

DOCUMENTING THE HOMEWORK SUPPORT PROGRAM: ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborations between Aboriginal communities and the universities can be beneficial if they involve respect and equality. Universities and society are finding common grounds for co-production of knowledge by working "in collaboration with society on social issues of shared concern" (Lévesque 2012: 291).

After decades of research marked by an unequal division of powers between university researchers and Aboriginal communities (Smith, 2012), the terms of this relationship need to be redefined. Marked by both success and errors, and in the face of well-established organizational cultures, new guidelines for researcher/community relations must be developed. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of what makes positive collaborations possible.

In Canada, the Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) have enabled partnerships between the Aboriginal communities and the universities, resulting in collaborative work on various issues such as language, natural resources management, protection of culture, and health. These partnerships have provi-

ded an opportunity to redefine the terms of the production of scientific knowledge and to come up with new ways of doing things, including initiatives that reflect the questioning of conventional ways of doing things in the social sciences, where researchers where researchers strive for objectivity, in dissociating themselves from the context of their research (Guay and Thibault 2010).

In Québec, the ODENA – Aboriginal Peoples in Quebec Cities, which is a Quebec research alliance headed jointly by the Regroupement des Centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ) and DIALOG- Aboriginal Peoples Research and Knowledge Network, adopted a charter setting out shared ethical values: 1) respect; 2) fairness; 3) sharing; 4) engagement; and 5) trust (see the contribution by Lévesque et al. in the toolbox). All researchers and partners of the ODENA Alliance who request internal grants for funding of their projects must include "provisions for the co-construction of knowledge." As Basile et al. (2012) emphasize, it is high time that Aboriginal organizations become an integral part of the process of redefining ethical approaches to research that concerns them.



THE ISSUE: THE HOMEWORK SUPPORT PROGRAM

The Homework Support program that we have chosen to document is an initiative that stems from a collaboration between the RCAAQ and ODENA Alliance. This program is part of the numerous programs and services offered by the Friendship Centres throughout Quebec to meet the specific needs of urban Aboriginal children. Thanks to a commitment made at the First Nations Socio-Economic Forum by the RCAAQ with the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Sport et du Loisir (MELS), six Native Friendship Centres have been offering the program since 2006: Lanaudière, Quebec City, La Tuque, Saguenay, Chibougamau and Val-d'Or.

An integral part of the friendship Centres' programming for almost a decade, the Homework Support had never been documented, beyond a descriptive summary of the project and the activity reports written for the funding agencies. But every year close to 140 children register in the Homework Support program, and it is one of the approaches highlighted by the MELS (2008) to encourage academic success and to prevent school dropout.

We note that the high school graduation rate among Quebec First Nations members over 18 years old stood at 76% in 2012, compared to 87% among the non-Aboriginal population in Quebec (Statistics Canada 2012). According to the First Nations Regional Health Survey, 39.9% of First Nations adults had less than high school compared with 24% for the Canadian population at

large (FNIGG, 2008). In addition, Aboriginal people face specific school-related difficulties. Aboriginal children are often confronted by an education system presenting barriers that are difficult to overcome, such as language, prejudice and the lack of understanding about Aboriginal realities and Aboriginal culture (Lainé 2014). Quebec's Commission des droits de la personne et de la jeunesse accordingly considers Aboriginal youths to be among the groups most likely to be subjected to discrimination or racial profiling in Quebec (Eid *et al.* 2011).

THE BENEFITS OF THIS RESEARCH: A SUMMARY

This research partnership allowed us to document the relevance of the Homework Support program offered by the Friendship Centres (Blanchet-Cohen *et al.* 2014). The Centres' willingness and interest that 130 people were able to participate, making up three target groups: 1) elementary and secondary school students who are currently receiving or have previously received Homework support program; 2) families; and 3) the Centres' employees directly involved in the service. Between November and February, discussion groups and individual interviews took place and a questionnaire was completed by more than one-third of the children participating in the program. The Centres presented the project orally to the parents. A consent form was sent home for the parents/guardians to sign. Phone call were made to remind parents/guardians to return the form, but none refused that their child participate.

The information collected clearly brought out the holistic approach underpinning the program offered by the Centres. Beyond the concrete help with learning provided by the Homework Support staff, the service offers a context conducive to the acquisition of new knowledge and development of self-esteem among the students. It gives them the desire and motivation to learn, by providing positive reinforcement combined with diversified learning strategies and the creation of intergenerational and inter-community links. This approach helps students' adopt a more positive attitude towards school, to persevere more in the face of difficulties and failure, and ultimately, continue their studies. The service also encourages families to provide the children with appropriate supervision to promote their success.

With the submission of the research and evaluation report, the Centres offering the program saw that the research brought out the scope of their programming. The questions raised by the discussion groups or interviews led to wider reflection on these issues by the program's staff at the Centres. The research also served to define and articulate the winning conditions of the Homework Support program, including:

- **A culturally safe supervision and accompaniment approach:** Flexibility in an Aboriginal context, positive reinforcement and recognition increases the children's motivation and helps them adopt a more positive attitude towards school, their schoolwork and the difficulties they encounter.

- **Staff's profile:** Having staff who speak the children's first language or who belong to their nation considerably helps the children to understand their homework and creates a relationship of trust with the staff.
- **Transportation service for students:** In areas where there is poor public transit, where the schools and Aboriginal communities are isolated and where parents do not have a vehicle, the transportation service of the Homework Support program ensures that as many children as possible can participate.
- **Continual adaptation of the service:** Annual evaluations and constant adaptation of the Homework Support service are key elements in an ongoing process of improvement.

The documentation of the program fostered a questioning of the Friendship Centres role. In light of the growth of the urban Aboriginal population (Comat *et al.* 2014) and the difficulties children have in adapting to their arrival at school, there is indeed an increase need for adequate school support of Aboriginal children. The friendship Centres could thus play the role of an intermediary between the student, his or her family, and school. By establishing solid relations for collaboration and joint action within the community, the Native Friendship Centres are able to work together with the schools and other resources (police services, health services, social workers, etc.) to combat the racism and social exclusion that young Aboriginal people may experience. These

collaborations can therefore help to ensure better support for Aboriginal families whose socio-economic, family and health conditions constitute obstacles to their children's academic perseverance and success.

These reflections allowed the RCAAQ to explore new avenues for solutions with the MELS and to propose the recruitment of a liaison officer. Based at the Native Friendship Centre of Val-d'Or (NFCVD), this pilot project will promote collaboration and coordination of actions between the NFCVD and the city's elementary and secondary schools that take in Aboriginal students.

Four elements that contributed to the success of this research partnership are described below. By research partnership we mean the "pairing of different kinds of expertise between the universities and civil society organizations" (Fontan 2010: 3), which serves to coproduce new knowledge from a perspective of social change or transformation. These elements reflect the principles for "good research practice" identified by the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador (APNQL, 2005, page 3).

1. A NEED DEFINED BY THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

The first element of this collaboration is the fact that it emerged from the people directly involved at the community level, through the RCAAQ. Since its creation, the RCAAQ has been an incubator of initiatives for urban Aboriginal people and has successfully developed innova-

tive and proactive strategies (Lainé 2014). Collaboration with researchers from the ODENA Alliance came out of a reflection from the RCAAQ, which saw that the Homework Support program had not yet been the subject of any study, despite its popularity. Furthermore, an external evaluation of the Homework Support program by the MELS in 2008 had not taken account of the activities implemented by the Native Friendship Centres. The RCAAQ thereupon obtained funding from the MELS to conduct an independent evaluation; this funding was enhanced by a contribution from the ODENA Alliance.

From the outset, the RCAAQ expressed an interest in documenting the Homework Support experience to make known its importance, scope and benefits. The research question was clear: What is the relevance of the Homework Support program? Three meetings were held with RCAAQ representatives to develop the research plan and to define the approach taken to document this program. This involved the following:

- To target the family and the community, not just the child, in recognition of the fact that the program goes beyond the individual;
- To understand the environment/context in which the child lives, because that influences the child's life at school;
- To emphasize school perseverance, not just academic success;
- To produce an inventory of the tools developed by the Centres to use Aboriginal culture as a means of facilitating the children's learning.



This plan served as the basis for defining the methodology and the approach used to obtain data. As Fontan has noted, “research that is defined jointly seeks to meet objectives that incorporate concerns which are not necessarily the researcher’s own concerns” (2010: 10). The framework provided by the local environment, where there is knowledge of the program and its specific nature, served to develop a culturally appropriate methodology.

2. TOOLS SELECTED AND VALIDATED BY THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

First of all, the RCAAQ took part in the selection and validation of the research tools. Further to identifying the study’s goals and including parents and extended families along with the participating children, the RCAAQ determined the type of data collection. A survey would not be appropriate in this context, so we opted instead for discussion groups/roundtables. This method allowed us to identify good practices, to explore what was or was not working well, and to facilitate sharing among the Centres. The joint development of the methodology allows for an equitable and respectful research (APNQL, 2005).

Based on the guidelines provided by the local context, the research team developed interview questions and discussion groups to encourage a conversation with the participants. The questions were then reviewed and reformulated to make sure they were expressed in clear and straightforward language.

The research team contributed to the project through its knowledge about research with children, which was its main area of expertise (Blanchet-Cohen 2014). A play-based approach was used. This involved first playing a ball game and then using drawings to create an atmosphere where the children could express orally, in writing or in their drawings what they liked about the Homework Support service and the Native

Friendship Centre, and what they would like to see improved. The children were asked to draw what they liked about Homework Support on one side of a sheet of paper and what they liked about school on the other side. The children then explained their drawings. The social and personal relations aspect of the Homework Support emerged strongly from their drawings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Drawing by 9 year old Attikamekw, Centre d’amitié autochtone de Lanaudière



The discussion groups and the interviews with the families took place after the period devoted to the program. In keeping with the Centres' practice, a meal was provided before holding the discussion groups, which helped to establish an atmosphere of sharing. These meetings lasted 90 minutes on average and always included the Centre's employees, essential for creating a bridge to the research team and for transferring information to other employees. In the discussion groups for families, the employees were observers; they asked a number of questions to improve their ways of doing things.

The discussion groups with the Friendship Centres' employees were held during working hours and lasted about 90 minutes. They provided an opportunity for the staff to reflect on their work and to articulate their approach and the kinds of learning involved.

3. RELATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS

As with all university research, this project was approved by the Ethics Committee at Concordia University. Following the standards set out in chapter 9 of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement*, the letter presented by the RCAAQ with the submission of the project to Concordia's Ethics Committee recognized the requirement to ensure "community engagement and collaboration in research undertakings" (2010: 128).

Further to the letters of consent (those signed at the start of each work session and those signed by the parents for their

children), the ethics of this research were founded on human relationships. The engagement of the researchers allowed the RCAAQ to make the decision to carry out a research partnership on this topic. Accordingly, the RCAAQ proposed conducting this research following a conference presentation on the approach and work experience required for researchers working with Aboriginal youths (Blanchet-Cohen 2014). Aside from the need for the research, developing good relations between the researcher and the milieu proved to be essential.

Regarding the discussion groups, we saw that some participants had first chosen to observe the activity and decided to participate in the discussion only after a relationship of trust had been established. For example, even though he had a letter of consent, one child chose to withdraw from the activity, only to return later. The way that the researcher team presented themselves helped to forge this atmosphere of trust (Kovach 2010). The RCAAQ members thus appreciated the language used by the research team, and their way of engaging in conversations, including a non-imposing presence and a soft tone of voice.

As noted by Basile *et al.*, ethics "is above all a matter of people's relationships with and engagement towards one another" (2012: 3). The large number of children and parents who participated illustrates the engagement of the researchers and the local environment.

4. OWNERSHIP OF THE RESULTS BY THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Throughout this research activity, a dialogue between the research team and the local environment made it possible to validate the data analysis and effective appropriation of the results by the community.

Halfway, the research team prepared a PowerPoint presentation, which was given to the RCAAQ board of directors. This preliminary draft of the results was based on the fieldwork carried out at four Centres, giving food for thought to the RCAAQ and contributing to its programming. Following submission of the report, a joint presentation was made at the ACFAS Conference in 2014, as well as to the RCAAQ board at its quarterly meeting. These presentations were not only an opportunity for the Centres to discuss the Homework Support programming, but they also led to a proposal for creating a liaison officer between the schools and the urban Aboriginal community.

CONCLUSION

We have learned that a research partnership depends on the desire of each party to pool their complementary expertise. One must be both intentional and flexible, in order to effectively combine the wealth of each type of expertise and to get the most out of the partnership at every stage.

In respecting the roles and functions of each party, this partnership was beneficial. This type of research not only led to the production of knowledge concerning the relevance of the Homework Support program in the Aboriginal communities (a topic hitherto largely unstudied), but also brought immediate benefits for the community, in terms of their thinking about the programs offered and in terms of identifying new

needs, such as the liaison officer position. It is essential to establish a good relationship between researchers and Aboriginal organizations in order to create bidirectional benefits (Asselin and Basile 2012: 5). Care must be taken from start to finish of a research project to maintain that relationship, with trust as an integral part, in order to meet the real needs of Aboriginal people.



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