



**PROMISING PRACTICES IN
FIRST NATIONS CHILD WELFARE MANAGEMENT AND
GOVERNANCE**

**Kunuwanimano Means “Keeping Our Own”
Practicing from a Perspective of Strength**

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Abstract

Kunuwanimano is a First Nations child and family service agency located in Timmins, Ontario. Incorporated in 1989, the agency provides prevention and family support services for 11 First Nations communities. Kunuwanimano’s operation from a foundation of recognizing, claiming, honoring and promoting the strength and dignity of First Nations people and culture, will be the primary focus of this article.

Introduction

Kunuwanimano Child and Family Services is reclaiming the strength, dignity and proud heritage of the First Nations people and culture subjected to decades of systematic denigration through assimilationist education and child welfare policies and practice¹. Kunuwanimano means “Keeping Our Own” through building community strength by respecting, practicing and teaching traditional ways passed on by the Elders. This is a perspective of empowerment where building strong communities begins with strengthening the family unit and focusing on the future generation. Critical to this endeavor is recognizing and honoring the strengths inherent in First Nations culture, communities, families and individuals. The vision of creating a culturally appropriate approach for the delivery of child welfare and prevention services is the agency’s primary goal. While the agency employs various methods in achieving this objective, it is the use of a strengths based perspective and the conditions required for this approach which will be the focus of this discussion.

Procedure

Kunuwanimano Child and Family Services was the first agency to respond to the Call for Promising Practices in First Nations Child Welfare Management and Governance placed by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada. On site interviews were conducted with Kunuwanimano Executive Director, Vicki Hardisty, Regional Child and Family Worker, Gary Martin and Foster Care Worker, Kristin Murray who are the co-authors of this article.

Agency Background

Kunuwanimano Child and Family Services was incorporated as a non-profit organization on May 15, 1989. The agency is funded by the Ministry of Community, Family and Children Services and provides prevention and family support services to First Nations

¹ The attempted assimilation of First Nations peoples into the Canadian body politic through federal policy enacted through church run residential schools which actively denigrated First Nations culture and prohibited cultural practice amongst child residents is now a well established matter of historic record. Though residential schools are no longer in operation, First Nations communities continue to lose a disproportionate number of children to the non-Native child welfare system. See McKenzie, B., 2002. “Block Funding Child Maintenance in First Nations Child and Family Service: A Policy Review.” Report. Kahnawake Shakotiiia’takehhas Community Services, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

children and families under *Part X Child and Family Services Act, Ontario*². Kuuwanimano operates within the pre-mandated child and family services scheme. The pre-mandated model is one of the five most common jurisdictional models developed by First Nations child and family services agencies in response to imposed legislation and funding procedures (Bennett, 2004). Under the pre-mandated framework, agencies provide prevention and family support in accordance with agreements including licensing agreements, with the provincial government. The pre-mandated designation is viewed as a capacity building measure pending the receipt of adequate resources and jurisdictional recognition through the delegated model or tribal based authority to provide a full range of child protection and prevention services (Blackstock, 2003). Kuuwanimano ensures access to essential culturally based services including, counseling/referral, family support/prevention services, advocacy and customary/foster care in a service area which encompasses a broad region in Northeastern Ontario that ranges from Hornepayne to Matachewan First Nation and includes 11 First Nations communities.

Philosophy of Practice

Kuuwanimano is of the belief that our communities are strong, and that we are capable of providing culturally appropriate services for our people, in our own way. This is evident through our survival as Anishinabe people, regardless of the decades of systematic attempts to eliminate our people through a process of assimilation. We have learned to focus and depend on our basic traditional values rather than becoming restricted by federal and provincial legislation and laws. Our natural systems are alive and healthy. We have positive role models, we have strong leaders and we have self-respect. These are vital components, which will assist in the development of our service delivery model. All too often, we tend to get caught up in the belief that our communities are unhealthy and that we are plagued with social problems. Even though this may be true to some extent, they are our problems and we will determine how to fix them (Hardisty, 2002).

Kuuwanimano's organizational and practice philosophy is based on operating from a perspective based on strengths. This is an approach which aims to understand clients in terms of their strengths and involves the systematic identification of skills, abilities, survival strategies, knowledge, resources and desires which can be utilized to meet client goals (Early and GlenMay, 2000). The focus on strengths provides the power for people to build on the skills, competencies and resources they already possess. Aboriginal culture itself is considered a source of strength and an effective tool in the healing process. Family Support Worker, Gary Martin, emphasized that Aboriginal ways of knowing and being including role models, parenting techniques, ceremonies, values, teachings and practices are core components of Kuuwanimano's direct practice with clients. The Aboriginal family system and the potential of many strengths and resources present within the communities to effect change in the quality and scope of the supportive social services offered are important constituents of this practice.

² Part X pertains to Indian and Native Child and Family Services

Working from a perspective of strengths was adopted after the agency engaged in a process of questioning the applicability of mainstream models of risk assessment to First Nations peoples and concluded that the standardization of human services is not possible. Kuuwanimano endeavors to operate from a human perspective as opposed to an administrative one. This required the agency to move from utilizing assessment models with long-term goals based on projections of risk to models which identify and build on strengths. The viewpoint of servicing clients with ‘problems’, risks and various negative aspects had to be discarded and replaced with a perspective rooted in a foundation of recognizing and honoring individual, community and cultural strengths.

Governance and Management

Creating a culturally appropriate approach for the delivery of child welfare and prevention services which provides assistance to First Nations families through positive experiences could not be done independently of the community. An essential aspect of this process is the primary role of community members in making fundamental decisions. The agency is governed by a Board of Directors which consists of a representative from each First Nation community in the catchment area along with two Honorary Elders from the communities. The Elders perform the same role as regular board members and have full voting power. Focusing on strengths as a principal approach to service delivery evolved through a series of meetings with the board and agency employees. Though operating from a paradigm based in Aboriginal culture, service delivery remains consistent with existing standards and legislation as governed by the Ministry of Community, Family and Children Services.

Conditions for Success

The success of this approach is highly dependent on the acceptance from leadership within each community served. Community leaders had to develop an awareness and understanding of the strength perspective. This process was followed by actively raising awareness within the community as a whole. In raising community awareness, the agency utilized a wide variety of resource and public relations material including workshops, pamphlets, annual reports, community consultations with Chief and Council and poster campaigns. The willingness to bring the community together is a critical component in operationalizing positive and empowering child welfare practice.

In direct practice with clients, building critical consciousness is cited as an important feature of the agency’s approach. Clients are assisted in reflecting upon and identifying the ways in which societal forces such as colonization, racism and classism, for example, have contributed to molding their situations, lives and belief systems in ways both positive and negative. It is believed that through engaging in this process, clients gain new insight and contextual knowledge of their situation as well as an acknowledgement of their ability to cope.

It is important that the client base and the needs of the service population be considered. Ensuring an environment of safety based on trust and respect which allow clients to

willingly participate in the service free from the pressure or threat of losing something they value such as their children, spouses, families, communities, culture, language and identity are paramount.

Independent client motivation is key to this method and service plans are client driven. In designing the service plan, clients are able to focus on what they know and understand to be strengths within themselves and are encouraged to search inward for the answers to their issues rather than relying on a system which emphasizes pathology and discounts resiliency and strength. Still, it is important to recognize that a strengths approach is not one in which client issues and problems are ignored. This is a process of exploring strengths that are present in the individual that can be used to work with presenting and root issues. Within this framework, the worker is not conceptualized as an expert with the solution. Instead, the worker is a resource and a source of assistance and support – the process is a shared journey, a partnership between the worker and the party seeking assistance.

Clients also exercise autonomy through the determination of timeframes, service providers and all other essential resources they feel are necessary for the healing process. The process of creating the plan of service is described as one through which clients gain hope that something can be done regardless of how well they can do it, or how bad their situation may be at the time. Observable increases in client independence are attributed to this practice methodology and the process is perceived as a powerful one not only for clients and their families, but also for agency employees who are given the opportunity to see that positive change is possible and that their work is valuable.

The principality of Aboriginal culture within the constitution of the Kunuwanimano's approach cannot be understated. Aboriginal cultural practices, traditions, customs, values, knowledge and methods of healing are identified as potent instruments in working with individuals, families and communities. This perception of culture as a source of healing is reflected by McKenzie and Morrisette (2002) in their discussion on the elements of a framework for effective social work practice with Aboriginal people. The authors discuss the centrality of cultural identity in self-perception, particularly among those who do not identify with the dominant culture, and the association of the loss of self-identity and self-worth with difficulties in coping. Given that Aboriginal people have been exposed to cultural imperialism, an oppressive process which allows the dominant group to define differences as deviant and inferior, social work practice with Aboriginal people must pay particular attention to the effects on self-identity and the need to reconstruct a positive concept of self and community. McKenzie and Morrisette (2002) surmise that through reinforcing Aboriginal culture and the values and traditions on which it is constructed, people who have experienced the effects of colonization can return to their own culture as a source of strengths in developing identity; for many Aboriginal people, this will include a reconnection with cultural values and some of the traditional practices which help to define Aboriginal well-being.

Employees form the foundation of any agency and have been identified as vital components in working from a strengths perspective. It is important that administrators

are able to relate to clients and this is kept in mind when selecting prospective employees. The fact that agency employees are from the community is viewed as a significant asset. Employees are required to be able to identify their own strengths and the personal experiences employees can draw on in the performance of their duties is also valued. In the broader context, the goal is to empower the community and employees are given tools to work independently in this regard. Ultimately, the baseline of operation for this approach is respect for each individual, family and community.

Indicators of success

The consistent rise in the agency's voluntary client caseload over the past two years is cited as one of the strongest indicators of success. New clients are often referred to the agency by former clients or through outside service providers. According to agency director, Vicki Hardisty, in the majority of cases, clients come of their own free will. This client initiated engagement is significant as it demonstrates an independent willingness to receiving help thereby allowing for the incorporation of a wide variety of healing techniques into the plan of service. The goal is to empower clients rather than fostering dependency and as such, work plans are between three to six months in length and at times shorter.

The high rate of client turn over is also seen as a positive. It is, however, interesting to note that client recidivism, when it does occur, is not necessarily assessed as negative. Instead, the positive aspects of clients identifying the need for and seeking out further assistance, is acknowledged. It is recognized that the healing process is a journey where people experience both good and difficult times. Once a client file is closed either due to completion or choice, agency services are offered as a form of aftercare. If a client feels the need to reconnect with the worker or the agency, this is viewed as a positive indication of the quality of the working relationship. When clients seek further assistance from the agency due to a difficult time in their lives, it is identified as another opportunity to help the client, their family and the community.

Vital to an agency such as Kunuwanimano is community perception and support. It is therefore, a notable achievement that agency workers are perceived as advocates within the community who foster trusting relationships between membership communities and the organization.

Challenges

The major challenge in working from a culturally based strength approach is identified as dealing with mainstream systems where there tends to be very little understanding and value of First Nations people and culture. The agency's experience is that mainstream administrators such as judges, lawyers, police officers, welfare administrators, social workers and others have difficulty identifying positives in First Nations families and communities. Dealing with these systems entails a constant process of education and affirming the value of First Nations culture.

The apparent disconnection between the mind, heart and spirit which mainstream practitioners are trained to exercise in the effort to maintain objectivity is also identified

as a challenge. In the strength based approach used by Kunuwanimano, the knowledge of the mind and the wisdom of the heart and spirit are embraced and utilized – following a ‘gut’ feeling is not discouraged.

The departure from the mainstream model, though necessary, is in itself a challenge. The risk focus utilized in the mainstream is seen as a major stumbling block for the strengths approach. There is frustration when decisions which will have strong impacts on clients and their families are influenced by an over emphasis on past difficulties which negate the current good work, significant accomplishments and proactive behaviors undertaken by clients. The lack of acknowledgement for contextual variants such as race, gender, socio-economic status and colonization is also of concern. The focus on crisis and the emphasis on deficits and individual pathology which overlook resiliency and existing personal and cultural strengths are contrary to Kunuwanimano’s approach to practice. An additional challenge lies in convincing political authorities that a perspective based on strengths is viable. It is believed that if this model is to succeed and proliferate, mainstream leaders must understand, accept and promote it.

Conclusion

A strengths perspective based in Aboriginal culture requires a strong belief in the value and capacity of First Nations people. It is a contrary perspective which is difficult to implement in the broader context of paternalistic and crisis driven policy and practice. A strengths perspective involves helping people to identify what they do well in their attempt to deal with serious challenges. It means refusing to overlook the successes in what appears to be a long line of failures and requires the practitioner to share power, have faith in the client and engage in ways which promote dignity and respect.

Many First Nations peoples and communities have embarked on the journey of decolonizing the mind, body, heart and spirit. Kunuwanimano Child and Family Services’ commitment to providing services based on First Nations culture while affirming individual and community strengths is one means of advancing this movement. The emphasis on strengths and competencies is one of the key aspects of empowering practice which functions to reaffirm the health and vitality of traditional systems, role models, strong leadership and self-respect in First Nations communities. The value and power of Aboriginal culture has not been lost; it remains a source of pride, sustenance and healing.

It is a matter of historical record that there was a conquest in North America in 1760. But, we must not forget that this represented the victory of England over France, not over the Aboriginal nations (Lepage, 2002, p.4).

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