

## 2014 CCCR national summit case studies

### Siem Smun'eem: Indigenous Child Well-being Research and Training Network

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<b>Steering Committee</b>	UVIC researchers Jacquie Green (Project Manager), Leslie Brown (Principal Investigator), Sandrina de Finney (Research Coordinator), Robina Thomas, Jeannine Carriere, Cathy Richardson, Shanne McCaffery and Shelly Johnson (UBC)
<b>Location</b>	British Columbia
<b>Dates</b>	2008—the present
<b>Partners</b>	Provincial Indigenous NGOs (First Nations, urban, Métis), BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres; Indigenous Perspectives Society (formerly Caring for First Nations Children Society), Métis Commission of BC
<b>Funders</b>	Over the life of the Network, funding has been received from the BC Government (Ministry of Children and Family Development), UVIC Faculty of Human and Social Development, VanCity Credit Union, Vancouver Foundation, Victoria Foundation, CIHR and private donations.
<b>Methods</b>	Various methods, primarily qualitative community-based methods, including storytelling

### Project background



Siem Smun'eem is a network of British Columbia researchers, policy makers, service providers and community members interested in research that supports the wellbeing of Indigenous children and families. Rooted in a vision for healing and the inclusion of diverse voices, Siem Smun'eem (Respected Children) initiatives seek to reclaim Indigenous ways of knowing and doing and reposition them at the core of child and family wellness initiatives. The network provides a space for critical dialogue about Indigenous research, as well as opportunities for research-related training, knowledge transmission, and resource sharing.

Siem Smun'eem was formed over 5 years ago in response to the recognition that child welfare policy and practice was not responsive to the needs of Indigenous children and families and that repeated attempts to transform systems and practices by governments and other service providers were being done on the foundation of research founded in Euro-Western ways of knowing and being. The hub of Siem Smun'eem is at the University of Victoria, chosen as it had the most capacity to support the research and training work of the network.

While the network members included people from a wide variety of Indigenous organizations and communities, Siem Smun'eem entered into a formal partnership with the three major provincial Indigenous organizations, representing on-reserve, off-reserve and Métis child and family services. The guiding principles for the partnership were formally agreed to in a Memorandum of Understanding with Indigenous Perspectives Society (formerly Caring for First Nations Children Society), the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres and the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC. These principles include:

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- To endeavor to include the wisdom of Elders and youth in all our work
- To engender mutual respect between Partners, engaging in a way that reflects Indigenous values
- To carry out our projects with a high standard of ethical conduct
- To treat data with respect, conducting research that honours the community and the teachings and stories of the community
- To conduct our business, research and meetings with integrity
- To remember that all our work is for our children, for improving their wellbeing and for facilitating effective change in the lives of children and families
- To respect the boundaries and capacities of communities and organizations by not overburdening them
- To operate through the principle, concept and process of relational accountability, both between Partners and in the community
- To honour Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, and to endeavor to embody these knowledges and practices in our conduct
- To recognize the commitment of the Partners to one another, and to acknowledge that relationship building is lifelong
- To honour community protocols

Funding for projects has come from a variety of sources including the BC Government, VanCity Credit Union, Vancouver Foundation, Victoria Foundation, CIHR, private donations and the University of Victoria. A significant portion of the funds raised has been for community research training. Siem Smun'eem has taken the same approach to its training projects as it has with its research; namely a community based approach whereby university partners work with community members to develop and to deliver the training. Such an approach includes the following key features:

- Respect for local protocols.
- Engagement with local knowledge (Indigenous ways of knowing as well as experiential and research knowledge)
- Co-development of research training
- Co-presentation of research training
- Provision of resources that enable the community to partner and participate and implement the training
- Guiding assumption that we, as individual academics, are in relationships with the people involved in the training and research

forever (i.e., not project time-limited) and that these relationships are personal as well as professional

- Self-reflection and evaluation embedded in every aspect of the work
- Peer mentoring and leadership building: training participants are invited to teach each other and past participants are invited to co-facilitate future sessions (Johnson et al, 2014)

The intention of this case study is to illustrate aspects of community-based research that exemplify excellence. The list of principles of the MOU and the list of features of the training are indicative of what Siem Smun'eem considers to be excellence in community-based work. In order to understand how these are reflected in actual practice, two short stories follow. The first explains a research-training project where a basket-weaving methodology for research was incorporated and the second tells of a research project on customary adoption.

### A training story

A collaborative approach was taken in the development and delivery of the research training in a community. Academic member(s) of Siem Smun'eem partner with community member(s), who often also hold membership in the network, to build a curriculum team involving Elders, youth and community members. The academics travel to the community to engage in the development process. While a template agenda is provided, the curriculum development process begins by listening to ancestral teachings from the traditional owners of the territory where the training is to occur. Based on the advice of the community curriculum team, illustrations of Indigenous research methods that have been used in the territory are incorporated into the curriculum. Once the curriculum is established, both the community and Siem Smun'eem promote advertising of the training. The training is then delivered, in the community, by a team consisting of academic and community trainers. As part of the training, participants are encouraged to share resources, skills and strategies that are relevant to their community. This enables the curriculum to be further tailored to each community. The training is participatory in nature and local protocols are followed under the guidance of Elders. Most training sessions are two days long.

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In one session held on Coast Salish territory, the methodology of basket weaving provided the frame for the research training. Johnson et al. (2014) describe this training.

In the morning of Day 1, we invited a basket weaver to share the process of weaving baskets with [Siem Smun'eem] training participants. In the afternoon we linked the various steps and processes of basket weaving to conducting research in an ethical Indigenous way. The entire basket-weaving process shared by the basket weaver is complex and lengthy. For the purposes of this case study, the preparation, weaving and usage process is condensed. For example, the basket weaver shared the important preparation process of readying oneself, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually, to pick the cedar, and how traditional knowledge is used to know when the cedar picking time is 'right'. To ensure the sustainability of this sacred resource, the weaver must know where on the land to pick cedar, how to prepare it, rip it into pieces, soak it, and ready it for weaving. Once the preparations have been made, the weaver will weave unique patterns into a basket. When the cedar basket is complete, this beautiful piece has many uses: It can be used to collect berries while out berry picking or store food or objects, to hold water, or as a gift to someone. Each basket may be made for different purposes and people in the same way that different research methodologies or processes produce different knowledge for different audiences and purposes. As researchers, we must also know the community that we enter when we conduct research or [Siem Smun'eem] training. We must adhere to all the necessary steps and protocols prior to conducting the research by building and nurturing relationships with the people and communities in which the research or training occurs. Once we have gathered our data, the findings should have immediate and long-term uses such as supporting a community to develop programs, policies, and/or traditional teachings (pp. 99-100).

### A research story

The work of Siem Smun'eem is integrated across its training, research, knowledge mobilization and other activities. The work in the area of customary adoptions exemplifies this. Custom adoption refers to the traditional cultural practices of adoption and caretaking of children that have always taken place in Indigenous communities and members of Siem Smun'eem have been working with communities to document custom adoption traditions. This community-based research study aims to assist communities in identifying ways to support their children living in kinship and other placements, including foster care, group care and adoptive homes, so that they are consistently connected to their communities and cultural identities through various kinds of supports and activities. The project is designed to achieve this by working with communities to document and utilize their unique caretaking traditions related to custom adoptions. Custom adoptions have been used since time immemorial in Indigenous communities when birth parents were not able to take care of their child(ren). Custom adoptions are different from mainstream adoptions because they are grounded in the teachings and cultures of Indigenous communities, instead of external legislation.

In 2011, a forum was held at the University of Victoria that included presentations from Elders, youth, and leaders in the area of custom adoptions. The purpose of the forum was to hear stories of adoption, custom adoption traditions and to learn from communities with custom adoption systems. Forum proceedings are available online in the report *Honouring Our Caretaking Traditions* (<http://www.uvic.ca/icwr>). One goal of the forum was to develop partnerships to support custom adoption projects with Indigenous organizations and Nations.

The first project initiated was with an Indigenous child and family service agency and three of the Nations that they serve in northwestern British Columbia. As the Executive Director of Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services (NIFCS) noted, "through increasing cultural knowledge NIFCS aims to enhance its practice to meet the holistic needs of children and youth in our care, in particular, to ensure that children and youth maintain connections with their families, extended families, and communities and are given opportunities to know about and learn their languages, spiritual teachings, and cultural traditions from the Elders, families and communities" (Bennett, forthcoming). Siem Smun'eem, led

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by our research coordinator Sandrina de Finney, developed the project and funding proposals collaboratively with NIFCS and the project plan reinforced our joint mission statements of preserving the uniqueness of cultural identity for every child and family.

Two subsequent forums were held in northern BC and were designed to collect stories of customary adoptions in three First Nations served by NIFCS: Talhtan, Kitimat and Tsimshian. The first was a two-day session in Prince Rupert that served to engage thirty-six Elders, community leaders and service providers to support youth to act as presenters and community representatives for a larger training session in Terrace two months later. The participants of the first session set the focus for the follow-up session, which had 67 people, including Elders, youth and children. What happened at each session was the sharing of sacred cultural knowledge that can help to sustain the cultural rights and the wellbeing of children and youth in the communities. Many participants noted that this knowledge was not often shared and that they were engaging for the first time in these conversations with each other.

The project was as much an action project as a research project. For example, engaging Elders in providing cultural continuity and leadership mentoring to youth was an action that was seen as very valuable by participants. Indeed, some communities are now working towards developing Elders' circles to support children and youth-in-care or in the adoption processes so that they might access cultural supports and mentoring.

This community-based research project not only nurtured relationships between the university and the community, but between communities. A participant commented:

There was also one piece that stood out to me within just the three communities, the Nations that are represented here today, the Tsimshian, the Haisla and the Tahltan. I was taught that a three cord is very strong and these three Nations and they're all represented in this room and caring together and it's not by accident. I believe that the creator has a greater vision for the people that are represented in this room. With putting our ideas and coming together something powerful is going to come out of it. I really believe that and I stand on that 'cause it's like a tripartite relationship that needs to be, you know we need to come

together more often so that we're able to work on this custom adoptions piece and we're able to work on bringing our children home.

The core intent of the project was to document traditional knowledge. All sessions were videotaped and each community received a video montage of key lessons and outcomes of their particular session. These videos are also available on YouTube and posted on the Siem Smun'eem website (<http://www.uvic.ca/icwr>). Further, Siem Smun'eem is guest editing a special edition of the First Peoples Child and Family Review that will focus on custom adoption. The academics are working with the communities to write articles for inclusion in this journal. The "Grannies Club" in Prince Rupert is so excited to be published.

### Domains of research excellence

All four domains of excellence were addressed, as outlined below.

#### Community relevance

Community relevance was ensured in many ways. Foundationally, the identification of custom adoption as a broad topic came from Indigenous child and family serving agencies in B.C. Cowichan Tribes is the only community in the province with a formalized custom adoption program and other communities wanted to explore this idea. Holding an open forum on this topic responded to that need. Subsequently, communities approached Siem Smun'eem to assist them in documenting the traditions in their particular communities. These foundations set the standard for community relevance. There were challenges of course, as there were both Indigenous child and family servicing agencies as well as bands/communities at the opening forum. Balancing the interests of the agencies (professionalized service providers) and bands/communities required negotiation. Their interests are certainly aligned, but not always the same. Evaluations were conducted of each session offered to ensure that the needs of the participants were being met.

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### Equitable participation

Equitable participation was established early on the custom adoption project in the northwest. The proposal for funding was co-written by Siem Smun'eem and NIFCS. The sessions were co-developed with academic researchers, Elders, service providers, community members and youth. Subsequent to development of the sessions, was the co-facilitation of the sessions. Moving sessions from one town to another helped to encourage equitable access to participation. Having Elders mentor youth to present and participate in the sessions helped both the youth and the Elders to engage. A challenge for Siem Smun'eem in this domain occurred when a funding opportunity was missed because a community partner didn't get their paperwork done in a timely fashion. Siem Smun'eem offered to help several times but in the end the work was not done and so this funding was lost. The capacity of a community to participate certainly impacts this domain of excellence.

### Action and change

Action and change is a domain that Siem Smun'eem strives for in both processes and outcomes. That intention drove the design of a series of community forums where connections between people was seen to be a catalyst for enacting change. Indeed, new relationships and new ideas for program areas have resulted from these forums. The challenge for this domain was to not let the research drive the process of the project but to allow research to happen as part of the project. The forums were sites of capacity building, knowledge mobilization, action and research.

### Research design

These first three domains significantly assisted with the construction of the final domain of excellence: research design. Siem Smun'eem fosters research training that is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The custom adoption project strove to document traditional sacred knowledge. The research design was therefore created out of the discussions with Elders and community members who wanted the project to enable storytelling, culture and relationship. A challenge in this domain was the balancing of limited resources (including money, people, and skills) with the academic research desires and the community desires for

cultural planning services that can support a range of customary adoption care in the communities. Traditional knowledge is lost each time an Elder is lost and the urgency to hear their knowledge and have their mentorship of youth was ever-present in the project.

### Conclusion

The strength of this project was its grounding in community and it exemplifies how the collection of research data can be a powerful support for community development. This project reinforces the understanding that "data" means gift. The gifts of cultural knowledge collected through this project are a responsibility for which Siem Smun'eem acknowledges its accountability. The researchers of Siem Smun'eem will be in relationship with these communities forever.

### Links

<http://www.uvic.ca/icwr>