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Strengthening Indigenous Social Work in the Academy

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of the development of an Indigenous¹ Social Work program in Sudbury, Ontario and how it was conceived, developed and implemented. It describes the transformational approaches that Aboriginal² faculty, communities and academic allies engaged in to create a rightful space for Indigenous social work in mainstream academia. In its 25th year, this program has provided many transformational opportunities for students, faculty and Aboriginal communities. Incorporating resistance and proactive momentum, the program has become pivotal in expanding the visibility and legitimacy for Indigenous social work in practice, theory, research and pedagogies. This program is an example of how community-faculty collaborations can sustain a robust Indigenous social work program.

INTRODUCTION

Developing new paradigms in a University system presents a number of challenges and those who introduce Indigenous ways of being and ways of doing into the academy must be prepared to be creative, to defend critically, to forecast the road ahead and to build relationships with allies across the ever changing landscape of a university. Those willing to situate Indigenous knowledges in an academy that has long standing and entrenched policies and attitudes that are rooted in Western ideology must be prepared to be active leaders in bringing about transformative change.

1 We have chosen to use the definition of Indigenous as Indigenous peoples are the descendants of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived in their lands. The new arrivals became dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means (Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2009). In this usage, Indigenous refers to Aboriginal, First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples of Canada.

2 The terms Aboriginal, Native and Anishnaabe are also used interchangeably throughout this paper.



It is in this context that we discuss the development of the newly named School of Indigenous Relations, which houses two Indigenous programs: the Bachelor of Indigenous Social Work and the Master of Indigenous Relations. The development of these programs is situated within the context of transforming Indigenous education in a mainstream, bilingual university in Ontario, Canada. This includes a discussion on establishing and sustaining relationships internally with faculty and staff as well as externally with Indigenous communities. We also discuss the importance of supporting Indigenous faculty who contribute to Indigenous social work theory and practice. We base our discussions and analysis on observations, experiences, evaluations, and insights gained through being members of the Indigenous academic faculty as well institutional leaders at Laurentian University.

INDIGENOUS TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Indigenous peoples of Canada have always been concerned about the education of their peoples. In the last 40 years there has been a rise in activism led by Indigenous educators, political leaders, and parents who have all asserted that the negative educational outcomes for their children needs to change. More recently the public acknowledgment of the abuses sustained on Aboriginal children during the residential school era has validated the enormous amount of racism and abuse that formed a part of the educational system (Government of Canada, 2008). In a recent book on the experiences of Aboriginal students in postsecondary institutions Cote-Meek (2014) confirmed the pervasiveness of racism that both Aboriginal students and professors faced in mainstream classrooms. Although Cote-Meek (2014) uncovered that some Aboriginal students were creative in finding positive and supportive outlets to endure the racism and discrimination that they faced in mainstream classes, this limits the range and trust of educational opportunities and almost always places the onus on Aboriginal students and professors to find hope and safety in constrained spaces. Battiste (2013) advocates that, “we must reject the idea that youth are confined to situations of fate, such as being born into a particular class, gender, or race” (p. 175). We concur. This is not “good enough.” Everyone has a right to have a good education. It is promising that Indigenous educators concerned about racism and discrimination in mainstream education have actively been involved in developing Indigenous supportive outlets and challenging institutes on racist policies and practices (Baskin, 2005; Battiste, 2013; Cote-Meek, 2014; Moeke-Pickering, 2010).

Battiste (2013) posits that, “education is the belief in possibilities” (p. 175). Generations of Indigenous leaders have accepted increased responsibility for transforming the educational landscape both in tertiary and academic institutes.

Indigenous educators view education as being a potential site for transformation and capacity building for their communities (Alfred, 2005; Alfred, 2008; Baskin, 2005; Baskin, 2006; Battiste, 2000; Battiste, 2002; Battiste, 2013; Cote-Meek, 2014; Couture, 2000; Moeke-Pickering et al. 2006; Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009). Indigenous education is a means of Indigenous people taking control of Aboriginal education and advancing self-determination (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). Thus, there has been a growing momentum for expanding the boundaries of mainstream academia to embrace Indigenous teachings, knowledge, skills, and practice either in the curriculum, policies, support services, research, theories and faculty and administrative positions.

Much of the momentum has focused on positioning an Indigenous place in academia. Often times, Indigenous leaders have been caught up in responding to injustices, racism, academic backlash and fighting the good fight. It is important to record these struggles, as they are vital clues for understanding the strategies that were employed by Indigenous leaders. A critical element of this struggle is about the creative and unique ideas and programs that have been fostered to transform Indigenous education in Canada. The mobilization of Indigenous communities to inform curriculum and ideas has been critical to a transformational resurgence. Indigenous educators have found space for their Elders and tribal leaders to authenticate content and protocols, thus combining with community efforts to confront mainstream academic processes as well as forging a pathway between culture and educational Indigenous achievements. Evolving community/education relationships strengthens the validity and legitimacy of content and culture and ensures the aspirations for Indigenous education are kept at the forefront.

A proactive positioning that incorporates Indigenous philosophy and critical analysis is a strategic investment for transformational change (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2003). Smith (2003) says that both resistance and proactive momentum are important in the transformational construction for education. Understood in this way, Indigenous educators are focusing on resisting further colonial imposition as well as developing transformative education built on capacity, strength and success. Battiste (2013) agrees that, “many remain committed to an education that is meaningful, relevant, critical, practical, and progressive” (p. 177). An Indigenous transformational education needs “to develop direction, purpose and impetus in struggle and to recognize the incremental gains along the way to the realization of the ‘vision’” (Smith, 2003, p. 2). A decolonizing-Indigenous centered framework offers Indigenous educators and their communities some hope in how to position Indigenous voices and knowledges in a process for transformational change in mainstream institutes (Battiste, 2013; Cote-Meek, 2013; Moeke-Pickering, 2010).

One example of an Indigenous educational transformation is the Indigenous Social Work program based at Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario. This program was developed over 25 years ago in collaboration with the community, who authenticated the content, who validated its need and who negotiated with the academic institute to have the program installed there (Alcoze & Mawhiney, 1988).

TRANSFORMING THE ACADEMY TO INCLUDE INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK

The Indigenous Social Work program formerly the Native Human Services program at Laurentian University was established in 1985 after a lengthy consultation with the regional Aboriginal community. During the development stage key developers worked closely with the community to establish a strong relationship built on trust and respect. It was only through this that a true collaboration could exist. This process has been documented (Alcoze & Mawhiney, 1988) and evaluated in terms of the role of Indigenous-based programs in the academy (Moeke-Pickering, 2010).

Mutual respect guided the development of the curriculum in the early years and also ensured that the curriculum that was discussed, identified, and designed by the regional working committee was held in high regard by those who would need to bring it through the system in the university. This collaboration was essential for providing the impetus for moving the program forward in the system but also ensured that faculty and others could act on the direction of the community. Today strong community ties are still evident and maintained in the relationship that the School now has with the Laurentian University Native Education Council (LUNEC) who are First Nations and Aboriginal members of regional organizations as well as internal university representatives. Their role is to provide advice and guidance on matters that relate to Indigenous education at the university.

In the first 15 years the program largely focused on ensuring the program was fully developed for delivery both on campus and through distance education. In terms of the curriculum Indigenous and social work values and theories are integrated into the courses and field placements. The program draws its teachings and practice from Anishnaabe traditions and culture. The Seven Grandfather Teachings and the Medicine Wheel Teachings are an integral cultural and theoretical underpinning for the program. The program promotes Indigenous culture and worldviews as an important body of knowledge and centers health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities as being important sources to guide Indigenous social work practice. Another key goal was to establish a place for itself in the School of Social Work as a legitimate program in its own right. It is important to point out that during this time faculty members worked at developing course content in a context where Indigenous social work literature was relatively scant. This required the faculty to be creative

about bringing Indigenous worldviews, ways of knowing and ways of being that were relevant to social work into the academy. This was done in several ways including but not limited to creating new curriculum, using existing social work texts and adapting them to include Indigenous perspectives, and inviting guest lectures and Elders from the community into the classroom.

In addition faculty in the program were also concerned about ensuring a respectful place for Indigenous social work in the broader academy. It is important to context the broader environment in order to emphasize that this is no easy task. Cote-Meek (2014) points out the challenges associated with the racialized constructions that exist about Indigenous faculty and Indigenous-based programs in the academy. So while at the time the program was established there were supportive faculty in the university there must be an acknowledgement that bringing about change in the academic context was often times difficult to negotiate. For example, in 1997 the School of Native Human Services released the first edition of the *Native Social Work Journal*. The purpose of this journal was to assist with establishing Indigenous social work in the academy and provided a venue for legitimizing Indigenous social work research, practice and theories. To date the Journal has seen 9 volumes published which represent a range of topics and areas that respond to key issues related to Indigenous social work. Some topics included AIDS, mental health, Aboriginal children and youth, and trauma.

In addition, with anywhere from 3-5 Indigenous faculty the School also worked to ensure an Indigenous voice was represented on many university and external committees including the School of Social Work's academic council, the Faculty academic council, the university Senate, LUNEC, and WUNSKA, the first national Aboriginal social work educators group in Canada. In recognition of their academic writing and research two of the faculty became full Professors. As well, the program appointed the first Aboriginal Director of an Indigenous Social Work program at Laurentian University in 2008.

As the program established itself into the academy it began to consider growth of the program and in 2006 established a partnership with Seven Generations Educational Institute, based in Kenora to deliver the undergraduate degree. This partnership ensured that those students who were unable to attend on-campus programming could achieve a degree in Indigenous Social Work and remain in their home communities. As well, this type of partnership signaled to the University that Aboriginal Educational Institutes were an appropriate venue to deliver academic programs. This partnership has continued and a second cohort was admitted in 2012 further confirming that universities and Aboriginal-based Educational Institutes was a valuable collaboration to deliver programs that are based in Indigenous communities.

A second partnership was also established with Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute (based on Manitoulin Island) in 2010 under similar premises to ensure access for Indigenous students to university education.

Student evaluations and feedback from the community also confirmed that the curriculum including Indigenous models, theories and pedagogies were critical elements necessary to the success of an Indigenous social work program (Moeke-Pickering, 2008; 2010; 2012). They also encouraged the School to look at the development of an Indigenous master's pathway. In 2008 the Director of Academic Native Affairs (now the Associate Vice-President, Indigenous Programs) responded to this request by seeking support from LUNEC to bring together key Indigenous faculty to begin the development of an Indigenous graduate program. This led to the development of the Master of Indigenous Relations.

Around the same time that the program was expanding its delivery base the faculty and staff began advocating becoming a stand-alone school. They consulted with the Aboriginal community through LUNEC where the council unanimously supported the move to establish a School of Native Human Services, which would house the Bachelor of Indigenous Social Work. In 2008 the Laurentian University Senate approved the establishment of the new School of Native Human Services (Native Human Services Accreditation Committee, 2008). This subsequently led to the School applying for stand-alone accreditation with the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE), which the school received in 2009. This program is one of only two Aboriginal-based social work programs accredited by CASWE in Canada.

In 2014, keeping with the trend nationally and internationally, the School changed its name to the School of Indigenous Relations and the name of the HBSW Native Human Services program was changed to the Bachelor of Indigenous Social Work. This also created a space to house the newly approved Master of Indigenous Relations, which saw its first cohort in September 2015.

The School celebrated its 25th anniversary in March 2014. A new Journal to commemorate its 25th year was created. This Journal weaved together stories and experiences from present/past students, staff and faculty and early developers about the program (Partridge, Cote-Meek, Manitowabi, & Mawhiney, 2014). It was a befitting way to authenticate stories from the voices of the people who benefited from and or whom cared for this unique but important program. In her reflections of the past 25 years of the program, Dr. Mary Ann Naokwegijig-Corbiere (2014), who was one of the early developers of this program contemplates:

The Indigenous social work program can take pride in having led the way in ensuring there are appropriately-trained professionals to facilitate healing of Aboriginal individuals, families and communities well before the Commission brought awareness to the nation

and beyond of the scale of the trauma engendered by colonization and subjugation. The needs documented by the Native Social Work Project that lay the groundwork for this program (and in which I was privileged to participate as a team member) provided but a glimpse of the tasks – and possibilities – of this program. (p. 4)

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING THE PROGRAM WITHIN THE ACADEMY

In his paper Professor Graham Smith (2003) outlined five implicit components that must inform any transformative theory if they are to be relevant to Indigenous peoples and their communities. The summarized key components include:

- a) capacity to make “space” for itself to be sustained in a context of unequal power relations...
- b) a capacity to understand the validity and legitimacy of the theory in the face of challenge...
- c) capacity to be “owned” and to “make sense” to the Indigenous communities themselves...
- d) capacity that has the potential to positively make a difference ...
- e) a capacity to be continuously reviewed and revised by those for who the theory is intended to serve... (paragraph 8)

These components are evident in the evolution of the School of Native Human Services program through to its current context as an Indigenous Social Work program. In reflecting back on the program’s development over the last 25 years, it is clear that the program created and sustained a space for itself in a mainstream institution. In creating a space for itself, developers, faculty and staff not only challenged existing and normative ways of doing, they also maintained a strong vision and contributed to the development of a body of Indigenous-based social work knowledge. Despite criticism from what Smith (2003) terms “colonizing imperatives” (paragraph 8) and from Battiste’s (2002) message of “false colonial and racist assumptions” (p. 27) the faculty made sure that the curriculum remained robust in Indigenous worldviews and also the Native Social Work Journal contributed to the knowledge distribution of Indigenous social work across Canada and Internationally.

Over the 25 years in existence, the program has also remained closely connected to its regional Indigenous communities to ensure a sense of ownership and also to ensure that the program remains responsive to the needs of their communities. A good example of this responsiveness is the faculty’s response to supporting the development of a master’s level program. There is no doubt that the program has made a positive difference in the community. Student and Program evaluations (Moeke-Pickering, 2008; 2010; 2012) consistently support the notion that the graduates are making a positive difference in their respective families, communities and chosen fields of social work practice. Part of making a difference is also evident

in how the Indigenous faculty contributed to the growing field of Indigenous social work through academic writing, presentations and research. This increases the visibility and legitimacy of robust Indigenous social work in Canada.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The lessons learned from the development of this Indigenous social work program provide us with some clues about how to ensure the sustainability of Indigenous-based programming in mainstream institutions. These include the following insights:

- community involvement in the program must be sustained throughout the development of the program;
- faculty must be engaged in actively challenging and resisting mainstream imperatives through creating Indigenous pedagogies, research, practice and theories;
- faculty must include “gentle pedagogies” and “learning circles” as Indigenous students often re-live what happened to their families via colonization. As such they undergo a process of uncovering, recovering and discovering their unique and important place in society;
- faculty must be prepared to take on leadership roles in the university to create visibility of Indigenous people and their worldviews;
- faculty and staff must keep connected to alumni in order to ensure the program remains up-to-date with current practice and issues; and
- relevant venues for creating and publishing Indigenous social work knowledge need to be developed and sustained.

We close with a befitting quote by Aboriginal author and educationist Dr. Marie Battiste (2013).

To understand education, one must love it or care deeply about learning, and accept it as a legitimate process for growth and change. To accept education as it is, however, is to betray it. To accept education without betraying it, you must love it for those values that show what it might become. You have to have enough love of learning to have the courage to remake it, imagine it, and teaching it. (p. 190)

Kia Ora & Chii-miigwech Taima & Sheila.

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