

Rethinking Social Work Education for Indigenous Students

between First Nations researchers and Allied¹ researchers in our study. From its inception, we collaborated as a team in spirit and application.

From 1995-2005, the McGill School of Social Work offered the Certificate in Aboriginal Social Work Practice and the Certificate in Northern Social Work Practice aimed at people currently employed by the social work agencies in the First Nations territories of Kahnawake and Kanehsatake and the Inuit territory of Nunavik. The Certificate was a 30-credit program. Students were able to participate in a range of curriculum modules (10) worth 3 credits each. After completion of the Certificate, students could transfer their certificate credits to the regular BSW program. The course topics were designed collaboratively by Indigenous and allied social workers to address issues relevant to Indigenous communities. The academic year 2005-2006 saw the last cohort of students engage in modules to complete the certificates.

In 2006, the McGill School of Social Work initiated a research study to explore current social work education and ongoing professional development needs in the communities of Kahnawake, Kanehsatake and Nunavik. The Ministère de l'Éducation, du Sport et du Loisir du Québec funded the study designed to gather information on social work issues facing Indigenous communities traditionally served by McGill School of Social Work. The study was also designed to investigate participants' experience of the certificate program, explore their perceptions of the social issues facing their communities, discuss barriers to involvement in University level programs and gather views on program content and delivery which would prepare students for problem-solving work in their own communities. Interviewees were also asked their views on ways in which the School of Social Work could attract more Indigenous students to the BSW program. The study addressed a persistent gap in knowledge regarding social work education needs in Indigenous communities and the ways in which one could increase the enrollment in social work education by Indigenous students.

This paper is focused on the findings from the interviews of First Nations' participants (from Kahnawake and Kanehsatake). The research team overseeing the study was composed of McGill School of Social Work and Kahnawake community members, meeting First Nations' goals of building capacity and knowledge within Indigenous communities. Researchers interviewed Certificate graduates, community members and other key stakeholders to determine the ways in which the McGill School of Social Work could contribute to social work education and continuing professional development opportunities needs in these communities.

The first section of the paper describes the methods and the study's qualitative approach. The second section presents the findings that illustrate ways in which participants wanted curriculum and program delivery to be adapted to their cultural context. The final section includes a discussion of implications for this adaptation and future plans for the BSW program at the McGill School of Social Work as well as continuing education offered by the School.


Project Context

In the past 20 years, certain Indigenous communities have been able to assume responsibility for and management of their own community services. For example, in Manitoba child and family services to Indigenous people are provided through three organizations: Métis Child and Family Services Authority, First Nations of Southern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority and First Nations of Northern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority.

In the case of Kahnawake, responsibility and management includes the provision of community social services. The Band Council gained control of community services in 1985 and since then has gradually been developing a range of services to the community from family support to youth protection and care of Elders. Historically, non-Native social workers predominated in community services in Native communities because there was a dearth of professionally qualified Native social workers from the community itself. The certificate program operated by McGill until 2005 was able to fill a gap in terms of community workers but, like other certificate or training programs (see Smith & Pace, 1988), the certificate program was not a degree program that offered a professional qualification.

Providing culturally relevant education (in curriculum and program delivery) to members of Native communities is a critical piece in the restoration of autonomy in social service provision in Native communities (O'Brien & Pace, 1990; Weaver, 1999). It is essential to transform educational opportunities for Native students by developing different approaches to learning. Members of Native communities have underscored the need to increase social work education, both degree programs as well as ongoing professional education in ways that are relevant to Indigenous realities (Bruyere, 1998). A reality for the Indigenous communities in Quebec is that there are limited opportunities for participation in social work education. There are myriad challenges to address: logistics, linguistics, cultural distance, racism, and a history of distrust engendered by colonialism (Ryan, 1995). In addition, social work programs have






special epistemic privileges and conducted their work without too much difficulty, we must consider that this is not always the case. Historically, research has been considered "... one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's library" (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 1). This point was not lost on the researchers who did their utmost to traverse this delicate terrain in a respectful manner. One of the challenges faced by community researchers was ensuring that a satisfactory reciprocal process was put in place where participants could have the opportunity to view preliminary data results and make suggestions that reflected their views correctly. Indigenous researchers have a dual responsibility of satisfying both the academy and their communities as the "field" is also their home.

The Kahnawake Research Council and the McGill Research Ethics Board approved the study. The project also had to satisfy the ethical standards developed by the communities themselves. This required meeting with and presenting the project to the Kahnawake Community Research Council and to community leaders in Kanehsatake. The Kahnawake Research Council is made up of community members from Kahnawake, Quebec. The Council, which dates back to 2001, was originally developed to attend to numerous external requests to conduct research within the Territory of Kahnawake. The primary role of the Research Council is to safeguard the community from individuals who come with agendas that disadvantages the community. The Council's other task is to ensure the community receive some benefit from the research.

Content analysis was used for analyzing data. Conducting line-by-line analyses of interview transcripts (transcribed verbatim), units of content were gathered, coded, and interpreted descriptively and then assigned to thematic categories that emerged, following the grounded



by allowing full participation as equals in mainstream Canadian society. Another participant highlighted the desire to be able to work with people of diverse backgrounds:

If it's geared for the Native, see that's the one thing, if it's geared for us to be dealing with Native people then we would still stay as Natives and all the material would be pertaining to Natives. Whereas if we were given many different Ethnic groups, meaning non-Native or Native or Black people, type of viewpoints on how to work with them, then we could work off

Additionally, participants said that it was important to have coursework that would help Native social workers address social work-specific issues such as managing job-related stress and to effectively implement social work practice in one's own community.

Program Delivery

Participants, who were from Kahnawake and Kanehsatake, also provided input regarding the delivery of a new social work program focused on Native issues offered at McGill. Certificate program participants, most of whom were mature with families, recalled the substantial challenges to involvement in the program, particularly child care, transportation, and working full time. In order for students to succeed, participants felt that it was vital that the program support students in addressing these three issues.

While child care expenses could be supported by financial subsidies, the other two issues could be addressed by program delivery options. Participants described great difficulties in traveling into Montreal. Additionally, some felt that coming to Montreal was as foreign as traveling to another country, and felt that logistical and emotional support would encourage participation in and completion of a BSW degree. To address some of the logistical as well as cultural challenges, there was consensus among participants that the program should be open to offering courses by McGill instructors in Native communities, such as Kahnawake

tutoring and all the general resources of the University are available.

The evaluation of this project and the experiences of the students presently studying in the School of Social Work will be a rich resource in terms of future development. There are also a number of future research projects which we hope will grow out of this project, including following graduates of the BSW program into careers in their own communities and elsewhere and explore the impact of the Indigenous Access Project on their practice. The reality is that the majority of First Nations and Inuit BSW graduates will go on to work in organizations or agencies serving children and families. Therefore, another potential study is assessing the impact they will have as Native social workers in their own communities. A potential longitudinal study might examine the impact of Native social workers who use a least restrictive practice approach on the number of Native children in the child welfare system.

Endnotes

1. For this study, the backgrounds of the two Allied researchers were Scottish, Irish, African American, German, Slovakian, Seminole, Cherokee, and Hungarian.

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