WORKING TOWARD A PROVINCIAL STRATEGY TO ELIMINATE POVERTY:
A REFLECTIVE REVIEW OF A PRACTICUM WITH POVERTY-FREE SASKATCHEWAN

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ABSTRACT

This report is a reflective review of an eight-month part-time Master of Social Work field practicum, which I competed in partnership with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Saskatchewan Office (CCPA-SK) and the Poverty-Free Saskatchewan (PFS) network between the months of January and August of 2010. My practicum experience focused on the continued development of Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, a network of concerned individuals seeking to develop a poverty elimination strategy. PFS is following the trend of other Canadian provinces which are working on poverty reduction strategies. My practicum followed the work of my colleague, Kirk Englot, who completed his MSW Field Practicum with PFS prior to my involvement. This report outlines the ideologies, theories, and values which underlie my work. Furthermore, I also reflect upon my practicum experience by evaluating my professional beliefs, skills, ethics and future career goals.
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INTRODUCTION

What is Poverty? The answer to this question depends on who is asking it, who supplies the response, and how the response is understood by the audience (Chambers, 2006). However, in Canada, the accepted definition or determinant of poverty for over fifty years has been based on the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) measure (Hunter & Miazdyck, 2004). According to Statistics Canada (2010), “…a LICO is an income threshold below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family” (Statistics Canada, 2010). An individual or family is considered to be low-income if their yearly income falls below the cut-off when compared to the LICO (Statistics Canada, 2006). Using the LICO as the measure of a Canadian poverty-line, it is very disturbing to note that over the last 30 years, the reality of Canadian citizens working at jobs that pay minimum wage has become dire. For example, in 1973, an individual working 40 hours per week at a job paying minimum wage, earned an income equivalent to 127% of the poverty-line. In 1991, the same full-time worker would be earning an income of just 56% of the poverty line (McQuaig, 1993). In Regina, Saskatchewan in 2004, this same individual working full-time for minimum wage would earn $13,832 per year. The LICO for a single person in Regina at this time was $16,979 (PWHCE, 2004). A low-income family as defined above suffers from more than just a lack of money or purchasing power. An individual’s financial status determines their social status, level of inclusion or social isolation (Zuberi, 2006). It follows that an individual or family living in poverty would experience their community differently than other people whose income and financial situation kept them
out of poverty. Income disparity impacts how people relate to one another (Wilson & Pickett, 2009).

It would be encouraging to be able to state that few people would argue that poverty should not be eradicated. However, there has always been a segment of society that believes that the threat of poverty and insecurity leads to a more productive workforce (Standing, 2009). However, in addition to the disagreement about how to define poverty, there is contentious and complex discourse about why poverty exists. The culture of poverty is historically based on an approach which blames the victims of poverty for their situations. One of the earliest references to the notion of a culture of poverty was from Oscar Lewis (1966), who discussed his view that people who live in long-term poverty become used to that lifestyle and develop beliefs, values and a unique view about their place in their community, and this unique culture perpetuates their poverty. The prevailing belief among many people is that poverty would not exist if those people living in poverty would simply change their behavior by working and following the unwritten rules of society (Zuberi, 2006). The main problem with this argument is that many of the families who linger at the poverty line are working and following the rules. This group has been labeled “the working poor” (Shipler, 2004). This group encompasses many of the families who once occupied the group labeled as middle class. Zuberi (2009) illustrates the transformation of this segment of the population:

The middle-class--the foundation of democracy--is shrinking in North America. While some individuals are getting wealthier, many more Americans and Canadians are feeling the squeeze financially and are becoming worse off. In the United States, more of the poor are living on less than half of the meager U.S.
poverty line. But many, many more are also living on the edge of poverty—on a stressful precipice, possibly one or two bad days away from potentially serious material hardship. Poverty is not increasing because people’s values have changed. The economy has rapidly shifted away from manufacturing and agriculture to the service sector, where many jobs are not providing enough income for households, even with people working a total of two, three, or four jobs to make ends meet. (pp. 164-165).

The transformation of the segment of the population previously known as middle-class to the working-poor can be traced back to a significant change in social policy, and this change will be discussed in more depth in the next section. In the 1980’s and 1990’s in Canada, neo-liberal/neo-conservative governments were elected in many provinces. These new regimes brought with them a shift from a commitment to ensuring equal access to income and resources through social welfare policy to a focus on big business, capitalist growth and globalization of the workforce (Mulvale, 2001). This shift also resulted in a casualisation of work (Broad, 2000). Rather than working 40 hours per week for an adequate wage, more and more people are forced to take part-time jobs for little pay and virtually no benefits. According to Statistics Canada (2010), Saskatchewan’s unemployment rate for 2010 is approximately 13%, while the percentage of the population living below the LICO is approximately 15%. Further evidence of the inadequacies of Saskatchewan’s current social welfare policies is the increasing number of women over 55 in the workforce, the number of families using the food bank, and the increasing number of individuals working more than one job (Gingrich, 2009).
Many Canadian provinces have similar statistics and as the Poverty-Free Saskatchewan discussion document, “Let’s Do Something About Poverty” (2010), discusses, some have begun to implement their strategies to reduce poverty and have had good results. My practicum experience involved working with a network of concerned citizens who evolved into Poverty-Free Saskatchewan and produced a discussion document titled, “Let’s Do Something About Poverty!” (Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, 2010).

**IDEOLOGY**

When discussing poverty, it is irresponsible to not discuss the notions of work and equality, and especially in the context of the impact poverty has on society. Ideologically, when discussing any social issue, and especially the issue of poverty elimination, it is important to consider it within the context of the population being affected, the historical context of the social policies in place over time in society, and their impacts. It is noteworthy that, while it is not possible to trace the development of poverty to a particular point in human history, it is possible to trace the issue of poverty back to early political discourse. Poverty impacts all members of society in various ways. Increases in the costs of providing health care to people who are not able to afford nutritious food or proper preventative medical care are one reality. The provision of affordable housing is another impact which society must address. (Douglas and Gingrich, 2009).

In my MSW practicum with Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, many members of the network had differing opinions on why poverty exists and what can be done to eradicate it. In the larger population, there are two main viewpoints on why people live in poverty. One view “blames the victim” and argues that people who do not have enough income
simply do not want to work and do not try hard enough (Zuberi, 2006). The other viewpoint argues that the social policies in place prevent an equal playing field for all citizens and some are simply relegated to having to go without. Furthermore, this opposing argument suggests a causative link between poverty and social policies “which result in lop-sided, concentrated control over resources, and unequal access to work, goods, services, and rights” (Gil, 1992, p.38).

Additionally, when working on the development of a strategy to address the issue of eliminating poverty, it is important to consult the affected population to determine what the outcome of any changes implemented needs to be. Although the ultimate goal of a strategy to eliminate poverty is to achieve a better quality of life for many people, one must remember that, “while one is concerned with who, what, and where issues, it is also important to understand the history and causality of the problem, previous attempts to address the problem, and the community’s readiness to deal with the problem” (Wharf and McKenzie, 2004, p. 57).

In my practicum fieldwork with the network Poverty-Free Saskatchewan, this placing of the issue in context was an agreed upon starting point for all members. Many discussions amongst the network involved how to build on work already done in our province to reduce poverty and how to build on the momentum already in motion. In order to understand the factors which produce poverty in our community, or in the global community, one needs to consider the changes which have taken place over the last few decades in the way the workforce operates and the meaning these changes have had for workers. This section will discuss the above issues and conclude with a look at
the sameness or differences between my personal views about how to eradicate poverty versus the views of the members of the PFS network, which served as my practicum setting.

The globalization of the workforce, in combination with the belief by many people in society that paid work equals security, leads to fatally flawed thinking. Modern social welfare holds on to the belief that if you participate in the workforce, you are then eligible to earn social benefits through contributory social insurance schemes like sick leave, maternity leave, disability leave and pensions. If you do not participate in the paid workforce, regardless of the reason, you are left with the crumbs that may or may not be left over (Standing, 2009). Globalization has also led to the widening gap between the three traditional classes of society. The upper class is not interested in the struggles of the lower classes and is detached from any social policy that serves to provide equality. Furthermore, the globalization of labour has led to a change from a natural insecurity for the holders of capital to the producers of labour. This was the basis for the destruction of the basics of labourism (Standing, 2009). A simple definition of labourism is that it was a political movement that stressed the importance of representing “the interests of its legitimate constituency, the working class,” (Knowles, 1992, p.18). The middle class, which now includes the “working poor”, believes in labourism but does not have the power to reconstruct it. The lower class is severely distanced from the other classes and lacks a sense of belonging due to the feelings of weakness and powerlessness that come from living in poverty (Standing, 2009). Poverty is more than not having enough money because people living in poverty “are not just the victims of a maldistribution of
resources but, more exactly, they lack, or are denied, the resources to fulfill social
demands and observe the customs as well as the unfolding laws, of society” (Townsend,
2006, p.6).

Furthermore, over the last 30 years, the globalization of labour has led to a
redistribution of income. Not only has income been taken from the workers in
industrialized countries and given to their employers, but income has also been
redirected to workers in less developed countries. Workers in less developed or more
economically poor countries are willing to work for a fraction of the typical wages earned
by workers in Canada or the United States. Therefore, moving jobs and production of
goods to these countries is an attractive option for profit driven companies. The trend of
giving jobs to lesser paid workers in other countries has led to a reduction of North
American produced goods and increased poverty (Standing, 2009).

Resistance against this trend needs to come from the workers whose earnings have
been diminished and even taken completely (Finn, 2007). This resistance against the
trend which has caused such deep poverty must be led by those who are in the midst of
the struggle, because they are the people who know exactly what the results of any
change need to be. Poverty-Free Saskatchewan (2010) holds that poverty can be
eradicatd by working on strategies that include individuals, groups and government and
the strategy can be developed through encouraging discussion and the sharing of ideas.
This type of strategy is rooted in the social planning approach to community
development, which:
...relies on research and a rational approach to problem solving, follows the tradition of urban planning and assumes that problems can be resolved by gathering information and presenting solutions based on the facts. It represents the science of social problem solving, which takes a neutral position to politics and power. (Wharf, 1997, p. 8).

My personal ideological foundation is closely tied to the ideologies which underpin the profession of social work. With respect to my experience in directing my learning objectives and fulfilling my practicum goals within my ideological framework, I was fortunate to be given independence from Simon Enoch, my Field Instructor and from James Mulvale, my Academic Supervisor. Both individuals guided my experience and were available when needed, but they allowed me to forge my own path in reaching my learning goals. In developing my goals, I relied heavily on the document which is the guide for meaningful and responsible social work practice, the Canadian Association of Social Work’s 2005 Code of Ethics. My practicum goals were based largely on one particular excerpt from the Code of Ethics:

Social work is a multifaceted profession. As professionals, social workers are educated to exercise judgment in the face of complex and competing interests and claims. Ethical decision-making in a given situation will involve the informed judgment of the individual social worker. Instances may arise when social workers’ ethical obligations conflict with agency policies, or relevant laws or regulations. When such conflicts occur, social workers shall make a responsible effort to resolve the conflicts in a manner that is consistent with the values and principles expressed in this Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005, p.6.)
The fight against poverty is not simply a community development project but it will take place in communities. Organizations like *Poverty-Free Saskatchewan* will be leaders in the fight and because of this belief, my practicum experience was sincerely meaningful for me because I have seen the numerous consequences faced by individuals of all ages who live in poverty. My clinical social work experience has allowed me to work with families who survive paycheck to paycheck and young people who confess that they commit crimes in order to have a place to sleep and three meals a day. This is a violation of not just the pursuit of social justice that is part of my professional life, but also a violation of common decency. No person should have to make a choice between personal freedom and having a place to sleep at night. Furthermore, the argument by followers of neo-liberalism that people should only be eligible for social benefits if they behave in a certain way and are connected to the labour market is flawed. People living in poverty and who cannot participate in the capitalist rush to consume, will lack a level of dignity and self-worth which makes it more likely that other social norms will lack meaning (Standing, 2009).

**THEORY**

Like the work I participated in during my practicum with *Poverty-Free Saskatchewan*, the community development work which is necessary to mobilize society into action is complicated and difficult to define. However, the reasons that a network like PFS is necessary are clear. Due to the globalization of the labor market (Standing, 2009), there has been a global change in how governments view the concept of welfare and social programs. Rather than the Saskatchewan government and citizens viewing
social programs which assist the less fortunate as entitlements for every citizen, these programs have been turned into earned benefits. The benefits are provided based on the beneficiary agreeing to fulfill numerous requirements due to “a restructuring of the welfare state in the delivery of social assistance programs to meet the needs of economic restructuring” (Hunter and Miazdyck, 2004, p. 20). Hunter and Miazdyck (2004) go on to explain this trend by stating:

With the economic restructuring occurring since the early 1980’s and a business community that wishes to increasingly offer flexible employment to workers with low-wages, no security and little in the way of benefits, we see the income support programs of the welfare state adjust. Current welfare programs are now being designed to keep people off social assistance by providing enough of an income supplement so that families do not qualify for welfare, thereby assuring business the labour force most desired for profit in service sector and temporary employment (p. 24).

My practicum work with PFS, along with my previous experience as a clinical Social Worker, has proven to me that the vast majority of people who experience poverty would much rather be able to provide themselves and their loved ones with a livable wage. People do not choose to live in poverty and should not be required to prove their motivation or desire to improve their standard of living in exchange for financial assistance.

*Basic Income*

One of the experiences I was fortunate to have during my practicum was the opportunity to attend the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) Canada conference in
Montreal, QC, in April 2010. BIEN(2010) was founded in 1986 and has a varied membership which includes people from all walks of life. This conference was an introduction to the position that all citizens have an inherent right to a portion of the money generated in their community. All citizens are entitled to a share of the economic pie, regardless of participation in the labour market (Standing, 2009). In his 2009 book, “Work After Globalization” (2009), Guy Standing explains the concept of a basic income as a social protection system which must be provided in a way “that allows the recipient to decide how to use it, unlike vouchers or food stamps that presume the ‘poverty’ is of a certain type” (p. 300). While people who are followers of the neo-liberalist approach to social policy and government may argue against the basic income approach to addressing poverty, it is conceivable that many more will embrace the freedom to pursue their individual goals without having to fight for their survival (Shutt, 2010).

Furthermore, the provision of a basic income would not only act as an equalizer between those living in poverty and those who do not. A basic income would provide dignity and would enable its recipients to participate in society independently, free from the stigma that is attached to the concept of welfare (Standing, 2009). I agree that society would improve if all citizens received a basic income that would be enough to allow people to provide for themselves. However, I think there is a great deal of work to be done in the community to make the provision of a basic income possible. That is where PFS and other provincial strategies are so imperative and the manner in which these strategies are implemented is crucial, and will be the focus of the next section.
In conclusion to the discussion of the concept of providing a basic income, it is interesting to note that Canada had a type of basic income in place as far back as 1945. The Canadian family allowance program, established in 1945, provided the equivalent of 20 per cent of the average income to a two parent family with three children. The family allowance program was available to all families with children, regardless of their earned income until it was cancelled in February of 1992 (McQuaig, 1993). It is not unusual in social policy work to find that some of the concepts and movements thought to be new and cutting edge, were in place in various forms in the past. This is another reason why networks like PFS must consider the work done by their counterparts before them, and why everything must be viewed in context of time and place.

*Community Development Theories*

Community Development is not a unique action for any particular profession and can be undertaken with or without radical actions like protests. Community development is a process that works on rebuilding structure and antistructure, two key elements within any community:

Structure holds people together through laws, organizations, customs, and rituals, rewarding those who conform and punishing those who do not. Antistructure operates informally, bringing people together in common quests, striving to resolve opposites and contradictions in society. It is spontaneous, seemingly unorganized, cutting across established boundaries to link together very diverse people in new (if sometimes ephemeral) quests and communities (Lotz, 1997, p. 26).
In addition, Community Development can be defined as a process that aims to engage and empower individuals in their community to participate and advocate for themselves in order to improve their social and economic situation (Lotz, 1997). Social Workers who use a community development approach in their practice are actually going against the popular and long-standing view that people in the community are cases that need to be managed (Wharf and Mckenzie, 2004). Social Workers, who are involved in community development, work with members of the community and build on the strengths and knowledge those individuals possess. The practice of community development has the primary goal of empowering individuals by seeking a just and equal society. An empowered individual is one who believes they possess the ability to influence the goings on of the community in order to ensure their needs are met (Lee, 1999). A practitioner of community development can employ a variety of strategies, some passive and some active, in order to motivate people to seek some change and increase the capacity of the citizens in a community to advocate for change.

Jack Rothman (2001) introduced three clear methods of community development: locality development, social planning, and social action. Locality development refers to work done by citizens, within their neighborhoods, to solve problems through cooperative work. Social planning is founded in research and information gathering. Social planning seeks to address issues by gathering information and presenting solutions which are based on facts but not tied to any particular political view. The third method of community development put forth by Rothman (2001), called social action, is rooted in the belief that change can only come from achieving power redistribution because some
people are purposefully oppressed due to a lack of wealth, resources, and the power that goes along with money. Another distinction between the three models discussed above is that, while locality development and social planning involve methodic problem-solving based on research and cooperation, social action is more likely to include some type of protest by members of the community seeking change. The dedication of PFS to successfully eradicate poverty in Saskatchewan has taken a slightly different approach to its community development efforts. The methods and ideology employed by PFS are closely based on the Pragmatic model proposed by Bill Lee (1999).

*Pragmatic Community Development*

The Pragmatic approach to community development is a method which tries to address both developmental and organizational needs of a community. Practitioners must:

...be able to see members of the community as fellow human beings who can give more than merely political support on one or two issues. Like soldiers who may have joined the army out of economic necessity or because of their political ideals, they endure and persist because of the caring for each other that they develop. We cannot argue too strongly for the building of consensus, and for the fostering of networks of support within the community.... Conflict cannot and should not be avoided. It can, and should be, managed. This is made possible by the development of an atmosphere of clear and direct communication; and warm and respectful relationships (Lee, 1999, pp. 36-37).

My practicum experience working with *Poverty-Free Saskatchewan* provided an excellent opportunity to see this pragmatic approach in action. Although the PFS network was already developed when I began my practicum, I was fortunate to work with the network
members on devising its plan to engage the community in order to develop a clear strategy to eradicate poverty from the province. The work being done by Poverty-Free Saskatchewan is being conducted under the framework of an anti-poverty strategy, so it is important to define what such a strategy entails.

Defining an Anti-Poverty Strategy

Canadian citizens are joining in the fight to eradicate poverty. Many provinces have developed anti-poverty strategies within their communities and Poverty-Free Saskatchewan has the good fortune to be able to follow this trend. An anti-poverty strategy is a form of participatory action which seeks to promote, empower, and mobilize people living on low-incomes, or in poverty, to work toward the goal of eradicating poverty (Ravensbergen, and VanderPlaat, 2009). The National Council on Welfare has a more detailed definition of the concept of strategies to eradicate poverty:

Those concepts include as an ultimate goal to eradicate poverty. The strategies are then focused on the most practical and effective combination of urgent and longer-term measures to progressively reach that goal. They include measures to prevent poverty at its structural and root causes; to improve the situation of people experiencing the deprivation of severe and persistent poverty; to reduce overall poverty rates; to reduce the risk of poverty among those with the highest rates; and to reduce large inequality gaps between rich and poor (NCW, 2007, p. 2).

A goal of eradicating poverty in Saskatchewan, or any community, is an ambitious one. The global focus on capitalism and neo-liberal policies makes the fight against poverty more difficult because capitalism relies on a class structure and on the desire of the individuals on the lower rungs of the class ladder to strive to reach the upper rungs by
participating in the workforce. There is a portion of the community that believes that if people did not fear poverty, they would not work and therefore, the economy would fall apart. However, if one looks at the concept of Basic Income, which has been successfully implemented in some form in other countries, there is no evidence that it results in people dropping out of the labor market (Standing, 2009). Furthermore, when one looks at the success which followed the adoption of poverty-reduction strategies in many European Union countries, it is obvious that everyone in a community benefits from eradicating poverty. For example, following the adoption of its poverty reduction strategy in 1997, Ireland reduced the number of people living in poverty from 15.1 per cent in 1994 to 5.2 per cent in 2001 (NCW, 2007). Similar results have followed in communities with similar strategies and it is the goal of PFS to follow this trend (PFS, 2010).

In my practicum with PFS, I had the interesting experience of joining the network at a point in its development when much of the initial work of devising its terms of reference was well underway. In addition, the members of the network’s main committee had basically worked out each of their roles and job descriptions. I struggled at times with the network’s primary focus on producing written descriptions of the work to be done, without a process for sharing our plans and research with the public at each stage. My experience as a social work practitioner has involved direct clinical work and a focus on action rather than planning. It was a valuable opportunity to have to shift my personal focus as a social worker from taking more immediate action in order to achieve a quick result, to a focus on planning and researching methods of intervention. By the time my practicum concluded, I had gained a better understanding that a committee like PFS
needs to have a clear message before going public. The knowledge and experience I gained from this practicum will be invaluable in my pursuit of my future career goals.

VALUES

This section will explore the value base of the social work profession, as well as my personal values and clinical values. Social Work is a complex profession that is often misunderstood by the individuals in the community. Social workers must balance many factors in their practice. In their clinical work, regardless of the client population, a social worker must make note of all aspects of an issue and also be aware of the context of all of that information. Specifically, the “practice setting, the realities of the social problems being addressed, behavioural roots of those problems, larger socio-cultural factors, and many other factors” must be taken into consideration in every case (Mattaini, Lowery, and Meyer, 1998, p. xvii). This is a daunting prospect for a profession that must balance this enormous wealth of knowledge with the needs of the client population and their readiness to accept and participate in any intervention. The issue of poverty is an even more complex issue because it is not only an issue tied to social justice and equality, but it is also an economic issue. When money is involved in any issue, it is more complicated to address because there are political implications for addressing poverty and any real change must be grounded in social policy change (Zuberi, 2006).

My practicum experience was truly an introduction to the process of working towards the goal of major policy change. While clinical social work practice is challenging and complex, this practicum surprised me by opening my eyes to the complexities of committee work, policy development, and community development work.
Not only did I need to be aware of my own personal values about the issue of poverty but, I also needed to be aware of those same values held by each of the other network members. While everyone was in agreement about the ultimate goal of *Poverty-Free Saskatchewan*, not everyone shared the same views on how to achieve that goal. Some network members wanted to compile large amounts of research on other strategies to address the issue of poverty, while other members wanted to focus on engagement of citizens and government officials in order to determine the climate that would be receiving our proposals. The challenge for me was to settle into the network and let the work unfold naturally. I was often frustrated with the committee discussions over simple choices like the capitalization of the word ‘network’ in our name. I think that my work experience has focused on results rather than process so I was challenged to slow down my problem-solving techniques and follow the strategies of community development which were being used by PFS. This experience has had a positive effect on my clinical practice because I have developed the patience to find ways to achieve necessary outcomes for my clients within in the bureaucracy that often dominates my workplace.

**ETHICS**

The Canadian Association of Social Workers’, or CASW’s, Code of Ethics (2005), is the primary influence for me professionally and it was a major influence on my practicum experience. The Code of Ethics is built around 6 core values. In the context of my practicum, the first 3 values are intrinsic to the work being done by PFS. These values are: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, Pursuit of Social Justice, and Service to Humanity (CASW, 2005). The issue of eradicating poverty is clearly in line
with all of these values and the practicum work with PFS provided me with a practical, meaningful, and realistic opportunity to pursue these values. The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is the main resource for me when I am faced with decisions about my social work practice and possible dilemmas. During my practicum experience, I was fortunate to avoid these dilemmas. There was just one issue that caused me to step back and consider ethical concerns, and this was the engagement process. While I must acknowledge that Poverty-Free Saskatchewan was still developing and planning its introduction to the broader community, there was a lack of focus on engaging the client population being targeted by our intervention. I was not alone in having this concern as other members of the network sometimes raised the questions of how and when PFS would involve or invite the people facing poverty into our discussions. In retrospect, I am less troubled by this issue because as my practicum came to a close, the network was introduced to the public through a website which I had the opportunity to work on and with the publication of the discussion document, “Let’s Do Something About Poverty!” (PFS, 2010). The discussion document and website pose 5 key questions to the public which the network hopes will elicit meaningful responses and allow the public to play a role in the development of the PFS strategy. The 5 questions posed by PFS are:

1. What does poverty mean to you?
2. Why should we worry about poverty in Saskatchewan?
3. What would a poverty-free Saskatchewan look like?
4. How can we achieve a poverty free Saskatchewan?
5. What targets and policies should we adopt?” (PFS, 2010, p. 12)

As part of my practicum experience working with PFS, I had input into the development of these key questions and the goal is that members of the public will forward their responses to the network and that this information can be used to direct the network’s focus.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are a key component in both social work practice and community development. In a clinical setting, a social worker must be prepared for what may come next in their work with the client population and always be prepared to evolve and meet client needs (Mattaini, et.al, 1998). In my clinical social work practice, I view the individuals I am serving as my partners in any intervention and I was prepared to extend this view to my community development work with PFS. Interestingly, in my current job as a Medical Social Worker in a long-term care facility, I truly see myself as the employee of the residents who call the facility their home. In community development work, my personal view is that my fellow citizens should be placed in a position of power in community work because it is they who will live with the results. Although I had the opportunity to have contact with a few individuals who acted as representatives of the client population PFS is seeking to help, it would have been useful to have more direct contact with the individuals and families who struggle with the reality of poverty on a daily basis. I think PFS began to build this relationship at the time that my 8 month practicum was coming to a close. I believe this is the most important next step for PFS. However, it can be argued that PFS was organizing and preparing for the relationship
with the community by using a form of the participatory action methodology. Employing participatory action addresses a common problem faced in community development:

People often have a deep-seated distrust of any kind of research, and/or of getting together with others. This is legitimate, in that it is often a reflection of their experience. People may say: “Why bother? Nobody really cares anyway.”; “It won’t work, we tried before.” or “This will only benefit those in power!” (Lee, 1999, p. 97).

Since the First Nations population in Saskatchewan faces poverty at a higher rate than other citizens with 45.1% of First Nation children in Saskatchewan living in poverty (Douglas and Gingrich, 2009), it is crucial that a poverty eradication strategy in Saskatchewan employ a method of relationship building that will successfully engage the First Nations population. This reality was pointed out in some of the committee meetings of PFS and I think the history of the Federal government surveying our First Nations people about numerous issues and producing little result, may have been a contributing factor in the slow engagement of this segment of the community.

Worker-Agency

In addition to the relationship with the client population, it is imperative to be aware of the relationship I had with the other members of the network and with myself. My practicum experience was unique in that I did not work directly with my Field Instructor, Simon Enoch at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). Although Simon agreed to take on the role of Field Supervisor as needed, there was not physical space at the Saskatchewan CCPA office, so I worked with Simon as a fellow
member of *Poverty-Free Saskatchewan*. Therefore, in effect, my practicum placement was more directly with the PFS network. I found this to be less complicated than it could have been, in large part due to the generosity of both my Field Instructor and my Academic Supervisor, James Mulvale. Both Simon and James were fellow PFS committee members and allowed me to experience the committee independent of their views. This allowed me to experience my work with the network as a peer along with the other members.

The founding membership of the *Poverty-Free Saskatchewan* network is comprised of interested citizens from a variety of backgrounds, including leaders in research on the issue of poverty in the province, academics, social workers, and representatives of other community organizations. I found it interesting to work among the members of the PFS network. I have been a member of small groups in my work experience whose function was to determine and implement a solution to a relatively simple problem. However, being a part of a larger group working toward such a lofty goal as eradicating poverty in the Province brought a new meaning to the concept of committee membership. Perhaps one reason for this new understanding is that when I worked with my colleagues on resolving a problem in the workplace, we basically came to the table with a common experience of the issue. In contrast, when I found myself working with the members of PFS, I found that each person had a unique viewpoint on the issue of poverty. Some had a thorough understanding of the historical and statistical details of Saskatchewan’s poverty epidemic, while others had worked with people directly affected by the reality of living in poverty. I noticed that these differences in personal and professional
experiences altered how the network members directed the work progress. Furthermore, I was introduced to a new awareness of how my experiences influenced my input into the committee and even my sense of urgency about the network’s goal being achieved. Additionally, my awareness of each person’s unique view gave me insight into how and why disagreements occurred. This awareness allowed me the opportunity to gain a new level of understanding of how such disagreements could be dealt with and “to stress the commonalities among members, and help them see and accept opportunities to come together” (Lee, 1999, p. 142).

Worker-Self

Being self-aware is an important part of being a Social Worker. I am in agreement with the position that it is not possible to remain neutral in social work practice (Sachs and Newdom, 1999). As a student completing a field practicum as a requirement of the MSW degree, and a practicing Social Worker in Regina, I had a unique perspective. The major hurdle I had to overcome was the juggling necessary to balance my varied roles during the eight months during which I undertook this practicum. Between January and August of 2010, I had to seek a balance between my practicum work, paid work for the Regina Qu’Appelle Health Region, and my most challenging role as a single parent of a young son. Not only was this challenging, it was enlightening as well because it led to a new awareness of my social context. As a single parent, a student, an employee, and a member of the community, I have first-hand experience with the struggle to survive between pay cheques. I am in no way trying to say that I know what it is like to live in poverty, but I feel as though I have had to look poverty in the face, so to speak, when I
have faced the decision about whether to pay a utility bill or repair my vehicle. This is perhaps one reason that I struggled to accept what I saw as a slow pace of the development of PFS. However, when speaking with fellow network members about their experiences on similar types of working groups, I realized that PFS was moving forward in a manner typical for such a group.

**STRATEGIES**

The strategies of community development employed by PFS were closely based on the Pragmatic approach put forth by Lee (1999). Since my practicum experience with PFS began after the network had formed, I am not going to focus on the phases of the organization’s development individually because although they can be described methodically on paper, in practice, they overlap (Lee, 1999). Instead, I will discuss the strategies I witnessed the network employ during my practicum and in preparation for the release of the discussion document, “Let’s Do Something About Poverty!” (2010). My role in the network during my practicum was not only as a member of all of the working groups, but also as secretary. I therefore had the responsibility to take minutes of the numerous meetings and this allowed me to spend a great deal of time reflecting on the decision making progress of the network. This showed me that there was a continual stream of research and information gathering being undertaken by all network members. For example, I found that all members were slowly introducing PFS into the consciousness of the community by discussing their membership and the work being done by fellow members. This was in effect, engagement and community analysis, two phases of the pragmatic approach to community development organization. These
phases continued, along with that of popular action, or keeping the movement going, and continuing to strategize how PFS would be officially introduced to the public (Lee, 1999).

*Poverty-Free Saskatchewan* consists of a main Steering Committee and a number of other committees which operate under that umbrella. There is a clear focus on leadership and the importance of a democratic process to decision making. That being said, the basic strategies employed by the PFS network included monthly meetings of various committees under the larger umbrella of the PFS Steering Committee. During my practicum, I witnessed elections of committee Chairs, and discussions and analysis about how to prioritize tasks. Furthermore, the PFS meetings involved discussion and information sharing about progress being made by other provincial strategies and about the opinions being gathered from the community in reaction to each member discussing their participation in PFS. I found it interesting that when I discussed the work I was engaged in for my MSW practicum, many people asked me if I actually thought it was possible to eliminate poverty. This is evidence that many people have learned to accept poverty as an inevitable part of society. Poverty is not inevitable (PFS, 2010).

Additionally, there was a collective acknowledgement among all the network members that it would be an effort to keep the organization moving forward in a productive manner (Lee, 1999). Rather than looking far into the future, PFS remained focused on continuing to move the development of the poverty eradication strategy forward in a manner which would achieve the ultimate goal of real, meaningful change in the lives of the citizens who struggle with the reality of poverty. At the conclusion of my time working as a practicum student with PFS, the network was within weeks of releasing
their discussion document and holding press conferences in Regina and Saskatoon. These plans were strategies to continue to move toward the ultimate goals of PFS.

SKILLS

The goal of the MSW program at the University of Regina is to “enhance the quality of individual and community well being. Our concern is with the development of advanced social work techniques and modes of social intervention, and with broader aspects and issues of service delivery, social policy analysis, and social welfare research” (University of Regina, 2010). My experience as a student of the MSW program has been successful in all of the goals stated above. I have had the opportunity to strengthen and develop my skill set and feel confident in my abilities to continue to advocate for the equality of all people and to participate in the pursuit of social justice.

Some of the specific skills which I exercised during my eight month practicum experience with PFS include the 5 skills necessary for pragmatic community development work according to Lee (1999).

Listening

If I had been asked at the starting point of my practicum experience about whether I believed my listening skills needed to be strengthened, I would have said no. I have worked as a social worker since 2003 and I think that my communication and listening skills are one of my strengths. I have been pleasantly surprised to discover that my practicum experience has allowed me to build on my past experience and to develop a different aspect of the skill of listening. I had the opportunity to be exposed to working
with a number of people from all walks of life. Although this was not a new experience, the context in which I was working with those people was new. Listening as a practitioner in a clinical setting is very different than listening to colleagues and community members in a setting like PFS. Rather than the comparatively simple task of listening with the goal of reflecting the information shared back in a therapeutic manner, my practicum involved new goals. My practicum experience required me to effectively engage my fellow network members in dialogues and encourage everyone to share their views and opinions in an open and tolerant manner.

Information Gathering

My skills in the realm of information gathering were developed through research into the historical views of the issue of poverty in Saskatchewan in order to contribute to a bibliography for PFS on the research and work done in the area of addressing poverty in the province. As well as contributing to the PFS discussion document, this gathering of information also helped prepare me for the work on this report. Additionally, my role as a practicum student with PFS also involved my acting as a conduit for information sharing with the network. This function was challenging because various members of the network would often forward relevant material to me and I would then distribute it to the members of the larger committee. This responsibility allowed me to strengthen other skills like negotiation, facilitation, and analysis because I was required to continually re-evaluate my personal opinions of the work being done by PFS. On a more basic level, I found that I gathered information from informal conversations with people outside of the
PFS network, and sometimes this feedback from co-workers and other community contacts was useful for PFS.

**Analysis**

Traditionally, the skill of analyzing information while working as a social worker involves the analysis of casework and determining how to place information gathered about a client into context in order to determine the best intervention. In my practicum with PFS, I was constantly reviewing information that I discovered in my research and the information discovered by my fellow PFS members and determining which network committee or members would be interested in the information. This filtering of the research and information gathering done by me and other network members was important in order to determine what would be most appropriate to share with the larger network and what was relevant only to the central steering committee. I also strengthened my skills in analyzing ways to determine how my role in PFS was progressing.

**Facilitation**

My opportunity to develop this skill came primarily from my responsibility to organize meetings, distribute minutes and relevant correspondence to network members, and prepare agendas for the meetings of the main steering committee of PFS. This was an important role because it ensured that PFS continued to progress toward its short term goal of the release of the discussion document and the ongoing goal of moving toward developing a strategy to eradicate poverty. Also, I found that during my practicum I was
able to participate in other provincial networks and relay information between those networks and PFS. This allowed PFS to stay in touch with the work of the other provincial committees and to sometimes build on the momentum being generated in the province.

Negotiation

In community organizing, working on some form of committee is inevitable, whether it is as a leader to a community group or as a member of a network like PFS. Regardless of where or how the community organizing takes place, it is necessary to possess a strong ability to negotiate among the numerous tasks that need to be accomplished and among the variety of individual views and interests. It became obvious to me during my work with PFS on all of the committees under the larger umbrella, that everyone had a personal agenda and a personal or professional stake in achieving the goals of PFS. In order for me and each PFS member to work toward achieving those goals, we all had to compromise and negotiate in order to come to a consensus we could all support. I was able to develop this skill during my practicum and I believe that development will continue throughout my career.

VISIONS

The completion of the coursework and my 8 months as a practicum student with PFS has ignited a new passion for the career of social work. I have a new appreciation for the important work done by practitioners of social work in initiating change in social policy in the pursuit of the social justice and the other goals set out by the Code of Ethics
Reflective Review

Reflective Review  

I hope to continue to contribute to the betterment of my community through direct practice as well as community organizing. I envision that my contribution to dealing with the issue of poverty will be through working in direct practice and advocating for individual clients' rights. While I enjoyed my time working in the social policy realm of social work, I feel I am best suited for a career that focuses on direct practice. Additionally, I hope to continue to play a role in PFS as it continues toward the goal of eradicating poverty. I am excited to find out what responses will be received from the public to the 5 questions posed in the PFS discussion document (PFS, 2010).

Conclusion

My goal of completing the requirements for my MSW was as daunting a task for me personally as the goal of eradicating poverty is for the PFS network. In the same way that I have received many sideways glances from colleagues who did not understand why it was so important to me to attain my MSW, and heard many questions about how long I expected it to take to complete, I witnessed those same reactions from people when I discussed PFS and its goals. I see parallels to the experience of the PFS network because it is a lofty goal with a meaningful outcome that is not easy to plug into a schedule.

When I began my practicum with PFS, I shared the belief of the other members that Saskatchewan needs to change its policies and programs to ensure that all of its citizens have enough money to not only provide for basic needs but to also participate in society, regardless of their ability to participate in the workforce. Upon completing my practicum with PFS, I am optimistic that the efforts of the network to engage members of the community, including those in a position to make changes to policy, will produce a
positive outcome. PFS has the good fortune of following in the footsteps of other provincial groups who have succeeded in seeing their governments’ implementation of strategies to address poverty. Saskatchewan is a unique province populated by citizens with a huge capacity to give. I believe that if the general public is provided with accurate information about alternative social policies that would reduce poverty, the people will take action and support the political leaders who show wisdom and bravery to implement new programs to address the plague of poverty. The process of realizing this bright future for the people of Saskatchewan is well underway with the work being done by PFS and its members. I am confident that the talent and perseverance of those involved in PFS will contribute to the achievement of the ultimate goal of the network, which is to eradicate poverty.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

Field Practicum Proposal: Master of Social Work Program

Angela G. Yung, BA, BSW, RSW

Academic Supervisor: Jim Mulvale, PhD, RSW
Academic Committee Member: Nuelle Novik, PhD, RSW
Field Supervisor: Simon Enoch, PhD, Director, CCPA-Saskatchewan

Practicum setting: Action for a Poverty-Free Saskatchewan Steering Committee
Time period: early January 2010-early Fall 2010 (part-time)

The goal of this practicum is to develop skills relating to community and social policy development and how to actively and effectively pursue social justice. These goals will be developed through work with Action for a Poverty-Free Saskatchewan (APF Sask.), a network of organizations that is pursuing the collective development of a provincial poverty reduction / elimination strategy. This network is closely connected with the Faculty of Social Work and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Saskatchewan Office.

Learning Objectives:
1. To develop strong organizational development skills. I will accomplish this by working collaboratively with interest groups and a variety of stakeholders concerned with the issue of poverty reduction. This work will involve the use of communication, problem solving, and decision-making skills that are required to work effectively within a dynamic membership driven organization.
2. To develop social justice skills. This will be accomplished by strengthening my social work practice skills and applying them specifically to seeking social change and social justice. I will develop my practical skills further by working with APF Sask. in developing an initiative that seeks to improve the quality of life of our community as a whole. In this pursuit of social justice, I will learn about collective and systemic social work practices that seek social change as this relates to social work ethics.
3. To acquire strong skills in social policy research, analysis and writing. I will gain research skills through a review of the literature on the development and design of anti-poverty strategies. I will develop an effective and concise writing style through work on proposals, letters, and other written communication and documentation.
4. To acquire a knowledge base in regard to comprehensive poverty reduction strategies that have been developed and implemented in other countries and parts of Canada, the roles played by governments and civil society organizations in these efforts.
5. To explore methods and practices for initiating social change. I will gain community development skills by engaging in collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders, and by facilitating and organizing meetings, and developing coalition goals and work plans. I will develop practice skills that lead to collaborative action that enhance opportunities for positive social change.

Revised 8 January 2010