Knowledge Keeper; ii) a quote from interviews with parents; and finally, iii) a question to help you think about your own 'Creation Story'.

To align the quotes, we followed a two-step process:

i) after the interviews, we used the information gathered to find common themes (refer to 'Step 6: Data Analysis of the Interviews');

ii) the questions listed below were then written for use in the Handbook, designed to encourage thought and discussion from readers.

- What does family mean to your story?

- How do you share goodness with those you love?

- Our stories can be hard to share. How can you share these stories in a way that is honest and empowering?

- Our history has left some of us feeling isolated. Some of us want nothing to do with our history. But our history will always be a part of our story. How do you balance our history with your story?

- Has anyone ever asked you about your story?

- Are you comfortable telling your story?

- What is your story?

- How can you use your story to better understand yourself?

- How will you use your story to have a positive influence with your family?

- How can connecting with the Elders' stories help connect your story to your culture?

- How does your traditional language support connections in your life?

- How do you use your life experience to connect and help others in your life?

     As stated, the questions and answers provided in the Handbook came out of the process of pairing the quotes from Mi'kmaq Elders and Knowledge Keepers with quotes from parents' interviews. There is no right or wrong way to pair these quotes; each of the questions were in reaction to what was being said by the community.

     While this case study was designed to help you create your own project, there is nothing wrong with asking for help. If at any point in the process you have any questions, please contact Neil Forbes at i.neil.forbes@gmail.com

     Thank you for your interest in this project, we wish you, your family, and your community success!