Canadian Social Work Review
Revue canadienne de service social

Social Work Curriculum Review Case Study
Service Users Tell Us What Makes Effective Social Workers

Elizabeth C. Watters, Cheryl-Anne Cait et Funke Oba

Volume 33, numéro 1, 2016

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037088ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1037088ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

ISSN

2369-5757 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Watters, E. C., Cait, C.-A. & Oba, F. (2016). Social Work Curriculum Review Case Study: Service Users Tell Us What Makes Effective Social Workers. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, *33*(1), 27–44. https://doi.org/10.7202/1037088ar

Résumé de l'article

Le présent article traite des résultats de groupes de consultation communautaire auprès d'usagers de services sociaux et il explore les caractéristiques d'un travailleur social efficace. Les groupes de consultation ont été menés lors d'une étude pour orienter une évaluation de la maîtrise en service social à la Faculté de service social de l'Université Wilfrid-Laurier. Cet établissement a en fait deux programmes de maîtrise en service social : un dans le domaine d'études autochtones et l'autre dans le domaine non autochtone. Le présent article porte sur le programme non autochtone. L'évaluation continue du programme, y compris l'obtention des impressions des utilisateurs du service, rend hommage au savoir des communautés marginalisées et fait partie des exigences de l'agrément conféré par l'Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (ACFTS). Quatre groupes de consultation ont eu lieu auprès d'un total de 24 personnes ayant profité de programmes d'organismes de services sociaux, y compris de services de logement supervisé, de services aux immigrants et de services aux réfugiés dans la région de Kitchener-Waterloo. Les usagers des services ont relevé de nombreux attributs d'un travailleur social efficace, y compris la gentillesse, la sensibilité culturelle et de solides habiletés en communication. Ils ont aussi fait ressortir la nécessité d'exposer les questions d'aptitudes à la profession et d'en traiter. Nous terminons l'article en nous demandant si l'évaluation habituelle des aptitudes à exercer la profession, à laquelle sont soumis les étudiants à la maîtrise en service social, est appropriée et nous présentons l'évaluation *holistique* et exhaustive du programme en milieu autochtone comme exemple d'évaluation de rechange.

SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM REVIEW CASE STUDY
Service Users Tell Us What Makes Effective Social Workers

Elizabeth C. Watters
Cheryl-Anne Cait
Funke Oba

Abstract: This paper presents the findings from community focus groups, comprised of social service users, and explores the characteristics of effective social workers. Focus groups were conducted as part of a case study to inform a Master of Social Work (MSW) curriculum review at Wilfrid Laurier University's Faculty of Social Work. Wilfrid Laurier University has two MSW programs—the MSW Aboriginal Field of Study (AFS) and a non-Aboriginal program. The case for this study was the non-Aboriginal MSW program. Ongoing program evaluation that includes feedback from service users honours the knowledge of marginalized communities, and is an accreditation requirement of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE). Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 24 individuals who access programs from human service organizations that provide supportive housing, immigrant, or refugee services in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Service users identified numerous characteristics of effective social workers, including kindness, cultural awareness, and strong communication skills, as well as the need to articulate and address issues of professional suitability. We conclude by querying whether the typical assessment of

---

Elizabeth C. Watters, is a Ph.D. candidate, Cheryl-Anne Cait, Ph.D., is associate professor, and Funke Oba is tenure-track faculty in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina, Saskatoon campus. *The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Kathy Absolon of the MSW Aboriginal Field of Study at the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social work, Wilfrid Laurier University, for her thoughtful review of this paper, and Dr. Martha Kuwee Kumsa of the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, for early contributions to this project. In addition, the authors thank the peer reviewers for their valuable feedback.*

Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 33, Number 1 (2016) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 33, numéro 1 (2016)

MSW students' suitability for the profession is adequate, and provide the AFS *wholistic* and comprehensive evaluation as an example of an alternative approach to MSW student assessment.

Keywords: Professional suitability, social work education, MSW programs

Abrégé: Le présent article traite des résultats de groupes de consultation communautaire auprès d'usagers de services sociaux et il explore les caractéristiques d'un travailleur social efficace. Les groupes de consultation ont été menés lors d'une étude pour orienter une évaluation de la maîtrise en service social à la Faculté de service social de l'Université Wilfrid-Laurier. Cet établissement a en fait deux programmes de maîtrise en service social : un dans le domaine d'études autochtones et l'autre dans le domaine non autochtone. Le présent article porte sur le programme non autochtone. L'évaluation continue du programme, y compris l'obtention des impressions des utilisateurs du service, rend hommage au savoir des communautés marginalisées et fait partie des exigences de l'agrément conféré par l'Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (ACFTS). Quatre groupes de consultation ont eu lieu auprès d'un total de 24 personnes ayant profité de programmes d'organismes de services sociaux, y compris de services de logement supervisé, de services aux immigrants et de services aux réfugiés dans la région de Kitchener-Waterloo. Les usagers des services ont relevé de nombreux attributs d'un travailleur social efficace, y compris la gentillesse, la sensibilité culturelle et de solides habiletés en communication. Ils ont aussi fait ressortir la nécessité d'exposer les questions d'aptitudes à la profession et d'en traiter. Nous terminons l'article en nous demandant si l'évaluation habituelle des aptitudes à exercer la profession, à laquelle sont soumis les étudiants à la maîtrise en service social, est appropriée et nous présentons l'évaluation *holistique* et exhaustive du programme en milieu autochtone comme exemple d'évaluation de rechange.

Mots-clés : aptitudes à exercer la profession, formation en travail social, programmes de maîtrise en service social

Introduction

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY IN Kitchener, Ontario offers two Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, the MSW Aboriginal Field of Study (AFS) and a non-Aboriginal MSW program. In 2012, the Associate Dean (second author) for the MSW program of the Faculty of Social Work (FSW), initiated a curriculum review of the non-Aboriginal MSW program, which was completed in December 2014. Accreditation standards require schools of social work to "engage in regular formative evaluation/assessment to ensure ongoing program development and renewal

in response to social change and new knowledge" (Canadian Association of Social Work Education [CASWE], 2013, p. 19). Schools are required to conduct systematic reviews on all aspects of the program, including curriculum, and incorporate feedback from stakeholders (CASWE, 2013).

To this end, the Associate Dean of the MSW Program convened a Curriculum Review Committee comprised of faculty, staff, students, and community members with the following mandate:

1. Identify areas where a curriculum review is necessary and the curriculum does not align with the vision/mission of the FSW and the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum.
2. Solicit input from all stakeholders, including but not limited to, service users, students, field agencies and instructors, staff, contract academic staff, faculty, and FSW committees.
3. Ensure curriculum courses are compliant with the Canadian Association for Social Work Education and Quality Assurance.
4. Develop a proposal for a revised MSW curriculum that aligns with the FSW vision/mission to be considered by Divisional Council and the University Senate. (Wilfrid Laurier University, 2012).

Throughout the process, the committee consulted both formally and informally with a range of internal and external stakeholders. Formally, data collection included a consultation event with students, alumni, faculty, staff, field instructors, and field advisors; a follow-up survey to the consultation event; and focus groups with service users in the community. The service user focus groups were conducted by two doctoral research assistants (primary and third authors), the findings of which are presented in this paper. Engagement in a curriculum review process empowers service users to share their knowledge as experts, thereby challenging a culture in universities, which privileges academic knowledge over that gained through experience (Branfield, 2009). Additional informal consultation was sought with faculty of the AFS to explore possible transferable learnings or approaches to the non-Aboriginal MSW program.

Literature review

The findings from this study emphasized the importance of professional suitability for social work practice and subsequently, the key role of schools of social work in assessing that professional suitability. The importance of suitability for the social work profession has long been recognized. Robinson (1978) identified a fundamental attitude of social work as "acceptance of self and acceptance of difference" (p. 140), and notes that those students who "cannot acquire this attitude at all, must be directed into another field of work" (p. 138). It is thus incumbent upon

MSW programs to be diligent in their gatekeeping role as they have a responsibility to the public to ensure only the most qualified, competent, and professionally suitable practitioners enter the field.

Professional suitability and the helping relationship

Definitions of professional or personal suitability and the criteria thereof vary (Miller & Koerin, 1998); however, the term "can be applied to the academic, personal, and professional elements" of counseling programs, including social work (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008, p. 2). As such, understandings of professional suitability can include elements concerning the "less tangible aspects of [social] work," such as values (Kelly & Horder, 2001, p. 695), aspects that greatly affect the success of the helping relationship.

Service users recognize the centrality of the helping relationship in their experience with social workers (Beresford, Croft, & Adshead, 2008; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002), and attribute the success of the intervention to both the personal characteristics of the social worker, and the nature of the relationship itself. These findings are congruent with workers' perceptions of effective relationships, as well as field instructors' assessment of effective social work students (Bogo et al., 2004; Bogo et al., 2006; Lafrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004). Characteristics of effective social workers include attributes like respectfulness, flexibility, kindness, caring, empathy, and warmth; capacity for self-awareness; ethics; attitudes aligned with social work values; and strong interpersonal and communication skills (Beresford et al., 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2006; Drake, 1994). Additionally, successful helping relationships often bear some resemblance to friendships. In this regard, service users value close, comfortable, authentic, and equal relationships where social workers engage with them in a less formal or professional manner, and are often willing to go beyond their traditional role (Beresford et al., 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2006; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002).

Furthermore, research in the field of psychotherapy has long established the importance of the therapeutic relationship on client outcomes (Drisko, 2004). Notably, one review of the psychotherapy literature by Lambert estimates that the therapeutic relationship is responsible for 30% of the variance in client outcome, second only to extra-therapeutic factors, such as client motivation to change, at 40% (Lambert, 1992 as cited in Drisko, 2004, p. 85). Similarly, a review of counselling literature concluded that counsellor-client relationship factors such as empathy, respect, and collaboration are the best predictors of client success, after client variables such as severity, chronicity, and complexity of symptoms (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). Studies in social work have also found a positive association between the helping relationship and client outcomes. In a study with Israeli women being treated with methadone,

the therapeutic alliance between social workers and clients significantly predicted clients' level of hope (Schiff & Levit, 2010); while in mandated child abuse cases, Lee and Ayón (2004) found that more positive social worker relationships were associated with improved discipline and emotional care of children, physical care of children, and parents' ability to cope.

Thus, the helping relationship, which is affected by the characteristics of the social worker, is a key factor in client outcomes. As such, professional suitability relates to social workers' ability to establish successful helping relationships. This highlights the importance of assessing students for their professional suitability, and consequently, the gatekeeping role of schools of social work.

Gatekeeping by schools of social work

Schools of social work have a responsibility to the public to ensure that only those individuals deemed professionally suitable, graduate from their programs. CASWE (2013) accreditation standards require schools of social work to have policies regarding professional suitability. The definition, criteria, and assessment methods and tools used by schools may differ (Miller & Koerin, 1998), thereby contributing to a variety of practice guidelines and approaches across Canada (Barlow & Coleman, 2003).

Despite variability, schools of social work generally assess professional suitability at the time of admission and through field placement evaluation. At admission, consideration may be given to personal characteristics such as maturity, self-awareness, and ethics, as well as social work commitment and values, and employment and volunteer experience (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Miller & Koerin, 1998). This information is typically gleaned and scored from such items as personal statements/essays, interviews, non-academic references, and résumés (Miller & Koerin, 1998). A more comprehensive assessment approach that involves multiple admission methods/criteria is often recommended given mixed research findings regarding the efficacy of predicting student performance in the program, particularly performance in field placements (Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002; Fortune, 2003; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006).

Field placements provide another opportunity for schools of social work to assess professional suitability as students "acquire, apply, and demonstrate knowledge and skills congruent with social work values" (CASWE, 2013, p. 15). Performance in placements may be based on students' qualities, learning approach, behaviour, practice and other skills, the field instructor's experience with the student, and challenges that arise (Bogo et al., 2004; Bogo et al., 2006). Although the admissions process attempts to assess professional suitability, field placements are generally regarded as the best opportunity for this evaluation (Gibbs, 1994);

however, placing too much weight on this one evaluative mechanism may be problematic when field instructors are reluctant to fail students. Many field instructors are concerned that failing students may: reflect poorly on them as instructors, initiate an appeal process wherein the school may not support their decision, and negatively impact the student's career (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). They may also be concerned about the potential trauma experienced by all involved, as Samec (1995) found in a study with psychotherapy supervisors. As a result of such concerns, field placement evaluations may not provide the most reliable assessment of MSW students' professional suitability.

As the gatekeepers to the profession, schools of social work must bear in mind the potential limitations of field placements and typical admission processes to assess professional suitability. Moreover, recommendations for a multi-method or comprehensive approach to MSW student assessment may be well-founded, so as to account for shortcomings in any one method or approach.

Methodology

Ethical approval for this exploratory study was obtained from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board. All data and identifying information is secured at the university or on the researchers' password-protected computers.

A case study design guided the research (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Stake, 1995). Case studies are used to help understand the "how" and "why" of a particular case (Yin, 2003). The case for this study was the non-Aboriginal MSW program at Wilfrid Laurier University. To assist with the curriculum review and the re-development process, we wanted to understand how service users understood effective social workers; that is, what does effectiveness look like for social workers from the perspective of service users? What are the experiences of service users with social workers and why are social workers helpful or not? To obtain answers to these questions, service users were recruited for this particular part of the case study.

This study defines "social workers" broadly to include both professional and paraprofessional roles to reflect the diversity of positions held by social work students and graduates in human service organizations. As such, although service users were recruited through four different organizations providing supportive housing, immigrant, or refugee services in Kitchener and Waterloo, they had accessed a range of community and social services, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 1. *Community and Social Services Accessed by Participants*

Service	Number & Percentage of Participants
Supportive housing and housing services	12 (93%)
Ontario Works (OW)	11 (85%)
or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) - *social assistance*	
Employment services	7 (54%)
Disability services	6 (46%)
Mental health social workers	5 (38%)
Shelters, group homes, or halfway houses	4 (31%)
Hospital social workers	4 (31%)
School social workers	4 (31%)
Family or couples counselling	3 (23%)
Substance use counselling	3 (23%)
Settlement, immigrant, or multicultural services	2 (15%)
Child welfare services	2 (15%)
Seniors' services	1 (7%)
Other:	
Community resource workers	1 (7%)
Correctional facility social workers	0

Note: *This table reflects data from three of the four focus groups (or 13 of the 24 participants), as the checklist was introduced after the first group.*

Participants were recruited with the help of the four community agencies. Agency representatives, who had contact with service users through existing programs, extended the invitation to participate in the study. In addition, dates and times of the focus groups were determined in consultation with the agencies, which also provided space for the focus groups. In total, 24 adults over the age of 18 (10 women and 14 men) provided informed consent and participated in the study. Due to limited research funds, it was not possible to provide honoraria, however, participants were offered bus tickets in advance, and refreshments during the focus group meetings.

Meetings lasting approximately 90 minutes in length were conducted with four focus groups. Service users were asked to identify the skills, knowledge, and attributes of "good" or "effective" social workers and to discuss their experiences with social workers. The focus groups were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed and edited to remove identifying information, redundancies, and non-content words or hesitations. Thereafter, data were analyzed incorporating components of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Initial coding of data from the first focus group resulted in the addition of a question regarding attributes to the focus group interview guide, to further explore the themes emerging from the data. Subsequent transcripts were coded and compared

to identify patterns and themes. These themes were then refined upon further reflection, discussion, and review of the data.

Findings

Characteristics of effective social workers

Service users were asked to identify the knowledge, skills, and attributes of effective social workers, but an analysis of the discussions revealed a reversal of this categorical ordering. Based on the degree to which each topic was discussed, service users appear to value attributes, or the nature and character of social workers, the most in the helping relationship, followed by skills and knowledge.

Attributes

According to service users, effective social workers genuinely care about the people they serve, which is demonstrated through kindness, empathy, and compassion. Service users engage with social workers at difficult times in their lives and want to work with someone who is warm and friendly, and truly interested in helping. For some, this manifests as a passion for one's work as one participant describes below:

> I can see from [the social worker] that he's passionate about his work, he's happy with what he does every day, and he's just happy to help. If you're not passionate about your work, why [are] you going to study in that field? (Man #11)

Despite the importance of these qualities, there is uncertainty whether they can be taught in university. One service user notes, "I don't know how [social workers] would learn to be compassionate and loving to people [but]...you need to have that" (Woman #7).

Other attributes valued by service users include a non-judgemental attitude, patience, understanding, and respectfulness. Effective social workers recognize the challenges faced by service users, be they language, poverty, childcare responsibilities, and so forth, and how they impact access to service. Two participants convey these ideas:

> If you connect somebody with three different agencies, they still need to get to all three of those agencies, potentially with a child, while working around whatever else is going on. (Woman #9)

> It's good to ask the person what happened to him, or why he missed school, or this thing…instead of judging him. (Man #14)

Service users also stress the importance of taking time to listen to service users' stories. This approach is also relevant to cultural awareness, as illustrated by the following service user comment:

> Awareness does not mean that every case is the same. The social worker still has to be aware of each individual, with their own situation, and where they are coming from. So even if the social worker is aware of cultural issues, time should be spent on each individual, separately, to go into their own problems. (Woman #1)

Service users explained that approaching each individual and his or her situation as unique prevents pre-judgement, stereotyping, and assumption-making. At the same time, some knowledge of international issues and cultural differences is important to ensure awareness and sensitivity in working with services users. One service user described an experience wherein a social worker assumed she was giving her baby up for adoption, shortly after giving birth. Such a suggestion was offensive and displayed ignorance of the woman's culture. As she says, "[in] some cultures you never think of giving up your baby, for any reason" (Woman #1). Additionally, service users may possess unique insight into their communities, and be able to suggest culturally appropriate approaches to resolving a problem, thereby reinforcing the importance of respecting their knowledge, wisdom, and experience.

Honesty, fairness, and trustworthiness – attributes that relate to social workers' ethics, integrity, and character – were also cited by service users. Examples include keeping promises, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring consistency of service with all clients. Even seemingly small promises, like returning a call by the end of the day, should be kept so that the service user does not feel disrespected or forgotten. Also, service users expect social workers to be trustworthy and refrain from sharing their personal information or stories with others. In terms of consistency, it is important that equitable service be provided to all service users within a social worker's caseload, especially in settings where service users are aware of the service provided to one another, as described by one service user:

> In a place like here [supported housing], I think consistency becomes very difficult because we are all individuals with personal needs. But because we're so involved with each other around here and so acutely aware of what's going on in each other's lives, we know when there has been an inconsistency [in agency response]. And that tends to create tension. (Woman #9)

Lastly, service users also feel that reflexivity or self-awareness, is relevant because it impacts on the helping relationship, and can help a social worker determine his or her fit for the profession. Self-awareness prevents a social worker's personal history and experiences from adversely affecting their work with service users. A lack of self-awareness can result in prejudging or stereotyping service users as described by one participant below:

> A social worker who is divorced, who had a bad man or a bad woman in his life…when they meet another woman or man, they don't have to take their own example and [apply it to] the client they have. So when they meet a case, a client, they have to deal with that case, without putting themselves in. (Man #5)

Ultimately, service users expect social workers have worked through and addressed their own concerns before counselling others. As another participant says, "It's not good to have somebody go into social work and then find out that they have *a lot* of luggage" (Woman #6). In addition, service users feel that being self-aware helps social workers determine whether the profession or particular roles therein are a good "fit" with their interests, strengths, values, and beliefs – as one service user says, in order to "do your best work, you have to be happy" (Woman #6). They note it can also help recognize signs of burnout and when it is time to leave an organization or area of the social work field.

Skills and Knowledge

Although discussed to a lesser extent, service users identify different skills and types of knowledge as important for effective social work practice. These include strong listening, communication, and critical thinking skills, as well as both general and job-specific knowledge. Listening to service users' stories is not only respectful, but also necessary to effectively communicate. Communication is a bidirectional process that requires social workers to attend to service users and provide information in a clear manner to prevent misunderstandings. The salience of such skills is conveyed by one service user who says, "[a social worker] who can't communicate very well, better do something else" (Man #5). Furthermore, social workers must be mindful that some service users may express themselves differently due to a different language or culture, and also recognize when it is appropriate to access an interpreter. Accessing interpretation services can increase the efficiency of the process by eliminating unnecessary appointments, and is also respectful to service users who feel they are properly heard and understood. Service users also feel this sharing helps to facilitate the helping relationship and bring the social worker "close" (Man #1).

Effective social work practice also requires critical thinking skills. Service users stated social workers need to become fully informed of the problem and hear both sides before providing feedback. Those who do not take the time to hear from all parties may judge a service user or situation incorrectly, as one service user describes below:

> Critical thinking is very important in the field of social work, because if you're not a person who can analyse the problem, analyze the situation, then you will end up judging people [and] judging [the] situation without concrete evidence. (Man #6)

In terms of knowledge, social workers are required to know both general and job-specific information to effectively deliver services. Some examples of general knowledge provided by service users include an understanding of different populations or current legislation related to social workers' area of practice (e.g. child welfare), while specific knowledge can include information about different programs and services, or how to conduct various assessments (e.g. assessing a child for a developmental delay). Service users note how the variety of programs and services, as well as the changing nature of legislation and policies, require social workers to stay informed so they are well-equipped to direct individuals accordingly.

Professional Suitability of Social Workers

In addition to the characteristics of effective social workers, service users also identified the importance of professional suitability, and raised questions as to the efficacy of student assessment by schools of social work.

Sometimes service users emphasized the importance of attributes by recounting instances where they experienced or witnessed disrespectful or inappropriate behaviour by social workers. For example, one woman recalled an experience where the social worker made inappropriate comments to a service user. She says, "[The social worker] said comments that *nobody* should say. I believe in speaking your mind, but this was not the *right* kind of thing to say" (Woman #6). She later makes reference to racist or discriminatory behaviour, which may have occurred in the aforementioned example, "It's not good to have somebody who's going to work in a multicultural [organization] if they have some prejudice" (Woman #6).

Subsequently, these stories prompted service users to suggest ways in which compatibility for the profession could be assessed both before and during MSW programs. For example, they suggest holding information sessions prior to admission so that prospective social work students are well informed about the profession and gain a better understanding about "what it is like to be a social worker…[they know] the work is not easy" (Man #5). In addition, service users suggest personality, psychiatric, or other assessments to help students understand themselves and determine an appropriate career path. Moreover, such assessments could assist schools of social work in identifying suitable candidates, as one service user describes below:

> It's probably prohibitively expensive to have, but I think it would be a good idea to have each application get a pre-psychiatric evaluation, to see if they're the [right] type of person. I know a guy that wanted to be, *thought* he wanted to be a minister, he was smart enough, but about halfway through the second year they told him "you're not going to make it, think of something else." (Man #10)

Other suggestions put forth by participants are currently implemented in MSW programs, such as practicums to gain experience and courses covering a range of topics to gain a breadth of knowledge. Service users feel practical work experience with different populations is one way to become more self-aware, and learn skills and knowledge that one cannot learn in an educational setting; while a variety of courses, including general courses, can help enhance understanding of the issues and challenges faced by different groups of people. Ultimately, these experiences and knowledge would help students determine which community or population they are best suited to serve.

In summary, service users value the attributes, skills, and knowledge of effective social workers, and recognize the imperative of assessing professional suitability. As such, professional suitability, and the methods employed by schools of social work for its assessment are of utmost importance to service users, which reinforces an important point for schools of social work when reviewing their programs.

Discussion

The findings from this study support a body of literature regarding the characteristics of effective social workers. A non-judgemental attitude, a caring and compassionate nature, and dedication to the service user's cause regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or any other social difference, are all important attributes of the effective social worker. For service users, the beliefs and attitudes held by social workers are as important as how they engage with others, and what they ultimately do for those they are helping. Service users also expect social workers to have the skills and knowledge (i.e. competence) necessary to do the job, though these aspects (especially technical skills) are regarded differently, and perhaps less importantly as it is believed they can be learned, whereas the qualities of the individual are more likely inherent. At the same time, service users suggest there may be some qualities that can be developed over time, indicating the overlapping nature of attributes and skills. For example, effective communication skills involve not only the ability to articulate oneself clearly, but the ability to listen carefully and respectfully to others and consider their viewpoints. Thus, even strong skills are often dependent upon the individual social worker's personal qualities, reinforcing once again, the intangible over the tangible, or the unlearned over the learned.

Given the perceived salience of the more intangible aspects of social work practice by service users – elements that greatly impact upon the helping relationship and thus service user outcomes – it is unsurprising that service users also identify the importance of professional suitability. Service users suggest educating potential students about the nature of the social work profession prior to admission, and providing means (e.g.

personality assessments) by which students can better know themselves and thus their suitability for the profession. Service users recognize the essential role of schools of social work in this regard, and the schools' gatekeeping responsibility to graduate only the most qualified, competent, and suitable individuals to serve the public as social workers. Thus, the ways in which students are selected, prepared, and evaluated in MSW programs are critical to service users as schools of social work continue to prepare future practitioners.

The emphasis on personal qualities and professional suitability by service users raises a question as to the adequacy of MSW student assessments. Notwithstanding the fact that some negative experiences recalled by service users may have pertained to non-social-work-educated professionals, literature suggests there may be some room for improvement in gatekeeping by schools of social work. As noted in the literature review, field placements are largely where professional suitability is assessed in MSW programs; however, concerns may be not be identified in field placements for various reasons, and some students who are not well-suited to the profession may be graduated. With this concern in mind, Wilfrid Laurier University's MSW Aboriginal Field of Study (AFS) is presented as an example of an alternative approach to student assessment. The AFS utilizes a wholistic[1] and comprehensive approach to evaluating students that is useful for illustrative purposes.

Wholistic evaluation of students

Colonization in Canada decimated Indigenous knowledge and subjugated Indigenous peoples to Eurocentrism, primarily through education and the residential school system (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Dumbrill & Green, 2008; Hanson, n.d.; Milloy, 1999). Most social work programs also reinforce Eurocentric perspectives, however "the oppressive nature of these 'educational' regimes has now been recognized and the value inherent in Indigenous knowledge is being increasingly understood" (Dumbrill & Green, 2008, p. 2). Some university programs disrupt Eurocentrism and thus "the dominance that excludes other forms of marginalized knowledge" (Dumbrill & Green, 2008, p. 2). The AFS at Wilfrid Laurier University is one such program, and is also the first MSW program in Canada rooted in an Indigenous, wholistic worldview (Wilfrid Laurier University, 2014b).

The AFS prepares students for social work practice that is grounded in an understanding of an Aboriginal Wholistic Healing approach, and respect for the history, culture, and traditions of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada (Wilfrid Laurier University, 2014a; Wilfrid Laurier University 2014b). This approach is "whole, ecological, cyclical and relational" in nature (Absolon, 2010, p. 76), wherein realities and experiences are understood by considering the influence of all elements on the individual

or collective, rather than just one element (Absolon, 2010). Further, this approach, which honours traditional ways, can subsequently be translated into practice with Aboriginal communities to support positive outcomes. For example, a study with Aboriginal women and hand-drumming found the practice supported "physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being," as well as connections to their culture and a supportive network (Goudreau, Weber-Pillwax, Cote-Meek, Madill, & Wilson, 2008, p. 73).

Also consistent with an Indigenous worldview, students in the AFS are evaluated wholistically by all Elders and faculty in the program (Saulis, 2010). Students receive feedback on four areas: spiritual/spirit, emotional/nature, mental/intellect, and physical/character (Wilfrid Laurier University, 2014c). The AFS provides a detailed description of these four areas including indicators of a student's competence. The following are examples of indicators: *spirit* - meaningful participation in ceremonies; *nature* - the ability to describe one's nature and how one influences others; *intellect* - the ability to both speak and write about one's understanding; and *character* - taking responsibility, acting consistently, and with integrity (Saulis, 2010). The evaluation of students begins with the admission interview and continues throughout all stages of the program including: courses, evaluation feedback outside of courses, and field placements. Individual evaluations of each student are provided through a comprehensive, faculty-wide format including AFS faculty and Elders, and using a *Circle* process that allows for discussion by all involved (K. Absolon, personal communication, December 5, 2013; Saulis, 2010). The Circle is a respectful and "egalitarian structure" as each person in the Circle is afforded an equal opportunity to speak, and speak as long as needed (Graveline, 2000, p. 364). Also known as Talking Circles or Sharing Circles, a stick, feather, or stone may be passed around the Circle, signifying that it is the holder's turn to speak without interruption (Baskin, Kolescar-Green, Hendry, Lavallée, & Murrin, 2008; Graveline, 2000; Trudeau & Cherubini, 2010). A smaller program size in the AFS (approximately 32 full-time and part-time first-year students compared to approximately 168 in the non-Aboriginal program) allows for use of the Circle, as well as engagement of students in a number of other activities that provide opportunity for evaluation and feedback. Students participate in a week-long, overnight Culture Camp that includes the learning of traditional teachings and practices by Elders and Aboriginal faculty, a wholistic conference within the faculty, and ceremonies throughout the term (K. Absolon, personal communication, December 5, 2013; Wilfrid Laurier University, 2014d). Ultimately, if concerns are raised regarding the personal suitability of a student and his or her capacity and commitment to practice from an Aboriginal worldview, then steps are taken within the AFS to address these concerns (Wilfrid Laurier University, 2014d).

Implications for non-Aboriginal MSW programs

As described above, the evaluation of students in the AFS is very comprehensive and places significant emphasis on the personal attributes or qualities of MSW students as well as their professional suitability for the practice of social work. This is not to suggest however, that all components – evaluative or otherwise – of the AFS are relevant to non-Aboriginal programs; for example, while students' intellect, nature, and character are already assessed in non-Aboriginal MSW programs to some extent, the role of spirituality in mainstream social work practice is a newer development (Seinfeld, 2012). We are also not suggesting that adopting aspects of Aboriginal MSW programs (e.g. ceremonies) is appropriate given Canada's colonial history and Aboriginal communities' experience with cultural appropriation (Garwood & Stevenson, 2009). Rather, it is the comprehensiveness of the wholistic evaluation approach that is important as it offers more opportunities to assess personal qualities and subsequently professional suitability.

Furthermore, while limited resources are likely to be cited as primary barriers to implementing more involved evaluation methods, such as interviews (Gibbons, Gore, Munro, & Powis, 2007), there may be opportunities to integrate additional evaluation when new courses are developed, or explore low-cost opportunities in existing courses. For example, MSW programs could implement, or maintain where applicable, a course that is dedicated to considering reflexivity in practice. Such a course could provide an excellent opportunity for faculty to assess students' relational dynamics, attitudes, and ethics. Additionally, evaluations conducted in courses typically focus on academic skills, such as writing, even though there are many informal opportunities (e.g. discussions and group work) for students to interact with one another and the professor, express their opinions and beliefs, and demonstrate their values. Faculty could make assessments through their observations and engagement with students, and provide informal verbal feedback. As an example, Reynolds (2004) utilized an assessment tool in pre-BSW courses that includes items related to professional suitability. The 11-item instrument assesses characteristics deemed necessary for the profession, six of which correspond to the BSW program's objectives, and five considered requisite by community agencies. The tool includes statements such as "Demonstrates openness to diverse perspectives," and students are rated on a seven-point scale for each item (Reynolds, 2004, p. 31). The scores can then be used in admission processes or as a mechanism to provide feedback to students.

As such, a course on reflexivity, and student evaluation tools used in courses, are but a few ways to more comprehensively assess a student's professional suitability for social work practice. However, while there may be other creative or novel ways to increase the comprehensiveness of the student assessment process without greatly burdening faculties of social work, the example of the AFS at Wilfrid Laurier University illustrates the degree of thoroughness that is possible with a reduced program size.

END NOTES

1. The AFS spelling of *wholistic* is intentional; for example, Absolon (2010) describes how her spelling of wholism reinforces the whole as "complete, balanced, and circular" (p. 75), and is intended to connote "whole" rather than "hole" or "holy" (Absolon, 2011, p. 59).

REFERENCES

Absolon, K. E. (Minogiizhigowke) (2010). Indigenous wholistic theory: A knowledge set for practice. *First Peoples Child & Family Review, 5*(2), 74-87.

Absolon, K. E. (Minogiizhigowke) (2011). *Kaandossiwin: How we come to know.* Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Barlow, C., & Coleman, H. (2003). Suitability for practice guidelines for students: A survey of Canadian social work programmes. *Social Work Education, 22*(2), 151-164.

Baskin, C., Kolescar-Green, R., Hendry, J., Lavallée, L., & Murrin, J. (2008). We pass the talking stick to you: Forming alliances and identities in the academy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 31*(1), 89-106.

Battiste, M., Bell, L., & Findlay, L. M. (2002). Decolonizing education in Canadian universities: An interdisciplinary, international, Indigenous research project. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 26*(2), 82-95.

Beresford, P., Croft, S., & Adshead, L. (2008). 'We don't see her as a social worker': A service user case study of the importance of the social worker's relationship and humanity. *British Journal of Social Work, 38*, 1388-1407.

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Hughes, J., Power, R., & Globerman, J. (2002). Evaluating a measure of student field performance in direct service: Testing reliability and validity of explicit criteria. *Journal of Social Work Education, 38*(3), 385-401.

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Power, R., Hughes, J., Woodford, M., & Regehr, G. (2004). Toward new approaches for evaluating student field performance: Tapping the implicit criteria used by experienced field instructors. *Journal of Social Work Education, 40*(30), 417-424.

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Woodford, M., Hughes, J., Power, R., & Regehr, G. (2006). Beyond competencies: Field instructors' descriptions of student performance. *Journal of Social Work Education, 42*(3), 579-593.

Branfield, F. (2009). *Developing user involvement in social work education: Report of consultations with service users on the development of service user involvement in social work education*. London, United Kingdom: Shaping Our Lives.

Brear, P., Dorrian, J., & Luscri, G. (2008). Preparing our future counseling professionals: Gatekeeping and the implications for research. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 8*, 93-101.

Canadian Association for Social Work Education (2013). *Standards for Accreditation*. Ottawa, ON: CASWE.

de Boer, C., & Coady, N. (2006). Good helping relationships in child welfare: Learning from stories of success. *Child and Family Social Work, 12*, 32-42.

Drake, B. (1994). Relationship competencies in child welfare services. *Social Work, 39*, 595-602.

Drisko, J. W. (2004). Common factors in psychotherapy outcome: Meta-analytic findings and their implications for practice and research. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 85*(1), 81-90.

Dumbrill, G. C., & Green, J. (2008). Indigenous knowledge in the academy. *Social Work Education, 27*(5), 489-503.

Feagin, J. R., Orum, A. M., & Sjoberg, G. (Eds.) (1991). *A case for the case study.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Fortune, A. E. (2003). Comparison of faculty ratings of applicants and background characteristics as predictors of performance in an MSW program. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 23*(1/2), 35-53.

Garwood, N., & Stevenson, J. (2009). Walking in the good way/ Ioterihwakwaríhshion Tsi Íhse: Aboriginal social work education. In I. Thompson-Cooper & G. Stacey-Moore (Eds.), *Aboriginal healing practices in mainstream social work education programs…sagacity or sacrilege?* (pp. 153-170). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Gibbons, J., Bore, M., Munro, D., & Powis, D. (2007). Using personal quality assessment for selection of social work students. *Australian Social Work, 60*(2), 210-221.

Gibbs, P. (1994). Screening mechanisms in BSW programs. *Journal of Social Work Education, 30*, 63-74.

GlenMaye, L., & Oakes, M. (2002). Assessing suitability of MSW applicants through objective scoring of personal statements. *Journal of Social Work Education, 38*(1), 67-82.

Goudreau, G., Weber-Pillwax, C., Cote-Meek, S., Madill, H., Wilson, S. (2008). Hand drumming: Health-promoting experiences of Aboriginal women from a northern Ontario urban community. *Journal of Aboriginal Health, 4*(1), 72-83.

Graveline, F. J. (2000). Circle as methodology: Enacting an Aboriginal paradigm. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 13*(4), 361-370.

Hanson, E. (n.d.). *The residential school system.* Retrieved from http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-residential-school-system.html

Kelly, J., & Horder, W. (2001). The how and the why: Competences and holistic practice. *Social Work Education, 20*(6), 689-699.

Lafrance, J., Gray, E., & Herbert, M. (2004). Gate-keeping for professional social work practice. *Social Work Education, 23*(3), 325-340.

Lambert, M. J., & Cattani-Thompson, K. (1996). Current findings regarding the effectiveness of counseling: Implications for practice. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 74*(6), 601-608.

Lee, C. D., & Ayón, C. (2004). Is the client-worker relationship associated with better outcomes in mandated child abuse cases? *Research on Social Work Practice, 14*(5), 351-357.

Miller, J., & Koerin, B. (1998). Can we assess suitability at admission? A review of MSW application procedures. *Journal of Social Work Education, 34*(3), 437-453.

Milloy, J. S. (1999). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system, 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.

Reynolds, L. R. (2004). Gatekeeping prior to point of entry. *Advances in Social Work, 5*(1), 18-31.

Ribner, D. S., & Knei-Paz, C. (2002). Client's view of a successful helping relationship. *Social Work, 47*, 379-387.

Robinson, V. P. (1978). *The development of a professional self: Teaching and learning in professional helping processes: Selected writings, 1930-1968*. New York, NY: AMS Press.

Ryan, M., McCormack, J., & Cleak, H. (2006). Student performance in field education placements: The findings of a 6-year Australian study of admissions data. *Journal of Social Work Education, 42*(1), 67-84.

Samec, J. R. (1995). Shame, guilt and trauma: Failing the psychotherapy candidate's clinical work. *The Clinical Supervisor, 13*(2), 1-17.

Saulis, M. (2010). *The evaluation of students in the Aboriginal Field of Study*. Kitchener, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University.

Schiff, M., & Levit, S. (2010). Correlates of therapeutic alliance and treatment outcomes among Israeli female methadone patients. *Research on Social Work Practice, 20*(4), 380-390.

Seinfeld, J. (2012). Spirituality in social work practice. *Journal of Clinical Social Work, 40*, 240-244.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Strauss A., & Corbin, J. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Trudeau, L., & Cherubini, L. (2010). Speaking our truths in "a good way". *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 33*(1), 113-121.

Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Social Work (2012). *MSW curriculum review committee terms of reference*. Retrieved from http://www.wlu.ca/documents/53688/MSWCurrrevtermsofref-3.pdf

Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Social Work, Aboriginal Field of Study (2014a). *Description of content and definition of Aboriginal Field of Study program*. Retrieved from http://www.wlu.ca/page.php?grp_id=1844&p=13298

Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Social Work, Aboriginal Field of Study (2014b). *MSW Aboriginal Field of Study*. Retrieved from http://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp_id=1844

Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Social Work, Aboriginal Field of Study (2014c). *Master of Social Work Aboriginal Field of Study: Wholistic evaluation instrument*. Kitchener, ON: WLU.

Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Social Work, Aboriginal Field of Study (2014d). *Personal suitability*. Retrieved from http://www.wlu.ca/page.php?grp_id=1844&p=13300

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.