

"You Should Write a Book!"

Honouring the Knowledge and Skills of Families

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Introduction

The freedom to lead a satisfying life and to enjoy good health is unequally distributed both between and within the societies of our world. This inequity is illustrated in the vast differences experienced by people in their material conditions, education opportunities, employment conditions, psychosocial support, behavioural options, and the quality of the environments in which they live; this in turn makes some people more vulnerable to poor holistic health. Social stratifications create differences in both the utilization of and the access to health care services, even within universal health care systems. Racism, trauma, social exclusion, & colonization have particularly impacted the health of Aboriginal people in Canada and around the world (Reading & Wein 2009). These inequities converge and are primarily illustrated by the great diversity of the human experience in early childhood. The World Health Organizations' Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2008) calls to "close the gap in one generation" by focusing on "improving the conditions of daily life - the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age" (pg. 2). Families, as the heart of any community, play a fundamental role in encouraging and practicing healthy lifestyles (Health Canada 2010). Investing in the early years provides one of the greatest potentials to reduce health inequities within one generation (WHO 2008). KidsFirst Saskatoon is an early childhood intervention health program which hopes to do just that by providing both support and proactive services to vulnerable families with young children in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. The families who are involved in KidsFirst services hope to provide their children with a safe and connected experience of family that they themselves did not experience. Many of the families involved in our program have experienced multi-generational trauma and are working hard to challenge the role of oppression, racism, poverty, violence, addiction, mental illness, food security, housing and disability in their lives.

The Collective Narrative Approach

The culture, stories, skills and knowledge of many communities have been dishonoured, disqualified, and marginalized for historical, cultural, social, political reasons. Being included in the society in which one lives is vital to the material, psychosocial, and political aspects of empowerment that underpin social well-being

and equitable health (WHO 2008). The collective narrative approach introduces a process to collectively identify, acknowledge, honour, and richly describe the knowledge and skills of marginalized communities. The narrative approach is an anti-oppressive, empowerment based methodology and a wide ranging companion to working with families. It can also serve as an evidence based framework to inspire both helpers and communities alike. The 'Collective Narrative Approach' emphasizes, values, and honours the importance of story and the traditions of storytelling in Indigenous cultures. We can support cultural safety and respect the diversity of families by informing our practices with the narrative approach. It provides a socially just framework for people to unite and respond to the collective trauma and oppression they have experienced while thickening their stories of capacity and resiliency. This narrative framework can be incredibly moving and empowering for the participants, the facilitators, and all of the witnesses involved. The 'Collective Narrative Document' can also inform practice, develop programming, create inclusive social policy, and inspire communities both far and wide.

The Project

In the autumn of 2014, I engaged in a collaborative and transparent partnership with a community of KidsFirst Saskatoon participants, both current and past service users, to build knowledge based on the concepts of social inclusion, capacity building, and empowerment. The primary purpose of our project was to honour the hopes, knowledge, and skills of the families involved in the KidsFirst program. We utilized the 'Narrative Collective Approach' to both thicken a narrative of knowledge and skills in which the participants could strengthen their sense of familial well-being and build upon in their future. Over a period of three months, the co-authors explored and documented their stories of struggle and determination with a dream of addressing the social inequities in the larger community, impacting service delivery & policy, and encouraging other families. The authors of "Honouring the Knowledge & Skills of Families" hope to create a sense of community for families who are facing similar challenges within their lives.

Storytelling

One of the first steps involved in the 'Honouring the Knowledge and Skills of Families' participatory research project was to collaborate with colleagues, various stakeholders in the program and community, cultural leaders, and the families participating in the KidsFirst program themselves to explore the who, what, when, where, and why of such a project. After we created a sketch of these five points, our next move was to obtain ethical approval to formally document and share the lived experience of the families. This was due to the fact that KidsFirst is a governmental health region program and the participants

involved were service users. The ethical review and approval of our undertaking as an empowerment based narrative research project was provided by a Tri-Council made up of representatives from the Saskatoon Health Region, the University of Saskatchewan, and the University of Regina Ethics Boards. The next big step, the main step, was getting all of the interested co-researchers to our neighborhood community center to meet and begin our planning as a group. I began this process by sending out invitations to many of the families who had participated in both the primary services of family support and the counseling program at KidsFirst within the last five years. The KidsFirst counseling service was the program in which I was hoping to provide some evaluative feedback. The letter asked the participants if they were interested in joining a group of KidsFirst families who were planning to write a book documenting the challenges that they had faced as well as what had helped them through the difficult times in their lives. I explained in the letter that this information could inspire others who might be facing hardships in their lives and could also help KidsFirst and other like programs to understand what works and what doesn't work when it comes to supporting families. The invitation clearly stated that the program would provide transportation, childcare, snacks, and coffee at our working group meetings. It also stated that if any of the recipients of the letter were unavailable at the specified time and dates due to other obligations (employment, education, etc.) that I would make arrangements to meet with them individually to include all of the interested participants. I created a flyer to share information about the project with the KidsFirst home visitors and other allied health professionals with program which they could distribute to any families in the program that met these criteria. Both the invite and the flyer clearly indicated that we valued the contributions of families and we illustrated this point by providing everyone who participated in the project with a gift certificate for a local grocery store located within the community center in which we would meet. The participants received the fifty dollar gift certificate at the second meeting and did not have to continue further to receive it. I emphasized that their participation in the project was completely voluntary and that they could discontinue their participation in the program at any time with no negative feelings or consequences on the part of myself, the program, or the health region. I followed up every invitation letter with a telephone call to explore interest, answer any questions about the project, and remind people about the upcoming information session. I also organized transportation and childcare based on these conversations.

We sent eighteen letters in the mail to formally invite families to join us in the project; we were not able to communicate with three families by letter and/or telephone as their contact information had changed. One of the project participants joined the group because her home visitor had presented her with the informational flyer I mentioned earlier. We had fifteen interested participants at the outset and all fifteen completed the project. Eight of the fifteen participants were able to meet weekly over several weeks to explore their stories in the group and use art or photographs to illustrate them for the book. Seven of the interested participants met with me individually one to two times to explore their stories because of other obligations at the date and time that we were meeting. There was fourteen women and one man who

participated in the project. There was one couple involved in the project and nine lone parents. Eight of the participants identified as Aboriginal Canadians and one of the participants identified a visual minority and newcomer to Canada. Ten of the fifteen participants disclosed primary attachment and familial interruptions in their childhood. This involved living outside of their family home for varying reasons and intervals and being in the care of relatives, of foster care families, and/or institutional group homes. All fifteen of the participants disclosed experiencing neglect, abuse, or trauma in their childhood. Ten of the authors participated in the art workshop which took place after the stories were gathered. All but two participants were able to participate in the definitional ceremony; both of these participants were visiting their home communities at the time, one of them out of the continent and the other far to the north of the province. I mention the interest, involvement, and consistent turnout of our participants because this is a population deemed 'hard to engage' by traditional health programs and community services yet the groups' obvious engagement and dedication to the project was highly evident and demonstrated in these statistics.

I introduced the 'Narrative Collective Assignment' and the 'Narrative Definitional Ceremony' frameworks in the initial, introductory meeting. After reading the three paged consent form with the group and signing them all, the participants were presented with several handouts; outlining the consent, the project in a nutshell, the narrative collective framework, the photo-voice framework, the planned meeting times and dates, some of the narrative questions I had planned to explore in the project, and a list of trauma/ counseling services within the community in the case someone needed further support. I shared my hope that the project would be collaborative, participant driven, and that the group would inform or alter the project in any way they deemed fit. I repeated this intention throughout the project in a variety of ways inviting the participants into the positions of co-researcher and co-author as much as possible. We were able to record and transcribe all of the group dialogues and the individual interviews creating over two hundred typed pages of collective stories. As the facilitator, it was my role to weave the quotes and themes from these many conversations into the individual interviews and the group sessions and back again to support the collaboration of all the authors. We used pieces of the stories to scaffold and build upon the authors' individual and collective stories of intention, hope, and knowledge.

We began our work together exploring how stories are told in our society and how stories in general vary from community to community and within different cultures. We explored the many stories told about families, children, and parenting in our society. We explored the common stories we had heard about health and looked at how particular stories might be privileged in our society. We noticed that many of the stories of family seemed to differ depending on what families looked like, where they lived, what they had, how they are configured, and who they were. We looked at the concept of dualism, how dichotomies are created and perpetuated in our society, and the group articulated many of the divides they had experienced. We noticed that some stories exist in the forefront and others in the background, marginalized both in our society and in our individual minds, taking the time to explore the influence and

interplay of one to the other. Together, we looked at how power affects knowledge as well as which stories are being told by examining the historical and present day relevance of this phenomenon. The group discussed how people are influenced by these overshadowing stories noticing the many stories which have been discounted and dishonoured in our society. The participants shared how they have been influenced by the stories others tell of them and the stories they tell about themselves. We explored the stories that the participants wanted and needed to hear about themselves noticing that these were the same stories they wanted their children and others to know about them.

The parents began to think and talk about the stories they choose to tell and retell about their lives for the project. They shared stories together about the difficult times they had experienced in their lives exploring both sides of their story. I asked questions to support the parents to explore just how they had responded during such hard times hoping to shine a light on the many things they had done to get through it. I asked the participants to recount how and why they responded in the ways that they did and what their responses said about them as a person and about the group in general. The authors examined just what their responses said about their intentions for their lives and about their intentions for their children's lives. We wrote down what these stories stated about what is important to them in their lives. We investigated what the stories revealed about the participants' beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams. We questioned what these stories said about these particular families and what they might say about families in the group in general. The group began to tell stories about what is important to them as a collective. As a group, we wanted the skills that these stories illustrated to be distinct. We wanted the important knowledge and wisdom that these stories demonstrated to be clear within the minds of the participants and to be the backbone of the document we were generating. We occupied ourselves with these stories for some time, pulling out specifically what these stories said about who the participants were as individuals and as families. We also highlighted the stories that the participants wanted to tell in their futures and what stories they wanted to hand down to the next generation.

During the individual and group sessions, I utilized several classic questions and strategies from the narrative approach to encourage collective storytelling. The concepts of double listening (White, 2004) and double-storied testimony (Denborough, 2008) were essential to exploring both sides of the stories - both the effects of *and* the responses to trauma. We explored narrative questions developed by David Denborough (2008) to highlight the knowledge and skills of each participant. We made large posters of these questions and placed them within the room to support transparency and collaboration:

What is the name of a special skill, knowledge, value, that has sustained you and/or your family through difficult times?

What is a story about this skill, knowledge, or value?

Can you share a story about a time when this made a difference to you or to others?

What is the history of this skill, knowledge, or value? How did you learn this?
Who did you learn it with and/or from?

Is this skill or value linked in some way to collective traditions?
Is it linked to family, community, or cultural traditions?
Are there any sayings, images, songs, stories from your family,
community, or culture that link to them?

We explored questions from 'The Seeds of Fire' (Denborough 2008) and posted these questions within the room as well:

What has drawn you to take part in the KidsFirst program?
What brought you to this narrative project?
Does this relate to a wish, an obligation, a commitment, a hope, a learning, a value?
If so, how? When did it first begin? What is the history? Where did you first learn this?
Develop this? Who did you learn it from, who did you learn it with, and in what place?

I also utilized interview questions to promote positive forms of inquiry in narrative research and bring the knowledge and skills into a future storyline (Marlowe 2010):

How have you been able to keep in touch with those things that are important to you,
the values and hopes in your life, through the hard times?
If someone else went through similar experiences to you, what suggestions or stories
would you offer them? What is your vision of the future?

I often used the participants' stories of knowledge and skills as a scaffold to support the author to explore another aspect of their story both within the group sessions and from session to session. I would weave the themes from the group into my reflections within the individual interviews and reflect the themes emerging from the individual interviews back again within the group dialogue to create a sense of collaboration between the authors. We created posters quoting the participants' stories of skills, values, and knowledge(s) captured in the transcriptions to collage the walls of our group room and keep these stories of response in the forefront of our project. This storied wallpaper created a loop of the transcribed conversations and the whole, preferred stories of the participants played consistently in the background to the foreground to the background again.

As part of the collective storytelling process, we asked the participants to illustrate their narratives with photographs and/or visual art. I hoped that this could add a visual element to the final document. The illustrative process could also assist in creating other opportunities to retell their final stories thickening a

narrative of strength and capacity for the author. Creative artistic expression and its therapeutic effects offers an opportunity to make contact with undervalued folk psychologies and allow practitioners to support regulating activities outside of the typical constructions of mental health. All of the participants were presented with a disposable camera and given some information on photo-voice, the limitations regarding photography, and asked to illustrate the stories of their values, skills, knowledge, and identity using the narratives already generated as a jumping off point. Photography and Photo-Voice presented an opportunity for the authors to illustrate their stories outside of the techniques of sculpting, drawing, painting, or beading which we hoped might be more inclusive. The authors participated in a visual art workshop which took place during our last collective session before the definitional ceremony. There was a skeleton copy of the document available and a final poster presentation of the themes generated and many quotes from the chosen narratives for the participants to pull inspiration from. I invited two local visual artists to come into our group and support the participants with their illustration work if the authors requested it. I gathered a variety of materials for the participants to use such as clay, paint, markers, pencils, paper, pens, pastels, charcoal, beads, paper, cardboard, canvas, etc. The author illustrations are peppered throughout the final document and were projected as a slideshow at the final presentation and definitional ceremony.

The Book

The document created during the project was entitled 'Honouring the Knowledge and Skills of Families'. It includes stories, artwork, and photography by a wealth of contributors, including Allison Morphy, Mandi Scherr, Lauren Reid, Phyllis Boese, Amber Wolff, Angelina McLean, Natasha Tinker, Karen Deobald, Darcy Prosper, Stephanie White, Jamie Daylight, Trisha Knorr, Laverne Charles, Ya Li Lin, and Terra Bird. All of the participants choose to be listed as co-authors on the document. I worked with the visual illustrations submitted by the authors and the two hundred transcribed pages as an editor to first convert them from oral tales and then to weave them together to create the collective document. I laboured to prioritize and keep the integrity of the authors voices within my editing work checking in with the authors on a couple of different occasions creating four different versions of the document. The book itself was seventy-seven pages containing acknowledgements, an introduction, a references section written by myself and the author's collective story told under four main headings: 1) "Background", 2) "Knowledge & Skills", 3) "Sharing Our Stories", and 4) "a bit more about KidsFirst". We printed over a hundred copies of the collective narrative document and shared copies with all of the co-authors, other KidsFirst participants (both within the Saskatoon KidsFirst program and the other regional KidsFirst programs), community organizations, government organizations such as child protection services, and other human service workers with the hopes of the book fulfilling the group purpose and find its way to other families like their own.

We have also made the book available electronically to cut down on printing costs and share the document with other interested parties. The complete version of "The Knowledge & Skills of Families" can be found at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/c17ecqvf45zx0pe/AAAB0VAe3wvkgbz3gu_PluGra?dl=0

The Launch

We sent out invitations for 'The Knowledge & Skills of Families' book launching and definitional ceremony to many people in our community including members of the KidsFirst team, mental health and addictions professionals, health administrators, government service workers, the Saskatoon Tribal Council, social workers, community workers, the local narrative community, child protection workers, and interested families connected to the KidsFirst Saskatoon program. We also hung posters on the local bulletin boards inviting any interested community members to participate. The co-authors also invited family, friends, and other supports that they wanted to attend. There were approximately forty witnesses present and exactly thirteen co-authors that were able to participate in the 'Narrative Definitional Ceremony'.

We were able to have several copies of the book available for the audience members to look through on their arrival. There were two large screens in the room flanking the two tables where the participants and presented. One of these screens had instructions for the audience members outlining the 'Outsider Witness' framework and setting the stage for the definitional ceremony (White 2003). We also had this information on handouts that the audience members were given as they entered the room. The audience members served as 'outsider witnesses' as outlined by Michael White (2003) for the 'Narrative Definitional Ceremony' in four particular ways:

Identifying the Expression: As you listen to the stories of other families, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a chord for you? What in particular impacted you?

Describing the Image: What images of people's lives, identities, and the world did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purpose, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, and commitments? How would you characterize what struck you? What did it speak to?

Embodying Responses: What is it about your own life that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experience resonated with these expressions and the images evoked by these expressions?

Acknowledging Transport: How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not have otherwise arrived at, if you hadn't been present as an audience to this presentation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions and stories in the way that you have? What new possibilities does it evoke in your life?

A local Aboriginal Elder, Linda Young, was present to open and close the narrative ceremony. All thirteen co-authors stood up and shared their stories with the audience. Their photographs and art work were projected on a large screen in a slow rotation to illustrate the stories as each author stood and shared. Each author chose two of their contributions to share orally at the event. The audience was asked to respond to the stories at four different intervals within the ceremony. One of the authors, singer and songwriter Lauren Spink, shared several original songs during these intervals to help bridge the transitions and exchanges between the participants and witnesses. The audience witnessed the authors tell the segments of their stories that they had chosen for the event applauding their courage and shared with the participants how they were impacted by their work. The audience responded to the presentations by expressing which particular aspects of the authors' stories and the collective presentation resonated with their own stories sharing both parts of themselves and knitting together the human experience. The audience was noticeably moved by the authors' presentations, and there was a real sense of awe for the bravery the participants displayed, not only in sharing their stories, but in the incredible capacity they demonstrated in becoming the person and the parent they had always wanted to become. Everyone shared in the strong feeling of hope and triumph in the room. The authors were quite nervous initially to be sharing such personal aspects of themselves in such a public and formal fashion but each and every one of them described feeling very empowered by the experience. All of the authors were visibly proud of their work in the project and who they have become as both a person and as a parent. The witnesses expressed feeling inspired and grateful to have had the experience. In both the telling and the witnessing of the stories, all of the people present seemed to be reminded of their personal strengths and of who they intend to be in the world.

Conclusion

The stories contained in "Honouring the Knowledge and Skills of Families" tell the tales of the contributors and their families; the challenges they have faced and how community services like KidsFirst have helped them along their journeys. These stories document how change really happens for families and the processes involved serving both the authors and its readers. "Honouring the Knowledge & Skills of Families" can also be used to tell and retell a story of alternate and empowering practices for families that are deemed as vulnerable in our society. Both the framework and its documented results can inform practice, programming, policy, and governments in the very important work of supporting and enhancing family wellbeing in our communities. It is my hope that "Honouring the Knowledge and Skills of Families" will inspire and support many more people as we share it with other families and other communities. The collective narrative process supported fifteen authors to tell and re-tell the preferred and whole narratives of their lives which in turn adds to the larger societal narratives and models. This practice may provide permission and a frame for others to tell the stories of their lives in the same vein. The 'Collective Narrative Approach' is an empowerment based methodology, a frame for individual direct practice, a community development practice, an advocacy tool and an evidence based research framework. It is a framework that can blend together the many arenas and sectors within the human – creating a fusion we can all understand.

The participants of this project told stories of family, of love, and of a great perseverance in the name of their children diminishing many of the myths pervading our society specifically that which suggests only familial separation can assure children's welfare. It suggests that support can make a world of difference and presents society and its system with a functional and humane alternative. It has been a great privilege to be connected with the families and co-authors of this project and to bear witness to their strength, hope, and love for their children. It has made me better person and a better mother - I am grateful for it!

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