

Collaboration in the NOW Play II Project: Insights from Community and University Partners

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Article 9.1 of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [CIHR], 2022) outlines the requirement of community engagement in Indigenous research. This demand stems in part from experiences in the colonial and post-colonial past where researchers would come into a community for a short period of time without providing feedback on the knowledge they gained from local interlocutors (Saxinger & First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun, 2018).

It is important for Indigenous communities to have a say in the research that takes place on their traditional territories and to have control over the data and knowledge that is generated (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc., 2014; Six Nations of the Grand River, 2014). Collaborative approaches to Indigenous research aim to address these issues by involving Indigenous communities in the research process and ensuring that they have ownership over the research products (CIHR, 2022). This approach to research can help build trust between researchers and Indigenous communities and can lead to research that is more relevant and beneficial to the communities (CIHR, 2022). Additionally, involving Indigenous communities in research can help to ensure that their knowledge and perspectives are included and respected (Banks et al, 2013;

Saxinger, & First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun, 2018). Participatory research also promotes co-learning and a balance between research and action that benefits both the community and science and emphasizes the relevance of community-defined problems (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a research methodology that involves the active involvement of community stakeholders and operates from a value base of sharing power and resources and working for mutual benefit. Banks et. al (2013) argue that standard ethical codes and institutional review processes for research do not adequately address the challenges posed by CBPR and suggest that an approach called "everyday ethics" may be more effective. Everyday ethics emphasizes the situated nature of ethics and focuses on qualities of character and responsibilities attached to relationships, rather than the articulation and implementation of abstract principles and rules.

Collaborative action research (CAR) is another research methodology that involves individuals working together to achieve change. Peterson et al. (2016) argue that the values, goals, and practices that underlie CAR share similarities with the principles of Indigenous research. Drawing from their own CAR with/in Indigenous communities, they shared how the spirit of reciprocity was evident throughout their research project and how, through their collaboration, researchers, teachers, and community members

created “understandings about teaching and learning that bring about positive change” (p. 29).

Partnership Research

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is one of three federally funded research granting councils in Canada. SSHRC supports Canadian researchers through grants, fellowships, and scholarships. SSHRC partnership grants, intended for large teams of postsecondary institutions and/or organizations, support new and existing formal partnerships for between 4 to 7 years. The intended goal of such partnerships is to advance research, research training, and/or knowledge mobilization in the social sciences and humanities.

The Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play (NOW Play) project is an example of this type of partnership. Building on the work of a previous partnership project (2013-2020), the NOW Play II partnership includes northern rural school districts with service agreements with First Nations communities, educational institutes with early childhood education certification programs, First Nation school boards, non-governmental service providers, national and international university academics with specializations in Indigenous or Aboriginal populations, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. The overarching goal of the 7-year project is to support young children’s Indigenous language and cultural learning and their writing through a model of land-based/experiential learning.

Community engagement during the early stages of the NOW Play II Partnership project included a face-to-face 1.5-day gathering of the Project Director and representatives from each of the partner organizations. During this gathering, the attendees co-developed the research design and governance model for the project (see Brant et al., 2022).

Then, in the first year of the project, consultant Dr. Karen Rempel conducted interviews with community and university partners to assess their

understanding of the governance of the project and their roles within it. In other words, Dr. Rempel’s interviews served to gauge the partners’ assessment of community engagement in the Partnership. In this paper, we present three insights from Dr. Rempel’s interviews and Summary Report (2021). We then discuss how the partners might draw from these insights to strengthen community engagement in the NOW Play II Partnership.

Key Insights

Defining Community

Although all the interviewees referenced *community*, community and university participants understood the term differently. Community participants associated the term with a geographical location or a professional community of practice, while university participants understood community “as part of a collective and relational approach to research with Indigenous partners” (Rempel, 2021, p, 2)

Role

Some participants were unsure of their specific roles in the project. For example, one participant voiced their confusion of language related to the governance structure, saying

To be honest, I just know, I know that we are partners. I don’t know exactly what that means in terms of the committees. So, I don’t know if we’re a core partnership committee or what we are because we’ve been, like I said, we’ve been here since the get-go.

When asked about their specific role in the project, community and university partners responded differently. Overall, Dr. Rempel found that community partners believed their role was to learn and apply the research findings to their practice, while university partners felt their role was to understand and learn Indigenous language and early childhood literacy from the Indigenous community partners.

Foundational Understandings

Participants understood relationships and common values as being at the heart of the project. Many of the participants in the project had pre-existing relationships with the project director and were only too pleased to be a part of this second partnership project. For example, one participant said, “Shelley asked me. I respect the work that she does and I think of her as a friend. And so, you know, of course I would say I’m happy to be a part of it.”

Others indicated that they shared common values with the project, including a commitment to empowering and building community capacity. One participant said,

Another compelling piece about this project was that it resonated so well with our overall mission. Our mission as an organization is learning together, success for all [...] and so this project, I saw as a vehicle to allow us to build that internal capacity with teachers.

Overall, the participants emphasized the importance of building long-term relationships, with one participant saying,

No man is an island; no woman is an island. I mean, I think certainly we have a certain amount of expertise but obviously collaborating with other agencies that bring another perspective is really helpful. It’s enriching to work together.

and conducting research in a respectful manner,

So, the community has to identify THE NEED, as opposed to the researcher assuming what the need is or their perspective of the need is being imposed on the community [...] so being led by the needs of the community or the members of the

community who are participating in the research.

Moving Forward

Insights from Dr. Rempel’s interviews can inform our implementation of the governance structure of the NOW Play II project and improve collaboration among the partners involved. Specifically, to ensure community engagement, we must remain mindful of how our partners define community and perceive their roles (engagement) in the partnership research. We must immediately address any issues or misunderstandings to ensure that the project is meeting the needs and goals of all partners. Additionally, participants’ emphasis on building long-term relationships and conducting research in a respectful manner must serve as a guide for our continued research collaborations involving Indigenous communities.

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