
A Study of the Mismatch Between Native Students' Counselling Needs and Available Services

Cheryl A. Dolan

Mount St. Vincent University

Abstract

This study examined the counselling needs of First Nations youth, living in five major First Nations communities of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The following types of counselling needs were identified based on the survey and interview data from 54 subjects: (a) the opportunity to validate their cultural identity, (b) personal and substance abuse counselling, (c) support in transition to provincial schools, (d) academic support, and (e) improved access to counselling services. The majority (57%) of the students reported having never or only once accessed the Native counsellor, while less than 10% of them reported ever accessing the regular school counsellor and 82% stated they would not be welcomed there. The provincial school students perceived significantly less counselling service available to them than did those attending band-based schools. Practical implications are discussed.

Résumé

Cette étude examine les besoins de counseling de jeunes autochtones vivant dans cinq communautés autochtones situées sur l'île du Cap Breton en Nouvelle-Écosse. Les types de besoins de counseling suivants furent identifiés à partir des résultats d'un questionnaire et des données provenant d'entrevues avec 54 sujets: (a) l'occasion de valider leur identité culturelle, (b) le counseling individualisé et le counseling pour des problèmes de dépendance chimique, (c) du support pendant la période de transition aux écoles provinciales, (d) du soutien académique, (e) accès accrue aux services de counseling. La majorité des élèves (57%) ont indiqué qu'ils n'ont jamais eu accès à un conseiller autochtone ou bien qu'ils l'ont consulté seulement une fois, tandis que moins de 10% des élèves ont eu accès à un conseiller non-autochtone, et 82% des élèves affirment qu'ils ne seraient pas les bienvenus. Les élèves qui vont aux écoles provinciales rapportent avoir accès à moins de services en relation d'aide que ceux qui fréquentent des écoles autochtones, la différence entre les deux groupes était significative. Finalement, les implications pratiques sont discutées.

Recent studies have indicated that the First Nations youths' experience in the education system has been a very rocky one. The literature illustrates how the struggle commences as soon as they enter the school system and continues until their exit. It starts with the average First Nations child being retained at least once, usually in grade one when they are adjusting to a new culture (Charleston, 1988). Their career opportunities are frequently limited by channelling them, more frequently into vocational studies rather than university preparatory programs (Parnell, 1976). The students have found that one way to avoid the frustration of coping with the system is to drop out. Consequently 20% of status Indians in Nova Scotia have less than a grade nine education, twice the national average (Statistics Canada, 1993). Similarly, only 20% of First Nations students ever graduate from grade twelve (Charleston, 1988). The highest dropout rate is occurring at the transition point,

when students must deal with major pressure in the switch from a reserve school to a provincial Junior High school (Wien, 1983).

When a First Nations student who has managed to survive the school system returns to contribute to their community, their problems only increase. The reserve is likely to have an unemployment rate of 70-80% (Lautard, 1987). The above profile illustrates the difficult circumstances that a First Nations student must endure if they wish to obtain an education. Lin's (1987) study describes the results of this conflict in the profile of isolated and troubled Native adolescents who frequently seek suicide as a way out (Lin, 1987). The urgency of his concern is alarmingly reinforced by the suicide rate of First Nations in the Atlantic provinces. It is three times the national average (Lautard, 1987). Lin (1987) cautioned that these students must receive assistance in dealing with their feelings of despair and disillusionment before schools can even attempt to meet their academic needs.

The Assembly of First Nations published their own study identifying education as the major means of improving their present situation (Charleston, 1988). In the study counselling services are identified as essential to linking the two worlds of the First Nation and the mainstream culture, and consequently preventing many social and academic problems. It highlighted the need for counselling services from kindergarten to grade twelve, and even on to post secondary institutions.

The need for counselling services to First Nations students has been clearly identified by previous research. Subsequently the purpose of the present study is to determine whether or not these services are being effectively delivered in the school system. The study was designed: (a) to determine the amount of satisfaction with the various aspects of school counselling services presently available to First Nations students; and (b) to compare services available to Native students attending band-run schools and those attending provincial schools to determine if there is any significant difference.

METHODS

Sample

The sample consisted of 54 First Nations students including 25 males and 29 females in grades seven to twelve. The students were all Micmacs from five reserves in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. They attended either a provincial school, where the majority of the student population was non-Native, or a band-based school on their reserve whose entire student body was Native.

There were two types of counselling services available within the district schools. Each school was serviced by a Native education officer who acted as a paraprofessional counsellor. They were employees of the

band and worked only with First Nations students. The Native students attending provincial schools also had access to the regular non-native school guidance counsellor.

Procedure

Each subject in the study was surveyed and interviewed in their school by the author, with the assistance of the Native counsellors. Permission to do so was obtained from each Band council and superintendent. Students were first requested to complete a fifty-six-item questionnaire, which used a five-point Likert scale to rate the following issues: (a) availability of cultural heritage education; (b) adequacy of personal, remedial and transition support; (c) accessibility and awareness of services; and, (d) quality of service. The author generated the questionnaire items based on related literature and her clinical experience. Each of the issues was covered by nine to eleven separate questions. Examples of the questions are: (a) Do you have to wait to see the counsellor? (b) How well do you know what the counsellor does in your school? (c) Do you use the school counsellor to talk about your personal problems?

After completing the questionnaire each student took part in an individual, semi-structured interview. It was conducted by the researcher in a private room. Ten standardized questions were asked concerning their personal use, percentage of and satisfaction with counselling services, as well as any improvements they might suggest. The students were encouraged to elaborate further at will and to clarify any ambiguous statements during the interview. The interviewer did not give any feedback or comments to influence the interview.

Verbatim transcripts were made for the purposes of coding. Coding criteria were developed to categorize the types of responses given by the students. Criteria were based on responses from students who were used in pretesting the procedures. Interviews were coded separately by three individuals unfamiliar with the hypotheses of the study. Each rater agreed on the presence of the five major themes included in the study. The items that did not receive unanimous agreement were excluded.

Descriptive statistics were used to report the trends found in the survey data. Individual quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the students' specific concerns.

RESULTS

The majority of the First Nations students rated the counselling services as inadequate and rarely used ($n=36$, 67%). They indicated a need for more counsellors and a wider range of services. Those attending band-based schools rated the amount of counselling services available to them significantly higher ($F=4.07$, $p<.05$) than did those Native students at-

tending provincial schools. The following comments reflect the First Nations students' concerns about the limited services:

They're hardly in their office. When I've a problem I can't go to them because they're not there! (female, 13, gr. 7)

Sometimes I even forget there is one. Tell everyone that there is a counsellor. (male, 15, gr. 9)

The main thematic areas identified as requiring more and improved service include: (a) cultural identity, (b) personal and academic counselling, and (c) increased access and support in the transition to provincial school. The qualitative interview data revealed no gender-related differences except in the area of confidentiality. Only female students listed this issue as an area of concern. All other issues were identified equally by both genders. The similarity of concerns shared by both male and female students is reflected in their personal quotes. Table 1 shows the percentage and gender of students who identified each area of need.

TABLE 1
*Types of Counselling Needs Revealed by
Male and Female First Nations Students*

	<i>Males</i> (n=25)	<i>Females</i> (n=29)	<i>Total</i> (n=54)	<i>Percentage</i>
1. Enhancing cultural identity and heritage	25	24	49	90.7%
2. Personal and substance abuse counselling	19	24	43	79.6%
3. Transition to provincial schools support	18	23	41	76.9%
4. Academic support	19	25	44	81.5%
5. Access to Counselling	18	27	45	83.3%

Lack of Cultural Heritage Education

Cultural factors which would strengthen their identity and self-esteem were rated as the most important to 94% (n=51) of First Nations students. One-way ANOVAs revealed significant differences between services available to those attending band-based schools and Native students attending provincial schools. The band-based students reported receiving more instruction in their heritage and language skills ($F=21.91$, $df=1/54$, $p<.0001$). In contrast, those attending provincial schools showed greater concern about the loss of language and lack of opportunity to learn the traditional culture ($F=23.58$, $df=1/54$, $p<.0001$).

TABLE 2
ANOVA Results Comparing Band and Provincial Schools

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Band School</i> (n=29) (males=14) (females=15)	<i>Provincial</i> (n=25) (males=11) (females=14)	ANOVA F (1, 53)
Instruction available heritage and language	M=4.2 (SD-0.9)	M=2.3 (SD-1.7)	21.91**
Opportunity to learn traditional culture	M=4.3 (SD-1.1)	M=2.1 (SD-1.6)	23.58**
Amount of counselling services available	M=3.2 (SD-1.3)	M=2.3 (SD-1.2)	4.07*

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

The students attending band-based schools also appear to display a stronger cultural identity during their interviews.

Give me a chance to learn my Micmac language which I don't know how to speak! (female, 16, gr. 10)

We need more Micmac teachers and counsellors so we can influence the Micmac students. (female, 14, gr. 10)

I would like to see us get our culture back. (male, 16, gr. 10)

The vast majority (n=47, 88%) of the interviewed students also reported a desire to participate in and learn about the mainstream culture, notwithstanding the importance of their own culture.

Having a school with just Micmac students will not help us learn about the real world, a multicultural world. (male, 16, gr. 11)

I want to make friends with non-natives and get along with them. (female, 15, gr. 9)

You have to learn to be with people other than your own race. (male, 15, gr. 9)

Inadequate Personal Counselling

The students were not satisfied with the counselling assistance they received concerning personal issues. The majority (n=38, 70%) reported rarely or never discussing personal problems with a counsellor. They stated that they were least apt to seek help for these types of issues. This is despite the fact that most of the students (n=36, 86%) from the two largest reserves, stated they often think about quitting school. They spoke of their many individual problems, as well as those of their friends and family. Although information was provided in the schools on drugs, alcohol and sexuality, students reported that no ongoing counselling was available in these areas as illustrated by the following response.

I've got no support for my drinking problem here. (female, 16, gr. 10)

We need to help people on the reserve with drugs and alcohol. There's a lot. Lots of kids can't go to school because of it. Too many [pregnant] friends have to leave school. (female, 16, gr. 11)

The vast majority of First Nations students felt that counselling was essential to help them stay motivated and remain in school (n=51, 94%).

It would be better [to have] someone to deal with problems, both [at] home and school. A counsellor for school and maybe another could visit and listen to teenage problems, drugs, sex, suicide. (female, 17, gr. 11)

A Difficult Transition

It was essential to 82% (n=44) of the students that the school be a friendly place. They stated a need for more help fitting into the non-native school environment.

I'm not welcome in this school. The teachers and principal are prejudiced. (female, 14, gr. 8)

Sometimes I feel I'm being left out. I don't feel comfortable here. (male, 16, gr. 9)

In the interviews, the transition from the band-based schools to provincial schools in grade nine was identified as a point where counsellor intervention was critical. They suggested one counsellor be assigned exclusively to assist those who were making the transition. Students also stated that increasing the number of First Nations teachers acting as role models would help them to feel more at ease.

Insufficient Remedial Support

The third major area in need of service was practical assistance in handling school and homework and 96% (n=52) rated it as important. The majority of the students (n=41, 76%) received little or no instruction in study skills.

You get discouraged with failing marks. The books are too hard to read for high school. The words are all different. (female, 18, gr. 12)

I need someone to help me handle the work. Help to catch up after school. I don't want to miss the whole year! (male, 13, gr. 7)

Remedial support was rated by 76% (n=41) of the students as being essential to their success. Students recognized that counsellors cannot do it all. They suggested several options, including peer and group counselling as well as workshops for AIDS and substance abuse.

Limited Accessibility to and Awareness of Services

The majority (n=31, 57%) of the First Nations students reported they rarely or only occasionally made use of any school counselling service. A First Nations counsellor is assigned to each of the schools and in addition, a regular school counsellor is available in every provincial school.

However, they are often not aware of the Native counsellor, as shown by a student's comments as follows:

There's no counsellor from my reserve in this school, not that I seen. (male, 17, gr. 11)

All First Nations students stated in the interview that they knew each school had its own non-Native counsellor for the total student body. However, they did not feel comfortable accessing this service. Only two participants, with parents who worked outside the reserve, reported that they would make use of the non-Native counsellor. All of the Native counsellors stated they have little opportunity for interaction with the formally trained regular school counsellors.

For our own problems I wouldn't use a non-Native counsellor, don't want the outsiders to know. (female, 12, gr. 7)

Language was also noted as a barrier to First Nations students in gaining access to the regular counsellor. They reported feeling shy about speaking in English and unsure of the vocabulary needed to articulate their concerns.

I feel dumb. I'm nervous about talking in English, shy to ask questions. (female, 16, gr. 10)

Several of the students stated that they had never even been introduced to the regular school counsellor and were sure they would not be welcomed there. Consequently, the school counsellor was generally seen as an outsider. To correct this, the students recommended that the regular school counsellor should become more receptive to First Nations persons and reach out through active contact.

Let us know you're there. Have to reach out to the students, draw them out. (male, 16, gr. 11)

Twenty female students identified confidentiality as an issue that limits their access to services. The limited number of First Nations counsellors servicing the schools frequently resulted in the students withdrawing when a personality or gender preference arose. Several students preferred a counsellor who was not from their reserve citing concerns about confidentiality in their close communities.

Individual students indicated that location and visibility are influencing the low turnout rate. They suggested that the First Nations counsellor increase their presence by going into the classrooms and checking with students to see how things are going. In addition, they recommended that all counsellors have their offices close to where students "hang out" as they are missing the majority of students, by not actively going out to them. The First Nations students stated that if counsellors would go out where they gather, this would increase contact and allow for trust to develop. This in turn may reduce their tendency to be reticent in sharing their personal concerns with anyone.

They should go in more to the class. They don't go out to students enough where we are. (female, 14, gr. 8)

I would use them more if they were more easily available. I'd go if they had a private office. (male, 17, gr. 11)

Quality of Service

The First Nations students emphasized their appreciation of the native counsellor, regardless of the amount of service they had received (n=46, 85%). They felt that such service as was provided was generally good. The students reported that the counsellors helped them see the value of education, and they made a school a friendlier place.

The counsellors try to brighten you up and make you happy. (male, 13, gr. 8)

They are worth having, a person we can relate to, open up. (male, 16, gr. 10)

They'll talk to you and not turn their backs on you. (male, 15, gr. 9)

The majority (n=48, 89%) of the students reported thinking of quitting school at various times in their education. However, 93% (n=50) also rated staying in school as important to them. First Nations students remain in school in hope of being able to help their own communities regardless of the difficulties.

I've got high expectations for myself. I'll be the first one in my family to graduate. (male, 17, gr. 11)

I'm going to be a lawyer so I can work for my reserve, help things get better. We need lawyers, it's important to get a good education. I don't want to be frying hamburgers. I quit before and did that; quitters don't do well. (male, 16, gr. 10)

DISCUSSION AND COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

This paper began by describing the difficult circumstances that First Nations youth must endure in order to obtain an education. In their own words the students described how the present counselling services are not meeting their urgent needs. The services are insufficient and generally of the wrong type. The students stated that their first area of concern was the lack of opportunity to establish a strong cultural identity and strengthen their self-esteem. This unfortunately was also the area receiving the least amount of service. This discrepancy was greatest for those students attending provincial schools. They experienced the least amount of exposure to their culture, and paradoxically reported fewer counselling services. Without this needed support, First Nations students in provincial schools experienced the highest dropout and failure rate (Wien, 1983; Lautard, 1987). The majority of the students spoke of seriously considering dropping out at some point in their school career; several had quit and then returned. Assistance with the transition to provincial school and school work, improved access to services, and

personal and substance abuse counselling, were all reported to be inadequately serviced.

Concern accelerates when one examines the profile of Native youth, who are described as isolated, troubled adolescents who often saw suicide as a way out (Lin, 1987). The alienation is echoed in one student's words: "No one was interested . . . we didn't fit anywhere" (Tempest, 1984, p. 4). First Nations students often feel despair and alienation due to their personal experiences of discrimination and oppression (Lin, 1985). The stress is even more severe and sudden when they have to move from their community to provincial schools (Blue & Blue, 1981; Runion & Gregory, 1984). This study has revealed the First Nations students' need for counselling services and the insufficiency of services presently available in their schools.

In order to effectively address the needs of First Nations students, it seems essential to have a more collaborative team approach between the First Nations counsellors and the regular school counsellors. In this way each group could provide their own area of expertise and thereby offer a broader range of services for all students.

The First Nations students have demonstrated considerable insight into their own needs. The students noted that better communication between counsellors and students is necessary to inform students about the services that are available. Such insight should play an active part in the development and implementation of services.

All students spoke of their need to strengthen and maintain their identity. At the same time they also expressed a need and desire to experience and live successfully alongside the mainstream culture. An effective counsellor could play a major role in facilitating this process in the schools.

The results of this study raise some important concerns about the adequacy of counselling services provided to First Nations students. The present findings suggest that increased service and greater collaboration are necessary to make a closer match with students' needs. The students showed in this study that they have a clear vision of where they want to go, and we need to provide them with the support needed to get there.

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About the Author

Cheryl Dolan received a Master of Arts in Psychology from Mount St. Vincent University and has worked as a therapist and school psychologist in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nova Scotia. She has had the privilege of living in and working with a variety of First Nations communities across Canada. She is presently employed with District #4 in Sussex, NB.

Address correspondence to: Cheryl A. Dolan, P.O. Box 7157, Riverview, N.B. E1B 4T8.