

A CASE STUDY IN PROGRESS: THE ROLE OF MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Newfoundland and Labrador, like other regions in Canada, is in a period of social transformation due to a number of processes to resolve outstanding political and socio-economic issues with the province's Aboriginal peoples. In addition, major initiatives in the region such as the Davis Inlet relocation and the development of the mega Voisey's Bay nickel deposit pose significant social risks and opportunities. Greater political autonomy and self-determination for the Aboriginal governments also creates obligation and responsibility for the social welfare of their citizens. What is the place for the social work profession, Aboriginal social workers and for Memorial University of Newfoundland's School of Social Work during this era of profound social change? This article explores the concurrent journeys of the Aboriginal peoples of the province, the School of Social Work, and an Aboriginal social work student as each grapple for meaning and relevance in building a new more socially just reality.

Aboriginal societies in Canada, including those in Newfoundland and Labrador, had for many decades been in a state of social drift but are now experiencing a social shift. The recognition of Canada's Aboriginal peoples and their existing rights in the Constitution Act (1982), legislative changes, judicial decisions and policy directions have all resulted in fundamental structural changes. Through a variety of instrumental means (primarily negotiated and administrative arrangements) the principle of Aboriginal self-determination and political, social and economic autonomy are being expressed. Although their agenda is often dominated by economic development, land

ownership and natural resource management issues, Aboriginal societies are also directly confronted with the responsibility for ameliorating social problems. Most expect to achieve this through developing and implementing more culturally relevant legislation, policies, programs and services in Aboriginal jurisdictions. However, greater Aboriginal control will not automatically eliminate the social pathologies so readily apparent in Aboriginal communities. The opportunities and risks associated with such profound social change are of particular interest and relevance to the social work profession and particularly for Aboriginal social workers who may view their profession as an instrument for social change for Aboriginal people, families and communities.

From a systems perspective, this period of social transformation extends from Aboriginal societies to implicate political, economic, social and academic structures and institutions throughout Canada. Significant social reform is evident in our professional history, but we have not yet understood current social changes, focusing instead on resolving personal troubles associated with the social turmoil that both precedes and accompanies change. Maybe we are uncertain of our place, as a Euro-western institution, with and within the emerging quasi-autonomous Aboriginal institutions and states. So, we continue to focus our attention on the peripheral social symptoms and fail to engage in a deliberate and strategic process to resolve current social ills through a reformed social order. The profession must do whatever it can to ensure new life, growth and opportunity emerges after the forest fire of social transformation. The profession must look to and support our pioneers, Aboriginal 'social work' academics and practitioners, who are forging trails in this socio-political unknown. Our professional obligation is to ensure that a socially just social order emerges out of the process of decolonization. The profession, including social work schools that develop the capacity of social workers and build their knowledge base, will have to change systemically.

These principles underlie the journey of the School of Social Work at Memorial University of Newfoundland within the context of Aboriginal political and socio-economic change, but it is a case study in progress. The journey occurs concurrently with those journeys of Aboriginal societies in the province and with the journey of Aboriginal social workers who

often struggle to reconcile the rifts between the issues in their communities with the expectations of the profession and its training institutions. Other similar journeys have taken place elsewhere in the country, with a longer history in some jurisdictions. Newfoundland and Labrador began the journey more recently because of the province's political, geographical, and socio-economic circumstances.

COLONIAL CONTEXT

Three Aboriginal nations are indigenous to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Members of the Mi'kmaq First Nation have historical and contemporary political and cultural connections with the Mi'kmaq Nation in the Maritime provinces. Labrador is the territory of the indigenous Labrador Inuit and Innu. Those of Labrador Inuit descent are now politically organized in the Labrador Inuit Association and the Labrador Métis Nation while the Mushuau and Sheshatshiu Innu bands are organized under the political umbrella of the Innu Nation. Mass political consciousness within Aboriginal communities, the emergence of a distinct sector of Aboriginal social workers, and Aboriginal social work scholarship is comparatively new to this province. The delay is partly due to relative isolation of the region and the province's late entrance into Confederation in 1949. Labrador is in the northern part of Canada, and Newfoundland is an island, so Aboriginal communities are geographically dispersed, and isolated both from each other and the mainland Aboriginal political arena. Under the Terms of Union in 1949, Newfoundland assumed responsibility for Aboriginal peoples in the province. 'Indians' in the province did not come under the Indian Act and all Aboriginal communities were treated the same as other communities in the province. The federal government directly funded the provincial government to subsidize these costs. Colonization, disease, forced settlement and community relocations, and Euro-western education persisted in Labrador for most of the twentieth century (Tanner, Kennedy, McCorquodale, and Inglis, 1994). Many Aboriginal people were either living traditional lifestyles or struggling with the impacts of colonization and not focused on political agendas.

Memorial University of Newfoundland and its School of Social Work also reflect the political status of the province within Confederation. The new province faced serious social and economic challenges, developing new public services, consolidating the population in more easily served communities, pursuing economic development projects that promised prosperity or at least steady work, and finally the collapse of the cod stock vital to the island's socio-economic base (Hardy Cox, 1995). In these troubled times, the School of Social Work evolved a generic BSW program that addressed social problems as experienced by individuals, groups and communities within this social and policy context.

Some Aboriginal people have always felt compelled to challenge and respond to social vulnerability and need. Many have and continue to do this in a variety of capacities within human services and often work from an inherently indigenous value base. Some, seeking a broader knowledge base, skills and perhaps legitimacy, look to the social work profession and assume social work education will provide the means for relevant social work practice. Many are drawn to the humanist value base, vision of social justice, belief in self-determination and empowerment, and skill set to address need and vulnerability.

The focus of the School of Social Work is to generate generic social workers able to practice in a variety of social settings. An Aboriginal setting is perceived to be just one more setting. The school has graduated social workers who have gone on to perform vital roles in the struggle for self-determination of Aboriginal peoples, but their education would not have equipped them with knowledge and skills specific to the Aboriginal realm. Cultural and professional assimilation is a risk in a generic social work education program that doesn't acknowledge and accommodate this distinction (Fiddler, 2000).

Critical reflection is required to resolve practice dichotomies; generic practice and diversity; mitigating needs and risks versus development and growth; managing social systems versus creating social structures; social compassion versus political action. Relevance in the Aboriginal context requires that the profession must determine our role and responsibility in Aboriginal society building and in the constructing the structures of a new social order (legislation,

policies, programs and services that both ameliorate and alleviate social problems). Of course, the rest of Canadian society and its social welfare structures can not remain static but must change to be relevant to a new social order which accommodates Aboriginal societies and their respective relationships.

REBUILDING: THE PATH TO A NEW SOCIAL ORDER

Most Aboriginal nations are rebuilding their societies. Their path is being forged in the political and bureaucratic arenas, largely through the negotiation and implementation of land claims and self-government agreements, judicial decisions and to a lesser extent administrative arrangements Durst (1996), provides a framework for understanding and pursuing greater self-determination within the social welfare realm. The circle of self-government 'begins' prior to colonization when autonomous Aboriginal societies had their own social welfare systems. I would also add that an indigenous helping knowledge base and skill sets also existed within Aboriginal societies and social work services were provided by local people (Zapf, 1999). The circle requires a return to a political autonomous state in a renewed federalism. In a period of 'benevolent colonialism' external systems of social welfare were imposed on Aboriginal societies, often implemented by social workers who, although well-meaning, were as oppressive and destructive (CASW, 1994) as their missionary fore-bearers. Aboriginal societies have recently moved to various degrees of autonomy in social welfare. Most systems are at least integrated, whereby Aboriginal people, ideas and approaches are included in existing social welfare systems and structures. Many others are engaged in co-managed or delegated models where predetermined programs and responsibilities are negotiated and are now administered with varying degrees of flexibility by Aboriginal organizations. Others are striving for co-jurisdictional arrangements based on equal power and joint partnerships between Aboriginal and Canadian or provincial governments, or in some cases holding out for autonomous jurisdiction within a renewed federalism.

Aboriginal nations throughout the Canadian state have different aspirations and capacities for control of their social welfare issues and systems. In 1984, in Newfoundland and

Labrador, Conne River became the first reserve and the *Mi'kmaq* band members became registered under the Indian Act. The federal government is now considering recognizing other, currently non-status, *Mi'kmaq* as a landless band eligible for federal social and economic programs and services. The new Innu community of *Natuashish* (created as a result of the relocation of Davis Inlet) is a federal reserve and *Sheshatshiu* is becoming a reserve. Meanwhile, in 2002, the Innu from both communities became registered under the Indian Act. Both the *Mi'kmaq* and the Innu have plans to pursue self-government. The Labrador Inuit Association is on the verge of a final land claims and self-government agreement. Meanwhile, the Labrador Métis Nation, while also pursuing interests in land claims and hunting and fishing and natural resource rights, is in the short term focused on access to and the administration of socio-economic programs and services (Chafe, 2003).

The Agreement in Principle for the Labrador Inuit Association (2001) provides insight into the implications for the social welfare within a self-government arrangement. The Labrador Inuit government will have some measure of jurisdiction and, therefore, the ability to create laws, development policies, programs and services for many fields of practice with direct interest and relevance to the profession of social work. These include substance abuse; mental health; community healing; social assistance (income support); social services to family, youth, and children; young offenders; family relationships; and corrections and victims services. The School of Social work has always had a vital role in the preparation of competent social workers in these fields but now they will be defined by the Labrador Inuit government. An added consideration for the School and the profession is the fact that the under the negotiated agreement, child welfare services in particular, must be provided by licensed social workers registered under provincial legislation. A concurrent obligation on the part of the School of Social Work is thus created to train both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers with the competencies to work within Aboriginal government institutions and services and with Aboriginal populations. Existing generic social work training does not automatically translate in to effective, relevant and socially just practice within Aboriginal societies.

The School of Social Work is challenged to expand its consciousness to include emerging political realities, and significant social and economic developments, and inherent social needs, risks and opportunities. Our profession was relatively helpless and inept in the face of crisis which raged like an uncontrolled forest fire in the community of Davis Inlet. The community itself sought control through their internal inquiry. (Innu Nation, 1993) This self-study enabled the Mushuau Innu people to understand their colonization experience and collectively determine their own political and social agenda. Their actual physical relocation and construction of the new community, Natuashish, in 2002-2003, is a significant milestone in the journey. But as a profession we recognize that consciousness of the impacts of a colonization experience and physical relocation of peoples, while a necessary part of the journey, has significant implications and risks. Again, we must ask how the profession can be relevant and responsive.

The region is also preparing for the development of the nickel deposit in Voisey's Bay, Labrador, in the middle of traditional territories for both the Innu and Inuit. Substantial social and economic risks and potential opportunities remain despite impacts and benefits agreements between the Aboriginal organizations and the company. Archibald and Crnkovich (1999) captured some of this concern as expressed by Inuit women. While the environmental assessment stressed the social benefits of increased employment and accessibility to Employee Assistance Programs, women were concerned about the impact, among other things, on their family relationships as rotational employment disrupts family life on the land.

Clearly, Aboriginal societies in Newfoundland and Labrador are in the process of rebuilding their governments, institutions, communities, and the lives of their citizens. Mainstream society is compelled by default to re-examine and readjust existing institutions and social order in order to accommodate and work harmoniously within this new reality. The School of Social Work at Memorial University of Newfoundland has shifted through collaborative research, collaborative social work education initiatives, and the integration of Aboriginal content within the curriculum. In addition, the presence of Aboriginal social work students is

being acknowledged, many of whom do and will play key roles in this new reality.

The relationship forged between the School of Social Work and the Labrador Inuit Association in the creation and delivery of the Inuit Social Work Diploma between 1994-2001 was a critical milestone. The process included a needs assessment involving interviews with community and political leadership and potential students in the Labrador Inuit communities in order to identify students, the mode of delivery and relevant course content. The result was a twenty credit diploma program consisting of social work specific and general studies courses in arts and science. Eight students from a cohort of ten successfully completed the program. The mode of delivery consisted of a combination of on-campus and outreach with intensive course delivery in three week blocks in different Inuit communities. Whenever possible, local and Inuit instructors were engaged. Three courses were specifically designed for the program and consisted of a culture camp and courses in Aboriginal social policy and Aboriginal social development. In the end, the experience was collaboratively evaluated and described as a “Deep Partnership” (Bella, Lyall, Ford, Decker, and Diamond, 2002) that had required intensive, supportive and trusting relationships between the Inuit organization and the university.

The program emphasized Inuit values; university qualification; attracting Inuktitut speaking students and valuing Inuktitut; providing critical tools for self-government; involving elders and adult learning principles. The realities of meshing diverse political interests, students’ needs and university requirements meant that their goals were accomplished to varying degrees. The experiences and learning have meant new insight for further forging and deepening the commitment to university and Aboriginal partnerships.

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

The journey to a more just society continues for Aboriginal communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, for the School of Social Work and for Aboriginal social work students. We are all pioneers, for none has been down this road

before and the road is fraught with perils, sometimes disinterest, and a lack of understanding leading to resistance to change. The School of Social Work has made a conscious decision to continue in this journey and has assigned two faculty to offer a strategic direction. This work includes building internal capacity within the School, enhancing external relations with Aboriginal communities and representative organizations, and creating relevant curriculum for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social work students. A recent decision situates the building of external relations within the school's pre-existing community partnership 'collaborative' program.

A relevant and responsive School of Social Work must reconcile mainstream social work education (with its emphasis on individual issues) with an Aboriginal pedagogical structure that must stress the colonial context and the collectivist orientation of Aboriginal communities. Although mainstream social work and Aboriginal social work education may begin as distinct entities they must eventually mesh, so both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students can understand and navigate a complex policy and practice realm that respectfully provides serve to Aboriginal peoples in mainstream social welfare programs; that ensures an ability to work with and within federal policies and programs specific to Aboriginal communities (including their intersection with provincial social welfare systems) and ultimately enable work within the new co-existing order of autonomous Aboriginal policies and services.

Guiding principles in the support of social development consists of four pillars: relations, relevance, respect and responsiveness. The School of Social Work must continue through open communication, trust and collaboration, to build relations with Aboriginal governments, organizations, and institutions. Approaches must be relevant and specific to each distinct Aboriginal society and must respect the priorities, decision-making and leadership processes in Aboriginal communities, as well as rights, perspectives and values. A more holistic or perhaps health determinants way of conceptualizing and viewing interventions must be used to address social problems. Values, including traditional helping knowledge, the wisdom and leadership of elders, a collective versus individualistic orientation and the time and opportunity to reach consensus must be respected. The School must also '*carpe*

diem' or 'seize the day,' deciding now if we are going to be relevant as a school and as a profession.

THE DESTINATION

The destination for most Aboriginal societies is a new state of harmony, balance and equilibrium between Aboriginal, provincial and federal governments that is socially just, egalitarian and humanistic. The School of Social Work which is currently positioned to be relevant and responsive to the social policy and social systems in the federal and provincial governance and policy spheres must now find an appropriate way to support Aboriginal social welfare systems and Aboriginal students while ensuring that all students can work within and interface with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal systems.

CODA

Aboriginal Social Worker

I was raised by my grandmother in a non-native community. We often had people visit who would be considered social outcasts, people who had been incarcerated or had mental or physical disabilities. But we always treated people with acceptance and respect and we didn't judge others. We weren't told to be nice to others, that's just the way it was. Everyone was always welcomed and we shared what little food we had.

I was eleven years old when I first went to a native community. The first things I noticed were children without shoes, parents who were out drinking, and older children looking after the younger children. The community didn't even have running water. I had problems in my own family but this is the first time I realized that hunger, poverty, and violence can be a community problem. This was my first explicit experience and I realized that it wasn't right. I couldn't understand why the children and the elders had to live like that.

I always knew I had to continue my education, so I did a Human Services Worker program in corrections from the community college. I did a placement in one of the remote

communities in Labrador. I was so organized and figured I had to do my work a certain way. But when I arrived I couldn't do my work because people were gone hunting, fishing and getting wood - even my work supervisor. I contacted my field placement coordinator and told her I was very concerned about not being able to get my work done. But she assured me that I had to accommodate the people's lifestyle, they didn't have to accommodate me.

I went to work for an Aboriginal legal services organization. We worked closely with offenders including violent offenders and sex offenders. I realized that the programs and services that these men needed did not exist. We did a lot of work trying to collaborate with government departments to try and fill in the gaps but there were always barriers to accomplishing anything.

I think I always knew I wanted to do social work. I thought if I did social work I'd have more power to make changes. I always felt I was the little person amongst the government officials and within the system.

Then the opportunity came to participate in the Inuit Social Work diploma program. We learned a great deal about understanding and addressing Aboriginal issues. We learned about political influences and I now understood about colonization, oppression and institutional racism. These words explained why I felt so powerless. Finally, I had the words to explain what was happening. Even more important was a revival in my culture. I wasn't proud of who I was because of the stereotypes and judgements. At first there were splits in the classroom particularly between myself and the most traditional student. But as we learned she came to understand how much it hurt me not to be accepted and to be marginalized in my culture and I understood what it was like for her to try and fit into a university program. As time went on we all learned to support each other.

I returned to work with an even greater understanding of the injustice experienced by Aboriginal people. It was even more frustrating at work. I remember spending a lot of time developing a culturally relevant sex offender program using an offender who was doing well in his own recovery and growth. We initially had the support of all the relevant players but after weeks of work, a few days before we were supposed to start, we

were told we couldn't do it by the federal government department.

I was later asked to participate on the evaluation team for the Inuit social work diploma program. It was very validating. I was finally able to have a voice and make an impact. I knew I needed more education.

I was accepted into the mainstream BSW program. I believed I would get the knowledge and power to address the social issues I had witnessed and experienced. I thought I would be around people just as thoughtful as myself. I didn't realize that there would be discrimination and that there wouldn't be support. I came from a program where there was complete support to a classroom setting where I knew nobody. I was the only Aboriginal person and I had no sense of belonging. I didn't feel safe or validated in my courses.

Then I went into my field placement at a nursing home in the city and I was told that my views of social work were not correct. When I started my placement an elderly lady entered the home. She was very independent but came in with her husband because she could no longer look after his needs. She was assigned to me and was told that I would help her adjust. I knew what she was going through; I was learning to adjust to being in the city myself. During our first meeting she expressed her concerns about losing her independence. She wanted me to help her learn how to use the public transportation system but the social workers disagreed and one even laughed at me. They told me this wasn't the role of a social worker. Social work was about doing the assessments and paperwork. In my evaluation, they said I had trouble changing from friendly visiting to social work. I was not allowed to be supportive of residents that weren't my clients; I would sometimes sneak into their rooms to visit with them. I was in the placement three months and the lady never did learn how to use the bus system. This experience created a lot of conflict for me. This wasn't the kind of social work I wanted to do.

At first I did everything that was expected of me in the program. Sometimes my own thoughts and ideas are validated. But now I feel I don't have to completely conform and I am resisting in my own way. I'm doing my papers my way on Aboriginal issues of importance to me. I think all social workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, need to be educated

and understand Aboriginal issues. That way we will all be conscious and prepared to work together with the realities. Sometimes I wasn't sure if I could finish the program, there were too many conflicts. But I will finish and I will always work on Aboriginal issues.

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