
Delivering Counsellor Training to First Nations: Emerging Issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a review of the outcomes of counsellor training programs on two First Nations communities in southern Alberta. Two general themes emerged as prevalent, namely, the continuing influence of the past, and the struggle for cultural survival. This study has indicated that significant modifications are required to the curriculum delivered. However, the data challenge the assumption of a deficit in the relevance and quality of counsellor training provided to First Nations students, suggesting cause for optimism and ongoing collaboration in counsellor education and training between post-secondary institutions and First Nations communities.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie les conclusions préliminaires d'une étude sur les résultats des programmes de formation de conseillers dans deux communautés autochtones du sud de l'Alberta. Deux thèmes généraux principaux se dégagent : l'influence continue du passé et le combat pour la survie culturelle. Cette étude indique que des modifications substantielles devront être apportées au curriculum proposé. Néanmoins, les données remettent en question la présomption d'une qualité et d'une pertinence insuffisantes de la formation de conseiller offerte aux étudiants autochtones. Ceci est de bon augure pour une collaboration continue entre les institutions du postsecondaire et les communautés autochtones, en ce qui concerne l'éducation et la formation des conseillers.

The primary purpose of the study was to document concerns and issues raised by participants involved in the delivery of post-secondary counsellor training programs to two First Nations communities in southern Alberta, namely, the Stoney reserve at Morley, and the Blood reserve at Standoff. This inquiry was generally guided by such questions as: a) what were the goals and objectives of First Nations education planners, b) to what extent was a curriculum designed for dominant society students appropriate and helpful for First Nations counsellor trainees, c) what concerns did instructors have regarding their courses and their students, and, d) what were students' perceptions of their learning experience. Data indicated two emergent themes, namely, the continuing influence of the past, and the struggle for cultural survival, which can provide direction for First Nations counsellor training. These themes can inform training through modification of the curriculum, instructor preparation, and attention to barriers to learning for First Nations people.

Mount Royal College has been involved in First Nations counsellor training since 1970 when an introductory course in human relationships was offered to adult students at Old Sun College on the Blackfoot reserve at Glietzen, Alberta. Introductory courses in human relationships were also offered to students at Eagle Point Adult Education Centre on the Stoney reserve at Morley, Alberta. Between 1989-1991, an Adult Vocational Training program prepared employees of the Stoney Education department to work as "paraprofessional" student counsellors in the school system. A two-year social work diploma program was offered on the Peigan, Blood and Morley reserves between 1990-1997.

These various training programs in helping skills were not meant to lead to professional designations common in the mainstream culture. Rather, they were intended to provide First Nations helpers with relevant helping skills to serve their people. Initiative for the training programs rested with the First Nations community leaders who acknowledged the need for trained counsellors to function as generalist social service providers.

The original hope for counsellor training was to develop a specialized curriculum for the First Nations helper. As work began, however, it became clear that although financial resources were available to support program delivery, only very limited resources were available for development of a culturally sensitive curriculum. Consequently, the framework for the training programs was based on the existing social services diploma curriculum from Mount Royal College. Over time, modifications to the curriculum, largely initiated by individual instructors, resulted in movement towards a more culturally sensitive program. As a final note, the counsellor training programs reviewed in this article have each been directed towards First Nations students and were offered in First Nations communities. On the other hand, the curriculum and instructors have been, predominantly from a mainstream educational institution and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historians judged early aboriginal education programs a failure primarily because they were formed with the intention of assimilation (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1986; Brookes, 1991; Piwowar, 1990; Stevenson, 1991; Ward, 1992). Beginning around 1860 and continuing into the 1960s residential schools operated by various Christian churches shaped the course of aboriginal education with devastating consequences for the students who attended. Chrisjohn and Young (1994) suggest that the negative aspects of the residential school experience for First Nations students was neither unintentional, nor a thing of the past but rather was an attempt at the genocide of aboriginal peoples.

The decade between 1960-70 was marked by an attempt to use education in the form of "integrated schools" to achieve the goal of assimilation. The findings of the Hawthorne report of 1966-67 show this experiment to be a failure as "only 12 percent of Indian students were in their proper age-grade, with the average Indian child being 2.5 years behind the average non-Indian student. It also con-

firmed a 94% dropout rate for Indian students" (Brookes, 1991, p.171). In light of the high dropout rate at elementary and secondary school levels, one can predict that Native students are generally under-represented in the post-secondary educational system (Alberta Advanced Education, 1991).

In this historical context of oppression, assimilation, and low achievement rates, the First Nations educator today is faced with the challenges of providing relevant and effective education in an environment bereft of effective role models. An emerging body of literature on First Nations education suggests that educators need to understand and acknowledge the important role of Native culture and spirituality (Feehan & Hannis, 1993; Friesen, 1995; McCormick, 1995; Ross, 1992). It is important that non-aboriginal educators be open to the establishment of a partnership which rests in their ability and willingness to acknowledge and understand how they may have promoted and encouraged, either overtly or covertly, the colonization of First Nations peoples and the oppression of their culture (Colorado, 1993; Kersell, 1989). Finally, curriculum must reflect a holistic worldview controlled by First Nations education planners (Ross, 1992).

Current literature concerning health care and the related areas of community development and counselling programs for First Nations, indicates parallel forces to those which have historically influenced education. Disputes over which level of government, federal or provincial, should be responsible for programs have led to a fragmentation of services (Long & Fox, 1996). Researchers of First Nations mental health and counselling programs (Long & Fox, 1996; McCormick, 1997; Regnier, 1995) stress that effective intervention is grounded in the recognition of the interrelatedness of social, educational, and health issues, and an understanding that health has traditionally been perceived by First Nations in the context of a well-balanced and productive community of physically, socially, and spiritually healthy people. This raises important implications for counselling practice and counsellor training. Throughout the literature, there has been an expressed need for health professionals to understand the cultural and social issues affecting First Nations (McCormick, 1997).

In relation to promoting healthy communities, Ermine, (1995), Long and Fox (1996), McCormick, (1997), and Regnier (1995), speak to the negative impact of mainstream policies of colonization and assimilation. According to these authors, solutions can come from counsellor education programs designed specifically to incorporate First Nations worldview. The incorporation of First Nations spirituality into the curriculum can be a powerful influence in experiencing education as healing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Problem Statement

This research project examined the concerns and issues that participants raised regarding the delivery of post-secondary counsellor training programs.

More specifically, the research problem was to explore and examine the perceptions of First Nations participants toward the counsellor training programs offered by a mainstream educational institution on site in their communities. In this instance, First Nations participants included educational program planners and leaders, program coordinators, instructors, and students.

The general methodological framework for this project was historical case study (Merriam, 1988; Wiersma, 1995), which is defined as “a systematic process of describing, analyzing, and interpreting the past based on information from selected sources as they relate to the topic under study” (Wiersma, p. 231). Sharan Merriam (1988) points out that an historical case study may go beyond the chronology of an event to attempt to understand “the event’s impact on the institution or participants” (p. 24). Within this framework, program-related information available to Mount Royal College between 1991 and 1997 was examined regarding counsellor training initiatives offered in two different First Nations communities. While the overall framework was historical case study, data collection followed multiple methodologies.

Data Collection

Sources of data for this project included documents and interviews. The document sources were secondary rather than primary in nature, and purposive sampling was used to determine the subjects to be interviewed. The data gathered from documents were obtained from six secondary sources: a) education policy documents, b) instructor correspondence, c) student evaluations of instructors, d) student surveys, e) student focus group discussions, and, f) key informant interviews. Key informants included members of the Board of Governors, educational administration, staff and instructors. In selecting these sources, the researchers generally followed what Sharan Merriam (1988) and David Krathwohl (1993) refer to as *purposive* or *purposeful* sampling. “Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (Merriam, p. 48). Most of the individuals interviewed were aboriginal with the exception of one of three program coordinators and two of four instructors.

Data Analysis

The documents chosen for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Merriam, 1988) included education policy documents provided by program participants, the Alberta Department of Advanced Education, and the Federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. As Merriam (1988) points out, “one of the greatest advantages of using documentary material is its stability” (p. 108), because it is essentially ‘nonreactive’ with the researcher. A file folder system of categorizing document content was used similar to the method used for categorizing interview content. All data were read and re-read, compared and contrasted, and an effort was made to determine areas of congruence, complementarity, and consistency, as well as possible gaps, incongruence, and

inconsistencies. Focus group discussions were initially tape recorded and transcribed. In some instances, the researchers had access to the original transcriptions, in other instances to the results of these discussions as reported in program evaluation documents. The data were categorized using guidelines suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989) concerning the construction and reconstruction of realities. The photocopied pages were cut up and coded sections placed into appropriately categorized and labelled file folders.

RESULTS

As indicated earlier, the data sources reviewed in this project are historical and secondary in nature. As such, documents and surveys were not constructed specifically for this project. The researchers attempted to locate and examine relevant information from past events which could shed light on the delivery of counsellor training programs to First Nations communities. Interviews and focus group discussions were originally conducted as part of program evaluation or review activities. While this use of data is very helpful in preserving the immediacy of information, it is limited in not allowing for the customization of questions.

In addition to specific feedback concerning courses and instructors, the following data reflect two major recurring themes: a) the continuing influence of the past, b) the struggle for cultural survival. Continuing influence of the past means the emotional residue from prior educational experiences perceived to be oppressive, while the struggle for cultural survival relates to challenging mainstream forces that strive to suppress First Nations culture.

Key Informants

Board of Governors and Administrators. Interviews with key informants indicated that the goals and purposes of post-secondary education related more to issues of becoming, being, existing, surviving, and continuing rather than thriving, flourishing, enhancing, or expanding. Because the primary goal of one of the institutions was locally controlled education, merely existing as a post-secondary institution has been an achievement “. . . we have to overcome that resistance, even among our own people in our own community towards promoting our own institutions, our own systems, and our own business.” In some ways the goal of becoming a tribally controlled college is viewed as a potential framework for ensuring survival. The concept of tribal colleges raises a very complex issue with regard to areas such as funding, culture, and accreditation, and while it might offer a solution to some aspects of student learning, it should be noted that tribal control of education may offer too simplistic a solution in response to very complicated issues.

Another factor related to survival is lack of protection of post-secondary education for First Nations. Hunting and fishing activities deemed essential to the preservation of aboriginal culture are protected rights under the Constitution of Canada. Currently the Indian Act protects education for First Nations children.

Similar protections, however, do not exist for post-secondary (adult) education. As a consequence, the Federal government has been reluctant to commit funds to post-secondary education other than as project grants. This economic uncertainty has had a negative impact on long-range educational program planning and development. Student enrollments are limited by funding caps which are based on a 'per capita' allocation formula, whereby the more that people use the funding, the less there is to go around.

Coordinators and Instructors. Interviews specifically with program coordinators and instructors focused largely on problems and concerns about the day-to-day management and delivery of programs and courses. Coordinators are directly responsible for informing prospective students about educational programs and advising them in respect to course selection and transfer opportunities to other educational institutions. Because of this, they appeared to feel responsible for helping students cope with the often contradictory tensions occasioned by assimilation and autonomy. One program coordinator stated, "We're dealing with the effects of cultural genocide . . . that's why I think it's extremely important that we do have a holistic approach, and Native education be approached differently."

While the concept of 'cultural genocide' might appear, in mainstream society at least, to be somewhat extreme, it is a term that has been used by many First Nations counselling students and the administrators of their educational programs. Whether the term is valid or not, it serves well to illustrate how strongly and passionately this issue is felt among First Nations people.

To varying degrees, instructors and coordinators accepted responsibility for modifying mainstream material to accommodate culturally relevant learning and, based on interview data, it appeared that they have attempted to respond to student issues with sensitivity and support. In fact, a concern raised by one of the coordinators was that much of her time was taken up with providing personal support to students in difficulty.

These interviews also revealed a number of advantages to providing counsellor training programs on the reserve. Students valued the supportive relationships with their fellow students and instructors and utilized this network to integrate non-native theoretical information with the experiences of First Nations people. In essence, they were creating a culturally sensitive curriculum through dialogue (often in their own language) with community members who were fellow students.

To enhance the quality of instruction, recommendations from this group included:

1. Develop an orientation program for new staff and instructors.
2. Organize workshops for current and former instructors with the goal of sharing information on successful teaching strategies and issues of common concern.
3. Develop a handbook for instructors outlining expectations of the college, a description of the educational programs, classroom management sugges-

- tions, and guidelines for structuring assignments and examinations and grading and attendance policies.
4. Make decisions about course offerings, which allow ample opportunity for instructor preparation and course development.
 5. Develop policies related to lateness and absenteeism and grading criteria.

Student Focus Group Discussions

Student focus group discussion data were provided by six groups of students, representing two different First Nations communities. Initially, students were asked to comment on the manner to which their program was meeting their expectations. Across all groups, students generally reported that the program had met their expectations and indicated that the education was helpful in preparing them for future education program entrance requirements as well as job expectations. In addition, students suggested that their particular programs were helpful in re-engaging them in educational processes and in helping them to address personal issues. They also suggested that increased support from instructors and school counsellors could enhance their learning.

The second question asked students to discuss what they felt they might have gained from their program. Students reported gains in the areas of: a) improved learning skills, b) greater understanding of socio-economic and political issues, c) improved communication skills, d) ability to function with greater independence, and e) improved problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.

The third area of inquiry related to positive aspects of their programs. Students responded by citing instructor and tutor support, the opportunity to establish new friendships and gain peer support, small class sizes and the availability of individualized help. "If there are problems and conflicts and what not, you have somebody you can talk to . . . if you had to go to university you will probably never get to say 'boo' to your instructor, you are just a number." Students also mentioned the convenience of the location as an asset, as well as activity-based learning such as field trips and role playing exercises. Several students spoke very positively about their Blackfoot Studies courses.

Students reported few negative aspects about their programs. In response to this question, students identified the following: the need for up-to-date program information, more guidance, less than adequate facilities, not enough time to complete assignments, and poor attendance. The latter point was perceived as negative in as much as it interfered with their ability to engage in activity-based learning.

Suggestions for improving their programs basically fell into the following five categories: a) a new and/or improved building and facilities, b) higher expectations of students, c) increased financial support, d) learning skills support, and e) more effective program planning and management. Additional general comments reinforced the need for specific facilities and more educational program variety, as well as positive comments about the opportunity to learn about First Nations culture with other First Nations students.

Correspondence from Former Instructors

Instructors who previously taught in the program provided unsolicited feedback about their teaching experiences with First Nations students in counsellor training programs. Concerns raised by these instructors related to four general areas: a) student screening and preparation, b) classroom management, c) student maturity and personal issues, and d) student learning issues.

With respect to student screening/preparation, instructors suggested that in the future students should be selected for the program on the basis of a mature approach to learning, effective writing skills, conflict resolution and coping skills, effective work and study skills, and demonstrated responsibility.

In terms of classroom management, instructors expressed concern that class sizes were too large (over 30), and therefore less time was available for providing help to individual students. Examples of student maturity and personal issues cited by instructors were the inability to deal with minor conflicts, the inability to keep commitments (lateness for classes and assignments), the need to balance personal and professional lives, the need to learn conflict resolution skills and to deal with personal issues, and the lack of access to personal support systems.

Learning issues of concern to instructors included difficulty integrating theory with practice, the need for improved written and verbal skills, better preparation for the realities of the fieldwork practicum, and the need to learn how to separate personal issues from professional practice.

Evaluations of Former Instructors

The data gathered from student evaluations of eight instructors, four native and four non-native, who taught courses in both communities, were rich in detail. Feedback was provided in the following categories: quality of instruction, course content, learning, grading, and administrative support. Students indicated that they valued instructors who were enthusiastic and motivated, clear about their expectations, well organized, willing to listen and explain, effective in pacing their teaching, willing to provide constructive feedback and available for consultation outside the class time. Personal instructor qualities that enhanced their learning were a sensitivity to student personal issues, a sense of humor, respect, and an understanding of First Nations issues.

Positive feedback was received in terms of the nature and quality of the course content and curriculum. Of particular note was that students found merit in courses that enhanced their professional skills and knowledge, while at the same time contributing to their personal self-understanding.

Feedback about learning revealed that students were predominantly concerned about the processes rather than the products of learning. They acknowledged the advantages of formalized discussion and group projects but also emphasized the importance of "fun" in the classroom. They preferred a diversity of teaching methods and materials and valued opportunities to give and receive feedback in the classroom from instructors and other students. Concerns about tests and

exams were related to the weighting of assignments, the perceived “fairness” of exams, and the clarity of exam criteria and expectations.

The subject of administrative support raised issues about the following: class scheduling, time constraints, attendance policies, access to learning materials and resources, and the difficulties which resulted from changing instructors after a course had begun.

Student Survey

A voluntary student satisfaction survey consisting of open-ended questions was administered to students who had completed several courses to get a sense of general satisfaction toward the program. In general, the responses to these surveys indicated a positive reaction to the learning experience. Nearly half of the students who participated in these surveys cited the convenience of the location as a valuable aspect of the program. Approximately one quarter of the responses included a positive reaction to specific courses, such as English and Native American Studies, as well as a positive response to the perceived quality of instruction and instructor support. Uncertainties about program expectations and course scheduling and management as frustrating or difficult aspects were cited by approximately one quarter of the students. More than 80% of the students who completed the surveys indicated that the program had met or exceeded their expectations. In addition, 65% of the students indicated that they intended to continue their education at the completion of their training program and 11% stated that they intended to pursue further education after an unspecified period of employment.

DISCUSSION

The continuing influence of the past

Data from the study demonstrate that past educational practices in residential schools continue to influence First Nations student experiences in general, and in particular, their experience with counsellor training programs. Both the Government of Canada and First Nations (DIAND, 1997) have mutually acknowledged and accepted the need for healing from residential school experiences, but what is still lacking at this point is a clear definition of what healing might entail and how it can effectively be addressed. The challenge for First Nations educational planners will be to define this area clearly and work collaboratively in developing solutions.

Results from the study suggest concrete strategies for addressing healing issues in the classroom. One instructor commented as follows “it is extremely essential that the first part of every course deal with their past history with residential schools.” This emphasis with students of counselling appears to be consistent with the suggestion by Joseph Couture (1994) that “a practitioner’s proactive respect for others requires increased self-awareness of his/her own socialization, attitudes, biases, and the limitations of his/her knowledge and skills” (p. 3). Not only is it important to begin to develop self-awareness in order to become more

effective when dealing with others, but it may be at least equally important to help First Nations students understand that resolving issues around residential schooling does not imply any "illness" on their part.

Another interviewee referred to this situation as a task of "educational repair," and suggested that it is critically important that students come to a valuing of education and a realization that unlike their past experiences, "education is not bad." Sources agreed that education in general and counsellor training in particular can function as a mechanism for counteracting colonization, and education was described as "critical if we're going to really get a sense of self-determination and control our own destiny." It would appear that these individuals understand that the "pathology," if there is one, resides within the system, and greater awareness of the system, whether it be counselling or education, and their role within it can lead to greater autonomy and self-efficacy.

A consequence of prior negative experiences of alienation in mainstream educational institutions is that many First Nation students enrolled in counsellor training courses experience deficits in learning skills required for academic survival in mainstream programs. Data from this study demonstrate that numerous issues, such as personal crises, learning difficulties, and time management problems, can act as a deterrent to learning. Educational administrators of training programs could better support their students by providing resources in the form of personal counselling and learning skills workshops, as well as eliminating some of the barriers and problems that are inherent in fixed semester and fixed entrance and exit program requirements. For example, First Nation students appear to be less bound by the demands of time-limited programs. In many instances students did not complete a program within the traditionally specified time frame of one or two years and a large majority of students demonstrated their desire, willingness, and ability to complete their programs of study over a longer time frame. It appears that when students complete a program of study could be less important than the fact that First Nations students demonstrate the desire and motivation to complete a program at some point in the future.

A final aspect related to past influences is the location of educational institutions. Being educated has traditionally meant that First Nations students were forced to leave their families and their communities. Such a departure was seen, and continues to be viewed as a factor contributing to the erosion of traditional culture. Respondents in the study believed that locating training programs outside their communities conflicted with the social reconstruction goals of the community and the self-actualization of First Nations students. They stressed the importance of community-based training which would enhance the possibility of preserving and promoting First Nations culture with its emphasis on spirituality, maintenance of community involvement, and continuing influence of community elders. While higher education and preparation as counsellors was deemed to be an important response to immediate needs, participants raised a concern that students who choose to continue to pursue education away from their home community might return with less sensitivity toward, and understanding of, their traditional culture.

The struggle for cultural survival

The most central tension underlying First Nations counsellor training programs is the preservation of traditional culture on the one hand and participation in mainstream education on the other. The need for autonomy and cultural expression was clearly articulated by sources in this study, but so too was the need for acceptance in the dominant culture with its emphasis on accreditation, certification, and licensing. Against this backdrop the ongoing challenge for educational planners will be to clarify what is meant by culture and how that might be reflected within the curriculum. A helpful concept for exploring and understanding culture within an educational context is the notion of "ecological culture" (Stairs, 1995). This form of acculturation includes the passage of knowledge through observation and imitation embedded in daily family and community activities. Couture (1984) and R. Ross (1992) suggest that it represents a way of learning characteristic of many of Canada's traditional aboriginal cultures. Acknowledging the learning styles of First Nations students can translate into counsellor training strategies which emphasize the use of case studies, social learning processes, and attention to the use of language and its role in the transmission of culture.

The issue of cultural survival has important implications for the recruitment and selection of instructors. According to the data on positive instructor qualities and skills, there appear to be some characteristics, which transcend cultural expectations. Feedback from student evaluations suggests that the characteristics of instructors that First Nations students deem to be important and helpful are similar to those characteristics and qualities which would be expected of any post-secondary instructors, regardless of their cultural connectedness. This implies a need to place equal weight on teaching abilities and qualities as that placed on cultural awareness. What is needed, among instructors from both cultures, is a curriculum model that can effectively incorporate First Nations culture.

SUMMARY

A potential benefit of this research project is to assist educators and counsellor trainers to develop educational programs relevant to First Nations communities. The data demonstrates that it is possible for educators to develop a greater sensitivity to First Nations community values and learning needs. In addition, heightened awareness of different learning styles and appreciation for First Nations traditional teaching methods could go a long way toward building bridges between the two cultures and achieving more effective learning opportunities. Data from this project also suggests the need for collaboration with First Nations communities in the development of training programs to avoid the pitfalls of institutionalized racism and the tendency, in dominant society programs and institutions, towards promoting assimilation.

This study demonstrates that the counsellor training programs reviewed were consistent with students' learning aspirations and could provide a bridge to other

higher education opportunities. The challenge remains to provide training programs that evolve from a First Nations cultural base and incorporate traditional concepts of healing and a holistic approach to teaching and learning.

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