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Decolonizing Field Education: “Melq'ilwiye” Coming Together: An Exploratory Study in the Interior of British Columbia

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Abstract

This article shares our reflections and learning on decolonizing field education programs based on exploratory research in the Interior of British Columbia (BC). Because there is no existing research on field education by or with urban Aboriginal people this article aims to contribute to the development of new literature on the process of decolonizing field education practices through cultural safety and intersectional frameworks. The findings call for a transformation in social work and human service field education policies and practices.

Introduction

This article shares the findings of a SSHRC funded Aboriginal development grant (2007 – 2009) and research partnership between Thompson Rivers University, in Kamloops BC, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology in Merritt, BC and the Interior Indian Friendship Society in Kamloops BC in order to examine the process and practices towards decolonizing field education programs in the Interior of British Columbia (BC). This article builds on our previous work where we reflected on the creation of an intersectional research team comprised of Elders, Indigenous educators, community practitioners, and allies (see Clark et al forthcoming 2010 for a more detailed description of our team) and which reflected on our experience in creating the team. As authors and research team members our various intersectional locations include a wide geographic representation, including on and off reserve, urban and rural and Indigenous to the territory and those who are visitors; Secwepmec, Metis, Mohawk, Sto:lo, Abenaki and Shawnee; English, Irish, and French-Canadian; we represent a cross section of ages from our 20's through to our 60's, with 2 recognized Elders; community-based and academic based researchers

representing four different disciplines; tenured and non-tenured; and parenting, and grand-parenting.

The word Melq'ilwiye is the Secwepemc word for coming together, and it not only described the experience of our team, but also of the partnerships, as TRU and NVIT campuses are located on the traditional territory of the Secwepemc and Nlaka'pamux peoples, noted throughout the paper as Aboriginal. For over 10 years the Interior Indian Friendship Society in Kamloops (IIFS) has accepted social work and human service practicum students from Thompson Rivers University (TRU) and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) for their field placements. This partnership remained unexamined with respect to acknowledging and integrating Aboriginal knowledge in field education; and talking about issues of power, trust, and relationship with respect to histories of colonization past and present. Because there is no existing research on field education by or with urban Aboriginal people this article aims to contribute to the development of new literature on the process of decolonizing field education practices in both university and field agency settings. This article will describe the process of examining the field partnership, the research methodology grounded in centering Aboriginal knowledge in field education, and strategies for best practices for students undertaking field placements in Aboriginal settings.

Goals of the Study

The goals of this exploratory study focuses on building research capacity within the urban Aboriginal (inclusive of non-status Indian, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples living off-reserve in the interior BC region) community, and to identify best practices for social work and human service students undertaking field placements in Aboriginal and other First Nations settings. The objectives of this project were 1) to increase our understanding of best practices in creating and supporting the learning experiences of students, field instructors and faculty liaisons, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; 2) to create lasting relationships between students, service providers and researchers in Kamloops and in BC; 3) to develop and teach culturally-relevant research skills of importance to urban Aboriginal agencies and Aboriginal students; 4) to centre Aboriginal knowledge in field education; and 5) to identify the process in facilitating an authentic learning and research partnership between IIFS and other First Nation settings, and TRU/NVIT. As stated by IIFS "learning together allows us to develop that closer relationship and to share our traditions and beliefs."

Context of Field Education

Social work has long recognized the importance of field education as a means for integrating knowledge and practice skills (Westerfelt and Dietz, 2001; Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2007). As professionals in the making, social work and human service students attend classes to learn practice principles, values and ethical behaviors, a body of specialized knowledge, and the scientific basis for practice (Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2007). In field instruction, students apply, under supervision, what they have been learning in the classroom to real situations. Thus, the preparation to become a social work or human service professional is composed of formal learning as well as practical experience, sometimes known as field

instruction, field placement, field work, practicum, or internship (Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2007).

Despite field education remaining an integral and valuable component of the social work and human service curriculum (Royse, Dhooper and Rompf, 2007; Razack, 2002; Bogo, 1998; Kenyon, 2000) the literature reviewed showed an absolute dearth of information on Aboriginal field education. However, Canadian schools are introducing new Aboriginal-centered practices and approaches to field education that need to be shared and documented. For example, the University of Victoria has implemented an Indigenous field education program and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) is incorporating ceremony and traditional practices in field education. The results of this exploratory research contributes to addressing some of the gaps in the current literature.

Social work programs employ a variety of approaches to nurture integration of theoretical content and field instruction. Some have developed close relationships with agencies and may provide consultation or occasional in-service training to the staff in host field agencies. Field instructors may also serve on advisory boards to provide feedback on the social work program's field education component. Students can enrich their learning by critically reflecting on what is being learned in the field. Many programs encourage reflective learning about how our own life experiences contribute to our ability to recognize, appreciate, and affirm clients and their efforts and strengths. Reflexivity is defined as "the practice of social work researchers being self-aware of their own beliefs, values and attitudes ... and [being] self-critical ..." (Payne and Payne, 2004).

The context in which social work practice occurs increasingly demand that social workers be proficient in evaluating intervention outcomes, and this is particularly true in working with marginalized groups in a variety of settings. There are two arguments that support the need for incorporating a research perspective into one's practice. First, our professional code of ethics emphasizes the responsibility of social workers to understand, utilize and conduct research. Second, we are accountable to those we seek to assist. We are responsible for knowing the struggles, needs, and assets of those we assist and for providing services that make a difference. Only through our continuous search for better understanding and the testing of current understanding can we effectively assist others. The same is true for field education coordinators in social work and human service education. Increasingly, in Canada, many field education coordinators, responsible for the coordination of field programs, are hired in tenure-track faculty positions with expectations for research and scholarly activity. It is our view that learning in field education will be strengthened by this approach.

Thompson Rivers University (TRU) and Nicola Valley Institute of Technology campuses are located on the traditional territory of the Secwepemc and Nlaka'pamux peoples: in many symbolic and real ways, all other people are visitors (Reid, 2003). The relatively recent arrival of Europeans and the subsequent colonization of Secwepemc and Nlaka'pamux and other Aboriginal peoples had devastating consequences which continue to manifest today (Reid, 2003). The marginalization of Aboriginal people in health and social services, at the local, regional and national levels, demand action by social work professionals.

The shocking reality of First Nations' poverty in Canada, with 1 in 4 First Nations children living in poverty, and the overrepresentation of First Nations children at all levels of child welfare cases in Canada, with 1 in 10 status children in care in May 2005 in a sample of three provinces (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, 2005), calls for our immediate action. Social workers have been and continue to be central figures in the delivery of services. However, as Cindy Blackstock (2005) demonstrates the social work profession has been implicated in the multiple harms experienced by Aboriginal children and Aboriginal families, in particular the residential school system and sixties scoop. Despite anti-oppressive, anti-racist and Indigenous social work classes this knowledge does not often get translated into field practice. As noted by Sinclair and Albert (2008) "the knowledge remains within the theoretical realm where students are generally not challenged to translate knowledge into action or change."

In our experience many social work and human service students enter the university with the best of intentions, which is not enough. Given the continued overrepresentation of children in child welfare and child protection cases, it is imperative that students become aware not only in courses, but in field education, of the realities and implications of colonization past and present. For this reason it is imperative to better understand how Indigenous knowledge can be integrated into practice by exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in their field placements, the perspectives of Aboriginal field instructors, and the role of field education coordinators in this process of learning.

Brown and Strega (2005) have shown that "traditional social science research, whatever its intentions, has silenced and distorted the experiences of those on the margins, taking a deficit-informed approach to explaining lives and experiences." The "many ways of knowing," referred by some scholars as "subjugated knowledges" have historically been devalued, misinterpreted, excluded or trivialized (Brown and Strega, 2005). The search for culturally-relevant research methodologies that are capable of grasping the experiences of those on the margins involves reclaiming and centering Aboriginal knowledge in a new way. In her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwei Smith (1999), a Maori researcher, presented 25 indigenous projects as examples of culturally based methodologies. Furthermore, Kovach (2005) argues that gaining control of the research process has been pivotal for Indigenous peoples in decolonization. There is, however, no available research on experiences in social work and human service field education by and with urban Aboriginal researchers and communities to critically examine how Indigenous knowledge can be centered in field education practice.

Research objectives

The research objectives of this study were 1) to increase the research capacity of urban Aboriginal community partners and Aboriginal students in order to improve social and health services for urban Aboriginal people; 2) to examine the narratives of Aboriginal students and community field instructors with respect to identifying best practices in field education, including the conditions and supports necessary to provide cultural safety and to decolonize social work field education; and 3) to critically examine the issues and barriers that Aboriginal students and Aboriginal community partners face both within the university and within the

community, and to contextualize these within the field of social work/human service and its relationship with colonization of Aboriginal people. In this article we focus on the narratives of participants to identify emergent best practices for Canadian social work and human service field education.

Research Questions

The study aimed to address the following related research questions:

- What supports do Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal students placed in Aboriginal field settings, and Aboriginal community partners require in facilitating their learning and research including mentors, Elders, access to Aboriginal faculty, learning resources and interventions?
- What process facilitates the creation of an authentic research and learning partnership?
- What is good practice for social work and human service students at IIFS and other First Nations settings? How can they “do no harm” given the history of social work and Aboriginal peoples?

Partnership Agreements

The study, conducted by research team partners at TRU, NVIT and IIFS, builds on agreements between TRU and the Secwepemc Nation and over 10 years partnering with IIFS providing training and field education for social work and human service students from TRU. We are Melq'ilwiye”. In 2006, TRU and the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society signed a protocol agreement to establish an ongoing process and to strengthen communication and a cooperative working relationship on issues on mutual concern between the two institutions. Educational institutions have a pivotal role in transforming the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canadian society (Mastronardi 2009: 43). Another strong partnership that informs this study is the one between TRU and NVIT. In the fall of 1998, the TRU School of Social Work (then University College of the Cariboo) began offering the BSW degree in Merritt, BC, through a partnership agreement with the School of Social Work at NVIT, an Aboriginal public post-secondary institution. In 2004 this agreement was renewed for a further five years.

Specific to this project, the School of Social Work and Human Service Program at TRU and NVIT formally invited the IIFS to enter into a partnership with respect to this research project, by formalizing and expanding the already existing relationship with respect to the training of students in field education. This was facilitated through a presentation by a faculty member (later the Principal Investigator) at an IIFS board meeting. The motion to enter into a partnership agreement, and to proceed with the development grant as well as ongoing research potential, was approved with full support of the board of directors. Discussion at the meeting included the importance of revisiting our past together, including sharing and learning from problems in the historical relationship between TRU and IIFS and between universities and Aboriginal people in general. Principles and ethics to guide the research process were developed in partnership between TRU, NVIT and IIFS and include ownership of data, ethics, issues of consent, and evaluation.

First ethics were established through the established community advisory board comprised of Elders, board members, students, faculty and service providers, and who then guided the research development process at all stages, including continued articulation of the question and identification of related themes and areas of investigation that emerged from the input of the research partners; ensuring the research methodology was culturally relevant and involved students at all levels; and provided feedback and ongoing ethical evaluation at every stage. In addition, all the research partners agreed to disseminate the results through their networks and organizations. Ethical approval through the University was established after ethical engagement with the community through the advisory board as described above. (for further information on the ethical process see Clark et al forthcoming 2010).

Methodology

The research methodology is a mixed methods approach that centered Aboriginal knowledge through a community based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach. Community based participatory action research (CBPAR) is chosen for its' focus on liberatory action and related dimensions that include power, building community capacity, trust and relationships, or can in fact be "considered a health-promoting endeavour in itself" (Macaulay, Delormier, McComber, Cross, Potvin, Paradis, Kirby, Saad-Haddad, Desrosiers, 1998, 105).

Consistent with emerging research on intersectional frameworks in health research, this study adopted an intersectional framework that supports reflection on the multiple social locations of both of us as researchers and the students we are working with. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women in the document titled "Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: An Emerging Vision" (Morris, 2006) state that intersectional frameworks "have the potential to open new spaces for transformation by examining not only the complex factors operating in women's and men's lives that keep them marginalized, but also how they are often able to respond to those forces in creative and innovative ways" (p.5). The term intersectional research team is critical here, in that it reflects a research team with members of varying powers and privileges, based on respective social locations and their connection to oppression. This builds on the work of Clark and Hunt (2007, 2008) in developing the concept of intersectional research teams in their work as community-based researchers within Indigenous communities. The term intersectional research team, as developed by Clark in her previous work with Sarah Hunt (see Clark, 2007; Clark and Hunt, 2007, 2008) is critical here, in that it reflects a research team with members of varying powers and privileges, based on respective social locations and their connection to oppression. As Clark and Hunt describe it "the contextual nature of identity across geography, social and cultural contexts, and time is understood and is integral in the development of a team that is intersectional. We further developed the concept of an intersectional research team in response to concern that research projects were applying intersectional health frameworks to the participants in the research but were not reflecting on the location and position of themselves as academics or professionals conducting research with vulnerable populations. As we have defined it, an intersectional research team is committed to ongoing dialogue and deconstruction of each of our intersecting axis of identity and their influences on the project" (Clark & Hunt 2008). And finally, the creation of an intersectional research team and community advisory was a deliberate and intentional focus attending to the

need for a deconstructed power division. It was also an integral commitment by the team to consistently deconstruct each of our intersectional identities and their influences on the project.

Further, Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) speaks to the decolonizing ability of qualitative research, which is based on oral storytelling and narrative in that the purpose is connected to listening to the stories of the individuals and the meaning of their stories. Oral storytelling and narrative analysis are best situated to listen to the stories and experiences of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students engaged in field placements in Aboriginal settings. The work of Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein (2003) also states that “in order to engage in true partnerships we must be willing to learn how to build new and less comfortable relationships” (p.92). Guiding principles and culturally determined ethics towards the goal of cultural safety were developed, and included statements of principles to guide the research that include respecting aboriginal sovereignty, data ownership, ethical considerations, and process for sharing results (McCauley, 1998, p.106).

Cultural safety is a term that goes “beyond the concept of cultural sensitivity to analyzing power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonization and relationships with colonizers” (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2006, p.1). The main themes of cultural safety are that we are all bearers of culture and that we need to be aware of and challenge unequal power relations at the level of individual, family, community, and society. Cultural safety draws our attention to the social, economic, and political position of certain groups within society, such as the Maori people in Australia/New Zealand or Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Cultural safety reminds us to reflect on the ways in which our [health] policies, research, education, and practices may recreate the traumas inflicted upon Aboriginal peoples” (Papps, 2005; Ramsden, 2000, as cited in University of Victoria, 2009). Field education programs must work towards developing culturally safe practices for students in both the university and community. Unlike the linked concepts of cultural sensitivity or cultural competence, which may contribute to a service recipient’s experiences, cultural safety is an outcome which shifts the power to the service recipient who then defines whether the relationship is culturally safe for them. As this applies to field education “first the educator must be culturally competent; and second, the student culturally safe in the learning relationship” (NAHO, 2006, p.2).

In 2008 – 2009, interviews were organized with 13 Aboriginal students, 2 non-Aboriginal students from TRU and NVIT, in Human Service and Social Work programs, who were placed in urban Aboriginal settings (total of 15 student interviews); Aboriginal field instructors, non-Aboriginal field instructors working in an urban Aboriginal setting (1 focus group with 10 participants), Aboriginal (3) and non-Aboriginal field education coordinators (1) and field education faculty at TRU, NVIT and the University of Victoria (4 interviews). In addition, a talking circle was held with 14 Elders who are part of the NVIT “best practice” of an Elders Council comprised of over ten Elders, whose logo is “Ambassadors, Grandparents, Good Medicine.”

Through a community advisory committee composed of Elders, Aboriginal students, urban Aboriginal service providers and field instructors, it was possible to guide the research process and identify critical issues that needed to be investigated on an ongoing basis. Aboriginal student research assistants who are TRU social work and human service students

were hired to assist in the research project. A community research assistant located at IIFS was involved in the gathering of narratives and interviews. A community research training workshop was organized at IIFS for the research team on culturally-relevant and community-based research skills.

Through this development study it was possible to introduce a number of field activities to foster decolonization in field education. For example, social work and human service practicum students were provided with a number of supports including access to an Elder on campus, Aboriginal faculty liaison, talking circles, Aboriginal-centered experiential professional development workshop on the legacy of residential schools, and a field preparation seminar on cultural safety facilitated by an Aboriginal trauma specialist. A culturally-relevant survey questionnaire was developed to gather demographic data and best practices, as well as interviews grounded in storytelling and narrative approaches with key informants, including students, Elders, and field instructors. The research team has recently been awarded a SSHRC 3 year research grant, in partnership with other field education coordinators and faculty in universities across British Columbia to expand the research team. The goal is to administer the survey questionnaire which was developed from the pilot research and to include qualitative and quantitative data from across British Columbia and within tribal communities in India. In order to extend culturally safe practices and commit to ongoing ways of re – searching together, we will require other sites to adopt the practice of a community advisory committee with gatekeeping Elders, and utilize the ethics practice principles (as highlighted in our Clark et al forthcoming 2010, or see Jones, 2000). Additionally, nationally recognized ethical standards for research with Aboriginal peoples, arising from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR Guidelines for health research with Aboriginal peoples, 2007), will serve as a tangible guide across multiple sites.

Decolonizing Field Education

Based on the analysis of data from the interviews and focus group interviews, there were several key factors identified by respondents regarding Aboriginal field education, best practices, and the experiences of non-Aboriginal students placed in Aboriginal field settings. The themes have been organized under the following six headings, 1) spirituality and ceremony within the social work and human service program, 2) Elders involved in all aspects of the students' education, 3) grief and loss honouring practices; 4) anti oppressive education practices, 5) relational supports as strengths in education; and 6) ensure the use of student wellness plans and self-care in practicum field placements.

Spirituality and ceremony within the Social Work and Human Services field education programs

Social work and human service programs have begun to recognize the need to create new spaces in the university and in field settings for spirituality and ceremony to occur within learning for all students. This emerging literature has called for the importance of making the time, space and necessary changes for spirituality and ceremony to be fully present in order to attend to the whole person (see Fire, 2006 and Baskin, 2006). In our research this was echoed, and specifically applied to field education seminars on campus and within the community at the

various field locations. Examples of this emerging best practice are found both at NVIT and at the University of Victoria who have created an Aboriginal Field Education Coordinator position where all Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students undertaking placement in an Aboriginal agency. Further, culture and ceremony have been integrated into the placement process, the recruitment process and the honoring of field instructors. More specifically, as suggested by students and Elders, were sharing circles/talking circles, sweats, smudges, Elders, and potlucks for Aboriginal students. It is important to caution, that Aboriginal ceremonies and practices are not homogenous, and that great diversity exists within Aboriginal communities across Canada. Further, it is important to consider to when, and under what respectful conditions, non-Aboriginal students might participate in these practices. This point is elucidated in the chapter by Nicki Garwood and Jean Stevenson (2009), *Aboriginal Healing Practices in Mainstream Social Work Education Programs.... Sagacity or Sacrilege?*. The authors state that including only pre-colonial practices is too narrow, and that “now every Aboriginal person needs to define his or her own sense of what constitutes “traditional” healing” (155). As one student indicated in her recommendation for knowledge about the protocol and practices for the Secwepmec territory, “*as a Cree person I know my culture, we don’t do sweat, but here in this territory we do... I don’t know about Shuswaps, I am Cree*” (student voice). For another student, who is Metis, she shared that she was unsure if she should participate in the talking circle, as she stated “*for me it was a new experience... allot of Metis don’t have connection to roots, and specific Metis traditions*” (student voice). However, for other students and faculty, integration of spirituality as they understood it was a daily practice.

Student Voice:

“Finding out about the one death [at practicum] I couldn’t just leave it, it was the same day I was going to facilitate group on healthy boundaries, I’m like I just need time, I asked if I could smudge there, they didn’t discourage me, they accommodated me, they said this room has the best ventilation, take the time if you need to talk to your spiritual advisor, take the time to do that, take the time you need to ... That was one of the things I asked in my interview, do you smudge here, and is it allowed here because I notice there was a sprinkler system, they said we don’t usually do it because other people in the building complain and the sprinkler system, but they said there are other places we can, I’m like okay because I do that a lot.”

Field Instructor Voice:

“At NVIT 11 years ago – had a sweat every morning – it was in the grounds – why not start each day with a smudge – let them smudge before [students] start their day “

Student Voice:

“Around stress, I go sweat, I pray or I smudge. I think it would be good for it to be available on campus.”

Clark et al.

Field Instructor Voice:

“It’s really good cultural teachings...I took some of the students for an Indian taco, a fundraiser . . . it was the first time in their lives where they were the only two non Aboriginal ladies in the room ... they had to experience what it was like . . . it was a really good learning experience.”

Field Education Coordinator Voice:

“The ones that make it in our program are the ones that have their own cultural supports in place already.”

Elders involved in all aspects of the students’ education

Consistent with recent literature within social work education that has called for the implementation of Elders in social work programming (see Fire, 2006) participants in this study highlighted the importance of the inclusion of Elders in the field education program. It was repeatedly stated that Elders had to be involved in all aspects of the students’ education, for support, care, advocacy, and protection to the student. Students named Elders as potential supports when stress and life experiences are impacting their education. In fact, in an interview with an Elders council at NVIT, who as a group are a long time best practice of the school, provided the following suggestion:

“Having Elders on campus is a culturally safe practice that assists to decolonize education and provide care, support and protection for Aboriginal students which means the integration of Elders in the university must be honoured through structural support to do so.”

One of the suggestions for beginning dialogue on Elder involvement is the following:

“Go to Elders connected to the ...territory, and start the discussion about Elders on campus.”

Faculty can advocate within their department for the structural and systemic support for Elders to be present on campus. It is important to consider allocation for office space, telephone numbers, emails, and payroll. It is important to move beyond accommodation to culturally safe retention practices. Further it was recognized the need for Elders who as one student stated “are well” and who represent different intersectional locations was key including nations, gender, and sexual orientation.

“Don’t wait. Invite Elders on campus now. Work to have Elders of multiple genders, and from varying Bands.”

Field education coordinators, faculty, students and field instructors can all play a role in connecting social work and human service students with Elders.

Practicum Student voices:

Clark et al.

“Then there is no support outside of just the students word of what is going on , if the Elder is involved from the beginning along with the faculty liaison together right from the beginning to end then there would be that extra support.”

“It would have been good to have an Elder or two support me. It would have made a difference, big difference.”

Elders can be involved in field visits in the community.

Field Instructor Voice:

“When you come out to do these evaluations with students I’d like to see you bring an Elder with you to be included . . . on every practicum site you go to . . . for all students . . . there’s nothing more powerful than an Elder sitting with you . . . I remember . . . it’s what kept me in school . . . that’s my recommendation.”

Field Education Coordinator Voice:

“Having Elders in the school is a best practice... we need more ... and attached to programs ... we need a gathering place here ... because not all of them [students] are going to the campus gathering place.”

Grief and Loss Honouring Practices

This was a repeated theme for Aboriginal student participants in the study and these experiences were connected to culturally unsafe practices tied to university policies. Across almost all respondents in their various roles (student, Elder, field education coordinators) was a call for changes to policy in responding to Aboriginal students who experience grief and loss during their practicum. As part of the research project, a female Elder and therapist was provided for Aboriginal students to participate in a talking circle. This experience was identified as very important for students who participated in it. As one student indicated who recommended talking circles for Aboriginal students, its also a way to create community. She stated “I feel like its easier to connect, and get to know more of the First Nations students in the program, I don’t know who they are”.

Field Education Coordinator Voices:

“She’s from a thousand kilometres away . . . some students will be gone for weeks to be away for a funeral.” “Family, community and culture comes first . . . and there are some faculty who are just like nope they missed classes they are out.”

“There’s a lot of grief and loss for Aboriginal students.”

Clark et al.

Student Voice:

“Me and him have similar values, he’s Aboriginal, he’s culturally sensitive, and he is flexible and very supportive. Like a relative died recently, and he was like okay that’s understandable, you can go to the funeral. But her (previous field instructor non-Aboriginal) she didn’t get it, my uncle died, and I was just not there near the end of my practicum, she even said that on her final evaluation, you weren’t there, you weren’t focused, and I was like don’t you know why? He was sick for a month and then died because of his illness. She couldn’t get it. I made up that time, I took one day off.”

Bruyere (1998) has observed that “often the pursuit of a social work education is considered by Aboriginal students to be part of their healing, and the wounds may still be tender” (p.174).

In addition non Aboriginal practicum students in non Aboriginal settings need ongoing support to practice cultural safety.

Field Instructor Voice:

“I took a non Aboriginal [practicum] student with me to a funeral ... we get back in the car ...and the practicum student is in shock ... I said funerals are just a part of life ... I’ve never even seen a dead body before...”

A number of recommended action items were discussed, including:

- Work for decolonized, anti oppressive change within all aspects of higher education.
- Create ongoing dialogue about the power relationships inherent in field education experiences. Work to change this, and practice from an anti oppressive position.
- Listen to students’ requests for field education supervisors who are of the same culture, gender, or sexual orientation, and take action to help make this happen.
- Create new pathways of accepted knowing and learning within the School.

Anti Oppressive Field Education Experience: Towards an Intersectional Understanding

An intersectional lens moves beyond an additive approach to a more nuanced approach to the needs of Aboriginal students in field education. An intersectional framework allows us to consider the narratives from a variety of perspectives. Some of the key intersections include geography, social isolation, gender, poverty, age, ability, gender identity/sexual orientation. Students who embody multiple positionalities impact their experiences of education and field education specifically.

Clark et al.

Student Voice:

“Well because I am an Aboriginal student, I’m a woman and person with disabilities. Honestly, there are no services on campus for persons with disabilities other than audio visual recording devices, someone to take notes, there are no disability services.”

Student Voice:

“I think that I guess for me, I have a disability, that has been a little bit difficult, I have a mental illness, so that was something that I needed to discuss with [the] field education coordinator, and that has been something I’ve had to approach this semester, and I think there is a lot of stigma attached to disabilities so it is difficult to bring up.”

Students, field education coordinators, Elders, and field instructors repeatedly discussed the reality of students with intersectional identities and their experiences in field education. Students noted feeling concerned and anxious about their practicum. Would individuals within the field agencies have the ability to work anti oppressively, and respond to the student with respect, relevance, and support? Participants spoke of racism that affects the practicum experience for students. In the narratives cultural identity was identified as strength for some students, but also a challenge for others. For example, a field instructor stated that “many of the Aboriginal students do not know their culture, and struggle, or are trying to learn about their culture.”

Field Instructor Voice:

“We are a non Aboriginal agency and sometimes when an Aboriginal student comes in, say from NVIT, some of our staff seem to have this expectation to have that person teach them all this cultural stuff . . . I think an openness is good but as an expectation is not okay.”

Field Instructor Voice:

“Students who have difficulty with diversity and looking at themselves might mean there are other issues . . . and it could mean they are not able to work with Aboriginal or non Aboriginal people . . . or to practice social work.”

Field Education Coordinator Voices:

“I acknowledge that I am not Aboriginal, but I can be an ally . . . and I have a role to play in supporting change ...”

“Locating yourself.”

“We cannot assume it is culturally safe . . . or that students aren’t facing racism [in practicum].”

At the university students requested more curriculum content grounded and centered in anti oppressive practice, and more support from faculty for entering and sustaining a field placement education as a diverse student. Students discussed and shared the pain associated with oppressive practices within their field education experience. *“I think that I guess for me, I have a disability, that has been a little bit difficult, I have a mental illness, so that was something that I needed to discuss with field education coordinator, and that has been something I’ve had to approach this semester, and I think there is a lot of stigma attached to disabilities so it is difficult to bring up.”*

Students noted feeling concerned about their practicum. Would the individuals within the organization have the ability to work anti oppressively, and respond to the student with respect, relevance, and supports. Recommendations from students included more support from faculty for entering and sustaining field education as a diverse student. As one student noted who identified as gender fluid, *“you just ask them, directly ask them within their policy do they include gender identity, sexual orientation, do they have a rainbow sticker in their front, ...because if they are a little bit supportive, you can always help to move it further, just acknowledging that not everyone is going to be in that place but could move there, just how your gut feeling is, if you walk into it, and you don’t feel right maybe that isn’t the right place for you.”*

Our findings and recommendations, are echoed in a recent taskforce report from Ryerson University, Final Report of the Taskforce on Anti-Racism at Ryerson (January 2010) found that students had concerns “about their vulnerability to discrimination and the poisoned work environment in some of these placements. Students have questioned the lack of cultural competence in their placements, favouritism and breakdowns in relationships that are so vital to student success”. The report goes on to state that, “the commitment to build an inclusive university which values diversity and practices inclusion needs to extend to these experiences and the relationships that define them” (pg. 37).

Relational Supports as Strengths in Education

An identified best practice was opportunity for space and time to honour relationships between students, Elders, community, field education supervisors and field education coordinators. Mentorship was named as a further relational support between students. Student Voice:

“We need the support, as students we need to be there for each other. I think that would have helped.”

Field Education Coordinator Voice:

“I wanted them [field instructors] to feel honoured, more than just the food or activities but the feeling.” “You have to establish those contacts.”

“A lot of one on one time.”

“A lot comes from sitting in the office . . . casual . . . over tea . . . stuff comes up.”

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"Supporting them with resumes, cover letters, and the handbook."

"Doing this job in isolation is not helpful . . . it's good to bounce things off of someone who does a similar role to you."

Student Voice:

"She [faculty liaison] was always willing to give her time, even though I knew she was busy" she always assured me she was never too busy, that was comforting, because I felt bad... so that gave me a comfort level that that was okay."

Ensure the Use of Student Wellness Plans and Self-care in Practicum Field Placements

It was recommended that wellness plans be developed as an active document and as a spiritual practice within the program. Programs such as NVIT have this as a built in component to the program and this was consistent with recommendations from participants who suggested that the wellness plan incorporate the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel.

Student Voices:

"I probably didn't cope with it that well. I cope with things well now. We didn't have your wellness plan back then."

"The advice I would give is to have a wellness plan, to be in their mind, body, spirit, to keep their balance . . ."

"You have to write each aspect of your life that will enhance your well being."

"It will help you not just in school but in life."

Field Instructor Voices:

"We need to be asking every practicum student about their personal wellness plans."

"The students tell me about trying to take good care of themselves during their practicum . . . I encourage them in this."

"Take care of themselves in a culturally relevant way ... at school and in the practicum."

The Medicine Wheel teachings are vast and limitless and are a symbolic tool and a part of the Aboriginal People's existence and the concept is based on a humanistic and Holistic approach and utilizes and provides recognition of the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental aspects of the individual (Kurtz, 2009). At NVIT students develop a Wellness Wheel as a component of their program of study. "...a healthy academic program would seek this balance holistically in

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its epistemology and its teachings, and encourage personal balance for faculty and students” (Fire, 2006, p.4).

Implications for Field Education

Developing relationships and community knowing remain important considerations for field education coordinators in all field settings, but are especially important in Aboriginal field settings. Respectful relationships require time and presence in the community, which enacts Aboriginal values of interconnected relationships.

Field Education Coordinator Voices:

“It helps to network and be out there.”

“I realize the importance of networking.”

“You have to establish those contacts.”

“Building those relationships . . . helping field instructors understand field education . . . and do the stuff that gives back to them . . . professional development opportunities.”

Yet field education coordinators face Eurocentric structural barriers such as increased practicum caseloads that deter relational development.

“There are so many students to place every year.”

“Sometimes I feel like I am begging for a placement.”

“Once students start their practicum, I am no longer involved . . . there is a new faculty person involved.”

“Some of the faculty liaisons are sessionals . . . they have not been involved.... they are bit like an outsider coming in to a conversation that has been ongoing. . . particularly for students in Aboriginal placements.”

“The workload is demanding.”

“There seems to be a need [as a field education coordinator] to be flexible with deadlines . . . though the onus is for us to be strict with deadlines.”

“Doing research on field education is important.”

Conclusion

“The point where social work theory meets practice is a tenuous link and spanning the bridge between abstract theorizing and concrete action requires tangible and practical

remedies. The rift between theory and practice perpetuates the status quo of a continuing culture of silence and a culture of complacency and denial within the social work professional with respect to issues of racism and oppression” (Sinclair & Albert, 2008, 2).

Field education is one of the sites where classroom theories get translated into practice. For this reason it is imperative to explore practical strategies to decolonize field education policies and practices. All partners in field education including students, faculty, field education coordinators and field instructors need to interrogate the oppressive policies and practices that continue to perpetuate Eurocentric practices. In recognition of the need for transforming field programs adequate human, financial and technological supports are required in order to address the need for relationships, time, and implementation of the identified emergent innovative practices discussed in this article.

Cultural safety and intersectionality provide frameworks for transforming field education. The narratives of students, field instructors, and others are required to shift the power from academic “experts” and calls for reflection on how those “positions of power may reify systems of racism, homophobia, sexism and classism” (Hankivsky and Christofferson, 2008). Cultural safety allows the space for students to identify whether they feel safe within social work and human service programs and within field education specifically. “Intersectional awareness demands change and new practices for social justice within social work education (Razack, 2001). The results of this exploratory study call for programs that are responsive to the unique needs and experiences of Aboriginal students toward the goal of decolonizing field education.

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