

HONORING COMMUNITY: DEVELOPMENT OF A FIRST NATIONS STREAM IN SOCIAL WORK

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 20 years First Nations leaders of northern British Columbia have been advocating for a Social Work program that would address the unique needs of First Nations communities. This is not surprising given the historical destruction of First Nations families and communities as a result of colonization. Many would argue that current child welfare practices continue on where residential schools left off in implementing government assimilation policies. Approximately 30% of all children in care in Canada are Aboriginal (Fournier and Crey, 1998). This is no different in British Columbia. In the northern half of the province the number of Aboriginal children in continuing care is as high as 80% (Children's Commission Annual Report, 1998). The need for culturally sensitive child welfare practices is critical to First Nations communities and families.

With the opening of a new northern university in 1992, University of Northern British Columbia, there was a renewed hope by northern First Nations leaders for a Social Work program that would meet their needs as well as support their vision for a future of self sufficiency and independence. This paper describes one small step in that vision, that is, the development of First Nations Social Work courses. To better understand this development process it is first important to be aware of the context in which it was undertaken.

THE CONTEXT

The First Nations Community

To describe the First Nations community requires an examination of several aspects. The following section

summarizes some of the demographics, socio-economic context and current services available to First Nations people in this area. The capacity of UNBC, and the First Nations community is also examined.

Demographics

The University is situated in the territories of 78 Bands and 16 Tribal Councils as well as many urban First Nations organizations. The population of the region is about 300,000 with approximately 10% being First Nations people.

Socio-economic Context

Generally, Aboriginal people have lower education levels, higher rates of suicide, higher infant mortality rates, greater numbers of children in care, and greater numbers of adults in institutions and more poverty compared to others in Canadian society. There is also a significantly larger number of Aboriginal people that are dependent on social assistance, fewer that are employed, and fewer that have post secondary education (DIA Basic Departmental Data: 1997)

The following statistics are only reflective of the registered status "Indian" population and do not include other groups such as Metis, non status and non registered Aboriginal people. Some estimates suggest that the actual number of Aboriginal people is double what is currently report by government officials. This however does not suggest that the statistics improve when including this Aboriginal population.

In December, 1997 there were approximately 650,000 registered status Indians in Canada living on or off lands reserved for Indians. Of this total population approximately 4,000 or six percent obtained post secondary education degrees as compared with 11% for all other Canadians.

In the 1950's in British Columbia, one in every 10 status Indian babies died during infancy – a rate that was five times the provincial average. In the 1960's the status Indian infant mortality rate dropped dramatically but still compared unfavourably to the general population – a rate three times the provincial average. In 1997 the Provincial Health Office (BC)

reported higher death rates among status Indian infants due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, pneumonia and influenza (approximately three times the provincial average).

Indian suicide rates have remained higher than the non-native population ever since comparative statistics have been compiled. In 1982 it was reported that one in every 10 Indian deaths was by suicide – a rate that was six times the national average. The Provincial Health Officer (BC) reported in 1997 that the rate of status Indian deaths caused by suicide remained six times the rate of the non-native population. The largest number of suicides was reported in the 15 – 44 age grouping (approximately 20 per 10,000).

The number of children in care in British Columbia has remained constant since 1963 when approximately one third of all children in care were identified as Aboriginal children. The Provincial Health Office (BC) reported in 1997 that there were 2,500 Aboriginal children in care in BC, representing one third of all children in care.

In April, 1999 Children's Commissioner Cynthia Morton reported that in 1998 there were 9,751 children in care and 4,068 in continuing custody in British Columbia. Approximately 40% of children in continuing custody were Aboriginal children. In the northeast and northwest regions of the province Aboriginal children made up 80% of the total number of children in continuing custody.

There is concern among community leaders that services needed to sustain the young Aboriginal population will seriously strain current infrastructures as that population grows older. In British Columbia alone there are approximately 57,500 registered status Indians who are under the age of 30 years. This represents approximately 55% of the total Aboriginal population in the Province.

Social status indicators also suggest that Aboriginal people are among the poorest of the poor. Over one half of respondents to the 1991 Aboriginal People Survey (Statistics Canada, 1991) reported annual income of less than \$10,000.00. Over 65% of those living on reserves reported income less than \$10,000.00 per annum. Almost 25% of the total Aboriginal population reported being unemployed. In some northern

Aboriginal communities the rate of unemployment reaches as high as 90%.

There is consensus among social work professionals, government officials, and Aboriginal people that poor living conditions exacerbate the rates of suicide, number of children coming into care, and poor health among Aboriginal people.

The view of social work professionals and government officials differ however from the views of Aboriginal people when explaining the poor social status of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people generally perceive the loss of social status and poverty as a consequence of a loss of political autonomy. Aboriginal people argue that political control, not better access to services or the replacement of non-Aboriginal social workers with Aboriginal professionals, offers long range prospects of improved social conditions among Aboriginal people (Shawana and Taylor, 1988).

While educating Aboriginal people in the social work profession is important it is only one aspect of a larger equation. Aboriginal people argue that merely educating Aboriginal people as social workers will do nothing more than have Aboriginal people administer mainstream theory.

Mainstream theory suggests that Aboriginal people will prosper as their lives begin to resemble those of the Euro-Canadian majority. This is simply not true. The current social work trend is to focus on Aboriginal lifestyle and essentially blame individuals for failing to cope with their social environment. The response is to promote healthier lifestyles through parenting courses and public education programs (Hudson and McKenzie, 1981).

The emphasis on personal lifestyles as causing poor social conditions ignores the source of those poor conditions like unemployment, racism, poor education and government policy. The tendency is to psychologize social problems, depoliticize social issues and blame the victim (Culhane-Speck, 1987).

For Aboriginal people it is the control of social forces that affect Aboriginal lives which offer some chance of reversing poor Aboriginal social conditions.

It is within this context that the First Nations Social Work course work was developed.

THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), Canada's newest university, was established in 1990. UNBC's Mission Statement drives its mandate in this institution's relationship with First Nations peoples. Specifically, UNBC celebrates diversity, "... especially in its relationship with the aboriginal peoples of the northern region." (UNBC Calendar, 2003). Since its inception, the university has focused on how this institution would best meet the needs of the aboriginal communities, which it serves.

The Social Work Program began in the fall of 1994 with the introduction of the Masters of Social Work degree. A Bachelor of Social Work degree was implemented one year later. Consultation with the First Nations community began prior to the establishment of the Social Work Program and has been constant over the years. Throughout the process, First Nations have maintained the importance service relevancy. In social work, this is equated to mean that First Nations communities have been consistent in their demands that UNBC produce social workers who will be effective with a First Nations clientele, whether or not the social workers themselves are First Nations.

Since the inception of the university considerable expectations have been built up in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. First Nations communities have expressed a desire in developing a First Nations Social Work Program. Further, it was articulated that the proposed program would incorporate a First Nations as well as mainstream social work theories and practices. A report, *"First Nations Social Work: Future Developments"* authored by Margo Greenwood in 1999 captures the desires of the First Nations community in terms of the vision for a First Nations stream within the Bachelor of Social Work Degree. Key points presented in this report include:

- The generalist First Nations Social Work program would have specific flexible First Nations core courses suited to diverse First Nations constituents.
- There was not enough First Nations content in the current Social Work curriculum, the content itself did not reflect the social work knowledge and practice needed to work with First Nations
- Interracial, intercultural, skills and competencies, First Nations history, worldview and realities, current issues, legal definitions and the importance of oral traditions should be included in any First Nations program.
- Involved regional input from First Nations communities through university established relationships and linkages.
- Ensure First Nations courses and Social Work courses with integrated First Nations content are a part of any regional delivery of the Social Work Program. (and review current Social Work courses for First Nations content).
- Meet with former First Nations Social Work graduates, now in the community.
- Establish a small working group comprised of: the Chair of the Social Work Program, and the First Nations faculty, and four First Nations representatives: one from Carrier Sekani Family Services, one from the First Nations Friendship Centre, one from a Metis organization and one from a First Nations community.
- Survey community family care workers and other human service workers for specific course and content ideas.
- Design First Nations Social Work stream within the context of the existing Social Work Program and delivery schedule.
- Establish a community-based advisory committee whose purpose would be to vet curricula content and delivery process.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL

The comprehensive review and report carried out by Greenwood in 1999 laid the foundations of a proposal that was submitted to the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education Training and Technology for a curriculum development project. This proposal was approved in April 2000 and the project began. The 1999 report recommendations became the workplan for the project.

The intention of the First Nations Curriculum Development Project has been to develop culturally relevant and meaningful pre-service First Nations Social Work curriculum that will meet the needs of learners seeking employment in either First Nations communities and organizations or in the broader society. Specific goals for this project included:

- To participate with First Nations communities and organizations in identifying Social Work course content;
- To participate with First Nations communities and organizations in identifying processes for teaching course content;
- To develop four new Social Work courses including development of course outlines, instructor's guides and student reading packages and;
- To develop accompanying resource packages for core Social Work courses.

COMMUNITY PROCESS

First Nations communities have had a long history of 'outsiders' parachuting in programs with little or no consultation taking place beforehand. This was a consideration of paramount importance when this project began to unfold. Partnership, rather than consultation, with First Nations community was established. Poonwassie (2001) lays out primary considerations reflective of the process that this curriculum development project followed:

All too often, programs are designed for the people by experts from the outside. Local educators and stakeholders must be part of any planning process that is designed to meet the needs of First Nations people.... In other words, planning needs to start with the people, ensuring a consideration of indigenous knowledge, values, traditions and systems. ... experts... should not be dictating the activities of the local people. It is not sufficient to have local people on advisory boards simply because in many cases these boards are used as shields from genuine substantiated criticism (Poonwassie, p. 276).

With the above in mind, a Community Advisory Working Committee was established in the fall of 2000. Members included representatives for Carrier Sekani Family Services, Lake Babine Nation, Saikuz First Nation and the UNBC Social Work Program. The committee met three times a year.

This phase of the project focused on the collection and analysis of data in preparation for the development of the First Nations Social Work courses. In conjunction with Carrier Sekani Family Services' biannual meeting of all human service workers, a large focus group was conducted in March 2001. Participants from all First Nations communities affiliated with Carrier Sekani Family Services including Lake Babine Nation were invited to participate. Focus group participant packages and questionnaires were developed. The questions were given out ahead of time so participants were aware of what they would be asked and could prepare if they wanted to.

Initial discussions with local First Nations community social workers, human service workers, educators, health professionals, Elders and administrators were undertaken in focus group sessions. Focus group questions included:

- What topics do you believe are important for social workers to know when working in your community?
- What are some of the ways that these topics could be taught to students?
- What protocols should social workers know to work in your community?

- Who in your community could act as a resource person for the social work program?
- Are there traditional teachings that should be incorporated into the Social Worker courses?

Focus group participants included: Practicing Community Social workers, Family support workers, Health Professionals, Drug and Alcohol Workers, Senior Administrators, Elders, and Community members.

Within these responses key community resources and individuals were identified that could be asked to participate in consultation and delivery of the new First Nations courses. The focus group data was analyzed into thematic groupings that formed content and implementation processing of specific courses.

The data also formed the foundation of the curriculum development rationale and framework. This information was then given to curriculum developers to ensure integrity of community relevancy and consistency.

“Local people need community-centred and culturally relevant training in order to deal with problems created by years of oppression and colonization.” (Poonwassie, p. 279).

Community development/education in perspective:

“It is now time for a revolution in adult education that will focus on the rise of concern for First Nations peoples. It must begin with skilled First Nations people who can provide the vision and direction for socioeconomic development in their communities. Understanding and recognition of indigenous structures and systems are essential if adult educators are to be successful in partnering with First Nations peoples in relevant and meaningful adult education initiatives.” (Poonwassie, p. 280)

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT VISION AND PRINCIPLES

Responses to these questions along with information from background documents created in 1999 and 2000 and a review of social work course outlines from throughout the province and beyond was used to draft a framework including potential courses for the UNBC First Nations Social Work stream. The following paragraphs outline those thoughts and ideas:

Vision

A First Nations Social Work stream will provide students with culturally relevant, meaningful First Nations Social Work curriculum that will meet the needs of learners seeking employment in either a First Nations community or organization or in broader society.

Principles

The First Nations Social Work stream will be guided by the following overarching principles:

Bicultural

First Nations Social Work courses will be relevant and meaningful to students wishing to practice in either a First Nations community or organization or in the broader society. Courses will include First Nations and community perspectives.

Partnership

Partnerships with First Nations communities are preferred to consultation. These partnerships will be characterized by ongoing, meaningful dialogue that is not time limited. First Nations communities will be involved through the life span of the courses.

Inclusion

At every opportunity possible First Nations communities' and individual's voices will be included in both the development and implementation of the First Nations Social Work stream.

Experiential

Courses will be based on adult education principles with emphasis on bridging theory and practice. Learning activities, wherever possible, will be hands on in nature.

Student Centered

Course content and delivery will be designed to access student's life experience and knowledge. Any learning in the program will encourage and support student's life-long learning.

Credible

The First Nations Social Work stream will meet Bachelor of Social Work accreditation standards as set out by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work as well as credible within the community.

COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

The following identifies the four First Nations Social Work stream courses and their content descriptions. These courses have been tailored to the needs of the diverse First Nations communities within UNBC's regions.

Individual and Community Wellness (New Course)

The purpose of this course is to create an understanding of the role that wellness plays in the life of Aboriginal/First Nations individuals and communities. Topics to be explored will include the definition of healing and wellness, the role that historical events have played in the development and current socio-economic situation of First Nations and the role that social

workers can play in the future development of health and wellness of First Nations individuals and communities. As well, the issue of self-care and self-management for First Nations people and the social workers who may work in high stress situations will be explored.

First Nations Governance and Social Policy (New Course)

In this course, First Nations family values and standards will form the basis of the study of First Nations policy development and its relationship to self-governance for First Nations communities. We will explore self-determination from a First Nations perspective, it's impact on social policy across Canada and the need to build Child and Family social needs into self-governance and planning. There will be a focus on examples within BC communities. Additionally, the course will explore the importance of how social work practitioners need to become skilled advocates aimed at influencing policy and laws affecting First Nations and family systems.

Family Care Systems (New Course)

The purpose of this course is to create an understanding of family caring systems from an Aboriginal/First Nations perspective. Topics to be explored include Aboriginal/First Nations worldviews, traditional roles of family members, the role that historical events have played in the development and current social realities of First Nations and the role that social workers can play in family wellness. Contemporary social work practices with Aboriginal/First Nations children and families will also be analyzed and critically reflected upon, with a particular emphasis on future directions in Aboriginal/First Nations child and family welfare.

Social Work 410 – First Nations Strengths and Challenges (Revised Course)

This course critically examines the historical process of colonization in Canada and its impact on First Nations people. Local control, devolution of services, and emergent approaches to service delivery including strengths and challenges facing First Nations communities will be examined. Contemporary

social work practices with First Nations peoples will also be analyzed and critically reflected upon.

COURSE DESIGN

Courses include opportunities for students to integrate new information and skills into their own experiences and knowledge. In some cases they will generate knowledge using their previous experiences through the use of e.g. generative type questions. Courses will also include a number of experiential activities including discussions, presentations, community guest speakers, field trips, art activities, interviews, readings, etc.

Community information and perspectives may be directly involved in the First Nations Social Work stream by:

- including specific case studies and examples derived from the local First Nations communities;
- encouraging students to use local specific examples in their discussions and assignments;
- inviting local community resource people to participate in course delivery; and
- participating in discussions with a community based implementation committee prior to course delivery.

INCLUSION OF ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES

The courses for the First Nations stream in Social Work have been developed with the premise that each be grounded in Aboriginal perspectives. As such, each course begins with traditional (pre-contact) Aboriginal practices relevant to the content and topics presented in the course. In addition, Aboriginal Worldviews are also presented in each of the courses. Second, the effects and impact of colonization are presented, such that there is a critical understanding of colonial impacts upon contemporary Aboriginal realities as they exist today. In essence, a common teaching amongst many

Aboriginal cultures has guided the themes and sequence of learning events in each course; that being the response to the questions: *Where have I been? Where am I now? Where am I going?* This approach is similar to educator Paulo Friere's concept of *conscientization*, loosely translated as "...the development of the awakening of critical consciousness." The writers have interpreted this to mean developing a critical understanding of aboriginal history and its resulting impact that has manifested in the contemporary reality of Aboriginal peoples today.

The overall goal of each course is to effectively prepare social work trainees to work effectively with diverse Aboriginal populations while at the same time ensuring that there is not a 'pan-Indian' approach to this process. It is imperative that the instructor does not see the assigned readings as the starting and end point in terms of the topics or issues raised. Rather, they are to be used as a starting point, and effective instruction will incorporate course content adaptation to meet the needs and interests at the local level and the instructor's individual expertise and teaching style.

It is anticipated that these courses will address the community aspects of adult education practices. In short, it is recognized that social workers are often 'change agents' in the communities that they work with. Further, the needs of the community beyond social work practice often surface, particularly in the areas of community development and empowerment. Poonwassie (2001) states, "Adult education is a force that can foster an environment that will improve the living conditions of First Nations peoples by helping their communities to empower themselves" (p. 271)

Central to the course design considerations is recognition of First Nations communities aspirations for autonomy and self-determination. It is a given that First Nations social agencies are required to 'jump through the hoops' set by provincial and federal government authorities in their administration of social work programs/agencies. However, it is imperative that First Nations communities and those who work for them retaining a vision of control that the community/nation strives toward. This fundamental issue is addressed in each course developed.

ADULT EDUCATION PRINCIPLES AND ANDROGOGY

Androgogy is the study of adult teaching and learning, as opposed to *pedagogy*, which focuses on those same processes in relation to young learners. The teaching methodology and strategies outlined in these courses reflect effective adult education practices, namely dialogical with an emphasis on reflective practice.

The dialogical nature that these courses are founded take into account and builds upon the foundation of the life experiences that adult learners bring into the learning environment. Brookfield (1983) sums up the importance of the dialogical interaction in learning. He states,

Effective practice is characterized by a respect among participants for each other's self-worth....Facilitation is collaborative. Facilitators and learners are engaged in a collaborative enterprise in which, at different times and for different purposes, leadership and facilitation roles will be assumed by different group members.

In essence, the above speaks to the roles of the learners and the instructor. Both are equal in the learning situation. The task of the instructor is to facilitate learning such that there is co-learning taking place in the classroom at all levels; co-learning between the instructor and learners as well as between the learners themselves.

Another key element in the andrological process is the cultivation of critical thinking amongst the learners. The renowned libratory educator Paulo Friere speaks of *praxis*, which is a key process that this curriculum incorporates. Brookfield (1983) provides the following explanation of Friere's term;

Praxis is placed at the heart of effective facilitation. Learners and facilitators are involved in a continual process of activity, reflection upon activity, collaborative analysis of activity, new activity, further reflection and collaborative analysis, and so on. Facilitation aims to foster ... critical reflection. ... learners will come to appreciate that values, beliefs, behaviours, and ideologies are culturally transmitted

and that they are provisional and relative. The aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed , empowered adults (p. 11).

Thus, through *praxis*, the learners gain a critical understanding of the history that has shaped the present reality. Moreover, once that understanding is gained, there is a less chance of history repeating itself. This is especially important for social work practitioners working with an Aboriginal clientele.

IMPLEMENTATION

Like the curriculum content and design, delivery of the First Nations Social Work stream strives to support First Nations' vision for the Social Work program. Curriculum development does not occur without course delivery playing a role even if it is not addressed directly. Some of delivery considerations that have arisen focus on preparation of students for entry into Social Work program, student supports, delivery schedules, delivery locales, resources and curriculum support. It is the latter that is significant for this curriculum development initiative. As noted earlier development of the Social Work course is not a discrete process but relies on delivery processes for their success. For example, one way to ensure the inclusion of community or territory specific examples and to identify community resource people would be to establish a community implementation committee that would vet the curriculum as well as provide support for its successful delivery. This committee could also play a role in designing the actual delivery of the courses within the regions.

The courses have now been completed and approved by the university processes. Implementation will begin in the near future.

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