

THE ROLE OF EMPOWERMENT IN SOCIAL WORK DEGREE PROGRAMS FOR INDIGENOUS NATIVE PEOPLE: A CRITIQUE OF ONE SCHOOL'S EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT / RESUME

The Maritime School of Social Work at Dalhousie University developed a special degree program in social work for Micmac students. The program design included a significant measure of Micmac participation, and thus empowerment through control. The authors review this experience, which has implications for program development in other fields.

L'Ecole maritime d'Assistance Sociale à l'Université Dalhousie a développé un programme de licence spéciale en assistance sociale pour les étudiants Micmac. Le plan du programme comprenait une participation considérable des Micmac, et par conséquent le pouvoir de contrôle. Les auteurs réexaminent cette expérience, qui a des conséquences dans le développement du programme pour d'autres spécialités.

INTRODUCTION

In Canada, as in many other nations, the past decade has born witness to the emergence of a growing political reality, that of Native groups and communities organizing, coalescing and demanding a rightful role in sharing the nation's resources and in self governance. In Canada, this trend has resulted in important constitutional amendments which have entrenched Aboriginal and treaty rights. Of notable importance to social work has been the assumption of responsibility for the provision of human services by Native communities. In conjunction with this transfer of responsibility, Native groups have been turning to social work educational centres to provide programs which will equip their members with the expertise to deliver services in their communities.

Those universities which have taken up the challenge have been provided with a unique opportunity to put into practice concepts which have a long tradition in social work. Notions of community control and participation, cultural relevance of content, culturally appropriate instruction styles, empowerment and ownership have been predominant organizing concepts in the negotiation and conduct of programs. False starts, pitfalls and obstacles have been numerous, and while it is still too soon to evaluate with accuracy the results of these educational collaborations, it is not too soon to analyze the components which have informed them.

It is against this background that this paper will review briefly the experience with Native social work programs in Canada and, using one program in particular, will examine selective notions within social development theory which have been instructive. The paper concludes with a discussion of unresolved issues for social work and Native groups as a result of such ventures.

Traditionally, Native groups have not placed much emphasis upon post secondary education. Over the past 20 years the trend has changed as Aboriginal groups strive for self-government. Education is now thought to be the link between service delivery and control. Two disciplines, education and social work, have been most involved in the tailoring of educational programs specifically for Aboriginal groups.

In 1986, 711,725 Aboriginal people lived in Canada; 14,220 were members of the Micmac tribe (Canada, 1986). By 1990 there will be well over one million Native people in Canada as birthrates and new government legislation combine to increase their numbers. An increasing Native population combined with a move toward self government will result in the need

for increased numbers of Native social workers to provide social services on reserves.

To bridge an educational gap, stemming from the fact that proportionately far fewer Native people enter universities than non-Native people, several schools of Social Work have been invited by Native groups to provide culturally relevant social work education. Explicit in this invitation is the notion that there will be shared ownership of programs. In demanding control, Castellano et al (1986) write:

Native political leaders are acutely aware of the dangers of turning over entirely to academics the training of personnel who will occupy sensitive and influential positions in the communities. Their past experience with social workers, whose interventions have ranged from ineffectual to destructive, has made them wary lest a new corps of social workers, shaped in the same, prove equally noxious. (Castellano, Stalwick and Wien, 1986:176)

The formats of programs vary across the country but all take into account local community needs and traditions. Not all programs are affiliated with universities, nor are all degree programs. It is important to note that each Native group is culturally different, and Aboriginal people are not a single homogeneous group. Assimilation has taken its toll with some tribes, while in others tradition remains strong.

It is difficult to enumerate students in social work programs across the country without qualifying the type of program. In the four schools of social work which offer degree programs, approximately 150 students are taking classes in adapted Native Bachelor of Social Work programs. In addition, there are likely 100 more students registered in mainstream Bachelor of Social Work programs. In community colleges and Native institutes there are hundreds more students completing certificate or diploma programs as human service workers. It is clear that the thrust is towards qualifying Native social work students to work in their own communities.

To ensure that appropriate social work standards are maintained and Native groups are equal partners in any program plan, the Canadian Schools of Social Work endorsed a series of resolutions at its 1987 annual meetings, which were subsequently translated into Accreditation Standards, against which schools offering programs for Aboriginal peoples will be assessed. Through these resolutions, schools will be expected to consult and share control of Native programs. This concept of sharing with

community groups represents a significant challenge and departure for Schools of Social Work in Canada.

The Maritime School of Social work at Dalhousie University was one of the first schools to begin a Native Bachelor of Social Work program. In the Fall of 1984, 27 students registered for the first 2 1/2 courses of the degree. These students, all employed as human service workers on reserves in Nova Scotia, commuted to classes two days every two weeks. The decentralized part-time format of class delivery was not unique to the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work program. The School has offered a decentralized part-time Bachelor of Social Work program since 1978 in three other centres of Atlantic Canada. However, it was the first time the School had attempted course delivery to an ethnic group. Since 1984, the School has built on this initiative by reaching out to another ethnic group, the Acadians of Nova Scotia, and most recently the School has begun a partnership with the University of Guyana to offer a Bachelor of Social Work degree to Guyanese students.

In developing and delivering such a wide array of programs, the Maritime School of Social Work has overcome many obstacles, not the least of which has been the need to define and redefine initial concepts which influenced the shape of the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work. It is this, at times painful, analysis we would now like to share.

THE MICMAC BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

The Role of Social Development Concepts

It is our perception that the opportunity afforded social work educators to develop social work degree programs for Native students was accompanied by the opportunity to test in practice long held beliefs in the power and utility of social development concepts. Concepts such as community control, participation, empowerment, shared ownership, cultural appropriateness and sensitivity have prominent presence in the literature and belief systems of social work and provide a ready source of insights for educational innovations of this type. Indeed, most if not all programs make explicit reference to these as organizing concepts.

In this section we shall examine these concepts and provide specific illustrations of how they informed the structure and delivery of the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work Program (Micmac B.S.W.) at Dalhousie University. Accepting that attempts to operationalize concepts are characteristically

accompanied by false starts, pitfalls and obstacles, we shall also provide a critical assessment of our programs' shortcomings in concept transformation.

Empowerment, Community Control And Participation

Notions of client control and participation have always been assigned traditional importance in social work. Practitioners working with client systems have understood well the importance of seeking means to engage clients in defining their own problems and actively sharing in the resolution of those problems. As well, educators have noted that motivation and learning is enhanced when the student perceives personal control over the context and outcome of the learning task. Recent research in social learning theory, specifically in the area of locus of control, has validated these observations (Whitmore, 1988).

Empowerment, a logical extension of control and participation, has a more recent conceptual life in the social work literature. Reviewing the concept, Whitmore (1988) concludes that while there is no agreement on a single definition, there is agreement that empowerment is a complex process and, depending upon the author, is seen as consisting of a series of steps, components, aspects, or interrelated actions. Most also agree that empowerment has an individual phase in which the building of self-confidence is critical, a group stage in which collective interaction is emphasized and an environmental or action stage in which participants express their confidence by initiating change in their external environment.

In the same article she summarized the underlying assumptions on which there appears to be agreement:

Individuals are assumed... to understand their own needs better than anyone else (particularly experts) and consequently they should have the power both to define and act upon them. Second, ... all people possess strengths upon which they can build. Third, the process of empowerment is assumed to be a life long endeavor. Fourth, the assumption which recognizes the importance of ... personal knowledge and experience as valid and useful in coping effectively with one's environment (Whitmore, 1988:4).

The work of Paulo Freire (1984, 1985) has been especially instructive to those who wish to advance the notion of empowerment in educational programs, particularly programs which target cultural minorities. He re-

gards conventional education as essentially oppressive; a means used by culturally dominant classes to “domesticate” students to dominant values. He describes this process as a form of “cultural invasion”. As an alternative, he prescribes a model which is emancipative and liberating in intent, one which emphasizes conscientization of social reality and assists persons to act collectively to change oppressive conditions in their lives. Freire sees his approach to education leading to a “cultural synthesis” as opposed to conventional approaches which he sees as tantamount to “cultural invasion.”

Freire's model is also instructive in directing educators to the importance of aiding indigenous groups to understand and value their culture and traditions. Through the process of conscientization people are encouraged to analyze the societal forces which have resulted in the subordination of their culture, to rediscover and reaffirm its importance; in short to learn to believe in themselves and their own abilities.

Freire's model was developed and tested with the poor and illiterate of Brazil. He further demonstrated it with Australian Aboriginal people. In a recent paper, Smith (1988) notes the parallels between the Aboriginal people of Australia and the Indians of Canada. Both groups were original peoples who were defeated, isolated, subordinated and the victims of attempted assimilation by a dominant culture. This subjugation was achieved through deliberate policy choices, including educational policy, and stands as a prime example of what Freire calls “cultural invasion”. It is not surprising then that the Freirian model was influential in shaping the Micmac B.S.W. program.

Operationalization Of Concepts

There are many areas, both in the structure and the delivery of the program, where the concepts of empowerment and cultural integrity are evident. For example, at the planning and funding level deliberate choices were made to insure meaningful dialogue with, and the participation of, Native groups. The program was conceived at a three day conference co-sponsored by the Maritime School of Social work and representatives of the Nova Scotia Micmac community. Out of this conference a Planning Committee was formed with broad representation from the Native community, and following a two year period of planning and negotiation, a Micmac B.S.W. program was instituted at Dalhousie University. Native representatives to the committee and the Native user groups consulted during the

planning phase were instrumental in articulating the type of program they wanted, including the type of adaptations to the conventional program necessary to ensure cultural appropriateness. The detailed adaptations have been presented elsewhere and will not be developed here (Pace and Smith, 1987, 1988, Smith and Pace, 1988).

Deliberate decisions were also taken at the funding level to reinforce the sense of shared ownership and Native control. Normally, a program such as this would seek total funding from the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DIAND). In this case a funding arrangement was struck which has DIAND as the principle funder but with a portion (determined by formula) of the total program costs assumed by the three Native agencies which sponsor students in the program. While the funding arrangement has been cumbersome and at times difficult for the Native agencies, it was seen as necessary to break with the paternalistic, dependency creating tradition of having the Federal agency pay the total bill. From the outset it established the Native agencies as legitimate co-owners of the program, and in a practical way it protected the program from unilateral, single interest program cuts.

In retrospect, while we still believe that the co-funding arrangement is beneficial in serving the objective of empowerment, it is not without blemish. Aside from the cumbersome nature of the agreement, mentioned above, it contains the added problem of administrative inefficiency. The agreement has to be negotiated yearly, and it is difficult to make adjustments in the face of unanticipated costs. Other problems associated with the current arrangement include the fact that the Native sponsors cannot afford the level of contribution originally agreed upon, and Dalhousie University is thus not fully compensated for the real costs of hosting the program. The University, however, is disinclined to seek adjustments, for to do so would create further difficulties for the Native sponsors. A final problem can best be described as a perceptual difficulty. Despite Dalhousie University's view that it is not adequately compensated for the program, the Native sponsors hold the opposite view: that is, they view the University as a non-contributor. This seems to be related mainly to the fact that Dalhousie University's contribution is of an "in kind" nature, e.g. waiver of overhead, faculty consultation, use of facilities, and so forth.

Notions of empowerment, control and cultural integrity have also found expression at the program structural level. The program is governed by two major committees; the Advisory Committee and the Curriculum Committee.

Each committee is chaired by a Native person and the membership is weighted to favor Natives. The Advisory Committee has overall policy responsibility for the program. The Curriculum Committee oversees the curriculum to ensure that program and university standards are met. In particular the committee assumes responsibility for ensuring that mainstream social work content is screened and adapted to Native requirements. Over time, the Curriculum Committee has developed a fairly extensive and explicit set of procedures to ensure that curriculum adaptation occurs. In the first instance faculty appointments are made with great care. First preference is given to Native applicants, and second preference is given to non-Native applicants, who have had experience with Native groups. Second, applicants are specifically screened for their sensitivity to Native issues, philosophical agreement with the program thrust, acceptance of adult education principles which govern course delivery, and for their preparedness to adapt course content to include Native material and lifeways. Once an appointment is made, the professor presents a draft of the adapted course outline. This outline is debated by the Committee and modifications are made. Finally, professors have to report back to the Committee at the end of the course with a critique of their experience and suggestions for the future.

Professors are provided with tangible support to meet course adaptation requirements. Course development funds are made available to instructors in recognition of the additional time requirements necessary to make adaptations. Also, program staff have assembled useful resource materials which are available to instructors. As well, program staff are available for ongoing consultation.

This is the ideal we hoped to achieve. In the real world of implementation we have experienced challenges to the ideal. At the faculty appointment level we have had difficulty recruiting university-qualified Native instructors. As well, in at least one instance a seemingly well qualified Native instructor was found to be unfamiliar with local Native customs. When non-Natives were appointed, we occasionally had difficulty in justifying decisions not to give priority consideration to resident Maritime School of Social Work faculty. Needless to say this created some tension within the faculty of the Maritime School of Social Work.

We also found that it was easier to say that course content and instructional style ought to be culturally appropriate than it was to ensure that they actually were culturally appropriate. In looking to the committee

for help in this respect we quickly realized that there was a diversity of views among Native committee members which needed reconciliation before a consensus could be reached. This diversity has origins in what now appear to be obvious differences in local Band-based customs, differing philosophical positioning as influenced by field of practice, and simple personal individual-based differences. We naively sought and expected a simple definition of cultural appropriateness when frequently, for the reasons mentioned, there were many.

On a related level we noted that the need for cultural specificity often exceeded the capacity for such. Members knew when conventional content was deficient but were not always able to articulate alternatives. As well, there were shortcomings in the resource material available to assist instructors. As a field of study and practice we have simply not been involved long enough in Native programs to have developed sufficient adaptations of mainstream social work practice to work with Native people. Recent work of this nature is encouraging, but for those currently engaged in offering programs for Native people the lack of adequate teaching resources is frustrating (Nelson and Kelley, 1985; Stalwick et al, 1986; Castellano et al, 1986).

Some tension has been experienced in the program around the issue of faculty autonomy and academic freedom. This has been particularly problematic for program instructors who also hold university appointments. The level of committee consultation, course monitoring and evaluation has sometimes clearly exceeded the expectations of professors.

Finally, at the overall program level the committee has had to be especially vigilant of the need to balance university requirements as embodied in standards, and regulations against the need for the program to be relevant and appropriate to its Native users. In doing so, it has had to contend with what some have defined as an indwelling conservatism within universities which equates different with inferior. To compound the matter it is not uncommon for Native people to adopt a similar stance concluding that the designation "Native" may imply lower standards (Castellano et al 1986).

Notions of empowerment, control and cultural integrity also have been influential at the student level. As described previously, the courses which comprise the program are carefully monitored to ensure that the content is culturally relevant and the instructional methods are guided by adult education and Freirian precepts. In addition to structuring opportunities for

students to become active participants in their education at the individual course level, opportunities are provided for students to provide meaningful input at the organizational level. Students are represented on both the Advisory and Curriculum Committees. They play an active role in the selection of content for courses, in course and instructor evaluation, in decisions to appoint instructors, and in decisions on which electives will be offered. In addition to these structural provisions, considerable staff effort has been invested in supporting a normative climate which expects and supports student participation and control.

As with other levels of implementation, the ideals set for student control and involvement were difficult to reach. The major obstacles were situational in nature. Due to the way in which the program had to be offered, pressures on students were far greater than those traditionally experienced by adult learners. The program was offered through four intensive all day sessions per month, two days in one region of the province and two days in another region. All students were required to take all four days, and thus were required to travel. The students were employed full-time in social agency work, and thus the need to juggle work, study, family and travel was considerable.

Additional compounding factors included language, with approximately two-thirds of the students speaking English as a second language; and initial educational deficits, with the majority of the Micmac B.S.W. students admitted under mature student criteria meaning they lacked normal high school university preparation. To some extent these deficits have been obviated by allocating program resources to study and writing skills tutorials. Despite these counter balancing efforts, which in many cases have produced substantial improvements, the deficits are considerable and difficult to remedy.

At the level of cultural relevance, students experienced the same difficulties as Native committee members. That is, consensus on the appropriateness of material was difficult to achieve as definitions of cultural relevance differed among students and between students and their community sponsors. As well, students were unable at times to articulate cultural appropriateness, and curiously, at other times students tired of instructor attempts to ensure the presence of Native content in courses.

Finally, while it is clear that instructional methods which emphasize small group discussion and collective problem solving and dialogue have contributed to enhanced critical consciousness among students, there are

indications that this objective has been imperfectly achieved. For example, students' continuing interest in having more courses on intervention skills with individual problems is perhaps an illustration of what Freire would refer to as naive transitivity. On his scale of conscientization, Freire marks this as the mid point, the phase in which people tend to see problems existing at the individual — rather than societal — level (Freire, 1984) Also on a more practical level, when assessing program achievements in this respect, one must not overlook a point raised by one reviewer's critical commentary on Freirian precepts:

Nowhere does he seem to consider that a significant proportion of people might come to reject such radical freedom in favor of benign authoritarianism and aesthetically tinged mystification once they discover that radical praxis meant hard work, unrationalized frustrations and too many evenings (Stanley, cited in Smith, 1986).

CONCLUSION

Planning and implementing a culturally relevant Bachelor of Social Work degree program for Native students has been a valuable learning experience for both the Native community and the Maritime School of Social Work. However, the program has had its share of difficulties. In moving from the ideal to the practicalities of delivery, compromises have been necessary. At the administrative level the challenge has been in sharing control, direction and participation with others who do not normally find themselves at educational planning tables. At the program level the challenge has been from the need to acknowledge the inadequacy of current theory and teaching resources to appropriately educate Native social workers. Nonetheless, we believe that the Native community has achieved a measure of success by sharing control of this program. Being part of a university-based degree program has been a new experience and has given Native people some legitimate sense of control over their education. In addition, knowledge of how university systems operate has been beneficial to Native groups as they seek to make inroads to other professional schools such as Law, Medicine and Nursing.

The Maritime School of Social Work has been privileged to share this unique opportunity with a Native group. Being one of four schools of social work in Canada to offer a Native Bachelor of Social Work degree is a

challenge in itself. Forging new ground at Dalhousie University has challenged many traditions and set new precedents. Implementing social development concepts in a traditional University environment has been another challenge. Skeptics suggest that shared control of a university program does not enhance it; but others disagree. It is our experience that sharing control of the Micmac B.S.W. Program has been mutually beneficial. Many of the learning experiences will be useful in future endeavors. Some issues addressed by the Micmac B.S.W. Program Committee have importance for the existing Bachelor of Social Work degree program at the Maritime School of Social Work.

Castellano et al concur by saying that many of the

issues emerging in Native social work education mirror issues confronting mainstream programs in Canadian Schools of Social Work...analysis of adaptations and outcomes in Native programs may therefore be instructive for making adaptations in other dimensions of social work education (1986:183).

To conclude with predictions for the future may be premature, as Native groups are still defining self government and their future direction. However, we are certain education will be vital to the mission of self government. We can be certain that any new educational initiatives in the Micmac community will carry the expectation of shared ownership, as a result of this experience. It is clear that Native people will no long be taught without teaching at the same time.

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