

## CHAPTER SIX

# Evaluating Family Group Conferencing in a First Nation Setting: An Example of University-First Nation Child Welfare Agency Collaboration

*Fred Wien*

Community partnership comments by *Joan Glode*

## INTRODUCTION

Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services (MFCS) was established as an organization in 1983, one of the earliest First Nation child welfare agencies to be put in place in Canada. From the beginning, the agency has looked after child welfare matters for all 13 Mi'kmaq communities in the Province. Its Board of Directors is made up of the 13 Chiefs from the communities, with additional representation from the Native Women's Association of Nova Scotia and the Grand Chief of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council. Additionally, it has an agreement with the Province of Nova Scotia such that any Mi'kmaq or other Aboriginal child or family in Nova Scotia that requires the services of an agency is referred to MFCS (MFCS 2000).

The bulk of the agency's funds are provided by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), but the agency is recognized by and provides services under the authority of the Province of Nova Scotia and its legislation. Formally, the agency was established through a Tripartite Agreement among the federal government (represented by INAC), the Province of Nova Scotia (represented by the Department of Community Services), and by the First Nations community (represented by the 13 Chiefs and by the Native Women's Association of Nova Scotia).

---

Copyright © 2011 Sophie Léveillé, Nico Trocmé, Ivan Brown, and Claire Chamberland. All rights reserved.

*Suggested citation:*

Wien, F., & Glode, J. (2011). Evaluating family group conferencing in a first nation setting: An example of university-first nation child welfare agency collaboration. In S. Léveillé, N. Trocmé, I. Brown, & C. Chamberland (Eds.), *Research-community partnerships in child welfare* (pp. 139-154). Toronto, ON: Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare/ Centre d'excellence pour la protection et le bien-être des enfants ([www.cecw-cepb.ca](http://www.cecw-cepb.ca)).

In its early years, MFCS staff were pursuing a part-time Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program offered by Dalhousie University. MFCS gradually assumed, over a six-year period, responsibility for the full range of child and family services, including child protection. Operating under the Nova Scotia Child Welfare Act and related standards, the agency was constrained in offering services to the Mi'kmaq community in a manner that was congruent with Mi'kmaq culture, although some modifications were made at the margins (e.g. in the standards/qualifications that were required for families to adopt children). Additionally, the funding formula that provided operating funds to the agency did not provide the support required to undertake the training and redeployment of staff, which would have been required for implementing different approaches to dealing with child welfare issues.

The agency was, however, able to mobilize some funds and staff time to undertake research on Mi'kmaq traditions and customs relating to family and child welfare (Young 2004; Metallic and Young 1999). At the same time, it was gaining experience with the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream approaches when applied in a First Nation context. It was also learning from the best practices of other agencies in the country, especially after the formation of the national organization, the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, which represents more than 100 First Nation child welfare agencies across the country.

Word was also spreading about a different approach to dealing with family and child welfare issues, an approach that originated among the Maori in New Zealand and that was adopted into legislation there in 1989. This was called Family Group Conferencing (FGC) or Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), an approach that seemed to incorporate many of the traditional customs not only of the Maori in New Zealand but also of Aboriginal groups in other parts of the world (Pennell and Anderson 2005). Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services began to experiment with the approach in 2001. Initial feedback, not only from the families involved but also from the social work staff and other participants, was quite positive.

It was not long thereafter that the agency became interested in undertaking evaluative research on the approach in order to obtain more systematic information about its effectiveness, but neither the agency nor any of its current staff had had much training or experience in conducting research. The agency wanted to play the lead role in the research project, but it also recognized that it would need to form a

partnership with faculty members at a university School of Social Work in order to obtain the methodological and other kinds of expertise that the agency lacked. There may also have been the thought that the research would have more credibility if the research team included academics from a university. In addition to the partnership with the university, the agency had an ongoing relationship with a Mi'kmaq lawyer who spoke the Mi'kmaq language fluently and who was interested in, and had written about, Mi'kmaq customary traditions as reflected in the language and ceremonies of the people. As a result, both the author of this article and the Mi'kmaq lawyer, Tuma Young, were invited to become partners in the research enterprise.

As conceived principally by the agency, but with input from the partners, the objectives of the research were the following:

- To evaluate the family group conferencing (FGC) approach and provide evidence about how it works in practice.
- To deepen our understanding of the FGC approach and what adaptations are needed as it is applied in a First Nations context.
- To develop the research capacity of Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services through collaboration with the School of Social Work at Dalhousie University.

If the study resulted in favourable outcomes, it would strengthen the case to include FGC as an option recognized in provincial child welfare legislation and associated regulations.

## **FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCING**

Before discussing our methodology and results, it is useful to outline, briefly, the essential elements of a family group conferencing approach to dealing with child welfare cases. As noted above, the approach originated with the Maori of New Zealand and its value was recognized by the New Zealand government in its child welfare legislation of 1989. Since then, the approach has spread to other countries, including Canada, the United States, and Europe (Merkel-Holguin 2003).

At its core, FGC involves bringing together the extended family of a child and his/her immediate caregivers, as well as other key community persons as designated by the client (Merkel-Holguin 2005). This may include the Chief of the community, a respected elder, the priest, and so forth. In convening the group for an extended family conference that may last several hours, the responsibility for the resolution of the child

welfare situation shifts to the family and the community, with the child welfare agency acting essentially as the facilitator of the process. If courts are already involved, they would be aware of the meeting and in some cases would need to endorse the outcome.

Typically, a family group conference would involve six phases. It should be noted that all meetings are usually chaired by a staff member of Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services, who must also endorse the outcome of the proceedings.

Phase I is the pre-conference preparation stage and involves talking with the client and others, deciding on participants, and explaining the process of FGC to all involved.

Phase II consists of the opening ceremonies, which includes an opening prayer or smudge, introductions, and establishing ground rules for the FGC.

In Phase III, there is sharing information about the situation, discussion of the issues and of alternative courses of action.

Phase IV involves a family caucus. Family members have the option of meeting among themselves to decide on the course of action they wish to pursue without social workers, therapists, and others.

In Phase V, the family reports back to the larger group on the agreement that it has reached. Responsibilities and time frames are clarified. It is necessary that the agency approve the agreement.

Phase VI consists of follow-up meetings. These are held as necessary to monitor implementation of the agreement and to adjust the plan as necessary.

This approach is contrasted with what we call the Nova Scotia Approach (NSA), the mainstream alternative, which typically involves such activities as social workers and other professional staff meeting with clients (that is, the child and/or immediate caregivers), having case conferences among professional staff, attending court proceedings with lawyers present, or implementing court-mandated agreements or decisions.

## **RESEARCH SUMMARY**

### **Methodology**

We chose a comparative methodology for this evaluation project, deciding to compare how clients fared under both the FGC and NSA approaches. Although our methodology has some of the trappings of

a quantitative approach (a sample, random assignment of cases, etc.), in fact it is qualitative in nature, that is, we followed a limited number of cases, undertook in-depth interviews, used participant observation, and made limited use of administrative records. Our results are best understood as arising from a small number of case studies rather than rigorous comparisons expressed in quantitative tables.

To select the sample of cases to be included, all clients of the agency were listed and cases that were deemed to be unsuitable for the research in the opinion of the responsible supervisors, or for family group conferencing, were dropped from the list. The remaining cases were then listed alphabetically and 50 were selected randomly. Those who were selected in this manner were then approached and asked if they wished to participate in the study, after it was explained to them that they would be assigned randomly to proceed either under the FGC or NSA approaches. Taking into account refusals and other factors, 28 participants were randomly assigned between FGC and NSA.

There are two interesting points to note about the methodology. First, a large number of cases (308 out of 474) were dropped from the list of all agency clients on the grounds of unsuitability for the research project. Sometimes this was for practical reasons, such as cases being supervised for other provinces, cases just at the intake phase or close to termination, or the lack of availability of key participants. More frequently cases were dropped for reasons such as extensive and unresolved substance abuse, or a history of sexual abuse or family violence. In these instances, supervisors had apprehensions about participant behaviour and potential impact on other participants, especially if the case were to be selected for family group conferencing. In retrospect, having learned more about FGC in the interim from other jurisdictions, we came to the conclusion that we were too conservative in making the judgment to exclude certain cases, and that FGC is perhaps more resilient in dealing with difficult situations than we had anticipated.

Second, the random assignment of cases to the two approaches raised certain ethical issues. In preparing to proceed through the university ethics process mandated by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, questions arose about the ethics of refusing access to an approach to child welfare – namely FGC – that was widely believed to be more culturally congruent with Mi'kmaq culture and more effective in resolving child welfare issues in this context. Did we have the right, ethically, to exclude some persons from the FGC process during the time of the research? To obtain advice

on this issue, the principal investigator from MFCS and the university partner met with the Chair and staff of the University Ethics Board (social science) and were advised on how to address this issue. In the end, the University Ethics Board took the position that the proposed benefits of the research outweighed the disadvantage noted above, and made it acceptable to proceed with random assignment.

Data collection proceeded along the following lines. Agency social workers, many of whom were members of the research team, were assigned responsibility for data collection with respect to specific cases in the sample. The research team discussed what information should be collected and how this should be done, with written instructions provided on techniques such as participant observation and interviewing. Interview guides appropriate for NSA and FGC were also prepared and reviewed by the research team.

Although we were not successful in obtaining all types of information for all cases in the sample, a complete file for the FGC cases, for example, would include a report on the FGC based on participant observation, completed questionnaires with participants, a case event report, and a document outlining the history of contact with the clients. The process and outcomes of cases were also discussed within the research team, and this proved to be a valuable source of information and insight.

All of the information sources were then analyzed using qualitative research techniques, especially to identify common themes and pertinent insights that emerged from the written record.

## **Results**

Through the family group conferences that were conducted as a part of the research project, as well as others carried out by the agency, MFCS has gained considerable experience with both the process and the outcomes of this approach to intervention in child welfare cases. Overall the agency is encouraged by the positive experience it has had with FGC, both in terms of the cultural appropriateness of the intervention as well as the substantive outcomes entailed by this approach for families, the agency and the community.

This is not to say that the approach worked perfectly in all instances, and we will return to this below. In general, though, participants in the FGC process were positive about the experience, stressing in particular the opportunity it provided for extended family members and others to provide support and demonstrate affection for the client. Participants appreciated the fact that they had a say in the process, and that cultural

ceremonies and traditions were incorporated into the proceedings. They noted that the process, by incorporating a talking or healing circle format with its attendant ground rules, was also less oppositional than the mainstream alternative.

For MFCS, the process was creative, sometimes resulting in outcomes for particular clients that agency staff would not have imagined possible. Although it is difficult to generalize, there is also a sense that the agency is regarded in a different light when it is seen as a facilitator of resolutions based in family decision-making rather than an agency that exercises power and control over families and communities. As one agency staff member put it, it is not often, using the NSA approach, that agency staff are given a hug by family members after a case is concluded.

The implications for the community are also significant. While the concept of self-determination or self-governance is often understood just in terms of the powers of governing authorities such as Chief and Council, in fact it has a much broader meaning and extends to all major areas of activity in First Nation communities, including matters such as health, education, economic development, and child welfare. FGC is important in this context because it represents a process whereby family and community regain the primary responsibility for looking after the welfare of children, in a process that is facilitated by the child welfare agency.

MFCS also learned that the FGC approach entails at least two other changes in perspective. First, FGC is more than a conference; it is a new approach that begins when the family first comes to the attention of the agency. It does so, inviting consideration of a wider range of options: early intervention, support, customary care, and adoption. Secondly, the FGC approach appears to be more inclusive in that all the key people are involved and part of the decision-making. As a result, the process is more holistic in considering all aspects of the situation. The community and the agency become more familiar with the issues in the case and a range of community supports can be put in place.

Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the research findings points to the need to educate professional staff about FGC and their roles in the process. This applies both to the staff of MFCS who have a key role in setting up and managing the process, and also to other professional resource persons who may be invited to attend a particular conference. They need to understand in advance that they are not the stars of the show, and should not dominate the proceedings.

Apart from these general results, we also learned more specific lessons about process. More specific lessons learned from the FGC process were:

- There is a need to create a climate of safety before the FGC, as well as during and after. Participants may be apprehensive and need to be reassured through such means as explaining the process in advance, and assuring the clients that they have a key role in determining the location of the FGC and its participants, that they are able to bring a support person, and that they will have resources to deal with family members remaining at home.
- The time required for a family group conference is up to 5 hours for large groups and 2.5 hours for small groups. Several conferences may be required. Consistent with findings elsewhere, staff reported that the process of setting up the FGC is very time-consuming (Pennell and Burford 2000; Sieppert, Hudson and Unrau 2000).
- Not all cases work out smoothly (e.g. parents who don't follow through; presence of uninvited persons, absentees).
- We noted some areas for improvement. For example, participants would like to see additional cultural components, such as being able to conduct a FGC in the Mi'kmaq language. They would like to have a respected and neutral person from the community present in case emotions flare up; more and better preparation of participants in advance is desirable — preferably one on one. It is also important to debrief participants.
- Timing is important: the extended family has to be ready for the conference.

### **PARTNERSHIP: VIEW OF THE AUTHOR/RESEARCHER**

It is still a common complaint that Aboriginal people have been “researched to death,” and that they receive little benefit from “fly-in, fly-out” researchers who obtain academic degrees or publish peer-reviewed articles based on research in Aboriginal communities. However, this situation is changing, not least because of the determination of Aboriginal people themselves to put an end to exploitative research patterns. Increasingly, it is Aboriginal communities or organizations who initiate research and who find willing collaborators. At the very

least, if research is externally generated, it must be carefully reviewed by Aboriginal communities that collaborate.

Aboriginal communities have also implemented formal protective mechanisms, such as requiring community approval before research can proceed—an effective mechanism that has even denied access to Statistics Canada's census takers in some instances. Ethics review procedures have been developed in some locations, such as the Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch in Nova Scotia and the ethics procedures of the Mohawk at Kahnawake. Aboriginal people have also worked with the three national granting councils (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC); Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)) to put in place a more satisfactory set of ethical guidelines and procedures in relation to research with Aboriginal communities. Indeed, CIHR, through the leadership of its Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health, has recently adopted a very comprehensive and demanding set of ethical guidelines governing research involving Aboriginal people. Best practice principles have also been produced, such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) principles from the National Aboriginal Health Organization, and the model put forward by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

There is increased attention as well to designing and implementing research in such a way that there is effective communication and use of the results through knowledge transfer strategies. Having Aboriginal communities or organizations as partners in the research from the beginning is obviously an important step in this direction.

Under the general heading of community-based participatory research, there are, of course, different approaches to structuring the relationship. At one end of the continuum, the project can be led by the researcher, who may initiate the process and contact the community to negotiate a partnership. This process may involve a letter of support, creation of an advisory committee, or the hiring of research assistants from the community. At the other end of the continuum, the Aboriginal community or organization may originate the research idea, and look around for a research partner to join the team. The research partner may bring to the table some proposal writing skills, assistance with ethics review procedures, experience and knowledge regarding methodology and data analysis, and familiarity with the literature. The involvement of the research partner may also lend additional credibility to the project

from a research standpoint. The project described here fits more closely with the second model.

### **Nature of the Partnership**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, over the past two decades, Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services has become firmly established as the child welfare agency serving the 13 Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia, and indeed all Aboriginal families in the province. It is now well positioned to move beyond the constraints of mainstream approaches to child welfare and their attendant regulatory regimes, in order to put in place (in actual fact, to re-institute) more culturally appropriate practices. These include a greater focus on strengthening families through prevention and early intervention, re-establishing practices of customary care and adoption, and developing family group conferencing as an alternative to what we earlier called the mainstream or Nova Scotia approach.

The funding constraints and accountability requirements that earlier placed impediments to innovation have also eased, not because the agency has more funds in real terms but rather because, at the beginning of this fiscal year, the agency moved to a block funding arrangement with a five-year horizon that provides more flexibility to allocate available funding to priorities that the agency wishes to pursue.

Research figures prominently in this new funding arrangement, with work underway on customary care and adoption as well as FGC (Wien, Glode and MacDonald 2005). With respect to the latter, the agency was interested in establishing how well the approach has worked, how clients and other participants react to the experience, and in what ways the approach could be improved as it is applied in the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq context. As a result, the idea for the research originated within the agency, with some encouragement from the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare to submit a funding proposal. Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services not only originated the idea but also coordinated the development of the proposal. The agency's executive director was the principal investigator, and the research team was composed entirely of its directors and supervisors, with the exception of the university-based researcher.

How was the research partner selected? It was a natural step for the agency to look to the School of Social Work at Dalhousie University for research assistance. Most of the agency's staff are graduates of the School, as is the Executive Director, who is the first Mi'kmaq person to

graduate from the School with a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree. She has also served as a member of the School's Advisory Committee and taught in both the BSW and MSW Programs. She approached the author of this paper because he has had a long-standing relationship with the Mi'kmaq community. He also has a relationship with her agency, in particular, that dates back to its origins. In 1982, along with the President of the Union of Nova Scotia Indians at the time (the late Chief Noel Doucette), he organized what became known as the Liscombe Lodge Workshop (Moore 1982). The latter brought together a cross-section of Mi'kmaq people from all over the province to discuss social conditions and services on reserves, and led to a strengthening of resolve among those attending to put in place a Mi'kmaq family and children's services agency. This happened in short order thereafter, along with a special BSW program that was geared to the staff of the emerging agency and an initiative supported by the Donner Canadian Foundation to formulate an economic development strategy for the communities. Having a researcher with depth of experience and understanding of the issues is not always possible, but it does encourage a broad perspective and it avoids a lengthy period where things need to be explained to the research partner.

While any particular relationship has its unique elements, one can identify a handful of researchers across the country who have similarly developed longstanding relationships of trust and collaboration with Aboriginal communities. With respect to our project, the basic model of collaboration that played out was one in which the agency is the initiator and lead player, and the research partner comes on board as a resource person to provide advice and support as needed. He attends the research group meetings, advises on certain technical issues such as the selection of participants in the study and the constructing of questionnaires, and (at the invitation of the organization and in conjunction with its Executive Director) is involved in the development of written reports and public presentations.

### **Challenges and Benefits**

The partnership adopted for this research is not the only possible way to structure such a relationship, but it has worked well in this instance. It is also a format that encourages learning by all parties. Certainly for the researcher it was an opportunity to become familiar, first-hand, with the workings of an Aboriginal child welfare agency, to understand the constraints and pressures under which the agency and its staff operate,

and to appreciate the ways such an agency needs to adapt in order to reflect the culture and environment of its communities.

The research team met regularly to update on progress, to make decisions on issues that needed to be resolved, and to move ahead on tasks that needed to be accomplished. As an example of a specific task involving mutual learning, the supervisors of the agency played a key role in the selection of participants, advising who among the agency's clients could not safely be included in the list of those from whom the final selection would be drawn. Once the sampling frame was determined, members of the research team participated both in the random selection of those who would be approached to participate and their random assignment to the FGC or NSA approaches.

Sitting with the group was an "eye-opener" for the researcher, who became familiar with the pressures faced by the supervisors and staff of an agency that is chronically underfunded and understaffed, yet often dealing with situations that are at a crisis point. Indeed, it was a rare occurrence when all hands were on deck around the table. At any given time, there would typically be one or more persons off to the side of the room or in the hallway with a cell phone pressed to their ear, dealing with a particular emergency.

This, in fact, gave rise to our greatest challenge because we were relying on the staff of the agency, including the supervisors, to actually carry out the main activities of the research – for example, to observe FGC meetings, to conduct follow-up interviews, or to record the times and make notes about their involvement with each case. This imposed a cost in terms of the timely and thorough completion of the data collection phase of the project.

With respect to benefits of the collaboration, it is fair to say that the results of the research have been useful to the agency. In general, the findings provide support for the family group conferencing approach, and some specific results indicate ways in which the implementation of the approach can be improved, as noted above. More precisely, though, the issue is how this particular approach to conducting research is advantageous. As noted above, there are different ways to structure a satisfactory community-researcher relationship, but the important elements are that it is a relationship around research that is community-based, is participatory, is collaborative, and embodies a respectful partnership. This has at least two advantages:

- It builds capacity for research, and an appreciation for research, in the community agency. By being involved in the research from the beginning, some of the mysteries of this process were unraveled, and agency staff learned about many of the important features of the research process.
- It allows different types of knowledge to be represented. One of the difficulties with a research model in which an external researcher (usually non-Aboriginal) initiates and controls the research process from beginning to end is that the world is seen and interpreted only from the point of view of the researcher. A truly collaborative partnership where both partners learn from each other permits insights derived from Indigenous or traditional knowledge, and from the experience of the agency, also to become part of the mix.

### **The Way Forward**

In a small way, this specific research project has contributed to developments at the international, national and agency levels. With respect to international involvements, for example, it has given rise to our participation in the annual conference of the American Humane Association, which is the organization that has come to champion family group conferencing in the United States and, to a degree, internationally. This provides exposure to an international network of persons who are applying and, in some cases, researching family group conferencing. Following from the last annual conference of the American Humane Association, discussions have begun about mapping out a research agenda for family group conferencing internationally. This research project is providing some important baseline knowledge for this international initiative.

With respect to the Canadian context, we have been invited to prepare an article on family group conferencing within Canadian Aboriginal communities, to be published in a special issue of the American Humane Association's journal, *Protecting Children*. We expect to write about our research project, but also to highlight other initiatives applying the concept of FGC in Aboriginal communities in other parts of the country. At this stage, there are a handful of First Nation and Métis agencies that are applying for family group conferencing in Canada (see, for example, Desmeules 2007). Our documenting of what is currently being done, and what challenges and successes agencies are experiencing,

could be a first step in forging closer collaboration among such agencies in Canada.

Finally, with respect to the MFCS agency, the research project has, in the first instance, given staff of the agency first-hand experience with participation in research, and has contributed to learning arising from that. Secondly, the results of the project have given support to the use of FGC as a legitimate intervention in child welfare cases, as an alternative to the mainstream approach. Some important lessons about the conduct of FGC have been learned, from the kinds of situations in which it is appropriate to the specific steps that are undertaken in its implementation.

**PARTNERSHIP:  
A PRACTITIONER'S POINT OF VIEWPOINT**

*Joan Glode*

Approximately three years prior to the start of this project, the agency's Executive Director, Joan Glode, gave Dr. Fred Wien a copy of an article published in *Families In Society* titled "Family Group Conferencing in Child Welfare: Lessons from a Demonstration Project" by Jackie D. Sieppert, Joe Hudson & Yvonne Unrau (2000). This article was the inspiration for Mi'kmaw Family & Children's Services to explore more compatible approaches to working with families and children. When the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare announced funding for researcher/practitioner partnerships to conduct research, Dr. Wien concurred with Ms. Glode's request to submit a proposal. The research that ensued has led to the reclaiming of traditional ways of seeking solutions, the endorsement of the Province of Nova Scotia and of the Board of the Agency, which is comprised of the 13 Chiefs of the Bands and a representative of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association.

Unexpectedly, there was a high level of interest and support for this approach. For example, as we were beginning, judges who were attending an annual training event in Halifax heard about our work and asked the agency to present. They were aware that other Aboriginal groups were beginning to develop restorative justice models and were interested in exploring how this would impact and intersect with their work. They expressed openness to seeking new ways to support children and families, and especially ways to assist First Nations and Aboriginal

groups to lessen the over-representation of our children in the child welfare system.

To conduct our research, we formed a research team that included Kevin MacDougall who was, at the time, a supervisor in the Nova Scotia Protection Services, and Susan Cameron, a protection worker. Both have had early experience with family group conferencing and became mentors for the research team. The research team included the Director of Child Welfare, Arlene Johnson, supervisors Lesley McKee and Donald Gloade, and social workers Sandy MacIntosh, Ann Sylliboy, Lenora Paul and Leeann Higgins. These individuals in turn became mentors for other staff as well as research assistants, scribes, interviewers, storytellers, supporters and advocates for family group conferencing. Their participation was invaluable.

We now have a full time Coordinator for Family Conferencing. Some of the unintended benefits have been the dramatic decrease in legal fees and the number of formal complaints as family group conferencing and decision-making become established practices and as judges become knowledgeable about our work in this area. As an agency, and as individuals involved in this work, we are proud to work with Dr. Fred Wien and to be part of a process that respects First Nation beliefs and practices while supporting families and communities.

## ENDNOTES

- i. For example, in our Atlantic Aboriginal Health Research Program, which provides grants for research in Aboriginal health, virtually all of the funded projects are community initiated.
- ii. A conceptual and practical approach to knowledge translation involving Aboriginal communities is found in Wien, 2006.

## REFERENCES

- Desmeules, G. 2007. A Sacred Family Circle: A family group conferencing model. In *Putting a human face on child welfare: Voices from the prairies*, ed. I. Brown, F. Chaze, D. Fuchs, J. Lafrance, S. McKay and S. Thomas-Prokop, 161-188. Toronto, ON: Prairie Child welfare Consortium and Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare.
- MacDonald, N., J. Glode, and F. Wien. 2005. Respecting Aboriginal families: Pathways to resilience in custom adoption and family group conferencing. In M. Ungar (ed.), *Handbook for working with children and youth* (pp. 357-369). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

*Research-Community Partnerships in Child Welfare*

- Merkel-Holguin, L. ed. 2003. Promising results, potential new directions: International FGDM research and evaluation in child welfare. *Protecting Children* 18 (1-2) (Special issue).
- Merkel-Holguin, L. ed. 2005. FGDM: An Evidence-based decision-making process in child welfare. *Protecting Children* 19 (4) (Special issue).
- Metallic, F., and T. Young. 1999. *Apoqonmaluktimk: Working together to help ourselves*. Amherst, NS: Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs.
- Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services of Nova Scotia. *Annual Report 1999-2000*. Shubenacadie, NS: Author.
- Moore, D. 1982. *Social conditions and services on Micmac reserves in Nova Scotia: The workshop at Liscombe Lodge*. Halifax, NS: Maritime School of Social Work and the Union of Nova Scotia Indians.
- Pennell, J., and G. Anderson. 2005. *Widening the circle: The practice and evaluation of family group conferencing with children, youths and their families*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Pennell, J., and G. Burford. 2000. Family group decision making: Protecting children and women. *Child Welfare* 79: 131-158.
- Sieppert, J., J. Hudson, and Y. Unrau. 2000. Family group conferencing in child welfare: Lessons from a demonstration project. *Families in Society* 81: 382-392.
- Wien, F. 2006. *A dance to create meaning together: Perspectives of the ACADRE network on knowledge translation*. Prepared on behalf of the 8 ACADRE programs in Canada for submission to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples Health.
- Wien, F., J. Glode, and N. MacDonald. 2005. *Respecting aboriginal families: Pathways to resilience in custom adoption and family group conferencing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Young, Ta. 2004. *Comment*. Unpublished manuscript, Halifax, NS: Author.