

Welcome to Getting Schooled and the newest feature in our series in interventions. As we practice in schools, cultural sensitivity is of paramount consideration with respect to providing meaningful service. Ms. Melissa Tremblay and Dr. Troy Janzen discuss some critical issues with respect to consultation and intervention with Indigenous peoples, highlighting the importance of understanding contextual factors as well as cultural competency and responsiveness.

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Consultation in Schools with Predominantly Indigenous Populations

Consultation has a long history and a growing dominance as a professional service and form of indirect intervention that psychologists offer to schools. The current article focuses on providing psychological consultation services for Indigenous children and families. In this article, we use the term “Indigenous” to refer to individuals who self-identify as First Nations, Inuit or Metis. We believe that consultation and other forms of direct or indirect interventions offered to Indigenous children and their families require adapting existing models to be culturally informed, responsive, and aligned with best practices.

What Do We Mean by Consultation?

Consultation is a rather nebulous term with multiple connotations. Within school psychology, consultation may be defined as a structured, indirect, collaborative, problem solving relationship between the psychologist (consultant) and one or more consultees. Psychologists often consult about behaviour, social and emotional wellbeing, and programs, instructional/academic issues and skill development. Consultees can include teachers, parents, administrators, and organizations. Typically, psychologists consult about a child with the goal of improving the behavioural, emotional and/or mental health of that child. A secondary goal can be to facilitate improved home-school connections, communication, and partnerships to address needs as they arise. Psychologists can use various consultation models in schools, all of which typically incorporate problem solving.

Indigenous Context

Demographic realities. Alberta is home to the third largest population of self-identified Aboriginal or Indigenous peoples. In Alberta, Indigenous peoples represent a highly diverse population, with more than 60 distinct languages, 48 First Nations, and eight Metis settlements. Canada’s Indigenous population is growing at three times the national average, with substantial growth taking place in Alberta as well. In the province of Alberta, the Indigenous population is particularly young; the median age of Indigenous peoples was 25.3 in 2011, as compared to a median age of 36.8 for the general population. Nearly half of all Indigenous peoples in Alberta live in rural areas.

Some of the pragmatic realities of Indigenous communities can be easily taken for granted by consultants. For example, in consulting with parents at their child's school, many families might be challenged to find transportation or access to a phone. This might especially be true in more remote communities. In addition, consultants should take into account the immense variability of Indigenous communities with respect to the availability of resources and access to health, therapeutic and other services. It may not be safe to assume that families have access to such resources and services.

Social strengths and challenges. The social, cultural and political issues facing many Indigenous peoples, combined with issues of geographical location and isolation, pose distinct challenges for the provision of psychological services. Some of the social challenges that face many Indigenous communities include a lack of access to quality housing, over-crowding, poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, and low high school graduation rates. While an awareness of these challenges is critical, it is equally important for consulting psychologists and other professionals to recognize that Indigenous communities across the province possess resilience and strengths that variably impact the ways that these challenges are experienced.

Truth and reconciliation. In 2009, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was formed to acknowledge residential school experiences and impacts, and to promote awareness and education about residential schools to the Canadian public. The work of the TRC has been instrumental in taking steps to move past conflict toward respectful and healthy relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. However, the TRC has acknowledged that "we are not there yet".

It is important for non-Indigenous consultants entering schools serving predominantly Indigenous students to keep this acknowledgement in mind. The residential school system has resulted in far-reaching inter-generational consequences that continue to impact Indigenous students and schools today. It is incumbent upon psychologists to recognize the ongoing impacts of residential schools rather than perceiving impacts as being confined to the past. While we can move forward with positive goals for healthy relationships in mind, we must do so with an understanding that the work of reconciliation and healing is still very much ongoing in schools and elsewhere.

Translating school-based consultation for work with Indigenous populations

Cultural competency. The American Psychological Association cites six key guidelines for performing psychological services across cultures.

1. Recognize that individuals, as cultural beings, may hold attitudes and beliefs that can influence their perceptions of and interactions with individuals who are ethnically and racially different from themselves. In consultation relationships, reflexivity becomes particularly important in adhering to this guideline.
2. Psychologists are encouraged to recognize the importance of multicultural sensitivity/responsiveness to, knowledge of, and understanding about ethnically and racially different individuals. In consulting with Indigenous populations, it is

important to move beyond simply knowing about historical events toward deepening understanding about the potential for ongoing impacts.

3. Psychologists should employ the constructs of multiculturalism and diversity in psychological training and education.
4. Conduct culture-centered and ethical psychological research. This is absolutely essential for respectful relationships with Indigenous schools and communities. Because many Indigenous communities have experienced significant harm from research, sensitivity to this issue is paramount.
5. Psychologists are advised to develop multicultural competencies, as well as skills and practices that incorporate unique cultural perspectives.
6. Use organizational change processes to support culturally informed organizational (policy) development and practices.

The concept of culture is also interwoven throughout the Canadian Psychological Association Code of Ethics for Psychologists. For example, the Code explicitly prohibits unjust discrimination due to culture and advises psychologists to be responsive to cultural differences (for example, non-verbal indications of a desire to terminate services if it is not culturally appropriate for a person to express this verbally). It is imperative for consulting psychologists to consider how these guidelines and codes relate to their own practice and skills before taking on consulting roles with Indigenous populations.

Cultural responsiveness. What does it mean to be culturally responsive? According to Cotton, Nadeau, & Kirmayer (2014), it has become increasingly important to provide culturally responsive health services, especially in remote Indigenous communities. Cultural responsiveness is a broader term than cultural sensitivity. To be culturally responsive requires one to move beyond cultural sensitivity toward being informed about cultural knowledge, including socio-political forces, cultural values, and history. When working with Indigenous communities in particular, the importance of understanding historical contexts cannot be overstated. A lack of historical knowledge is known to contribute to inaccurate and incomplete perceptions on the part of non-Indigenous people, and to fuel mistrust when working with Indigenous communities. Building on this, Knotek (2012) comments how cultural responsiveness toward Indigenous peoples means having knowledge of and affirming diversity and culture, a commitment to connect the home and school experiences of students, and a willingness to adopt a wide range of instructional and assessment strategies.

Indigenous cultural values and consultation. It is important for consultants to familiarize themselves with the positive values and strengths among Indigenous peoples in Canada, including values of cooperation and harmony, connectedness to one another and the world, and highly relational cognitive and communication styles. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada describes how many Indigenous values follow from spiritual teachings that emphasize Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility and Truth. In our experience, additional strengths common to many Indigenous populations include a clear value for family and a strong ability to use humour in the face of adversity.

Best practices in consultation with Indigenous populations. There is a paucity of research examining the effectiveness of school-based consultation among Indigenous

populations. However, best practice guides on consultation in school settings generally outline the need to apply some sort of problem solving model. However, Sheridan (2000) cautions against uncritically applying research findings to cross-cultural settings and multicultural populations.

The authors' experience with consulting in Indigenous communities in Alberta, combined with the general guidelines for psychological practice with multicultural populations outlined above, has led to a number of considerations that can be taken into account by psychologists practicing in this field. When entering schools serving primarily Indigenous children and families, psychologists are advised to:

1. Be informed about the history, culture, and values of the population and the community.
2. Demonstrate cultural responsiveness.
3. Be open to diverse perspectives on diagnosis and use a strength-based, trauma-informed approach.
4. Be patient.
5. Carefully build collaborative relationships (and especially with key stakeholders such as Directors of Education, Principals, and Chief and Council).
6. Use a more relational communication style that respects the values for harmony and cooperation. Indigenous cultures are highly relational, with values centering on respect and reciprocity and this must be taken into account throughout the consulting process.
7. Approach the task of consultation with humility and respect, honouring the local people and the strengths of the community.
8. Maintain awareness of challenges while working toward strengths.
9. Enact a community- and family-minded approach.
10. Employ a non-hierarchical approach with an intentional emphasis on building a collaborative alliance.

References

- Cotton, M.E., Nadeau, L. & Kirmayer, L.J. (2014). Consultation to remote and indigenous communities. In L.J. Kirmayer et al. (eds.), *Cultural consultation: Encountering the other in mental health care*, International and Cultural Psychology, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4614-7615-3_11, Springer Science and Business Media: New York.
- Knotek, S.E. (2012). Utilizing culturally responsive consultation to support innovation implementation in a rural school. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 64(1), 46-62.
- Sheridan, S.M. (2000). Considerations of multiculturalism and diversity in behavioral consultation with parents and teachers. *School Psychology Review*, 29(3), 344-353.

A copy of the full reference list is available upon request.