

TOUCHSTONES for LEADERSHIP

RECONCILIATION IN CHILD
WELFARE CURRICULUM

BACHELOR of SOCIAL WORK

3rd year Bachelor of Social Work or
1st year Master of Social Work
Course Outline



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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal peoples have concepts of personal and social justice, safety, and well-being dating back millennia—but social work education still largely acts as if Aboriginal peoples are a blank slate for western social work knowledge to fill. Birthed from a colonial nation and culture, social work has often embodied the colonial tradition of superimposing western knowledge and ways of being on Aboriginal¹ peoples and proclaiming such actions as necessary regardless of the level of harm experienced by Aboriginal children (RCAP, 1996; Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley, & Wien 2005). This course introduction surveys the literature on the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal “social work” knowledge before exploring how colonialism has affected social work education. The course introduction concludes by compelling social work education to fully engage in the reconciliation process and principles (touchstones) set out in the document entitled *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* (Blackstock, Cross, Brown, George & Formsma, 2006).

Indigenous Social Work Education

Canadian child protection is embedded in the colonial western culture and yet it continues to be forcibly imposed on Aboriginal peoples with little reflection of its colonial underpinnings to the detriment of Aboriginal children and their families (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002; Blackstock, 2003; Hart, 2007). After 50 years of western child protection services, Aboriginal children have arguably never been at greater risk. There are more Aboriginal children in child welfare care today than at any time in history—including during the residential school and 60s scoop eras. Emerging evidence suggests that neglect embedded in structural risks such as poverty, poor housing, and caregiver substance misuse coupled with significant deficits in service access are the primary reasons for the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care (Trocmé, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004; Assembly of First Nations, 2007). For decades, Aboriginal peoples have expressed significant concern that western social work pays little attention to the impacts colonialism and its resulting structural risks (e.g., displacement, racism, poverty, poor housing, food and water insecurity) or the influence of cultural values on concepts of child safety (Union of BC Indian

¹ Aboriginal refers to peoples of Métis, Inuit, or First Nations ancestry.

work education; the problem is that the latter receives almost no recognition in either social work programs or more broadly in society.

Reconciliation in Social Work Education

A thorough exploration of the historical relationship between social work and Aboriginal peoples is fundamental to understanding why reconciliation is needed in child welfare at two mutually reinforcing levels: (1) the demonstrated acknowledgement of social work's past and current relationship with Aboriginal peoples and the associated harms, and (2) a commitment to centre the child welfare systems on the five reconciliation touchstone values (self-determination, holism, culture and language, structural interventions, and non-discrimination) that experts in Aboriginal child welfare believe are essential to reversing the overwhelming over-representation of Aboriginal children in child welfare care (Blackstock, Cross, Brown, George, and Formsma, 2006).

For Aboriginal peoples in Canada, there is a great deal of distance between the high cultural value for knowledge and knowledge transmission and the experience of western education in Canada. Too often the word "education" has become synonymous with Canada's assimilation policy, which aimed to purposefully eradicate both Aboriginal knowledge and cultural identity (RCAP, 1996; Battiste & Barman, 1996). The introduction of western education to Aboriginal peoples was fierce and abrupt as the first residential schools began opening in the 1870s (RCAP, 1996; Blackstock, 2003). The primary goal of these schools was to assimilate Aboriginal children by forcibly placing them in Christian run residential schools (Milloy, 1999). Along with being devastating incubators for disease, neglect and child abuse, the schools also attacked Aboriginal knowledge by teaching the children that Aboriginal knowledge was inferior, and in some cases evil, and needed to be replaced by more "civil" and "legitimate" western ways of knowing.

Many Canadians know about the prolific abuse and neglect experienced by children in these schools but few are aware that social workers were responsible for serving on admissions committees for the schools and placing the vast majority of children in residential schools during the 1960s (Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley, & Wien, 2005). Even when social work history is recited in schools of social work, too often it involves social work's response to outside events versus an exploration of the profession itself. Social work education rarely encourages students to engage in a historical critical analysis of what happened; what social work did or didn't