

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK INDIGENOUS DIALOGUE CIRCLES

Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC
(AMSSA)
Various Locations, British Columbia

Area of Practice:

Immigrant-Indigenous Relations

Video:

<https://youtu.be/4DF4laIW9yo>

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

The Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of British Columbia (AMSSA) was established in 1977 and began as a network for multicultural organizations in British Columbia's interior region. By working together, these organizations expanded each of their community's multiculturalism knowledge and capacity for anti-racism. In 1983, AMSSA grew to include newcomer-serving organizations. Today, AMSSA is a province-wide association that strengthens over 80 member agencies, as well as hundreds of community agencies who serve immigrants and newcomers and build culturally inclusive communities. AMSSA's purpose is to co-create, together with its members and community partners, the conditions for success that allow immigrants and newcomers to British Columbia to live their best lives.

AMSSA is known for collaborating with governments and community partners on a provincial and national level. Alongside its members and community partners, AMSSA plays an important role in addressing emerging issues and impacting policy. AMSSA is focused on building partnerships and networks, developing and facilitating training events, and producing highly relevant information resources based on current research and policy trends. Through these indirect services, AMSSA strengthens the capacity of organizations who work directly with immigrants and newcomers.

AMSSA has been working in the space of Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization for many years. More recently, AMSSA was approached by member organizations and individuals participating at various AMSSA events who were seeking answers to questions on the topic of Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization. As a result, in 2016, AMSSA applied for and obtained funding from Canadian Heritage to engage in conversations and build relationships with Indigenous organizations and communities. The goal was to try to understand how to engage in the work of Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization in a respectful manner that centers Indigenous voices and presence and to understand the role of settlement organizations in this work.

In 2021, AMSSA received further funding to engage in this work from the B.C. Ministry of Municipal Affairs. As a next step, AMSSA decided to facilitate five Indigenous Dialogue Circles with representatives of B.C. Settlement and Integration Services (BCSIS) service providers and an Indigenous leader. The impetus for developing these Dialogue Circles was the observation that, while many leaders of BCSIS agencies are engaged in Truth, Reconciliation, and Decolonization work at the policy level, the level of engagement among frontline staff of these organizations has been limited. In fact, one of the challenges reported by frontline staff of BCSIS agencies was their lack of knowledge on how to address questions from newcomers on the topic. The aim of Indigenous Dialogue Circles was to provide BCSIS service providers with the knowledge and understanding that they are supporting settlement on unceded and occupied territories.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

Indigenous Dialogue Circles

Description:

AMSSA facilitated a series of Indigenous Dialogue Circles with BCSIS settlement service providers and an Indigenous leader. The purpose was for participants to build relations and learn from the stewards of the land by respectfully participating in discussions, asking questions and listening to each other.

Five Dialogue Circles took place between June 25 and August 23, 2021. There was one Dialogue Circle per broad B.C. geographic region, including the following: Metro Vancouver East and Fraser Valley; the North and Interior; Vancouver Island, Sunshine Coast and Sea to Sky; Metro Vancouver; and a combined group for those who could not participate in the event for their region. Each circle was 90 minutes long and held virtually using the Zoom meeting platform. The Circles were small groups, with a preferred limit of 10 participants and a guideline of one participant per service provider agency.

As a prerequisite, service providers had to register through an Expression of Interest survey that included general information and required them to describe their interest in participating in the Dialogue Circles, outline their previous interest or work with Truth and Reconciliation, and confirm their commitment to active participation in a full 90-minute session. All participants were expected to engage in the discussions with cameras and microphones turned on. To make the sessions safe spaces, the Circles were closed to external observers and were not recorded.

Prior to each Circle, participants were invited to submit anonymous questions through an online survey. They could ask any question with an Indigenous focus. Participants were encouraged to speak with their colleagues at work to also find out what questions they had. About 50 questions were submitted in total and shared with the Indigenous leader of the Circles. Importantly, the questions were shared with the Indigenous leader without any screening. Prior to most Circles, the Indigenous leader provided written responses to the submitted questions. During the Circle, the Indigenous leader also spoke about the questions asked and provided additional insights.

The Dialogue Circles took a focus group approach. The discussions were guided yet open without limiting discussion topics. The discussions, questions, and answers provided qualitative data about participants' key areas of interest and knowledge gaps. Detailed notes were taken during the Dialogue Circles, which were then later analyzed for themes. A total of four themes emerged, including: 1) Indigenous worldview versus colonized worldview, 2) decolonization, 3) intergenerational trauma and the inherited survivor spirit, and 4) we all have our own indigeneity.

Goal(s):

The goal of the Dialogue Circles was for BCSIS service providers to learn ways to relate to Indigenous people and center Indigenous presence in their work and their connection with newcomers. An important aim was also to establish a meaningful connection between service providers and Indigenous leadership.

Target Client Group(s):

The target client group consisted of BCSIS service providers. There are approximately 50 service provider agencies throughout B.C. who deliver BCSIS services to newcomers who have temporary status or are naturalized Canadian citizens and are ineligible for federally-funded services. The goal was to engage not only organizational leadership, but staff who are in direct contact with clients, on or close to the front lines of service delivery. Furthermore, the goal was to also achieve substantive

representation from each geographic region of B.C. and across all BCSIS service provider agency types.

Delivery Partners:

The Dialogue Circles were delivered together with an Indigenous leader who also acted as a consultant and collaborator on the project. The Indigenous leader was Norm Leech who has been the Executive Director of the Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre since May 2016. Norm Leech is from T'it'q'et, a St'at'imc Nation community which surrounds the town of Lillooet, B.C. and he has served as community chief.

Human Resources:

The Dialogue Circles were conducted with the help of several AMSSA staff members. AMSSA's CEO facilitated four of the five Dialogue Circles (the fifth was facilitated by AMSSA's provincial integration coordinator) and is responsible for the project leadership. In addition, AMSSA's provincial integration program manager oversaw each Dialogue Circle and is responsible for the management of the entire project. AMSSA's provincial integration coordinator helped with the project coordination and note-taking during the Dialogue Circles. Finally, two additional staff members provided technical lead and support. In other words, for each Dialogue Circle the facilitator was supported by four AMSSA staff in the capacities of oversight, technical lead, technical support and notetaker or alternate facilitator.

Funding:

The Province of B.C. through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs funds AMSSA to provide sector supports for the B.C. Settlement and Integration Services Program (BCSIS).

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

Several factors contributed to the effectiveness of the Dialogue Circles. One of the factors included the communication of clear expectations to prospective participants. To register for a Dialogue Circle, participants had to respond to an Expression of Interest survey and describe their awareness and prior engagement with Truth and Reconciliation, as well their interest and ability to take back and share information learned with their organization. To establish a meaningful connection between service providers and Indigenous leadership, all participants had to commit to be focused, active and respectful during the Circle and to participate with their cameras turned on and not to be muted. They were expected to ask questions and also listen to their colleagues and the Indigenous leader.

In order to make the Dialogue Circles as effective as possible, it was also important to create a comfortable space that encouraged open expression. This was accomplished, for example, by limiting the number of participants in each Dialogue Circle to 10. Also, there were no restrictions on what could or could not be asked. The questions were not screened, which provided a much clearer understanding of the gaps in knowledge and where the conversation needed to go for participants to feel more connected and more knowledgeable about Truth and Reconciliation in their work. In addition, there were no external observers, and the sessions were not recorded, so that people could speak freely.

Another important factor that contributed to the effectiveness of the Dialogue Circles is that the funder allowed AMSSA the latitude to create a unique program that engaged an Indigenous leader, followed an Indigenous approach, and centered Indigenous presence. The program respected the spirit of Indigenous culture, and the outcomes were not prescribed or predetermined; rather, they followed the collective progression of the Circles. Of note, the funders were also not allowed to participate in the Dialogue Circles.

Finally, having a strong team of AMSSA staff available to take on various roles during each Circle as well as Norm Leech's ability to connect with participants and offer guidance, wisdom and leadership strongly contributed to the effectiveness of the Circles.

Efficient:

While the Dialogue Circles had to be conducted virtually on Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual setting was very efficient because it allowed participation from all regions of B.C., which would not have been possible otherwise due to budget considerations. For example, there were almost 40 participants from 10 B.C. regions, including remote areas where travel expenses would have been too high. It was also efficient for the Indigenous leader and the facilitator of the Circles, who made significant contributions to five events over eight weeks, while handling a vast range of other leadership responsibilities.

Relevant:

Participants learned practical ways to relate to Indigenous people and center Indigenous presence in their work and their connection with newcomers. Through the discussions, questions, and answers provided, participants communicated key areas of interest and knowledge gaps that may be representative of the sector. The conversations revealed essential themes for additional learning, and understanding of where the starting point should be for future projects, which will help meet BCSIS service providers' needs through future related projects.

Sustainable:

The Dialogue Circles, including the learning and the guidance provided by the Indigenous leader, laid the foundation for continuing work for longer-range contributions toward Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization. For example, the Dialogue Circles were the basis for a bridging project, the Indigenous Leaders Circle AMSSATalk. The Indigenous Leaders Circle AMSSATalk was a 2.5-hour virtual event during which a pre-recorded conversation between four Indigenous leaders and a facilitator about the four themes of the Dialogue Circles was shown to an audience of over 100 participants from across the province. This event in turn was foundational to new work supported by the B.C. Ministry of Municipal Affairs in the 2022/2023 fiscal year. In the future, AMSSA's intention is to expand upon the knowledge of the four themes and possibly develop a training program that relates to these themes.

Transferable:

The Dialogue Circles format could be replicated effectively and efficiently by any organization in any geographical region and for a variety of participant groups. In order to successfully implement the Dialogue Circles, a sincere commitment from all sides to Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization, a genuine awareness and regard that ensures an Indigenous approach, centres Indigenous presence, respects the spirit of Indigenous culture, and a funder who does not mandate or predetermine

outcomes are essential. Furthermore, a good and strong relationship with an Indigenous leader is imperative. Furthermore, it is advised to keep the groups in each Circle small, ask for participants' expression of interest prior to their registration for a Circle, and ask for participants' active participation during the Circle. Given that the Circles cover topics that may be difficult for some, good facilitation skills and time management skills are important. Finally, it is also advised to have enough staff to support the Circles in various capacities (e.g., tech support, detailed note-taking given that the Circles are not recorded to create a safe space).

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

The Dialogue Circles were innovative and forward thinking because the program first and foremost respected the spirit of Indigenous culture, including spoken tradition. The Circles followed an Indigenous approach and centered Indigenous presence. It is unusual that for a government-funded program, the outcomes were not prescribed or predetermined; rather, they followed the collective progression of the Circles, which allowed the learning uncovered in the four key themes. The funder learned collaboratively through parallel discussions.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

To our knowledge, no other similar programs have been created to which the Indigenous Dialogue Circles could be compared. The Indigenous Dialogue Circles are unique to the sector.

High Client Uptake:

All BCSIS service providers were invited to join the Dialogue Circle (ideally) for their region. To keep the numbers small and comfortable, only one person per agency could participate. Almost 90% of the main BCSIS hub agencies participated. When all BCSIS service providers are considered, almost 70% of eligible agencies participated. Forty percent of participants were individuals in a leadership position. The rest were individuals working on or close to the front lines of service delivery.

High Client Retention:

High client retention is not applicable in this situation. However, the post-Circle survey responses indicated a high level of commitment to continued future work with AMSSA on Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

At the end of the Dialogue Circles, participants reported that they had found the sessions very meaningful; in particular, they indicated how valuable it had been for them to talk directly with an Indigenous leader. The Indigenous leader, Norm Leech, was described by Dialogue Circle participants as "a wonderful, engaging speaker" who is "a warm, fantastic presenter and I could listen to him talk for days on end" as well as "approachable and open in his response to questions and in his presentations." In each Circle, participants felt a strong and immediate connection to Norm and welcomed his guidance.

Furthermore, all participants expressed a clear interest in continuing to engage with AMSSA on the topic of Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization. The time commitment respondents were willing to make toward listening, participating, and learning more was substantial. Those who quantified their response recommended, on average, to meet 15 times a year, which would involve activities at least once per month.

Finally, many respondents shared additional thoughts that reflect a remarkable range of responses, including ones with layers of complexity. Participants expressed that they wanted to learn and engage more, and that they wanted to involve their own organizations and have supportive conversations with their clients.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

Given the nature of the project, there was no conventional performance measurement and evaluation strategy. The project followed the Indigenous tradition of spoken word and sharing of ideas. Nevertheless, after each Circle, a short 3-item questionnaire was administered to participants to obtain feedback. The first question asked participants whether they would be willing to continue to engage with AMSSA on Truth, Reconciliation and Decolonization. The second question asked participants how much time they would be willing to commit to this endeavour. The last question asked participants to share any thoughts they had.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

AMSSA

www.amssa.org

The Indigenous Leaders Circle AMSSATalk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FczcE-ZpmE>