



EXPLORING THE MEANING OF THE MSW: SPIRIT, CEREMONY AND PROTOCOL

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Abstract

In June, 2010, a one-time cohort of graduate-level social work students completed a unique MSW program. Of the twenty five graduates, twenty-one were of First Nations or Métis ancestry. The program was delivered in partnership between the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary and Blue Quills First Nations College. The program honored traditional knowledge and ways of learning combined with a critical analysis of Western perspectives of social work knowledge. Elders and other staff who provided cultural teachings and support to the MSW students were identified as extremely vital to the MSW program's success. All groups involved in the program (i.e. students, teachers, Elders) believed that by incorporating Ceremony, the spirit world became part of the program. One student stated, "It was more than a program or course; it was a program that taught life lessons through traditional knowledge." Another commented, "The program nurtured the gifts we all bring to the program as *nehiyaw* (Cree) people." The program also provided a sense of confirmation for the knowledge and gifts the students brought into the program. Strong fiscal resources enabled the program to establish a formal support network of various staff for the students and to support the development of Indigenous curriculum and programming that encouraged an informal support network amongst the students. Support staff felt privileged to contribute safe place for the students to process challenges into positive transformational. Instructors commented on the centered, empowered, balanced, and congruent students. The formal and informal, concrete and invisible supports to the students ensured the success of this program and this cohort of students. As one student commented, the program started in ceremony, finished in ceremony, and could not fail with ceremony.

Introduction

In 2008, a cohort of students began their journey in a graduate-level social work program provided by the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work in collaboration with Blue Quills First Nations College. In June, 2010, twenty-five students will complete this odyssey. The program has been unique and demanding – the courses combined the accredited program from the Faculty of Social Work with the honored knowledge, protocols, and ceremony of the *nehiyaw* (Cree) people. After many courses, long hours in field education, cultural training sessions, and countless ceremonies and celebrations and assignments, these students have acquired a complex and very unique understanding of graduate-level social work in a First Nations and Métis context.

An integral component of any program is evaluation. Program evaluation also takes many forms - ranging from the quantitative measurement of a variety of variables to a qualitative exploration of meaning and impact. We have chosen to approach the evaluative process for this program from two directions – only one of which is represented in this document. This document is a qualitative exploration of the meaning and the impact of the program for the students, the elders, the wisdom holders, the instructors, and the support staff. These people were asked about the meaning of the program based upon their specific individual experience within the program. It is our hope that this document expresses the full experience and meaning - for the people involved - of the MSW at Blue Quills First Nations College.

Please note that, while the term "evaluation" is used frequently in this document, we believe that the term "assessment" – defined as "to explore something in order to understand its value, quality, and importance" may be more appropriate. Hence, this report may be more accurately named "an expression of value" than a "written evaluation."

In the following pages, after providing a background story about the program, we will explore the meaning of the program as expressed by the participants, discuss some of the unique features of the program and then share some thoughts and interpretations about meaning and the lived experience as expressed by the participants.

The History and the Setting

In 1998 a group comprised of community members and faculty from the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work developed a proposal for Access funding from the Alberta Provincial Government. Understanding the need for BSW education in rural, remote, First Nations and Métis communities throughout the province, this initial proposal (Rogers, 1998) was approved for funding by the Provincial Government in February 1999.

The proposal came as a response to the demand for social work education outside the urban centers. Students from rural, remote, First Nations and Métis communities had misgivings about urban-located coursework that was grounded in urban Western European assumptions that did not fit well with world views and helping practices in their home regions. Communities, agencies, and institutions in rural and remote regions of the province had expressed their demands for social work education with a geographic and cultural relevance (Bodor & Zapf, 2002).

In January, 2000, the new Access BSW program began delivering “culturally and geographically relevant curriculum” (Rogers, 1998) across the province in seven rural, northern and First Nations communities. Since that time, the Access program (later renamed “Learning Circles”) has graduated over 300 students in various communities in Alberta – including a high number of First Nations and Métis students in northern Alberta. The combined graduates of Access and the ongoing campus-based BSW programs has resulted in many BSW-level social workers in northern Alberta – a number of whom are interested in completing an MSW degree.

One of the early sites (est. 2002) selected for the Access program was Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) located in northeast Alberta just west of the town of St. Paul. BQFNC originally started as a Residential School in 1931 and, in 1971, control was turned over to the seven First Nations in the area and an era of Indigenous control over Indigenous education began. The Access site at BQFNC continued until 2007, graduating over 55 students with BSW degrees. Given the number of graduates and other social workers in the geographic area holding undergraduate social work degrees, it seemed logical that BQFNC would collaborate with the Faculty of Social Work and the University of Calgary to provide the MSW at BQFNC.

In the Winter of 2008, Alberta Advanced Education, in response to a proposal from BQFNC, agreed to fund a one-time only MSW program at BQFNC. BQFNC then contracted with the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary to provide a culturally relevant MSW. Potential students were interviewed during the summer of 2008 and started in the MSW at BQFNC Entry Camp that Fall. Classes began in February, 2009 and were completed in June of 2010. Of the original 33 students enrolled in the program, 25 will graduate in June (one will be a posthumous degree). Of the 25 students, 21 are of First Nations or Métis ancestry. This appears to be the largest cohort of graduate-level First Nations and Métis students in Canada and provides clear evidence

that, with the appropriate supports, curriculum and cultural components, First Nations and Métis students can be extremely successful.

Students in the MSW program were required to complete:

- Six courses including Research I and II, Methods I and II, Diversity and Oppression, and Social Policy;
- Two option courses including “Rebuilding Person/Place Connections” and “First Nations Healing Practices” and,
- Two community-based Field instruction/practicum courses totaling 600 hours.

Along with the 10 courses provided by University of Calgary Social Work Faculty, the students also completed two Professional Development Opportunities that focused on First Nations and Métis social work;

- Entry and Exit Camps (four days each) and,
- Cree and Métis Language and Identity

Finally, students participated in all of the seasonal ceremonies based within the *nehiyaw* (Cree) community including Sweat lodges, the Give-Away, the Four Fire Ceremony, and Culture Camp.

Searching for the Meaning

Funding for this assessment was included in the original budget for the program. It was felt that it would be important to bring together an assessment team that would encompass many features inherent to the program itself. As a consequence, the team included the coordinator of the program (to provide an academic, historical and overarching perspective), a non-Indigenous MSW student currently enrolled in an urban non-Indigenous program, (to provide an external, knowledgeable and experienced perspective) and a student within the BQFNC MSW program of Métis ancestry (to provide an internal, Indigenous, and experienced perspective).

The team members brought themselves into the process – along with their knowledge, experience, and understanding of MSW education. The process followed the basic principles of First Nations research methodology – which has been likened somewhat to a hermeneutic methodology in Western research. There are many sources of literature exploring First Nations research methodology and hermeneutics. If the reader wishes to further explore these concepts, we would suggest Wilson’s text Research is Ceremony (2008) - listed in the reference section.

Early in the assessment process, the research team determined that potential interview sources could be divided into four general groups of participants. These groups

were “Elders and Wisdom Holders”, “Students”, “Instructors and Teachers”, and “Program Support People”. It was felt that the majority of people involved with the program were included in these four areas. Two of the assessment team members divided the four groups between them for interviews and approximately 60 interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks. The interviews were then analyzed to identify both common themes and specific “moments of meaning” – times when individual participants shared a special, unique, or particularly meaningful thought or experience.

Elders and Wisdom Holders:

Elders and other staff who provided cultural teachings and support to the MSW students were identified as extremely vital to the MSW program’s success. The roles of Elders and traditional knowledge holders were to incorporate *nehiyaw* knowledge directly into the curriculum and to support the students and faculty through *nehiyaw* ceremony and cultural gatherings that occurred on the sacred land located adjacent to BQFNC. The MSW students and faculty benefited from various *nehiyaw* ceremonies that are performed routinely at BQFNC throughout the year and are open to the community.

Elders and traditional knowledge holders created and offered the MSW Opening Camp specifically for the MSW students and introduced them to the cultural teachings in a gentle, planned process that was consistent throughout the program. Through ceremony, smudging, and singing, Elders and traditional knowledge holders brought in an experiential spiritual component to the program in general and into each academic course. Traditional song was incorporated often in class, and during ceremony. One knowledge holder commented on his role of incorporating song into the program where he states, “It was a gift I have and brought it to the program. Songs moves the spirit; it calls the spirit. It’s an important part of program.”

Ceremony appeared to be a fundamental theme throughout the interviews with the Elders and the traditional knowledge holders involved in the program. All participants discussed the importance of integrating ceremony into not only the MSW program, but into education in general. One Elder stated, ‘we acknowledge spirit, whereas in mainstream academia, it’s not.’ The program set the context for ceremony; ceremony set the context for people to connect to their spirituality. Another Elder explained, “ceremony opens up the spirit: which leads to emotion. Emotion allows us to be who we are fully meant to be.” “Ceremonies,” declared an Elder, “guide us in all projects that we do. You have to start with the Creator in a project.”

The Elders and knowledge holders stated that traditional teachings provided the context for the group’s circle process which empowered an ongoing traditional process for monitoring accountability and responsibility amongst the students. One BQFNC knowledge holder stated that, “The students do their own policing through circle process. It allows a sense of ownership and we are accountable to each other for not carrying our loads...these social workers have learned to be accountable to their communities. We are a collective: and everyone has a voice, we have worked hard to get this message to all involved.” Relational accountability, an Indigenous teaching that assumes a collective

responsibility for the success and welfare of past and future generations, held vital meaning for the knowledge holders and, by extension, for the students.

The *nehiyaw kiskeyitimowina* (Cree knowledge) involved in the MSW was not seen as complimentary, but was believed to be fundamental to all facets of education. The Elders and knowledge holders believe that this component was essential to the success of the MSW program. One knowledge holder commented that the MSW program at BQFNC serves as an example to refute the myth that Cree culture is dying and that the communities have lost their connection to it. “Our culture is not dying, it’s there, and it’s up to us to connect to it.” The goal of incorporating ceremony and spirit into the curriculum was seen as the ‘unseen’ success factor by all traditional knowledge holders and Elders involved in developing and carrying out the MSW program at BQFNC.

Another key theme identified by the Elders was the belief that the development of the Masters level program was community-driven. There was a sense of ownership and inherent responsibility from BQFNC, the Seven First Nations represented at BQFNC, and employers that funders and the University of Calgary supported. BQFNC felt that the delivery of the MSW program was their responsibility. BQFNC Elders and traditional knowledge holders felt responsible to educate their communities and future social workers in a way that was culturally relevant and anti-oppressive. The program was set up in a way that allowed BQFNC to take the lead on incorporating what was important to them. The belief of “knowing oneself through culture” was seen as an essential component in creating positive change within families and communities.

They also stated that the effects of the program were beyond them as individuals; it permeated into families and community. One knowledge holder stated that “We had people in place that understood and respected our need to take ownership that were connected to the U of C.” It was generally felt that the MSW at BQFNC contributed to the reclaiming of BQFNC from the historical traumas associated with residential school. As one knowledge holder suggested, “BQFNC was formerly a bitter place. Now it is a place of remembrance, ancestors, grandfathers, grandmothers, and reclamation of culture. We are learning about who we are and that is the most important thing.”

Interviewees also commented on the student transformations they witnessed over the course of the program. One BQFNC knowledge holder spoke of the impact this program will have within the community, “We will have 25 graduates at the MSW level – this is a huge community impact. People are left voiceless from oppression; this program transformed students. Knowing ourselves through our culture is the foundation of the program.” Dr. Leona Makokis, president of BQFNC, discussed the transformational change she saw and acknowledged relational accountability and the historical context of BQFNC as an important factor in the success of the program. “The transformation is something beyond us. I think about vision of my parents, the residential school...the sense is that this is bigger than ourselves.”

Students:

Student themes of the program were multiple and multilayered; they permeated into other group themes as well. Relational accountability was a constant theme for the students and all commented on the need to be successful in the program for the sake of future generations: but there was also a sense of collective responsibility to the larger group. Because the program opened in ceremony and closed in ceremony, there was a strong belief that the program's success was inevitable. One student stated, "We cannot fail with ceremony and the Creator as part of process." The students felt a high degree of responsibility to make sure this program was successful for others, including classmates and future generations. Many students also discussed the relational accountability they felt to their classmates to finish the program. In western institutions, the meaning of being successful is often based on individual responsibility. In this program, success was defined in terms of the collective; the honor of one was the honor of all. One student stated "It's not about grades. It was about learning culture, sharing and our accountability to each other". Themes of equal relationships, non-hierarchy and a lived experience of inclusion were prominent. This strong sense of collectiveness was the driving force that kept students motivated and determined.

Another key theme identified by the students centered on their own feelings of health and wellness in terms of feeling grounded and whole due the spiritual and cultural component of the program. The spiritual and cultural component had extremely positive effects in students' personal and professional lives. Many commented on the personal growth they experienced and it was not uncommon to hear things like, "This program changed my life." Another key theme that emerged was the personal healing that many experienced through the ceremonies, sweat lodges, and other cultural gatherings. For the MSW students, education and healing were not viewed as separate entities. There was a belief that education *should* be a healing experience. One student stated, "We have a responsibility to be as healthy as possible and that's why education needs all four components...this program unified me as a spirit and brought me to wholeness." Another stated that "participating and learning ceremony was a reinforced way of learning traditional *iyiniw* (First People) values and knowledge." Ceremony permeated every part of the students' lives and relationships. One student stated, "Ceremony *is relationship*." Ceremony seemed to connect the students to their 'life force.' It connected students to lost loved ones and ancestors which was very powerful and healing for all involved, symbolically mirroring the collectiveness of the group and essentially taught relational accountability. One student affirmed, "ceremony *is love*."

All groups involved in the program (i.e. students, teachers, Elders) believed that by incorporating Ceremony, the spirit world became part of the program. One student stated that "ceremony allowed us to honor and respect the spirit world." Many felt that the program was a process of spiritual growth. Several students reported a positive overwhelming sense of spiritual feelings that can't be explained or forgotten. The spiritual teachings became a part of many of the student's lives and they felt that their presence in the program was fate, destined by the spirit world. One student stated, "We are not in control. The Creator knows our paths." Another stated that she had "come to the realization that we cannot control everything in our lives and in our world; that is not

our teachings. *miyo pimatisiwin* (the good life) is not about material things or pleasing others, it's about trusting the spirit world." A strong sense of *purpose* resulted from these spiritual 'signs' or messages which were experienced by many of the students throughout the program. The program initiated a newfound sense of inner spirit or spiritual awakening in almost all of the students. One student commented, "Learning was done through mind and spirit simultaneously; this connection was powerful."

Many students talked about the strong relationships between classmates, with faculty and Elders. A strong sense of collective connectedness was identified. One student summarized this common theme when she stated, "Ceremony and my relationships to my classmates kept me coming back to class when I wanted to quit; there are no words to describe this spiritual journey. It's similar to how you feel in ceremony: you must experience it to understand."

Importance of relationships became extremely apparent from the interviews. The program was influential not only in terms of relationships between students, but also in personal and professional relationships. Their positive experiences often resulted in students moving from unhealthy spousal relationships to healthier relationships. Many reported that the teachings they were learning permeated into their family life, resulting in healthier lifestyles. One student stated, "It was more than a program or course; it was a program that taught life lessons through traditional knowledge." The program was life changing for almost all of the students and all reported that they had newfound strengths, confidence, and the ability to make positive changes in their own lives and in their communities. There was a sense of transformational change. Many stated that it was the best academic experience they have had in their lives. One student stated, "This program allowed me to be who I am as a *nehiyaw iskwew* (Cree woman)."

The program allowed for reclamation of culture and identity and many students felt it gave them the power to find their 'voice'. One student stated in metaphoric terms that "This education is our buffalo." – suggesting that the resources once provided by the buffalo (food, housing, clothing) are now provided by education. The students learned new ways of knowing and thinking that challenged students and pushed their boundaries to find innovative ways of addressing issues within their communities and workplaces. One student states, "The program nurtured the gifts we all bring to the program as *nehiyaw* people. We *can* walk in two worlds." The program was also a sense of confirmation of the knowledge and gifts the students brought into the program. A student suggested, "I know my people and I have and I bring knowledge. It reaffirmed our values, our traditional knowledge and our ancestors."

The use of Cree language within the program and the opportunity to learn Cree for many was a strong component of program that was seen as healing. Students were empowered to use and speak *nehiyawewin*, especially during the *Cree Language and Identity* course. Ceremonies were also conducted in the *nehiyaw* language. To Elders and students, the *nehiyaw* language is a spiritual language. Dr. Makokis explains, "through ceremony - embedded in language - we gain a sense of purpose for living. . . language is our 'moral compass'. The ability to speak an indigenous language is an indispensable

part of our identity, as these languages convey a sense of distinctiveness, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of spiritual relationship to the universe.” (Makokis, 2000)

Being able to learn and practice *nehiyaw* and Métis culture also allowed for cultural reclamation and resulted in a stronger sense of identity for many. A recurring theme of personal healing due to cultural learning’s and experiences within the program was universal for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The program provided time and ‘space’ for students to heal and allowed non-Indigenous students to not feel ‘guilty’ about colonization throughout the learning process. One student stated that the incorporation of culture was a necessity as “we must know who we are through our own culture, so we are able to help our communities.” This was a strong theme that emerged in many interviews with both students and Elders. The traditional teachings were based on all parts of our humanness (the four parts) of *nehiyawiak* people.

Having the support from Elders was a key aspect and important part of the program, according to all students. They provided students with traditional Indigenous teachings, song, prayers, and other healing practices. Students had access to various traditional healing practices and could approach the Elders for support. Many described the Elders of the program as ‘gentle’ or ‘humble’. The strong and revered relationships with, and between, students and Elders was astounding. Many students felt that the *nehiyaw kiskeyitimowina* (Cree knowledge) taught by Elders was equally as important as the academic material – if not more important!

Instructors:

The MSW program inspired instructors and reinforced their spiritual and social values. The students’ experiences in an Indigenous worldview learning environment impressed the instructors with the authenticity of identities of the students and staff at BQFNC and the quality of relationships with those supporting the program. Other themes the instructors (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) observed was the caliber of commitment, eagerness, empowerment, and academic performance of the students. The depth of responsibility and meaning in learning was a constant theme.

When teaching and learning within an Indigenous worldview learning environment, instructors noted fundamental differences from the conventional learning environment. Experiential learning, cultural teachings, *nehiyaw* ceremony, smudging in each class with an Elder, and songs were noted components of the holistic approach. Instructors were conscious of the sacredness of the learning environment that set the tone for trust and authentic participation. One instructor noted that the students “are giving you privy to information that is sacred.” In this context, instructors commonly noted the need to do things differently. One instructor commented, “we met curriculum targets, but we had to do it differently.” Flexibility, trust, authentic personal participation, and spiritual faith were regarded as helpful if not necessary for the program instructors.

Spiritual meaning is often challenging to capture in English words. A number of instructors commented on the limitation of English words to express the meaning of the program to them, one commenting on the historical and contemporary oppressive impact

of the English language in the representation of Indigenous ways of knowing. An instructor recognized that the intent of the program was to undo some of the legacy of colonialist oppression and to “reclaim what was taken and lost.” Instructors were conscious of the need “to make it a safe space to talk about the experience of oppression.”

While being conscious of oppression and also in alignment with the Indigenous worldview, instructors found themselves in a reciprocal and equal sharing of knowledge: “I went in with an ‘I don’t know better than you’ attitude - that I was going to deliver some sort of material that they needed to have. We were going to have a conversation for a few days and see what happens.” This sentiment was echoed by an instructor who was intentional to “make way, make space for people’s talents and gifts to come through.” Instructors commonly felt that they were outside allies respecting the knowledge of *nehiyaw* culture and ceremony of the students. Instructors commented on the value of learning aspects and details about the Indigenous worldview from the students. “I learned as much, if not more, from the students and the experience as did they.” Another instructor considered the knowledge acquisition to be collective: “I was learning; together we came to a number of realizations.”

The holistic interconnectedness of the cohort of students left a strong impression with many instructors. One instructor commented, “The class acts as a whole. It’s as though the class itself is an organism and for a time I was invited to be part of that organism.” Holistic interconnectedness and relational accountability were also observed by the instructors in the responsibility of the students to their communities. An instructor commented, “they are there out of commitment to their people, their community, something larger than them. Many of them have been advised by elders that this is something they should do. There is a direction from outside the group.” Another instructor noted the sense of service amongst the students, “helping themselves is a foundation to help their communities.”

Students impressed the instructors with their courage, commitment, empowerment, sense of responsibility, and quality of their work. Papers were noted to be of “phenomenal” or “amazing” quality. The quality of the students’ work aligned with the instructors’ impressions of the quality of character for the cohort of students. For example, the instructor who taught the first course of the program opened with an invitation to introductions. The instructor asked each student, “Who are you? Why are you here? And what do you want to get out of this class?” The instructor said, “It took us three days to introduce ourselves. That depth and depth of analysis was very instrumental in making that course a success.”

The positive teaching and learning experience was personally and professionally transformative for all of the instructors. Two instructors noted that the distinction between personal and professional does not seem to happen at Blue Quills College. In this context, relationships are with people, not students, colleagues, or subordinates. One instructor commented that the program held immense depth of meaning for him largely due to the relationships with students when many were involved in a previous site-based

BSW program. In addition, the same instructor found additional meaning through a personal long-term professional connection with the program coordinator. Accompanying former students through this program provided a sense of completion that was a validation of personal and professional investments in relationships, teaching, mentoring, and learning.

It was commonly recognized that there is something fundamentally different at Blue Quills College. Two instructors described it as a different experience of heart, of unconditional belonging and acceptance free of judgment. One instructor observed, “you have everybody all the way there with a full heart and a good heart and an unquestioning heart. It felt like home.”

The positive teaching and learning experience reinforced individual philosophy and personal pedagogy for the instructors. One instructor’s experience at Blue Quills reminded him of the importance of each moment, “be at peace with one’s self and enjoy your day and enjoy your life and enjoy your relationships and I suppose because you don’t know what tomorrow holds. So, if you get too invested in doing things for a future reward, you may miss today. I had this before but I felt like it was reinforced and validated and now I’m able to continue on a bit recharged.”

Instructors were inspired and affirmed to participate in a learning environment where knowledge has the power to transform not only the lives of those in the classroom, but also the lives of others outside the classroom. Reinforcement of personal values such as Indigenous ways of thinking and behaving; emancipatory education; trust in students; nurturance of peoples’ gifts and talents; and hope for social change were inspired and/or reinforced in various instructors.

This program is seen by some instructors to offer the possibility to transform academic practices and social work institutions. One instructor noted the exemplary strength of Blue Quills College’s bond with the community. Another instructor observed, “marginalized communities are not successful because of the systems that are in place. How do we look at success? How do we reward learning? How do we reward transformation? This program has potential to teach us that.”

Instructors became cautiously hopeful about the potential of this cohort of students to expand space for the Indigenous worldview in Western institutions. One instructor recognizes Western, quantitative ways of knowing as “the belly of the beast; that’s (Western, quantitative research) the belly of where oppression starts.” Many years of disillusionment and discouragement with the Western worldview and its systems informed their cautious optimism for the potential impact of this cohort of students on Western institutions.

While contrasting the environment at the University of Calgary campus in Calgary or Edmonton with Blue Quills College, instructors were careful not to delineate a duality between the two. One instructor commented that “it’s not like a Likert scale on one side and a Likert scale on the other side—it’s not that obvious.” There are gradients

and shades between the two extremes. This instructor commented on the “void,” “gap,” or “chasm” between Blue Quills and the University of Calgary that could not be identified. This instructor spoke of the “gap” between wanting to understand and actually understanding Indigenous ways of knowing. For another instructor this was demonstrated in the one class held on-campus at the U of C in Edmonton. The ceremonial pre-class smudging was held in the parking lot because it is against fire code to smudge in the building. On one occasion, while the class was smudging in the parking lot in preparation for class, two of the students began to sing. The “ringing of the voices against the concrete” was symbolically significant - an example of “the juxtaposition of what we’re standing in and on versus what we’re doing in terms of invoking spirit.”

Instructors noted that the “gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous does not exist at Blue Quills College. One instructor speculated, “There’s not a lot of difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous there - non-Indigenous students are really tightly in there. There isn’t as big of a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous at Blue Quills as there is at the University of Calgary. Why? I don’t know.”

Support Team:

Support staff commented on the “meaningful” importance of the MSW at BQFNC being well-resourced. Strong fiscal resources enabled the program to establish a formal support network of various staff for the students and to support the development of Indigenous curriculum and programming that would encourage an informal support network (relational accountability) amongst the students. The various support staff roles were seen to be critical for a variety of reasons including supporting the students through the individual and collective legacy of oppression, supporting each student through daily experiences associated with living in oppression, and bridging Indigenous and Western concepts of knowledge and success.

Support staff for the program included a full-time BQFNC staff person who was available to students for academic and administrative support, two contract staff who supported the students with writing/editing services and counseling services, and various administrative connections between the University of Calgary and BQFNC.

Support staff were also deeply affected by their interactions with the students, as they assisted the students with various academic challenges and while helping to edit written assignments. One support staff commented on being deeply inspired by the hope, strength, and creativity of the students to overcome extremely complex personal therapeutic issues while studying in the program. The volume and complexity of grief, trauma, and stress associated with family and community issues were seen to be potentially “overwhelming”. The grief, trauma, and stress was complicated by the context of contemporary and historical oppression. One support staff commented that the students “are fighting oppression while they are oppressed.” The students’ ability to not only withstand but to transform tragedy into opportunity both individually and collectively deeply inspired support staff.

The physical setting of BQFNC as a reclaimed residential school and the deep commitment of BQFNC staff to education for transformation were mentioned by support staff as important contextual issues to understand the transformational power of the MSW program at BQFNC. The program, on many levels, was seen to serve as a “vessel” to transform tragedy into opportunity. Support staff felt privileged to contribute safe place for the students to process challenges into positive transformational changes that many of the students experienced.

Support staff commented on the relational accountability of the students to their cohort and their communities. One support staff commented on the collective will of the students to move forward and to create positive change within their communities. There was noted to be no separation of personal and professional identities for the students, a depth of authenticity and congruence that set the tone for the students’ profound willingness to share, to give of themselves, and to help their communities. The depth of authenticity was captured in story in the students’ writing, assignments, and class discussions.

Support staff recognized the importance of supporting students in a way that honoured both Western and Indigenous worldviews and systems. One support staff spoke of the brokering role that he played between the two worldviews and systems. Students, Elders, and support staff all mentioned the critical importance of this person and this person’s role for the success of the program in being able to work “between” the two worlds..

Honouring both worldviews was a learning process for one support staff. Through her role with the program, one support staff learned to honour the concept of professionalism held in both worldviews, “(in Western academia) bringing yourself into your work and your writing is not seen as professional, but they (Indigenous peoples) feel that separating oneself from knowledge is unprofessional. We need to understand this difference. It’s a different standard but still a successful one.” Holding students to this different but still successful standard was a key skill and understanding identified by the support staff.

To successfully support students in the management of, at times, conflicting expectations of the Western and Indigenous worldviews, support staff commonly recognized the need for flexibility, for honouring Western standards of success while taking a much more relational role. It was more of a process for some support staff than others to support the students in balancing Western and Indigenous epistemologies. One administrator commented, “my role was to get out of the way, that there are other people who know how and what to do better than I do, so it’s trying to make way, make space for people’s talents and gifts to come through.” For others, learning to balance the value of Western facts and grammar with Indigenous story-telling was a personally and professionally transformative experience. Witnessing and growing into supporting alignment between head and heart affected this support staff deeply and broadened the appreciation of and respect for living and working in two worlds. Another support staff

commented on the students' ability to find the 'space' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

All support staff believed their roles were crucial to the program's success. Being well-resourced ensured that students were able to bring their personal struggles to teachers and support staff and to support the establishment of a relational infrastructure of support amongst the students. Credit was given to BQFNC with the credibility, depth, and ability to write a compelling funding proposal to Advanced Education and Technology to enable an Indigenous-focused social work program to be "resourced well enough so that it could adapt and fit to what was appropriate for an Indigenous social work program." In addition, the feeling was expressed that "for the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work to offer an Indigenous-focused social work degree, this is the only way it could have possibly been done was through Blue Quills."

Unique Comments About the Program

Although several common themes emerged, there were some that were unique and could not be grouped to fit into other categories, but were still seen as significant for discussion. The location of the program at BQFNC was noted by many as convenient and students stated that had this program not been delivered at BQFNC, they would not have taken it. Students were not prepared to relocate families or leave permanent positions to attend the MSW program at an urban center (Edmonton or Calgary). The ability to choose and participate in the set up of meaningful practicums within the students' own communities was also important.

Location of the program proved to be meaningful at a deeper level as well. Many believed the geographical and physical location of BQFNC and the surrounding land helped shaped this MSW program. The 'place' and the spiritual significance of its history separated the program from others. Ceremonies performed on the land allowed for a spiritual connection to ancestors which provided direction and a sense of purpose to students. In some ways, the spirit and wisdom of this program is not replicable as the connection students have to land and ancestors is relative to their geographic history and Cree culture. Had this program been run in a different Indigenous context, the cultural components (i.e. Elders, songs, teachings) would have been very different.

There were some students in the MSW program who had attended the college while it was still a Residential School - and many had parents or grandparents who attended the Residential School. One MSW student stated that her mother and grandfather had all attended Blue Quills Residential School and the meaning of this was very deep and impactful. Students who either attended the school as children or who had parents or grandparents who attended felt that each day they attended BQFNC, they were reminded of the importance of being successful (relational accountability) to those who lost their voices, suffered or died at this location. They saw the program as an opportunity to de-colonize themselves and heal from the pain of intergenerational trauma. They saw the program as an opportunity to reclaim who they were and what was lost as a result of the emotional, cultural, spiritual and physical oppression experienced at residential

school. The history of the community and the geographical space of BQFNC itself creates space for healing and ceremony. That almost all of the classes – and all of the ceremonies – were held on the land was an essential component of the program.

Some students made connections to the oppression of Indigenous peoples within an international context. This was a result of the knowledge and historic information instructors brought in with respect to the rise of oppression and its effects on Indigenous groups around the world (i.e. South Africa). Students were able to make links between their experiences within their communities to other groups in different parts of the world. With respect to social work, the program taught students to think critically about the entire social work profession and to evaluate what is, and what is not, helpful for Indigenous communities.

One other unique component of the program deserves mention. The existence of the program allowed the creation of a number of other projects and events that would not have occurred without the graduate program. For example, the Alberta Centre for Child, Family & Community Research contracted BQFNC and the program to research, document, and present successful practices in Child Welfare with First Nations and Métis children. The initial presentation was done on-site at BQFNC including ceremony and presentations by the students of their research. In another case, as a consequence of the participation of an academic from Australia, an entire edition of a refereed Australian Journal was dedicated to articles written by students in the program. Additionally, the program has supported the creation and existence of a Research Team at BQFNC that have submitted a number of research proposals including one researching the successful resolution of trauma in First Nations and Métis communities and another exploring the traditional parenting roles of First Nations men.

Other important “side” benefits include an increase in community capacity in the areas of research and knowledge transfer and providing sustainability for the research arm of BQFNC. For example, through the program and additional funding, students and team members were involved in a genealogy project collecting and documenting oral knowledge of historical relationships and families in the nearby First Nations community of Saddle Lake. Other students developed teaching modules addressing historical issues of colonization and assimilation from a social work perspective and presented those modules at numerous social work courses in Alberta. The program has had far reaching consequences over and above the main goal of providing an appropriate social work education for people working in First Nations and Métis communities.

Discussion

A lot of intention, spirit, and planning was woven into creating the web of support for the students to succeed in the MSW at BQFNC. Various players spun different aspects of the web. Elders were intentional about spirituality and culture being foundations to the academic program; BQFNC invoked relational accountability in various forms and directions to own and direct the program; University of Calgary instructors and support staff were flexible and receptive to learning and transformation

related to the Indigenous worldview. The success of the BQFNC MSW program and the 25 graduating Indigenous, Métis, and non-Indigenous graduates is distinct and unique.

BQFNC is a reclaimed residential school and is thus literally and metaphorically emblematic of the radical transformation that touched all those involved with this program. Elders commented on witnessing the transformation of the students to reclaim their voices, culture, and identity. Instructors commented on the centered, empowered, balanced, and congruent students. The students were regarded as having a high degree of commitment, responsibility, resilience, and capability.

Relational accountability was one of the strongest and most frequently recognized meanings of the program identified by those interviewed. The students recognized themselves as a collective whose will it was to move forward and to create positive change within their communities. The relational connections to the community lost loved ones and ancestors, to future generations, the land, the Elders, the Spirit World, Mother Earth, and the Universe were strong and intentional. The depth of practice of relational accountability left a huge impression on all involved in the program. School and life, personal and professional were not distinct and separate in this program. This standard of practice of congruence deeply touched many.

Witnessing and participating in a sacred learning environment transformed not only the students, but also instructors and support staff. Transformation was also recognized to be happening simultaneously and consequently in the present, past, and future families and communities attached to each of the students in the cohort. Seeing the ripple effect of this program in Indigenous communities inspired many.

The formal and informal, concrete and invisible supports to the students ensured the success of this program and this cohort of students. As one student commented, the program started in ceremony, finished in ceremony, and cannot fail with ceremony. The depth of faith supporting this program is inexpressible.

Tangible supports that were crucial included structures that not only enabled but encouraged students to bring their personal struggles forward to each other, the teachers, and the support staff. Oppression and the internalized residue of oppression were centrally addressed. The program needed to provide a safe haven in which students were supported in dealing with oppression. As students fought oppression while they continued to be oppressed, the importance of effective emotional and spiritual supports was clear.

Many players supported the students as interpreters or “bridges” between the two distinct but not separate worlds of the Indigenous worldview and the Western worldview. One interviewee commented on the ‘weaves of knowledge’ at play in the students’ writing. It was a learning process for many to integrate Indigenous story, heart, and spirit with a facts-based approach and writing requirements of Western academia. Concepts of internal congruence were involved as well; the program required an alignment between

both head and heart. Witnessing and supporting this depth of congruence was transformative.

As one student commented, ceremony is love. An attitude and environment of unconditional belonging and acceptance with relational accountability were felt qualities of ceremony in this program. Many felt chosen by the Spirit World to enter the program. There was a common awareness and recognition of spiritual 'signs,' messages, and/or guidance from the Spirit World throughout the program. The Spirit World is now regarded as part of social work practice for many students. A strong groundedness and centeredness in spirit informed an element of surrender to spirit, a knowledge and acceptance that we are not in control, that the Creator knows our paths. *kiyam.*

Students commented that learning doesn't stop with the end of the program. One commented that 'this education is our buffalo.' Education grounded in Indigenous culture and ceremony is the contemporary buffalo that has the ability to sustain, nourish, and fulfill Indigenous needs. Education is life-long.

ekosi maka....

Supplemental:

One of the core concepts of First Nations research methodology – similar to that of hermeneutics - suggests that every element of the lives of the researchers is brought into the research process. It is strongly suggested that how well we have completed the assessment process is determined by two things; first, the research team’s degree of internal and individual change experienced by being part of the process and, second, the response of the reader to the shared meaning.

The first concept is best stated by the axiom “if doing it does not change you, then you have done it wrong.” In keeping with the first axiom, the assessment team has agreed to share with you, the reader, a brief comment on their experience of change over the process of this project.

The second concept we leave to you – the reader. If reading this document creates, at the least, a small change or moment of internal understanding – then the assessment team, the elders, the students, the instructors, and the support team have done well. We invite you to share – via email – your experience of the second axiom.

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Nadia:

The process of putting into context a program of such astounding meaning and value to all involved in the MSW program was a challenging process and a huge responsibility for me. The interviews I participated in with the students, the Elders, and the staff involved can be summed up as unforgettable discussions that were embedded with the energies that encompassed centuries of ancestral knowledge combined with the expressions of hope, newfound determination, and a strong sense of purpose for the future. The interviews honoured the past, present, and future in a way that mirrors the theme of relational accountability.

By respecting nehiyaw protocol during the interviews, I was able to connect with these individuals as the process of ceremony set the context for trust and allowed us to remember and honour the Creator throughout the interviews. All, including myself, believe that the spirit world was the underlying force that allowed all to experience healing and a renewed sense of connectedness within this program. I have come to believe that my role as a researcher in this project was also something predestined. The sense of determination and empowerment that all expressed and shared with me resulted in my own overwhelming sense of hope for the future of our communities. The process reaffirmed the power and gifts of culture. Indeed, a cultural revival is alive and well in our communities and I wait patiently to see the far-reaching effects this program will have on our future generations. The experience has, simply, renewed my faith – and that I am truly grateful to all – *ninanaskomon*.

Meagan:

My involvement with this project has substantially deepened my personal journey of surrendering mind to Spirit. As a white woman with British heritage, I am relatively new to surrender and find that relinquishing this control to trust in Spirit is immensely challenging. My involvement with this project has supported and validated the wisdom of surrender. At our initial team meeting for this project, I became aware, in a panic that I had been chosen by Spirit to play a role in the assessment of this transformative ceremonial MSW program. I was terrified simultaneously for two reasons. Firstly, I was terrified of not being capable to adequately and respectfully honour the spirit of Indigenous culture, ceremony, and the MSW at BQFNC. Secondly, I was terrified of risking, for the first time, to surrender my mind to Spirit in a professional, Western work context.

Nadia, Ralph, and the entire process were immensely supportive. Before each interview, meeting, writing, and editing session I set the intention to surrender to Spirit. This ritual and the project process has helped to shift my doubts about ‘not belonging’, a profoundly meaningful gift. Despite my peripheral role to this program, I have felt deeply touched, validated, inspired, and connected. It has been a deep honour and privilege to share in this ceremony. *All my relations.*

Ralph:

My participation in the final assessment of the program has been a process of affirmation. I entered into the overall project – as the coordinator – with a great deal of anxiety and concern. I remember, at the beginning, when we did individual interviews of the prospective students, realizing that each one of them did not talk about “getting a degree” as their goal – each of them expressed their hopes that they could bring back to their communities and families some sort of process that was culturally relevant and would contribute to healthier communities. I realized that many individual hopes and dreams were associated with the program – and I found that very humbling.

Now, as we conclude the program (the convocation was last week), I truly believe that the program – and the students – have achieved exactly what we set out to do. We have engaged in an educational process that has explored the integration of culture, ceremony, and relationship within the context of the practice of social work. Ancient teachings and protocols have been integrated with a hermeneutical understanding of living life as “Life” – to combine all that we are with all that we have – to truly live *miyo pimatisiwin* in relational accountability with generations past, present, and future.

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