Could you introduce the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory (Six Nations) community?

Six Nations is located in Southern Ontario. For the loyalty of some Iroquois nations to the Crown, the Six Nations were deeded a tract of land along the Grand River. Eventually, most of the land was stripped from them and at present Six Nations sits on 46,000 acres. The reserve is located in close proximity to large urban cities such as London, Toronto, Niagara Falls and the US border.

Six Nations has the largest population of all First Nations in Canada. According to the Six Nations Lands/Membership Department, as of December 2013, the total band membership is 25,660, with approximately half of the population living on reserve.

In 2005, Six Nations’ community agencies and members came together to address complex issues hampering Indigenous students’ success in the Canadian educational system. Can you provide an overview of the issues that inspired this collaboration?

The Six Nations activities started when various community agencies and members were investigating an emerging phenomena concerning the alarming rise in children dropping out of school, accessing social services and being moved through the criminal justice system. This led to an investigation into how children and youth were connecting to their schools and a decision that more formal research was needed.

How did you come to be a part of their research?

I was privileged to be invited to be part of the research. However, I would like to underscore the research belongs – insofar as any research can be ‘owned’ – to the Consortium and the Six Nations community.

After being invited by the Six Nations to join in their work, the Student Success Research Consortium was formed. Can you introduce this Consortium?

Prior to initiating any research, the community members, my fellow Brock researchers and I formed the Student Success Consortium. Collectively, we developed a memorandum of understanding that put the community first in all aspects of the research. We then developed all of the research materials and completed the ethics applications collectively.

Together, we submitted a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant and were awarded funding to conduct a scoping exercise and collect some baseline information. This consisted of 12 research gatherings (similar to focus groups) with a total of 35 youths and 33 adults.

The 12 research gatherings were conducted in convenient locations within the community. Each gathering began with the sharing of a meal and an opportunity for the participants, Consortium members and research team to get to know one another. Following the meal, we spent one to two hours discussing various aspects of students’ lived experiences. Michelle Bomberry, Sandra Styres and myself formed the research team and were always present at each of the research gatherings.

Can you introduce some of the issues Indigenous youth and their parents face in the Canadian education system?

Both the youth and the community members speak about feeling disengaged and misrepresented in Canadian education systems. Both groups also speak about the overt and systemic racism they face in school. The youth speak about experiencing things differently from their parents and the increasing pressure to walk in two worlds by successfully navigating their own culture and Canadian culture. Much of the research demonstrates that there continues to be (and with good cause) a deep distrust of the Canadian education system that is an ongoing historical and contemporary legacy of colonial relations of power and privilege. This makes it difficult for community members, parents and students to connect to Canadian school systems and create relationships.

Is there anything you would mention about your working relationship with the Six Nations community?

I think it is important to recognise everyone who is involved in the project – which originated in the community and continues to be directed by community members through the Consortium. This research is a true collaboration in which Aboriginal leadership is privileged and centralised. My fellow Brock researchers and I have assisted with the project, but the true direction has come from the community members within the Consortium. I think it is also important to acknowledge Michelle and Sandra, both of whom are from the Six Nations. They were integral to the research.
THERE IS A significant amount of research that suggests the education of Indigenous populations in Canada is in crisis and that they are being left behind. For example, Statistics Canada notes that 42 per cent of the Indigenous population in Ontario do not hold a high school diploma – compared with 29 per cent of non-Indigenous peoples. However, much of that research uses a deficit perspective and applies a pathologising lens implying that Indigenous students are the problem. The research often positions Indigenous education as being in crisis while failing to provide adequate context and historical background.

Former National Chief Shawn Atleo claimed that it was essential to ‘smash the status quo’ in Canadian education. The provision of education for Indigenous students has a long history in which the status quo has been to devalue Indigenous culture students while failing to meet the needs of Indigenous students. In response, in 2005, the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory (Six Nations) community – a First Nations community located in southern Ontario in which all six Iroquois nations live together – embarked on a project to investigate how children and youth connect to their schools.

After identifying a need for more formal research, Michelle Bomberry, a Six Nations member, reached out to Dr Sandra Styres – who worked at the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education at Brock University – to discuss the research and determine if the Tecumseh Centre would be willing to move the project forward from an academic perspective. The Tecumseh Centre agreed to assist with the research, bridge the community scholars with University faculty, and provide cultural guidance and support until the Consortium was formed. They invited researchers from Canada’s Brock University to work with them, including Dr Dawn Zinga.

The group then formed the Student Success Research Consortium. Bomberry, Styres and Zinga worked together with the Consortium on the project and helped secure two distinct grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to support the research. The Consortium was initially formed by 14 community members and social service agencies representatives associated with Six Nations and two Brock researchers to identify the specific challenges hampering the success of Six Nations youth.

GATHERING PERSPECTIVES: COMMUNITY-FIRST, LAND-CENTRED RESEARCH

One area where the Consortium put significant efforts was in identifying the perspectives and lived experiences of Six Nations youth in educational systems, as well as gathering the perspectives of parents and members of the Six Nations community. In conducting a scoping exercise of 12 focus groups, they found that mainstream ideas of success were being imparted to the Six Nations youth, and it was difficult to reconcile these notions with what the community defined as success.
“Some of the elements that many community members agree upon is that success for children and youth can be measured by an individual having a clear sense of identity and connection to their culture,” explains Zinga. “While education is highly valued, traditional Western or mainstream definitions of academic achievement were not necessarily equated with success.”

The difference between mainstream beliefs concerning research and community partnership and those of the Six Nations community was exemplified in the different research methods and approaches taken by the members of the Consortium. Thus, the community and the university formed a research partnership that focused on how best to conduct research collaborations effectively.

Central to achieving this aim was thinking about how research could be done with community members and youth in respectful, responsible and reciprocal ways. The Haudenosaunee Research Method (HRM) is one that aims to engage particular communities in ways that are culturally appropriate and sensitive, and it informed how the Consortium’s research was planned and conducted. Reflecting back on how the research unfolded, it was clear that there were important differences from HRM. “Sandra and I realised that we had developed a way of doing research that placed the community first and was grounded in the importance of land,” explains Zinga.

IMPOSITIONS ON DIFFERENT PARENTING TRADITIONS

Another focus of the research was on the definition and understanding of parenting within Six Nations and how that may differ from people of other cultural backgrounds in Canada. “Many community members and parents spoke of how traditional ways of parenting have been interfered with by the imposition of Western knowledge and by the residential school system,” notes Zinga.

Within Six Nations, parenting is more of a shared responsibility between extended family members and, as such, many people play important roles in a child’s life. Importantly, while the extended family is expected to support a child in finding his or her path, they are not to interfere with that path. Naturally, given the problems with education, both Six Nations children and parents require support, so part of the project sought to understand what support is needed. “We found that parents needed support and resources to be able to demonstrate how they cared for their children, to hold them accountable and to support children and youth through the challenging times that many experience in their journey towards becoming responsible adults,” Zinga summarises.

A SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD

Ultimately, the research has provided valuable insights into the nature of the challenges Six Nations members face. While the research may be news to those outside the community, within the community much of the research confirmed what its members already knew. For many community members have been pushing to be more involved in education and to have education systems that better serve the needs of their youth and community.

One notable landmark achievement that has recently come about thanks to this push is that Six Nations Polytechnic was granted the right to confer university degrees through their new Oqwehoweh Language programme. This marks a significant step forward in delivering education for Indigenous students.

This research on students’ lived experiences within education systems has been published and the research on parenting is in the process of being disseminated. The Consortium has also been developing a series of videos with Garlow Media (a multimedia firm in the Six Nations Community). These videos will be released in spring 2016 and available as resources for individuals working within education and for anyone interested in the messages and perspectives that emerged from the research.

Lessons learned

Dr Dawn Zinga introduces what the Brock University learnt from the Six Nations peoples about how to improve its own practices:

“The University was challenged by our insistence as a Consortium that the community must come first. Various departments had to learn that things could be done differently that met their needs whilst upholding practices integral to the local protocols of the community. I believe that the University learned to be more flexible and our research ethics in particular developed a deeper understanding of the intricacies of research in collaborative partnership with Indigenous communities, as opposed to research on Indigenous communities. While there were some lessons learned, it is important to point out that understanding the complexities of collaborative partnerships is an ongoing process that will require continued learning and negotiation.”