First Nations and Aboriginal Counsellor Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses contextual issues unique to First Nations and Aboriginal (FNA) undergraduate counsellor education. Although FNA and non-FNA student counsellors share similar educational experiences and needs, significant differences between these two groups require consideration and accommodation. This paper explores important features that influence student learning including student acclimatization, learning styles and participation, and the disclosure of cultural information.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de questions contextuelles propres à la formation universitaire de premier cycle de conseillers des Premières nations et autochtones. Bien que les étudiants conseillers autochtones et non autochtones partagent des expériences et des besoins éducatifs similaires, des différences significatives entre ces deux groupes exigent la prise en considération et l'accommodation. L'auteur examine certains facteurs importants qui influencent l'apprentissage de ces étudiants, y compris le degré d'adaptation, les styles d'apprentissage et la participation à celui-ci, ainsi que la divulgation d'information d'ordre culturel.

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The introduction of counselling theory and practice is common in professional undergraduate programs such as child and youth care, social work, and psychiatric nursing. To provide students with a foundational understanding required for clinical practice, they are introduced to leading theoreticians, the historical development of specific theories, and corresponding strategies. Benefits of counsellor education include opportunities: (a) to self-reflect, (b) to engage in critical thinking, (c) to interact with practicing professionals, and (d) to translate theory into practice.

Conventional counsellor education is a rigorous and demanding enterprise that is continually evolving in an ever-changing clinical landscape. Subsequently, there has been a corresponding movement within counsellor education to increase student sensitivity toward cultural differences, beliefs, and practices. There has been a concerted effort to integrate new information and modify mainstream theories and practices to better accommodate multicultural clientele (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 2002). Despite these efforts, however, aspects of mainstream counselling theories remain culturally insensitive.

From the First Nations and Aboriginal (FNA) perspective, for example, mainstream counselling theory and practice fail to address societal issues of racism, oppression, and marginalization. France and McCormick (1997a) remarked, "In many ways, people from the first people of North America have been subjected to

Euro-centric attitudes and practices that have only been met with partial success or none at all" (p. 1). LaFromboise, Trimble, and Mohatt (1990) drew a similar conclusion and wrote, "Traditionally oriented therapy (e.g., behavioral, person-centreed, psychodynamic) clearly takes a different track than one typically expected by many Indian clients" (p.632).

As increased attention is devoted to cultural sensitivity within the counselling profession, the specific needs of minority student counsellors requires attention. This paper explores contextual issues that are based on actual teaching experiences within the First Nations and Aboriginal Counselling program at Brandon University. FNA counsellor education should not be confused with established Native Studies programs that exist throughout Canada. A major difference is that a FNA counsellor education program prepares students to assume clinical roles upon their graduation. Although FNA students take courses from the Native Studies curriculum, their program is unique, separate, and clinically oriented. From the outset, it is conceded that the issues addressed in this paper may not be unique to FNA student counsellors. However, these issues appear more pronounced among FNA student counsellors. Finally, this preliminary information may prompt interest and discussion in FNA counsellor education.

CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several contextual issues have emerged and directly influence the teaching and learning environment. Although some challenges were anticipated (e.g., English as a second language, learning styles), other issues have been identified and are discussed below.

Student Counsellor Acclimatization

FNA students require academic and emotional support as they transition to a mainstream university setting and enter a counselling program. For example, not all students are aware of counselling theories and principles or the marked differences that exist between traditional FNA and mainstream healing practices. Therefore, understanding the differences (e.g., direct versus indirect intervention) (France & McCormick, 1997b; Restoule, 1997) is important for students who wish to complete practicums and eventually work with FNA clients within a mainstream counselling context. Furthermore, to prevent psychological injury (e.g., Figley, 1995; Pearlman & MacIan, 1995) students should be informed about the occupational hazards associated with their learning and the counselling profession (e.g., Grosch & Olsen, 1994; Morrissette, 1996; Morrissette, 2000).

The degree to which FNA students are influenced by past events varies dramatically. The impact of historical oppression and maltreatment endured by FNA peoples (Morrissette, 1994) warrants careful consideration. Although the disclosure of traumatic events is common among students from a variety of cultures, FNA students may be especially susceptible to secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995). For instance, students can be vicariously traumatized when witnessing the distress of classmates and clients who disclose painful stories and

events. In discussing an interactional view of traumatic stress among FNA counsellors, Morrissette and Naden (1998) wrote:

> First Nations counselors frequently report emotional turmoil while attempting to identify the source of their despair following a disclosure. Although not having been directly affected by the traumatic events being described, they are, nonetheless, left grappling with their own emotional, spiritual, and physical reactions. (p. 47)

Based on their reactions, students question their own emotional stability and suitability for a counselling career. This issue has direct implications for both students and their significant others. Students may be unaware of the degree to which they have been influenced by what they experience, witness, and learn. Consequently, they may be unable to focus on their personal needs or the needs of their loved ones. Unless students are provided with ample opportunity to debrief and discuss how they have been impacted, they may return to their social network psychologically wounded, depleted, and emotionally unavailable.

FNA students commonly report that their pursuit of a counselling degree is part of a healing process and symbolizes personal growth. The healing process, however, may be interrupted at various points. For example, during case presentations and practica, students may encounter clinical situations that are difficult to comprehend and manage emotionally. As noted by Herman (1992), "Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships . . ." and ". . . undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience" (p. 51). Support for students becomes critical as descriptive clinical examples are reviewed within the classroom context.

More specifically, ample time must be allotted when spontaneous reactions, disclosures, and discussions occur. Presentation of cases of domestic violence and suicide, for example, can trigger deep emotions including anger, sadness, and despair. Asking students to postpone their reactions or disclosure can be perceived as disrespectful and oppressive. Moreover, intense feelings that remain repressed can be counterproductive to student counsellors' well-being and emotional development. It is important that students are given latitude to express highly charged opinions and feelings. This process can be likened to the release of an internal toxin that has tainted the student's sense of self and worldview. Effective management of the learning environment necessitates a balance between the freedom of personal expression and the well-being of other students. Allowing students to articulate their emotional pain during class time should not be equated with group therapy. Rather, students are encouraged to identify and acknowledge their source of pain within a safe classroom environment. As will be discussed later, resources for students who require additional assistance can be addressed.

Expressed Emotion

Anger is a prevalent emotion that often erupts within FNA counsellor education courses. When discussing the range of presenting problems within FNA communities, students begin to discuss the source of individual, family, and social problems. Typically, students begin to describe in a forlorn manner what

they have survived, witnessed within their own families, or observed in their communities. In many cases, this tone slowly changes as the contents of a story unravel. During these moments, a common ground among students is shared and similar hardships become obvious. Energy can mount when stories of maltreatment and injustice are recounted. In order to facilitate student expression, faculty need to remain vigilant and ensure that the process is productive and serves to enhance the learning experience. Students can be helped to channel and redirect their energy in productive ways within their communities or through political activism (Morrissette, 1994).

Flexibility and compassion must also be exercised when students unexpectedly exit the classroom during periods of emotional despair. When personal feelings become very intense, students require time and space to regain their composure. This may prove especially true for students who are involved in their own healing process while they are pursuing their academic studies. Flooded with emotions, these students can be helped to find ways in which to explore their own pain while learning how to extend themselves to others.

Normalization and Introspection

Students can be reassured that internal negative reactions that may emerge during the learning process do not necessarily signify that they are unsuitable for a counselling career. Rather, they can be informed that such reactions can be anticipated and are normal. Further, the challenges of clinical work and the importance of self-awareness and personal well-being must be underlined.

Students may be informed that becoming self-aware through introspection (Morrissette, 1999) is central to counsellor development and generally involves exploring one's life history through timelines (e.g., Stanton, 1992), genograms (e.g., McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985), and autobiographies (e.g., Goodman & Carpenter-White, 1996). This process can be difficult and can unearth painful memories. When this occurs spontaneously, students can experience a sense of vulnerability and may require peer and faculty support. Students who continue to experience acute distress (e.g., uncontrollable crying, angry outbursts, inability to concentrate) would be encouraged to speak with an Elder or professional counsellor.

Students may question the introspection process and state that they are pursuing a counselling degree in order to help others, not themselves. When this happens the important connection between the person-of-the-counsellor and clinical practice is emphasized (Aponte & Winter, 1987; Aponte, 1992, 1994; Brothers, 2000).

Metaphors, Symbols, Storytelling, and Participation

The use of student metaphors and stories are powerful techniques when explaining a situation or describing an emotion (e.g., Sterling, 1997). These communication styles should not be misconstrued as avoidance techniques. Rather, students understand that words may not convey deep meaning. As such, they

rely on metaphors, symbols, and stories to underline the power of their experiences. Tremendous value is placed on oral narratives that have been passed down through the generations within the FNA culture.

A unique aspect of the FNA classroom is the degree of verbal and active participation. To an outside observer, it would seem that student verbal participation is minimal which may be interpreted as an indication of disinterest or indifference. In actuality, the opposite may be true. Although students may be overtly reserved and soft-spoken, they may be deeply interested and invested in the educational process.

To avoid inter-group rivalry and to promote harmony, FNA peoples advocate cooperation (Brant, 1990; Sue & Sue, 1990). Baruth and Lee Manning (1999) explained, "Many Native Americans, however, view success communally, by contributing toward the maintenance of the group identity and by promoting a harmonious whole" (p. 325). These authors further stated as follows:

> Likewise in games requiring talent and skills, players may choose to play in such a way that places group cooperation over individual winning. A similar situation may occur in the classroom, where competitive academics may be shunned to avoid some students being perceived as losers.   (p. 327)

Some students point out that their silence is reflective of their attempts to translate and integrate mainstream theory and practice. Rather than reacting immediately to a mainstream theory or method, students work toward gaining a better understanding of underlying ideas and actions. Students also report that they engage in an internal process whereby they contrast mainstream and FNA principles and practices to achieve greater understanding.

Activities such as role-playing and psychodrama are usually an integral part of counsellor training. Students, however, report an apprehension and a sense of vulnerability when demonstrating their skills publicly. It is important to remember that FNA students are asked to demonstrate skills that have been developed primarily within the dominant Euro-Canadian society. Students report that these skills are awkward and culturally foreign to them. To ensure that students do not misinterpret their initial reluctance as an inability to perform skills, faculty can explain that there may be differences in cultural healing practices.

Group Dynamics Process

A sense of community among FNA students typically emerges during episodes of personal distress. France (1997, p. 5) wrote, "It is unfortunate that Western counsellors and teachers still stress the role of individual responsibility when helping First Nations students." When a student becomes tearful or sullen, it is not unusual for his or her peers to demonstrate respect and support by silently suspending the process in order to acknowledge the student. This intentional suspension provides students with an opportunity to leave the group, share their experience, or signal that the process can proceed. Regardless of the agenda, this process needs to be honoured. Bypassing the process and proceeding with an agenda can be perceived as coarse and insensitive.

Faculty who are determined to cover course material within a predetermined time frame may find this process unsettling and disruptive. Students can learn a great deal from spontaneous reactions. For example, students who have difficulty witnessing and processing the distress of others may learn that this process may in fact benefit their personal growth. Other students may learn to appreciate the importance of non-verbal behaviours, silence, and pacing. Rather than charging ahead, they learn about the need to attend to group nuance and process.

Life Experience and Academia

Students sometimes assume that their survival of life experiences makes them competent counsellors. In their opinion, their experience (e.g., child abuse, family violence, substance abuse, institutionalization) has provided them with expertise to provide counselling to others with similar experiences. Without question, a student's ability to survive tragic circumstances, defeat the odds, and pursue secondary education demonstrates incredible resilience and is a remarkable feat. However, some students fail to realize that their experiences alone cannot be generalized and certainly do not in themselves make them competent counsellors.

The challenge for faculty involves acknowledging student experiences, validating student opinions, and inviting students to consider differing perspectives. For example, some students who have struggled with substance abuse are convinced that abstinence and regular attendance at alcoholics anonymous meetings is the only way to address addiction. Likewise, some students are convinced that individuals who have been abused as children will likely abuse their own children. Despite a lack of substantiating research, some students remain entrenched in these beliefs and refuse to consider alternative perspectives.

Inviting students to consider different perspectives and treatment alternatives can be a daunting task. For example, some students are easily offended when their way of thinking is challenged. Other students become agitated when it is suggested that personal experiences are unique and therefore, cannot be generalized. Therefore, it is recommended that faculty remain mindful when working with FNA students.

Mainstream Clinical Protocols

FNA students typically perceive the formality of mainstream assessment, diagnosis, and treatment protocols as restrictive, rigid, and permanent. Students who attempt to follow specific assessment guidelines for diagnostic purposes, describe their initial discomfort with the mechanical and hierarchical nature of this procedure. Their discomfort, in part, stems from a belief that the healing process must provide a safe, respectful, and non-judgmental context wherein clients can discuss life circumstances. In their opinion, a mainstream clinical environment can jeopardize the relationship-building process.

Furthermore, providing a mainstream clinical diagnosis is viewed as an oppressive practice of labeling. Unlike mainstream psychological intervention, FNA healing practices usually involve more than the client and therapist

(LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990). Several authors have addressed the reluctance of FNA psychologists to attach a diagnostic label due to their conceptualization of the spiritual healing processes (Horowitz, 1982; Kelso & Attneave, 1981). In this regard, FNA students have the opportunity to contrast mainstream counselling theories and practices with traditional healing beliefs and rituals from a cross-cultural perspective.

The Influence of Older Students

The age difference among students appears to be an important consideration. Older students are often perceived as knowledgeable, resilient, and wise. Younger students honour the experiences and struggles of their elders and admire their determination in pursuing secondary education. Older students are held in high esteem and their perspectives and opinions are rarely challenged. Further, their opinions are considered invaluable information that can be shared with future generations.

Younger students frequently emphasize the traditional need to demonstrate respectful attitudes and behaviours toward their elders. Therefore, it is not uncommon for students to interrupt a process in order to listen to stories and examples that are shared by students who are more senior. Although based on tradition and respect, this process can inadvertently present a challenge for older students. For example, during a class discussion an older student asserted that global statements such as "Older students are wise" are inaccurate and misleading. In her opinion, not every older student possessed the wisdom or knowledge with which they are credited. She further expressed the concern that if her views remain unchallenged, her personal and professional growth could be stunted.

Younger students report feeling intimidated by, awkward about, and fearful of transgressing an important boundary. Despite being in a classroom environment where critical thinking, debate, and constructive criticism are encouraged, younger students grapple with how to either disagree with or how to challenge their older counterparts. On the one hand, they realize the importance of on-going conversation and debate; at the same time, however, they are mindful of traditional teachings and customs. Sharing ideas is particularly important in counsellor training as students begin to articulate their theories of change. Receiving feedback on individual perspectives and being challenged on personal theories of change can enhance individual and group learning. Encouraging student transparency through participation is vital to counsellor education.

An obvious implication associated with this phenomenon pertains to the misinterpretation of student counsellor behaviour within a clinical placement. Unless supervisors are familiar with FNA traditions, a student's reluctance to begin the assessment process with older clients may be mistakenly perceived as incompetence. The task for faculty and students is to openly discuss this cultural difference and discover ways in which a respectful stance can be maintained both within the classroom and clinical settings.

In mainstream counselling programs, younger students sometimes feel patronized by their older counterparts. Although the advice of older students is well

intended, it is not always welcomed. Relationships between younger and older FNA students are not like this. Older students speak of their own experiences and do not attempt to direct others. It seems that there is an unspoken understanding that meaning will be extrapolated from stories and that direct interpretation is unnecessary.

Student Tribal Status

Although FNA students may not share the same status as a professor within the larger university community, their status is recognized among their peers. For example, FNA community leaders or healers do not lose respect or status when assuming a student role. Their respect and status is evident, for example, when mainstream counselling theories or techniques clash with the traditional lifestyle, traditions, or beliefs. At these times, examples are used by these individuals to draw similarities and contrasts between mainstream and traditional healing practices.

To ensure that students with elevated status are not disrespected or discounted, collaboration is required between students and faculty. As faculty share their knowledge of mainstream theories and practices, they can invite students to teach them about traditional beliefs and healing methods. In doing so, the elevated status of particular students is preserved, and their experience and expertise is acknowledged.

Sharing Cultural Information

Sharing sacred ceremonies and rituals outside of the FNA community remains contentious (France, 1997). Different FNA communities adhere to different perspectives regarding this issue. France (1997) wrote, "Even some native spiritual leaders, who teach native spiritual ways, have been criticized for selling out to whites" (p. 7). France goes on to assert that, ". . . some ceremonies and practices, such as the Ghost of Sun Dance, should not be open to outside members" (p. 7). These statements illuminate the difference of opinion regarding the disclosure of ceremonial information. When students disagree on this issue, the learning atmosphere can become tense. For example, some students contend that discussing the details of specific ceremonies will bring about *bad medicine* [italics added]. Other students contend that sharing sacred ceremonies serves to bridge the gap between cultures and enhances mutual respect.

Facilitating a learning environment where differences of opinion are adamantly held can be a challenge. Caution must be exercised to avoid triangles where a faculty member is perceived as supporting the position of a particular group over another. Also, students can regard discouraging conversation as oppressive and controlling.

FAMILY AND INTIMATE PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

Embarking on a university education marks an important milestone for many FNA students. This venture often involves leaving extended family and communities and relocating to a larger urban centre. This decision reaches beyond the

individual and can affect intimate partners and offspring. Such moves can disrupt family patterns and contribute to unforeseen stress as discussed below.

Student Reflection

Students often evaluate their own life journey and current circumstances. They assume a reflective stance, recount meaningful events that shaped their lives, and acquire new information about their personal development. This process usually involves confronting personal patterns and the behaviour of others. Although sounding reasonable in theory, this can lead to problems in their personal life. For example, students may begin to challenge their children on longstanding inappropriate behaviour or to disclose their unhappiness to a partner. Thus, encouraging student counsellors to reflect on the status of their own lives is critical to the learning process (Morrissette, 2001). From an ethical and professional standpoint, students must be informed about the potential consequences of their own personal reflection and growth. It is important for them to know that heightened stress may be experienced within intimate and family relationships.

Intimate and Family Relationships

Intimate partners do not always share the student's excitement over their personal growth. For example, some partners express feelings of abandonment and insignificance. In turn, students report that their partners appear resentful and/or threatened by the student's growth and personal transformation. This heightened tension within the couple unit can be problematic.

Children who are accustomed to parent availability and companionship may also show their dissatisfaction with the changes resulting from a FNA student's academic study schedule. Despite warnings about the demands brought about because of university and parental absence, children can resent the physical and emotional unavailability of a parent. Establishing boundaries with offspring in order to study or complete assignments can be very difficult for students. Students miss spending quality time with their children and thus, begin to feel self-centred and guilt ridden about their academic responsibilities.

Students who experience personal and interpersonal conflicts tend to seek out peers for mutual support. However, their partners and children rarely enjoy the same opportunity and as a result, begin to feel marginalized. During these times, students require additional faculty support, encouragement, and guidance. Unless such appropriate faculty and administration support and understanding are available, student stress might result in premature withdrawal from the program. Students who require help may be encouraged to speak with an Elder or professional counsellor about their conflicts and stress. Events can also be arranged to support students and their partners/families. For example, social events can be organized where students and their partners/families mingle and create a natural support system. Finally, inviting partners to observe particular classes can provide them with an opportunity to better understand the learning context.

Divided Loyalties

The experience of balancing personal goals with family obligations is not an easy task. Although this experience is not unique to FNA students, it is a major issue with which they grapple. Within counselling courses, students learn about the importance of personal well-being and stability within intimate relationships and families. In the process of learning how to balance their own goals with the needs of their families, students report guilt and heightened stress. Feelings of distress can be especially severe when children or partners demand more attention.

Attending classes and studying can increase stress for students and their families. The adjustment period includes acclimatizing to the university setting, adapting to a rigorous academic schedule, meeting new people, and helping family members stabilize in their new environment. When academic pressures begin to mount, a fear of failure clouds student thinking. In response, they contemplate withdrawing from university and returning to their home community to regain a sense of familiarity and stability. This is a critical period for students and faculty. In many ways, this student experience parallels the experiences of clients who feel vulnerable and fear the unknown. Although in retrospect, many students report that these periods were tremendous growth experiences, the hardships they endured during these periods are not forgotten.

CONCLUSION

FNA counsellor education presents new and exciting challenges for students and faculty alike. Although FNA and non-FNA students share many similarities, there are important differences between these two groups. These differences must be discussed in programs that prepare FNA counsellors. To accommodate FNA students in their educational quest, their learning preferences and cultural practices must be honoured. Moreover, particular attention needs to be devoted to student acclimatization, the learning environment, and specific tribal customs and practices.

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