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Aboriginal Social Work Education in Canada: Decolonizing Pedagogy for the Seventh Generation

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Aboriginal social work is a relatively new field in the human services, emerging out of the Aboriginal social movement of the 1970s and evolving in response to the need for social work that is sociologically relevant to Aboriginal people. Aboriginal social work education incorporates Aboriginal history and is premised upon traditional sacred epistemology in order to train both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers who can understand and meet the needs of Aboriginal people. The deficiencies of contemporary cross-cultural approaches and anti-oppressive social work education are highlighted as a means to emphasize the importance of socialwork education premised upon relevant history and worldview. The values and responsibilities that derive from Aboriginal worldview as the foundation for Aboriginal social work education are discussed in terms of the tasks that are implied for the educator and student of Aboriginal social work. Such tasks include self-healing, decolonization, role modeling, developing critical consciousness, and social and political advocacy. Aboriginal social work education, a decolonizing pedagogy directed to mitigating and redressing the harm of colonization at the practice level, is a contemporary cultural imperative.

Abstract

Aboriginal social work is a relatively new field in the human services, emerging out of the Aboriginal social movement of the 1970s and evolving in response to the need for social work that is sociologically relevant to Aboriginal people. Aboriginal social work education incorporates Aboriginal history and is premised upon traditional sacred epistemology in order to train both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers who can understand and meet the needs of Aboriginal people. The deficiencies of contemporary cross-cultural approaches and anti-oppressive social work education are highlighted as a means to emphasize the importance of social work education premised upon relevant history and worldview. The values and responsibilities that derive from Aboriginal worldview as the foundation for Aboriginal social work education are discussed in terms of the tasks that are implied for the educator and student of Aboriginal social work. Such tasks include self-healing, decolonization, role modeling, developing critical consciousness, and social and political advocacy. Aboriginal social work education, a decolonizing pedagogy directed to mitigating and redressing the harm of colonization at the practice level, is a contemporary cultural imperative.

Aboriginal Social Work Education in Canada: Decolonizing Pedagogy for the Seventh Generation

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Introduction

Aboriginal social work education is an emerging pedagogy framed within colonial history and Indigenous worldview. Colonial history establishes the proper contexts for contemporary social and physical pathologies that are highly visible in many Aboriginal communities while Indigenous worldview provides a vital source of knowledge and cultural reflection for Aboriginal students. This paper describes the risks that result from an assumption that current cross-cultural and anti-oppressive approaches are an effective lens through which to regard hundreds of years of oppression and cultural destruction. A discussion of Aboriginal social work education is held to support the assertion that a decolonizing pedagogy is a contemporary cultural imperative; that culturally appropriate and sociologically relevant teaching and healing models must evolve and translate into practice and service delivery that will meet the needs of future generations.

Historical context of Aboriginal social work

Between the years of 1950 and 1977, the Spellumcheen Band in British Columbia lost 150 of 300 children through child welfare apprehensions (McKenzie and Hudson, 1985). In the same period, a Manitoba Band lost just over 100 children. Child welfare authorities removed many of these children without any notice to the families or bands, and many of these children have never returned. While child welfare agencies received thousands of dollars per Aboriginal child placed for adoption, Aboriginal families who searched for their children were lied to and deliberately misled by social workers (Kimmelman, 1982; Fournier and Crey, 1997).

The scooping of the children comprises mainstream social work in the eyes of Aboriginal people. Social work has negative connotations to many Aboriginal people and is often synonymous with the theft of children, the destruction of

The social work profession and social work education have not been free from colonial influence. In the words of Freire, “the social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action”. Indeed, early social work practices were complicit with government colonial actions. When Aboriginal people began to protest against the residential schools system and the schools began to close down, the ‘child welfare era’ ensued and is evidenced by the mass child welfare ‘scooping’ of Aboriginal children culminating in transracial adoption and/or long-term foster care. Aboriginal people have decried these actions as genocidal.

families, and the deliberate oppression of Aboriginal communities. The “60’s Scoop” is one story in the backdrop of colonialism and how colonization has manifested in the realm of child and social welfare and social work with respect to native people in Canada (Duran and Duran, 1996; Bruyere, 1999; Lee, 1992; Hart, 1999; Poonwassie and Charter, 2001; McKenzie and Hudson, 1985). Aboriginal involvement in the foster care and welfare systems are other stories, the origins of which can be traced to colonialism. Social workers that work with Aboriginal people must be aware of these historical elements of the interaction between western social work and Aboriginal people because the majority of Aboriginal clients will have encountered these experiences directly or intergenerationally.

Colonialism and the growth of the Child Welfare system

The historical context that all social workers should know is the story of two nations of people who began a symbiotic and allied relationship that, over time, deteriorated as the driving forces for land and resource acquisition strengthened. The colonialistic actions and attitudes towards Aboriginal people have been deliberate and calculated; designed to displace and distance the people from their land and resources. The attempted obliteration of Aboriginal culture was one strategy towards achieving that end. Almost every contemporary social pathology or health issue in Aboriginal communities can be attributed directly to the fallout of colonialism (Midgely, 1998) whether the source is the industrial/residential school era which saw children forcibly confined to institutions, the child welfare era that witnessed the forced removal of children from their families and communities, or the contemporary era of racism, social exclusion and marginalization, and oppression.

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colonial influence. In the words of Freire (1990), “the social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action” (p.5). Indeed, early social work practices were complicit with government colonial actions. When Aboriginal people began to protest against the residential schools system and the schools began to close down, the ‘child welfare era’ ensued and is evidenced by the mass child welfare ‘scooping’ of Aboriginal children culminating in transracial adoption and/or long-term foster care. Aboriginal people have decried these actions as genocidal. In this manner, the social work profession became a pawn to further enact state policy towards native people (Hart, 1999; Bruyere, 1999; Maurice 2000) During the residential school period, complicity occurred through the social workers who accompanied the police on their forays onto reserves to remove the children. After the residential school period, the profession unquestioningly aligned itself with the assimilation policies manifested in the transracial fostering and adoption of Aboriginal children (Fournier and Crey, 1997). It is often stated that the intentions of social workers who went to reserves and apprehended children were good, albeit misguided. One BC social worker has a more enlightening perspective:

...when we removed children from their own homes and put them in foster homes about which we knew next to nothing, no matter how we cloaked our actions in welfare jargon, we were putting those children at risk....the welfare department which employed me was the biggest contributor to child abuse in the province (Fournier and Crey, 1997: 86).

To quote Justice Kimmelman (1982), “the road to hell was paved with good intention and the child welfare system was the paving contractor”.

Canadian government policies with respect to Aboriginal people have been

Recognizing that western trained social workers might not be able to meet the needs of the Aboriginal population, Aboriginal educators began to question to relevance of mainstream social work education for Aboriginal students, and the First Nations University of Canada (formerly the "Saskatchewan Indian Federated College") School of Indian Social Work was founded in 1974.

directed towards a goal of assimilation. The titles of the various pieces of legislation of the last century speak for themselves: The Gradual Civilization Act of 1857; the Gradual Enfranchisement Act of 1869. Enfranchisement with respect to the *Indian Act* occurs when an Aboriginal person willingly or unwillingly relinquishes their Aboriginal status and any rights that accrue from that status. Duncan Campbell Scott, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, speaking about the issue of enfranchisement, stated in 1920:

Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department. This is the whole object of this bill (Jamieson, 1978: p.120).

The enfranchisement amendment to the *Indian Act* encouraged Indian men to relinquish their Indian status and become "Canadian citizens" (Frideres, 1998). Enfranchisement was automatic for individuals who received a university degree, entered the military, or became a doctor or lawyer. The educational agenda for Aboriginal people in Canada was also designed from within an assimilationist perspective and had the goal of acculturating Aboriginal people to a western way of living and thinking. By forcing residential school (legislated in the 1920 amendment) education on Aboriginal people, the government welded absolute power in altering language, culture, and socialization. Aboriginal people argue that this form of education amounted to cultural genocide as languages were lost, cultural practices were denigrated, and traditional socialization practices were replaced by institutionalization.

Social Work Education

Western theoretical hegemony manifests primarily in educational institutions. The most harmful assumptions are that western thought ought to be the standard educational platform, is automatically relevant and valid, and is

universally applicable. The Aboriginal person becomes a virtual non-entity in institutions that marginalize Aboriginal thought and reality through the neglect and erroneous authoring of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, languages, and colonial history. For Aboriginal children who are required to learn in mainstream institutions, western education has not mirrored the social, political, economic, or worldview reality of their daily lives because Aboriginal history is generally absent in curricula. The exception is specific native studies degree programs. The early Aboriginal social activists and pioneers who penned "Indian control of Indian education" recognized the potentially harmful effects of such an educational system on Aboriginal people (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). They understood that the western educational paradigm was serving to colonize Aboriginal people at the intellectual level (Cardinal, 1969; Smith, 1999) and some directed their critiques to social work (Weaver, 1999; Hart, 2001; Morrisette, McKenzie, and Morrisette, 1993). The paradigm from which 'social work' has been taught and practiced is western in theory, pedagogy, and practice.

We need to address the problem of how we train an Indian social worker. I have some very serious doubts about the ability of existing social work schools to do that – to really meet the needs of native people. I don't think they're capable of that. Not because they're not teaching and doing good things, but I don't think they understand native people (Stalwick, 1986, p. 16).

Recognizing that western trained social workers, Aboriginal social workers included, might not be able to meet the needs of the Aboriginal population, Aboriginal educators began to question to relevance of mainstream social work education for Aboriginal students, and the First Nations University of Canada (formerly the "Saskatchewan Indian Federated College") School of Indian

Awareness without legitimate action is a cognitive ploy that risks passing for anti-oppressive and anti-racist pedagogy and practice in social work. It contributes to silence and inactivity about tangible issues of racism and oppression in the field of social work and in society. Contemporary anti-oppressive pedagogy does not address the culture of silence because it does not require anything beyond a theoretical grasping of issues.

Social Work was founded in 1974. The following year, the social work diploma program was initiated at Maskwacis Cultural College in Hobbema, Alberta. The development of Aboriginal social work education programs has been a vital step for several reasons: the lack of substance within cross-cultural and anti-oppressive social work education for Aboriginal students, the neglect of the impact of colonial history on contemporary social and wellness issues, and the absence of Indigenous knowledge in social work pedagogy.

Cross-cultural and Anti- Oppressive Education

In the contemporary context among mainstream generalist social work schools, the generalist social work student learns about Aboriginal people through cross cultural and/or culturally sensitive social work education and practice. Unfortunately, cross-cultural discourse often dismisses and/or incorrectly authors Aboriginal thought, history, and colonization in terms that are ambiguous and misleading. Examples of this include having the history of colonization phrased as “cultural disruption” (Williams and Ellison, 1996), or having Aboriginal epistemology relegated to the level of “religion” or “mysticism” (see Deloria, 1999; Warrior, 1995). It is inconceivable that any social worker mandated professionally and ethically to address social problems and strive for social justice, would not have a full understanding of the historical context of current Aboriginal issues given the high percentage of Aboriginal clients in most social work settings. The fact that the Aboriginal context is poorly addressed or omitted in social work (see for example, Turner, 1999) is unacceptable and contributes to what Freire (1970) refers to as a ‘culture of silence’. A culture of silence exists where the oppressed are not heard in society, and where a lack of knowledge about their contexts creates a high risk for the perpetuation of racism,

discrimination and an ethic of ‘blaming the victim’ for their own situation.

Similarly, anti-oppressive practice has an inherent danger. The danger lies in proclaiming an anti-oppressive stance, while doing little or nothing to address the reality of oppression. As a profession, social work can do many things with “awareness” of critical issues such as racism, including nothing. “Awareness itself ‘lacks political substance and is sociologically naïve’” (Dominelli, 1998, p.13). Awareness without legitimate action is a cognitive ploy that risks passing for anti-oppressive and anti-racist pedagogy and practice in social work. It contributes to silence and inactivity about tangible issues of racism and oppression in the field of social work and in society. Contemporary anti-oppressive pedagogy does not address the culture of silence because it does not require anything beyond a theoretical grasping of issues. Neither the personal involvement nor the commitment of the social work student or practitioner is requested or required. Social workers risk falling into the trap of believing that just because they are social workers they are, therefore, non-racist and non-oppressive because the profession has a Code of Ethics to guide practice and because social work institutions proclaim they are committed to this ideology.

For Aboriginal social work students, engaging in studies on how to become an effective cross-cultural worker in Canada verges on ludicrous because the cross-cultural or minority ‘client’, is automatically labelled as the ‘other.’ This forces the Aboriginal student to take a dominant subjective stance with respect to issues of diversity because they are never requested to examine their work with ‘white’ individuals as cross-cultural. They are required to perceive of themselves and their people as the “other” who is in need of assistance (Said, 1978; Blaut, 1993, see also Gross, 1995). Such an approach only perpetuates marginalization and constructions of difference, and fosters the internalizing of racism. An explanation for

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this is found in Duran and Duran (1995), who articulate that the term “‘cross-cultural’ implies that there is a relative platform from which all observations are to be made, and the platform that remains in place in our neocolonial discipline is that of Western subjectivity “ (p.5). In simpler terms, even in the new millennium, the standard for social work education and practice is literature and education based on the worldview, lifeways, and reality of the dominant, predominantly white, and mainstream society.

Aboriginal social work education, mandated by Aboriginal Elders to train social workers to work with Aboriginal people, is not cross-cultural because within Aboriginal social work programs are founded on the assumption is that the workers and the clients are from the same cultural group. Rather, Aboriginal social work education attempts to achieve cultural relevance. Mainstream social work can take a lesson from this concept. Culturally relevant pedagogy incorporates perspectives and practices respectful to the group in question and attends to those issues that impact most on Aboriginal people (Weaver, 1999). Those issues are history and epistemology.

History

Many authors recognize the importance of understanding Aboriginal history in education and practice with Aboriginal clients (Morrissette, McKenzie and Morrissette, 1993; Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996; Cross, 1986; Hart, 1999; Puxley, 1977; Graveline, 1998; Laenui, 2000; Deloria, 1999; Battiste, 2000), as an approach that must occur within the context of colonialism and from an Aboriginal worldview perspective (Bruyere, 1999; McKenzie and Hudson, 1985; Puxley, 1977; Battiste, 2000; Poonwassie and Charter, 2001; Lederman, 1999; Duran and Duran, 1995). Incorporating the historical context into social work education and especially service delivery is an approach

that constitutes Freire’s (1970, 1998) notion of the development of critical consciousness through conscientization. Conscientization is a critical approach to liberatory education that incorporates helping the learner to move towards a new awareness of relations of power, myths, and oppression. By developing critical consciousness in this way, learners work towards changing the world. For Aboriginal students, accurate reflection of Aboriginal history and epistemology provides accurate frameworks to reflect their personal experiences in the classroom setting. This approach enables the Aboriginal social work student to truly understand their personal and familial contexts, as well as their sociopolitical contexts, and the contexts of the majority of the people with whom they are hoping to work and to whom they are hoping to be of assistance. Students gain the appropriate knowledge set to understand both the problem definition and the problem solutions. At the level of service delivery in Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal social service agencies, critical consciousness provides the structural framework for understanding contemporary social conditions, and it also paves the way to reacquiring the necessary value and ethical foundations for practice by drawing upon traditional knowledge.

The key to traditional Aboriginal wisdom rests in the reconstruction of Aboriginal ways of knowing - epistemology (Pillai, 1996; Grande, 2000; Duran, Duran and Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998; Duran and Duran, 1995; Bruyere, 1999; Henderson, 2000; Ermine, 1995) - and its incorporation into social work pedagogy. In the Aboriginal social work milieu, traditional knowledge is being nurtured and supported through inclusion in the curricula and synthesis into the daily workings of institutions. Reviving ancient knowledge from the ashes of colonialism is critical to Aboriginal social work education and the healing agenda. In discussing research, Maori scholar Karen Martin argues that theory has historically

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drawn "upon frameworks, processes and practices of colonial, western worldviews and the inherent knowledges, methods, morals and beliefs" (p.2) but that Indigenous worldview provides the "core structures" (Martin, 2001) of a theoretical orientation. In Aboriginal social work education and practice, Aboriginal epistemology provides the core structures - the values and ethics - for social work delivery and practice.

Aboriginal Epistemology

How do Aboriginal educators begin to reconstruct knowledge based on Aboriginal epistemology keeping in mind western theoretical and pedagogical hegemony, not to mention raised eyebrows at the mere mention of Aboriginal 'intellectualism' (Grande, 2000)? The lack of intellectual 'space' reserved for Indigenous thinkers in any field makes this reconstruction a challenge (Alfred, 1999; Battiste, 1998). However, the challenge must be taken because colonialism, in which oppression is a tool, "...constructs the 'other' as savage, barbaric, inert, and subhuman" (Pillai, 1998). Non-western theories and knowledge are marginalized in the colonial context. Cognitive imperialism extends to the post-secondary classroom (Battiste, 1998). Indigenous theories not only challenge the language of colonialism but challenge western theoretical hegemony and provide the space for important critiques of colonial relations of power, domination, and exploitation (Dei, 1999). In Aboriginal social work, these critiques provide the foundational context of education that will, ultimately, translate into direct practice.

Pillai (1998) adds that the critically important aspect of Indigenous knowledge reconstruction centers on the relationship between Indigenous epistemology and ecological survival. Indigenous ways of knowing are linked intrinsically to the land and nature, and hence, ecological survival - "reconstructing "Indigenous theories" must be seen not as an end in itself but as an

integral part of movements for ecological and economic survival" (Pillai, 1998, p. 209; see also Deloria, 1999).

Indigenous epistemology provides the pathway to knowledge from which flows natural laws, and human values, ideologies, and responsibilities. There are several key concepts that encapsulate basic tenets of 'Indigenous' epistemology. These tenets are, for the most part, generalizable among nations, although manifestations of them may be, different among nations (Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996; Morrisette, McKenzie and Morrisette, 1993; Hanohano, 1999). This background of 'worldview' information forms the pith of Aboriginal education in general and Aboriginal social work education, in particular, because for Native cultures, spirituality is inextricably and intrinsically woven into philosophy, ideology, and daily living.

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"All my relations" is first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds of us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, "all my relations" is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (King; 1990, p. 1).

The 'kinship web' extends to all human relations, both living and unborn. The responsibility of the living is to care

The second concept, which is woven through all concepts of indigenous worldview, is the concept of the sacred. If the notion of 'all my relations' is a cornerstone to indigenous worldview, then the notion of the sacred is best described as the supreme law: "The sacral permeates all aspects of indigenous worldview.

for and honour the suffering, memory, and spiritual well-being of those who have passed away, as well as to pray for the lives of (and to act as caretakers of the earth) for seven generations to come. Hence, the kinship web is physical, spatial, and temporal (Deloria, 1999; Henderson, 2000; Kulchyski, 1999, McCaskill and Newhouse, 1999). All species, all forms of life, have equal status before the presence of the universal power to which all are subject. The interrelatedness and interconnectedness dimensions of Aboriginal epistemology are often taught and understood visually through the medicine wheel, or the sacred circle, which is a symbol, a tool, and an ideology (Nabigon and Mawhiney, 1996; Morrissette, McKenzie and Morrissette, 1993; McKenzie and Hudson, 1985; Duran, Duran and Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998; Maurice, 2000; Hanohano, 1999; Bruyere, 1999; Hart, 2001; Graveline, 1998)

The second concept, which is woven through all concepts of Indigenous worldview, is the concept of the sacred. If the notion of 'all my relations' is a cornerstone to Indigenous worldview, then the notion of the sacred is best described as the supreme law: "The sacral permeates all aspects of Indigenous worldview. In practice, this translates to a reverent belief in the sacredness of life manifested in an array of behaviours that are integrated into daily life: sunrise ceremonies honouring the new day, the simplest prayers uttered in the course of the day, to the most reverent ceremonies such as the Sundance and the sweatlodge" (Sinclair, 1999, p.5).

Decolonizing Pedagogy

The implications of these epistemological values for the Aboriginal social work educator go beyond merely knowing the information from whence one can engage in a 'banking' concept of education with students; that is, Freire's (1970) notion of the student as a tabula rasa or blank slate to be filled

with information, and the educator as the expert. Both the educator and the student must involve themselves in the process of healing, learning, and developing along a path guided by Aboriginal epistemology. Colloquially, one must 'walk the talk' (Katz, 2001). The Aboriginal approach to education is more than a difference in perspective. "At a fundamental cultural level, the difference between traditional Aboriginal and Western thought is the difference in the perception of one's relationship with the universe and the Creator" (Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991). The critical aspects of Aboriginal epistemology address the key concepts of harmony and balance, the absence of which signifies dis-ease or illness that form a focus for remedial action. Hence, Aboriginal epistemology and healing methodology are inseparable in the Aboriginal social work classroom.

In practice, what studies are finding is that remedial programs based on Aboriginal epistemology are proving effective with higher client reported success rates (Hart, 2001; Duran, Duran and Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998; Nabigon, 1996; Lederman, 1999; Stevenson, 1999). "Many successful programs currently operating among Native American groups use Native American epistemology as the root metaphor for theoretical and clinical interventions", as are approaches which utilize a hybrid, or mixed Aboriginal-mainstream methodological model – "postcolonial practice integrates Indigenous knowledge and therapies with Euro-american models of therapy" (Duran, Duran and Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998, p. 70). Duran, Duran and Yellow Horse Braveheart discuss emerging therapies and practices based on post-colonial thought which involves critical analysis of history and the revaluing of Aboriginal healing knowledge. Similarly, the goal of Aboriginal social work then, appears to be the decolonization of Aboriginal people, which is enacted through methodology that contextualizes colonization, and integrates

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From this perspective, Aboriginal social work can be described as a practice that combines culturally relevant social work education and training, theoretical and methodological knowledge derived from Aboriginal epistemology that draws liberally on western social work theory and practice methods, within a decolonizing context (Sinclair, 2001). Aboriginal social work education, then, is charged with the task of imparting this knowledge to students in order that they can effectively work in a decolonizing context.

The premises for social work in Aboriginal communities and with Aboriginal people is undergoing a transformation as the result of reclaiming Indigenous knowledge, expressing Indigenous voices, acknowledging Indigenous ways of knowing, and implementing Indigenous healing practices. This reconstruction of epistemology and the reconstruction of voice that challenges neocolonialism comprise the critical pedagogy that has evolved as the primary approach to Aboriginal social work education. For example, the recently implemented Master of Aboriginal Social Work program of the First Nations University of Canada and the University of Regina, is based on a pedagogy derived from Aboriginal epistemology, and is premised on training counselors and therapists who will utilize traditional methodology to work with the direct and intergenerational survivors of the residential school system (Katz, 2001). Similarly, the Native Human Services program at Laurentian University is community based and driven, and premised upon culture-specific helping methods. Such approaches are having an influence in the mainstream social work education milieu. Community based BSW programs delivered in communities by mainstream universities such as the University of Regina, the University of Victoria, University of Manitoba, University of

Calgary, Carleton University, and the University of Quebec have emerged along with “access” social work programs that emphasize rural and Aboriginal course content for delivery in Aboriginal and remote locations. The community based and access programs are striving to create culturally relevant programs for Aboriginal students and more often utilize Aboriginal educators and consultants in designing and delivering the programs.

The Challenges of a Decolonizing pedagogy

The cultural imperative of Aboriginal social work education is to train social workers who incorporate Aboriginal epistemology and pedagogical methods into their approaches, combined with appropriate and useful western theory and practice models, within a critical historical context. On one level, taking this path is simple – the Elders say ‘walk your talk’, ‘heal yourself before you can heal others’ - and once the individual has acquired sufficient western-validated education, the work begins. On another level, it is a solitary journey where Aboriginal worldview and traditional knowledge foundations have few mirrors in western pedagogy, and critical analysis with respect to Aboriginal populations is, at least within mainstream institutions, relegated to one class or theoretical approach such as anti-racism or cross-cultural social work. Aboriginal social work educators are informed by an array of theories in the areas of post-colonialism, liberation, anti-racism/oppression, and other critical theories, and they are charged with the task of incorporating what works in these theories with their own and their students’ social, economic, and political realities. Contemporary reality for Aboriginal people in Canada is neocolonialism, manifested in racism, oppression, and exclusion. For Aboriginal social work students, a large portion of the learning has occurred before they set foot in a classroom. The material that provides the fodder for Aboriginal

The material that provides the fodder for Aboriginal social work curriculum does not come from a textbook – it comes from the post-colonial frontlines where intergenerational trauma is the norm, and is manifested in lateral violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, depression, and rampant ill-health.

social work curriculum does not come from a textbook – it comes from the post-colonial frontlines where intergenerational trauma is the norm, and is manifested in lateral violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, depression, and rampant ill-health.

The approaches that Indigenous scholars are finding effective are framed within an ancient sacred knowledge. Aboriginal social work practitioners and educators are charged with personal responsibility based on this knowledge base. The responsibility is to engage in a healing journey in order to be able to embark upon the tasks of helping others whether it is in the field or in the classroom – “In healing ourselves, we heal our communities and our Nations” (Native Human Services Program Statement of Philosophy, Laurentian University). Hence, the work involves working towards individual physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. In addition, the Aboriginal social educator and worker must act as role model who is expected to challenge stereotypes, address issues of oppression and internalized colonization, reclaim and contextualize Aboriginal history, acquire western theoretical and practice knowledge, engage in the reconstruction of Aboriginal epistemology and pedagogical forms, and synthesize these tasks into a form that meets the mandate of the Elders, the requirements of western institutions and regulatory bodies, and needs of students.

The knowledge and insight that the educator accrues must then be presented with skill, tact, and sensitivity to students who come from diverse educational backgrounds and are most likely intergenerationally affected by colonization. They often have English as a second language, are survivors of residential schools, the sixties scoop and the child welfare system, are dealing with intergenerational trauma issues themselves, face social and institutionalized racism and oppression in an urban setting, and

finally, may experience their own degrees of internalized colonialism which affects how knowledge is heard and integrated. These are the challenges of a decolonizing pedagogy.

The Future

Increasingly the theme of decolonization as a necessary element of education is being explored (Hart, 2001; Bruyere, 1999; Laenui, 2000; Alfred, 1999; Weaver, 1999). The next task for Indigenous social workers is to discuss more freely the processes and models that are proving effective (Duran, Duran and Yellow Horse Braveheart, 1998; Graveline, 1998; Stevenson, 1999), and to articulate Indigenous models and methodologies for others to emulate. Hence, Aboriginal social workers and educators must publish at a higher rate in order to disseminate and share the knowledge. Recognizing that Aboriginal social work in the ‘frontlines’ is extremely demanding, and Aboriginal educators are scrambling to keep up with the increasing numbers of Aboriginal students, time and space must be made for authoring of Aboriginal wisdom. Another area where Aboriginal social workers and educators need to direct attention is towards health research. Support for Aboriginal faculty and workers to embark upon a research agenda is needed. The money is available through federal funding programs, but the capacity needs to be developed for Aboriginal social workers to be able to successfully access those funds. Aboriginal people must lead the assault on the ill health and social pathologies within Aboriginal communities and one way to do this is to participate in the health research agenda. Capacity building in health research is essential for Aboriginal communities to define their health issues, implement culturally relevant research strategies, and implement appropriate solutions for their own health issues. Aboriginal populations have reached a critical mass in terms of the illness wrought by colonization. Working towards

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health, in the context of neocolonial modernity, has become a modern Indigenous cultural imperative.

Conclusion

Aboriginal social work education has evolved out of a critical need for training of helpers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who will have the skills and abilities to meet the needs of Aboriginal people. The training that has emerged incorporates critiques of colonial history in order to contextualize the contemporary reality of Aboriginal ill health and social pathology. Aboriginal social work education is not cross-cultural social work where the assumption is that benevolence is extended to the less fortunate minority or disenfranchised group member of which the educator or practitioner is usually not a member. Rather, it is premised on Indigenous knowledge that encompasses Aboriginal philosophical and healing methods that can be incorporated into contemporary social work approaches to wellness. The values and ethics that stem from Aboriginal epistemology create a responsibility for the educator, student, and practitioner to 'walk the talk' of wellness. That means embarking on personal healing and wellness in order to help others. As Aboriginal social work pedagogy develops in order to continue the task of redressing the effects of colonization and neocolonialism, the commitment to a decolonizing pedagogy is a daunting and challenging, but necessary task. Our duty to the seventh generation demands it.

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