

Indigenous-settler relations in social work practice: reconciliation in education

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Introduction

The framework of social work is embedded in the construction of relationships. Academia teaches this concept of relationality in a stringent and detached manner. The social worker is identified as the *expert* or *professional* in textbook learning; therefore a certain distance is expected between him/herself and the client. Given that enduring and respectful relationships are also central for First Nations (Wilson, 2008), mainstream social work practice does not adequately prepare social workers to practice in First Nation communities. Authors Lise DeGrace and Nancy McBain have worked together in First Nations child welfare for more than two decades. In the present article, we discuss our relationship as intervenors in a First Nation community. We assess the authentic relationships needed in order to create change and transform the child welfare system in New Brunswick. We also recount the obstacles in academia that Nancy has faced as an Indigenous practitioner, despite her many years of experience and deep understanding of traditional knowledge. Through these difficulties, we maintain our vision for change, and we continue to achieve success in our work.

The Context of Social Work Pedagogy

We have been educated as social workers in a mainstream worldview of social work practice which has not permitted other

views. Though child welfare is a recognized sub-discipline of the undergraduate Social Work degree, it does not adequately prepare social workers to work in the child welfare system, even less to work in First Nation communities. As Sinclair (2004) notes, the reason for this gap is that social work pedagogy is framed within colonial history embedded in conflicts of power and control. The mere fact that child welfare is a provincial legislative mandate maintains colonial practices and interrupts Indigenous worldviews. The historical trauma of the residential schools and the 60s scoop has continued albeit in a seemingly milder form. Many First Nation communities in Canada identify social work as a threat to their communities and the future of their children, for the past is still very much present. As noted in the literature (Duran & Duran, 1996; McKenzie & Hudson, 1985; Bruyere, 1998; and Hart, 1999) many stipulate that the 60s Scoop is a continuum of colonialism and demonstrates how colonization has manifested in the realm of child welfare and social work with respect to Indigenous people in Canada.

Post-secondary institutions must bring these elements to light in order to decolonize the mainstream pedagogy and practices in social work. Shaull (2000) presents different functions of education:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (forward).

Education, in its intent, must create spaces to inspire the student to become a critical thinker facing a volume of knowledge and invites the process of evaluation and analysis of this knowledge in order to create a desire to be representative of change and transformation. To reproduce knowledge without question brings a dangerous conformity to past practices and is the ideology that maintains colonialism in education which transpires in society. This is no more evident than in the past epidemic of Indigenous children coming into care. Layers of colonialism need to be understood before the process of decolonization can begin.

The Child in Care Debate

Blackstock (2007) conceptualizes First Nation child welfare as a systemic crisis which has not diminished since the residential schools era. What has social work education constructively done to decolonize child welfare practices? The process of decolonizing and indigenizing social work remains a struggle in academia. In essence, the colonized nature of the society in which we live needs to be acknowledged. This can be difficult for Canadians as it destroys the perception of equality for all. Thereafter, the recognition of the power and privilege of whiteness has to become part of the process of decolonization in order to move towards a settler-Indigenous relationship based on mutual respect and honesty. Burgess (2011) suggests five distinct phases of decolonization: 1) rediscovery and recovery, 2) mourning, 3) dreaming, 4) commitment, and 5) action. As Burgess indicates, it is difficult to recover from the abuse of colonization when one lives in colonialism every day: “this phase of rediscovering one’s history and recovering one’s culture, language, identity and so on is fundamental to the movement for decolonization” (p.152). This phase must be identified and constructed by Indigenous people in a way that brings education and

practice towards Indigenous holistic knowledge. As such, mourning is a part of healing which can only be accomplished when pain and trauma can be openly discussed without victimization, shame or guilt. This brings the process to the next phase of dreaming, having the hope of transformation and the sentiment of safety for the future. Burgess states that this is the most important phase: "Here is where the full panorama of possibilities is expressed, considered through debate, consultation, and building dreams... which eventually become the flooring for the creation of a new social order" (p.155). Hope for transformative practices is the springboard for the social worker to begin a discursive commitment to decolonize knowledge about child welfare and to become the change which is needed. The commitment phase is a collaborative effort of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to determine a desired direction and outcome: "...over time the commitment will become so clear that a formal process becomes merely a pro forma expression of the ...will" (Burgess, p.157).

With our combined experiences in child welfare totalling more than 60 years of practical knowledge, we knew that mainstream social work practices were ineffective and could no longer be considered to be acceptable practice in First Nation communities. This is why we began to question the child welfare legislation, and the practices and the imposition of mainstream societal ideologies concerning the safety of the child and the definition of *child in care*. Many barriers have been placed in our path. However, we believed that we could transform the types of placements for children, which would also benefit their families.

The last phase in this decolonization process is action—which can be intimidating when we know that mainstream systems may not support these endeavours: "The responsive action is one

for survival. The action called for in the fifth phase of decolonization is not a reactive but a proactive step..." (p.158). As we became creative in addressing alternate care placements for children, we included the family in the process. However, we ensured that it was the child that became the one who decided on the relational availability and their level of engagement with every member of their environment.

The alternative placements for children have been a struggle. At times these were with extended family members, while at other times these were created with resources in place for children with specific needs. We agree that the place for a child is home with their parents. What happens when this is not possible? The basis of all our alternative placements is grounded in relationships. For example, the openness of the foster parents in inviting the parents into their homes to spend time with the children while sharing a meal, or support workers having a meeting at school with the parents to create a plan for the child. These relationships are essential to the child achieving their full potential.

Academic structures and processes are not often open to recognizing the importance of these authentic relationships within social work and therefore do not recognize traditional Aboriginal knowledge as a way of practice which, at times, is not conducive to mainstream social work practice. Embedded in structures of assessments, mainstream child welfare often reduces the importance of relationships and focuses on governmentality - established policies and protocols which reflect colonial thinking.

As Nancy was completing her social work degree in the Mi'gmaq/Maliseet Bachelor of Social Work program, she was requested to do 700 hours of field placement. Her 30 years of

experience and knowledge in the field had not been recognized as the valued contribution and accredited standard that it is. This exemplifies the need to decolonize structures of evaluation in order to ensure the move towards a holistic approach in education and practice.

Acknowledging Indigenous Knowledge in Academia

When Lise was first asked to go to work in Ugpi'Ganjig First Nation, a Mi'kmaq community in northern New Brunswick, the primary purpose was to help the Child and Family agency deal with child protection issues. A second purpose, however, was to make it possible for Nancy to complete her social work degree. Her years of experience in child welfare were not recognized by either the New Brunswick Association of Social Work or academia. As our working relationship developed, it became evident to Lise that Nancy was a natural teacher and social worker. Without hesitation, Nancy would intervene in the most complex of situations, and with amazing outcomes. Lise quickly understood that what she was witnessing and participating in was much more valuable than her formal education and work experience in mainstream social work.

Poonwassie & Charter (2001) speak of Indigenous holistic theory as an ancestral concept:

Aboriginal people in Canada have ancient culture specific philosophical foundations and practices, which continue to provide them with guidance in everyday life. In their healing process, these imperatives guide those who experience physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual distress - individually, in a family, or in a community (p.63).

Without a doubt, the last 17 years of working alongside Nancy has been the most life-changing experience of Lise's life. In many regards, Nancy has become Lise's greatest teacher, and has provided guidance and strength: To be authentic in all relationships is to accept what is in front of you because this experience is what you need in order to become aware, and to make the necessary changes, and to accept that everything happens when the time is right. Nancy is one of the most effective social workers Lise has worked with, even though she had yet to complete a formal social work degree.

Conclusion

Formal social work education sets out to isolate and treat the "problem" which only creates more imbalance. "Institutionalized words, *white words*, cannot initiate the kind of healing achieved through tribal rituals" (Blaesser, 1996, p.44). Connectedness in all relationships is essential when doing social work in First Nation communities. Traditional knowledge, ceremony and time are tools utilized in the practice of human connections and relations. It is a practice of honesty, trust and divine intervention. One could hardly speak of this in mainstream social work education. However, such practice is much needed in all aspects of social work: It brings an authentic guide to self and therefore an unconditional understanding of others in their suffering.

We continue to journey this path together. Despite the many obstacles she has had to face, Nancy successfully graduated from her social work degree in July 2017. Our work is only just beginning to bring about the changes required in First Nation child welfare. In the connectedness we have with the community, the families, and the children, we maintain our commitment to finding

meaningful solutions in the continuing struggles of child welfare. Everything will happen...when the time is right.

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Lise DeGrace has worked in the field of child welfare for 30 years. Initially worked as a social worker at Social Development, and has been in the community of Eel River Bar First Nation for the last 18 years. Unpacking white privilege, Lise is focused on Indigenizing child welfare. She received a Master in social work from the Université de Moncton in 2011 and is presently a PhD student in the IDST program at UNB. Lise and Nancy McBain have worked together for the past 18 years using the two eyed seeing approach to child welfare, believing that creativity in developing resources and services, and understanding family perspectives are essential in changing child welfare in moving towards an Indigenize practice.

Nancy McBain is a Mi'kmaq woman from the community of Eel River Bar First Nation. She has worked in the field of child welfare for the last 30 years. Initially in the Head Start program and other early childhood programs, Nancy then became a support worker for Eel River Child and Family Services Agency in the beginning of the 1980s. She graduated from the MWBSW program at St Thomas University in 2017. Nancy and Lise DeGrace have worked together for the past 18 years using the two eyed seeing approach to child

welfare, believing that creativity in developing resources and services, and understanding family perspectives are essential in changing child welfare in moving towards an Indigenize practice.

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