EXPANDING THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: SHORT TERM CRISIS INTERVENTION, LOOKING BEYOND NUMBERS

by

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Abstract

The following practicum report details my educational experiences related to the development of the Family Support Program, in collaboration with the University of Northern British Columbia, School of Social Work and the School of Business. The practicum learning goals are framed around the professional initiation of a program from the grassroots foundational work to a cohesive program. The purpose of the program was to facilitate a collaborative partnership between the School of Social Work and the School of Business and students in each discipline, while serving the needs of community members experiencing situational crisis. I have included insights gained from my practicum to highlight areas of learning and clinical development. This report and practicum include a literature review and evidence that programs like this are needed in the community; however its primary focus is on my experiential learning process.
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"In a gentle way you can shake the world." - Mahatma Gandhi
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Social work is a challenging field filled with a range of opportunities for the professional to experience. Crisis based social work can be demanding and intense, requiring skills that a social worker must work hard at developing. The balance between the need for crisis response and the need for service can be a difficult process. The following report outlines my practicum placement with the Family Support Program, developed with input from community organizations, by the Schools of Social Work and Business at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). The Family Support Program (FSP) was developed through interdisciplinary work to engage social work and business students in joint experiential learning to address short-term crisis response and intervention services for Prince George and communities in the surrounding area; and to respond to our proposed question, “How can we implement change with one-time crisis intervention, and provide an adequate response?”

The focus of the practicum was to assist in the program development for the Family Support Program (FSP), working collaboratively with the School of Business and community agencies. The FSP began by identifying gaps in the current social safety net. The goal was to address those gaps through short-term crisis intervention strategies, and to provide assistance as appropriate. There was a screening and interview process to assess the needs of the families coming to the program for assistance. A new project, initiated by the University of Northern British Columbia, the FSP is supported by generous donations from the Schwab family and IDL employees, who had a vision and desire to expand the knowledge base and joint experience of students in the Schools of Business and Social Work. A survey and needs
assessment were completed in 2012 by the School of Social Work to identify where social programs were failing to respond adequately to the needs of families in crisis.

My practicum placement and new FSP initiative was located at the UNBC downtown campus, in the Bank of Montreal building on the corner of Third Avenue in Prince George. The campus is situated in the heart of both business and poverty: areas where business borders the residents who are impacted by poverty and at-risk life styles. My practicum placement took place between September 2013 and March 2014 on a part-time basis.

The Family Support Program is a grassroots pilot program centered on an experiential learning opportunity for students who attend the University of Northern British Columbia, focused on meeting the needs of families in crisis. My role included intake and assessment and a response to families in need of short term crisis assistance. The FSP assists families in the form of financial services offered on a one-time-only basis and is open to anyone in Prince George and surrounding areas. In keeping with the ethics and practices of social work and the UNBC School of Social Work, referrals to other agencies or services are also provided to families who do not meet the FSP criteria. The scheduling for the program and intake process involves the families booking an appointment or telephone interview, out of which an appropriate crisis response plan is developed.

The needs assessment undertaken by the School of Social Work provided valuable information for the launch of the Family Support Program. Among the key findings was a determination that 40-49% of agency staff who participated in the needs assessment survey spent most of their time providing services such as prescriptions, intake, social work, teaching, outreach, support services, and case management (Pierce & Chabot, 2012, p. 22). Of the service providers questioned, only 0-15% said that their main service focus was crisis
response and preventative social work. This confirms the need for crisis prevention and crisis response social work to fill a gap in the social safety net.

In this report I will provide an overview of short term crisis social work through a review of the literature in areas such as: social work, the social safety net, grassroots social work, and experiential education. I will then give a description of some of the activities I undertook as a social work student involved with multi-disciplinary professionals throughout my practicum experience.

The report consists of eight chapters. Chapter one introduces the report, Chapter two explains my background and experiences as they relate to experiential learning with the Family Support Program. Chapter Three is a literature review focused on terminology, the history of the social safety net, crisis intervention, ethics in crisis social work, and grassroots experiential learning. Chapter Four provides an overview of the placement and how the FSP organization is structured. Chapter Five reviews my practicum contract and explains the specific goals I set out to achieve. Chapter Six continues this explanation further with insights from my experiential learning. Chapter Seven discusses the implications and future recommendations for social workers that will carry on this work. Chapter eight concludes with a summary of the last 8 months with the Family Support Program and experiential learning.
CHAPTER TWO: Locating Myself in Experiential Learning

As a social worker and Master of Social Work student I bring diverse experiences to the FSP. I have worked in the field of social work for eight years and volunteered for 3 years prior to beginning my degree. I continue to volunteer and work privately in the community, in areas such as culture connections, crisis response, and mental health. In my early adult life I experienced financial crisis, as both a single mother and in marriage. There tends to be stigma associated when a person is in need of assistance, and it can influence whether a person asks for help or not. Having struggled with this firsthand, I can identify barriers that families may face. In my career, I have also witnessed families falling further into the cracks of the social safety net. Mullaly (1997) describes the social safety net as “a modest system of universal transfers and means tested programs and minimal insurance plans oriented to mainly low-income and other vulnerable populations” (p. 11). In my experiences as a social worker I have been part of the social safety net and have seen more social work undertaken in reaction to crisis than there is done in prevention work. Given how overwhelming it can be for the social workers in these cases, one can assume the experiences of the families in crisis must be even more stressful.

In my experience as a practicing social worker, I have heard stories from many people that if they were only able to seek out crisis grants or assistance they would be able to support themselves with only limited reliance on the social safety net. I have the privilege of education that some do not have and I value that privilege; however that privilege came with hard work and dedication to ensure that I, and my daughter, would not become statistics in the social safety net. Nobody is immune to crisis or situations in which they need help. One key part of being a successful social worker is the ability to see resiliency in people and
families. The mechanisms for accessing social funding available from governments, coupled with the growing business climate in society, tends to pit minority groups with little power and the agencies that seek to assist them in a battle to be approved for limited funding and/or services. In my view, it is imperative to change how we work within the system, to seek ways to work more collaboratively and to advocate together for the families in need. When I heard about the Family Support Program, I knew immediately that I wanted to be involved. With the Schools of Business and Social Work engaged; private donations from the Schwab family, the IDL Company, and its employees; and a willing institution, success was possible. I began this work and practicum with an anti-oppressive, structural social lens, and cultural awareness.

In my experience, it is challenging to work with an anti-oppressive approach in the role of a child protection social worker. I was part of the first wave of Aboriginal Social Work recruits to work in the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), while also being enrolled in a post-Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) Child Welfare Certificate. It is through this experience that I learned how to work both as an ally from within and on the outside of the system. Through this work I witnessed many dark and sad stories. In most cases, I was limited in my ability to be an effective tool of change. The agencies are bound by policy and laws, and the focus of their mandates does not allow them to offer support without a direct and specific protective reason (i.e., child protection). My observations, and the challenges of my social work practice to date, highlight the need for initiatives such as the Northern Family Support Program.
Overview of Practicum Placement

At the request of funders with an innovative idea, the University of Northern British Columbia’s Schools of Social Work and Business have developed a pilot program focused on assisting families in crisis. As indicated previously, the Family Support Program offers one-time crisis assistance to families that current community services cannot provide. My role as a practicum student was primarily one of working with the site supervisor and FSP Steering Committee to launch and undertake the day-to-day work of the Family Support Program. Important aspects of this work include being located at the downtown UNBC campus for easy access to clients; developing promotional materials and related presentations for community agencies; creating intake criteria, processes, and related documentation; and informing each family that attends the program about the process of confidentiality, and the overall processes of the Family Support Program. Another important issue was the question of how to sustain this program so it would continue to be available to citizens on an ongoing basis. With the immediate focus of providing short-term assistance to families in crisis, part of my practicum involved working with the FSP Steering Committee to define what constitutes a “crisis”, and to assess and implement an appropriate response. My site supervisor at the Family Support Program was an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work, Joanna Pierce, who has extensive practice in field supervision and coordination, mental health and clinical counselling, and who is a leader in rural and remote practice and a variety of related research projects. She is known as a superb mentor to students. The practicum placement offered a diverse experience that broadened my scope of practice and enhanced my skills as a social worker.
Role of the Family Support Program

As mentioned previously, the Family Support Program developed out of a vision put forward by donors to UNBC, and ongoing donations from IDL employees to fund a program to help community members in crisis incorporating the experiential learning of both social work and business students. The crisis can vary from an overdue hydro bill to the cost of an airline ticket to be with a sick child receiving health care in another location. The aim of the program is to assist people who are unable to receive assistance from existing programs.

The Family Support Program requires families to be pre-screened to see if FSP is an appropriate avenue to assist in their circumstances. In screening a family’s request for help, the FSP also provides referrals to other agencies, if we cannot meet the needs of the applicant or if services are already available elsewhere. As demanded by the Social Work Code of Ethics and Practice Guidelines, strict confidentiality must be maintained for any clients receiving services.

My own experiential learning process included presenting cases to my supervisor and to participants from the School of Business for learning purposes, and making decisions about who qualified for crisis assistance. Another challenging task included rapport building skills that allow for a genuine connection with the client, while recognizing that the connection with the client would be brief; thus, the ability to effectively and efficiently find closure is essential. In short, I worked to offer genuine crisis response services but recognized I could only be in the lives of the clients for a short period of time. Another facet to this learning was ensuring that the families had access to another professional if they required longer-term support. This was an interesting part of the practicum as the families
were in crisis but in many cases revealed personal information that suggested the need for ongoing support.

My practicum included regular meetings with designated faculty members and students in the Schools of Business and Social Work, as well as with the University Development Office and Human Resources staff as required. These meetings provide a forum through which information could be provided about the demographics and generalized stories of the families receiving assistance. Another key part of the process was exposing the business student to information about provision of crisis services, why these are necessary, what difference they can make to people, and what social entrepreneurship can look like on the front line of social work. At the same time, as a social work student, I was exposed to issues such as the business planning, related record keeping, and a business perspective of social accountability. A necessary step in creating the collaborative framework in experiential learning, for all participants, was defining the terminology specific to each discipline.
CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review

The following chapter will review literature that has common themes pertaining to social issues, including the following: the social safety net, poverty, grassroots movements, crisis models and intervention, ethics in multi-disciplinary social work, and experiential learning. As a student involved in the Family Support Program it was imperative to continue to be aware of structural issues of the social safety net that currently impact the Canadian social system. A large part of the goal of the Family Support Program (FSP) was to provide support to citizens who are not currently receiving assistance, in order to develop and expand the local social safety net.

Terminology

As every field of academia has its own prescribed language, and given that we are working with two disciplines that are infrequently associated, the following section provides a foundation of some of the terms that social work and business utilized for the purpose of this practicum.

Safety net: “An informal term that refers to the collection of publicly funded programs designed to protect people from the negative consequences of natural disasters, personal crises, health problems and other hardships” (Chappell, 2014, p. 478).

 Ally: “A member of an oppressor group who works to end a form of oppression which gives him/her privilege” (Bishop, 1994, p. 152). Moreover, “oppression” is defined as one group of people using different forms of power to keep another group down (Bishop, 1994).

Crisis: Described by Belkin (1984) and James and Gilliand (2000) as personal difficulties or situations that immobilize people and prevent them from consciously controlling their lives. Crisis is also defined by Roberts and Ottens (2005) as being the individual’s perception of an
event as the cause of considerable upset, to the degree that the individual cannot rely on their own coping mechanisms to help them through it. As a result the event becomes a crisis.

The language and different disciplines of thought will redefine crisis through a variety of lenses; however, for the purpose of the practicum it will be guided by the following definition: Crisis is often a situation in which a person cannot cope and needs assistance, and they may rely on others and professionals to provide them with an appropriate response.

**Crisis response**: The response that a person in crisis will require, as described by James and Gilliland (2013), in the way that people seek out help from their natural support systems of family and friends rather than seeking further help when those formalized support systems cannot help them.

**Crisis intervention**: Explained by Roberts and Ottens (2005) as “assisting a person in crisis and finding the appropriate safe response” (p.331).

**Developmental crisis**: James and Gilliland (2013) explain that these are events that occur in the normal span of human growth, where a situation arises and the person has an abnormal response. This response is considered normal; however all crises are individual and must be assessed and addressed in unique ways (p.16).

**Situational Crisis**: James and Gilliland (2013) state that situational crises are “responses to uncommon situations that a person has no way of predicting, these are often shocking, sudden, intense, and catastrophic” (p.17).

**Eco-system crisis**: This can occur when “some natural or human-caused disaster overtakes a person, and it may impact their entire environment. These include floods, earthquakes, blizzards, oil spills, etc.” (James & Gilliland, 2013, p. 17).
**Existential crisis:** This occurs when a person feels there is no meaning in their life and they experience anxiety or stress as a result (James & Gilliand, 2013).

**Stress:** A symptom of crisis, or a condition that can often be thought of as a compounding contributor to crisis. As defined by Yeager and Roberts (2003), it is “any stimulus, internal state, situation, or event with an observable individual reaction requiring one to adapt to their environment” (p. 4). Stressors can range from something minor to something as major as an accident. In the practicum there were many forms of stressors that we saw families either adapt to or require assistance with. The purpose of our help is to assist families in getting support and helping them find ways to cope with both the minor and major stressors.

**Multi-level practice:** This is defined as social workers not only looking at the immediate family issues, but also seeking to improve conditions within and among social welfare organizations, which may involve inter-agency relations and new program development (Chappell, 2013).

**Multi-disciplinary teamwork:** Cott (1998) explains that team members must have a shared understanding of roles, norms, and values within the team; the team functions in an egalitarian, cooperative, and interdependent manner; and that the combined effects of shared, cooperative decision making are of greater benefit to the clients than the individual effects of the disciplines on their own (p. 851).

**Oppression:** As described by Barker (2005), this is the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or institution. Typically a government or political organization in power places restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups (p. 307).
Social change: “Variations over time in a society’s laws, norms, values, and institutional arrangements” (Barker, 2005, p.402).

Social consciousness: “Awareness of the needs and values of other people in society” (Barker, 2005, p. 402).

Business plan: For this program it is a plan developed by UNBC’s School of Business and as defined by Althouse, Rose, Allan, Gitman, and McDaniel (2011): “a formal written statement that describes in detail the idea for a new business and how it will be carried out; includes a general description of the company, the owners, and description of the product or service” (p. 542).

As the program continues to develop, the terms may be redefined as part of the process and as a result of experiential learning. As the partnerships continue there will be an exchange of knowledge between the students, and each will develop a better understanding of what is required for a business plan and what the rationale is for certain decisions when managing a budget. This is typically not an area that social work students are exposed to in any depth. Additionally, a presentation made by the students to the donors during the project (formulated in partnership with the business department) included the overall mission of the program as being social profit looking beyond the numbers. These terms provided a framework and a starting point for the multidisciplinary team, and guided me through the experiential learning process.

Social Safety Net

For the purposes of this paper, the term “social safety net” will be used. In social work education, examples are used to explain that the social safety net is a network of social
programs to help people stay above the poverty line. The Family Support Program is an expansion of this safety net that provides a new service not duplicated by another agency.

**History of Social Work and the Social Safety Net**

Within a given social system there needs to be a discussion of developing a social safety net, as Chappell (2013) describes, it is a system of social programs and assistance that is publically or privately funded to help keep families out of poverty. Mullaly (1997) explains the social safety net “consists of modest universal transfers, means tested programs, and minimal insurance plans oriented mainly to low income and other vulnerable populations” (p. 11). The practicum is guided by social work ethics, which are a set of guidelines and principles set forth by the governing body of social work to help social workers make fair decisions (Congress, 1994). Social work is a profession that seeks to advocate for change and assist society in making changes within the social constructs in which we live. Taylor (2009) defines it as a contextual profession and describes it as a socially constructed phenomenon. My practicum was grounded in Structural Social Work, which is part of critical theory. It is motivated by interest in the emancipation of the oppressed with the ultimate goal of liberation (Mullaly,1997).

Historically, social work has been largely a field directed by mainstream, relatively middle class workers, typically from groups who had social power but wanted to help the oppressed people in their communities. Through years of volunteer and church movements, social work has developed into a profession. Soydan (2012) explains:

The basic view of the settlement movement was that the environment – that is, society – generated social problems, and that change must be made in people’s
surroundings if social workers were to improve the social situation of individuals and combat poverty (p. 474).

However, Soydan further explains that the Charity Organization Society (COS) was not interested in social reforms. Its ideas were based on the belief that individuals were the cause of poverty and social problems. This movement and its beliefs made it easy to blame those needing help for needing assistance. Nonetheless, the social programs ultimately developed providing a social safety net for citizens in need. With the current trend towards cutbacks to social services, the social safety net is under more pressure as a result of an increasing number of people needing assistance.

When social work was established as a profession, there was assistance provided to groups with social needs. These needs continue to exist today, and inequality is still a factor in our society. Wharf and McKenzie (1997) explain, “The wealthiest 10 percent of family units held 53 percent of the wealth in 1999; the wealthiest 50 percent of family units held 94.4 percent of the wealth, leaving only 5.6 percent to the bottom 50 percent” (p. 5). Clarke and Barlow (1997) state that “federal social transfer payments are being downloaded so that provinces and municipalities have to feel the crunch of no public funds and services then are impacted” (p. 121). Perhaps the lack of government responsibility will ignite more grassroots movements to demand a change in our social safety system.

Devereux (2002) explains that poverty and vulnerability are determined by both characteristics and external factors, such as economic, socio-cultural, natural, political, and institutional environments. He also reports that there are many critics of the social safety net and its benefits; this is echoed by Mullaly (1997) and Carniol (2000). They suggest that the social safety net is a way to keep people invested in the welfare state so that the powerful and
wealthy people continue to benefit from others’ inability to escape the welfare social safety net system.

**Social Work and the Safety Net Today**

The FSP was developed to supplement the current safety net and current programs. The idea was to develop a program that was not a replica of existing service, but rather one that would be able to broaden help to populations in need. The literature reviewed suggests that the safety net is bursting and extra supports would be beneficial. Soydan (2012) states “a purposeful and planned action for social changes aims at altering what is regarded as undesirable and a social problem” (p. 469). Green’s (2013) research explains “the trends in the United States as a crisis and a disinvestment in families as a trade-off for a balanced budget” (p. 62). Similarly in Canada, the social safety net is in breakdown mode and the welfare state is turning support and food into a commodity. (Devereux, 2002)

Although structural poverty, violence, addictions, suicide, partner violence, hate crimes, racism, and oppression all exist, the Family Support Program aims to prevent short-term crises from becoming chronic, lifetime conditions of poverty or abuse, or worse, loss of life. Through our support, assistance, and guiding families to other services, the FSP seeks to provide and further develop a community response to crisis, including providing recommendations about how to better assist families in the future work.

Wakefield, Fleming, Klassen, and Skinner (2013) illustrate that the need is on the rise for more charities to help the citizens meet their basic living needs. Carniol (2000) suggests that the profession of social work was aware of this pattern of declining social programs and funding cuts. He also suggests that social workers understand the dynamics of safety net issues, and the struggles against poverty. Moreover, Carniol identifies a disturbing statistic:
“It seems not to matter that unemployment insurance and all welfare programs together have contributed to less than 6 percent of the federal debt” (p. 89). If the social programs only cost this much, then why do we continue to see cuts that push families into crisis and poverty? Carniol maintains, as do Wakefield et al. (2013) that food bank use is on the rise. This research highlights the connection between structural poverty and food insecurity: access to food depends upon access to adequate income. Chandler’s (2009) research presents evidence “that the onset of welfare reform in the 1990s spurred researchers to explore the economy and the widening gap between the rich and poor” (p. 172). This trend of devolution of the social safety net is also identified by Weaver, Habibov, and Fan (2010); as the federal government provides less funding and support to the provinces, we are left to question where that leaves the social safety net programs. Mullaly explains his view that the welfare state remains in place only to “protect capitalism” (p. 89), essentially to ensure that people have minimum benefits through which they can survive but which decreases their ability and likelihood to organize to change the system. Other literature identifies the trend of capitalism succeeding for the rich while the middle and lower classes see their quality of life decrease.

Anderson, Holter, and Gryzak (2002) suggest that many families will seek help from their natural support network before asking for outside help. This supports the insight provided by Caplan (1989) that people tend to need their natural support systems when in crisis. However, when there is a financial crisis, families may not want to borrow and thus owe money, or may simply not have the resources to assist each other. This substantiates the argument that cuts to social programs hurt more people than many realize. Ocean (2008) provides an accurate description of what can happen to people when reaching out for help: “I don’t qualify for welfare since I have more than $500 in the bank” (p. 10). As a structural
social worker, Mullaly (1997) addresses social problems and focuses on areas that can improve the system we live in and help alleviate the negative impacts of an exploitative and oppressive social order. As social workers and researchers seek to address prevalent social issues at the local and global community level, they also seek to facilitate movements in changing the social structures that give rise to these social concerns.

Anderson, Halter, and Gryzak (2002); Green (2010); Wakefield et al. (2013); Root and Choi (2011); Chandler (2009); Chapell (2013); Weaver, Habibov, and Fan (2010); and Ozawa and Yongwoo (2010) all discuss different aspects of poverty, the trends over the past twenty years, and the dismantling of the social safety net. For example, it is alarming when a government changes screening criteria for social programs such as the definition of an "employable adult". Social workers and other professionals are then tasked with determining what makes a person employable or unemployable? There are several factors that hinder people who are homeless or of lower income from getting and sustaining a job. These vary from not having a phone, a mode of transportation, or appropriate work clothes, to daycare costs and inflexible work schedules. As a result of any or all of these barriers, compounded by a person's inability to get assistance, people find they have few options for the future. This was evident with the shared experiences among families who attended the FSP. In order to keep working they needed help, and in order to acquire a job they needed to ensure they were rested and not in a crisis state.

The article "Working Hard, Living Poor", by Chandler (2009) identifies another theme in the literature as the creation of jobs that do not provide a livable wage. As a result, many citizens have to seek and maintain several jobs to meet their income needs and to be able to live without accessing the social safety net. Bishop (2002) points out the need for
change in the system when she suggests that “by living in our society today we help keep the
class system the way it is, and perpetuate the differences, in our absence to make change we
are silent oppressors within the system” (p. 47). Bishop also suggests that if we do not work
towards social change to create equality in the social system, then we too are oppressing
people in the minority groups. These all support the rationale for a program like the FSP, to
work together to stop oppression of people in need or crisis.

The literature illustrated that oppressed groups are growing. Even though current
society has become more politically aware, we have still allowed cuts to social programs.
Cutting these social programs takes away extra income that would help families leave
welfare and escape poverty. The current situation does not facilitate equality. Instead it adds
to existing holes in the social safety net and increases the gap between the rich and the poor.
As the number of people becoming poor is on the rise, social workers and agencies are forced
to scramble and compete for the same resources and funding thus creating divisions rather
than building cooperation to bring about needed change. This trend is on the rise as we
compete for the limited dollars available to fund social programs, and help keep as many
families afloat as possible.

Chandler (2009) suggests that the minimum wage should provide workers with a
basic living as was intended in the USA, Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The businesses
that win contracts or tax breaks from cities and counties should pay workers a livable wage.
Living and minimum wage movements have won in 28 states (Chandler, 2009, p. 174). In
relation to the program this is evident. As a participant of the FSP described, “I would rather
work than rely on the social assistance program available in Canada, as I can’t survive off of
that amount”. Chandler’s research suggests that economic policies tend to support business
needs at the cost of people's needs (2009, p. 174). The provincial and federal governments have made Canada a country open to big business, but, at the same time, we have seen unions, wages, and jobs decline. As Bishop (2000), Chandler (2009), and Carniol (2000) explain, the theme of oppression and social cuts has not changed in the last decade.

**Poverty in Canada**

The trend of the 1990s to tighten fiscal budgets and social programs has resulted in huge poverty challenges in Canada. For example, the report on child poverty, released in 2013, states that the rate of children in poverty has not improved in British Columbia: 1 in 5 children live in poverty, 18.6% of children live in poverty (www.cbc.ca). The report also highlights single mothers as having the highest rate of children in poverty. Although this research is meant to assist those in need, it may be misused to incite further oppression of minority groups. Much of the literature that I have reviewed illustrates an increase in food banks, racial and structural poverty, low paying jobs, stress of high daycare and transportation costs, and longer work weeks. As provinces receive less funding in transfer payments from their federal counterparts, provincial services are cut further, programs are closed, and new ones are rolled out with stricter criteria.

As the federal programs claw back funds, they force the millions now in poverty into a lifestyle they never knew, and we begin to see more intergenerational issues, from poverty to addictions, to other related crises. Clarke and Barlow (1997) have been warning about the federal agenda for years, but it appears not too many have listened: “The Chretien government in Ottawa has taken no action to launch a national employment strategy since taking office in late 1993” (p. 58). Instead the government pushes back to the private sector, and moves free trade agreements forward, such as the North American Free Trade
Agreement (NAFTA), and World Trade Organization. In the province of British Columbia by the 2000s, social workers and many other helping professions watched as the government was elected into political power with the mindset to balance the budget, and to get people off welfare and back to work.

The structural poverty that has settled into Canada and specifically British Columbia is startling to examine. In Prince George, more of our services are being impacted by social funding cuts, big businesses and oil companies on the move, and mines are looking to develop their industries. Many of the families today live one or two paychecks away from poverty. Chappell describes that “in 1990 - 2000 the number of Canadians living in poverty rose from 4.39 million to 4.72 million” (2013, p. 105). It appears this is directly related to trends of cuts to social funding and social programs. They are costing the middle class and lower wage earners a lifestyle in which they were raised. If examined further the trend is frustrating to review because the same patterns emerge: cuts to programs equal growth in poverty and even more social strain. This larger lens of society narrowed down to the personal interactions and reactions see a trend of people isolating themselves from the population because there is a stigma involved in being poor and not being able to afford things, and it can imply poor planning on a family’s part. It is a continuous cycle that blames the victim and divides the population, with the people struggling to make ends meet. At the same time, in my experience there is a strong resiliency in people to survive and invest in their local communities.

Poverty and Crisis Intervention

Poverty in Canada has been measured over the years and current statistics suggest that 967,000 children in Canada live in poverty (www.newswire.ca). But how is poverty
related to crisis intervention work? Specific to the Family Support Program, poverty becomes more evident and structural poverty is an identifiable issue. How do we as social workers figure out and rationalize a way to be both supportive to the family coming to us and then to possibly deny help, even if the need for help is what is impeding their ability to work and provide food for their children and a warm home in which to live? Poverty impacts everyone including single-parent families, people with disabilities, seniors, and married people. It has become apparent to me that in this field insight about how to be a social entrepreneur could be important and beneficial. As one example, the money allocated to this pilot Family Support Program project could be invested to help more families.

My question is, “How is success measured?” The FSP aims to provide crisis-oriented, one-time help for people and families. Poverty can be a lifetime circumstance, but with support there can be small changes. The change may be slow, but I can see areas where families would appreciate the assistance of the FSP without having to experience the social stigma connected to other social programs. Chappell (2013) claims the Canadian governments’ political “agenda has been starving the beast to support cutting social programs. In 2014 the current legislation governing the funding of social programs [through transfer payments to the provinces] expires” (p. 110); what are we going to see happen once those transfer payments are no longer available? The launch of the FSP has come at a time when our community is going to need it, and we are going to see more agencies competing for the same dollars, but most likely from a smaller pot of the federal dollars allocated to the provinces. Chappell suggests (2013) the results, if not changed, will be “the continued loss of quality of life and an increasing wage gap” (p. 215).
The FSP crisis response requires agency partners to re-evaluate how they react when they are faced with people who don’t meet the criteria for assistance, recognizing that the FSP may be another option. At the same time, implementation is a fine balancing act, as the FSP has limited capacity and budget. Crisis response is different in each realm of social work, from a mental health response, to a child protection response. Ultimately, my role was to gather information, collaborate with the business department and social work faculty, and ensure we were not duplicating services.

Crisis response and experiential learning require assessment skills, data gathering, maintaining documentation, balancing, and checking with the family seeking help. The ability to remain focused on their needs as opposed to the financial constraints of the project was at times a juggling act. Rapport (1962) suggests that “crisis is a major upset in a system be this individual, family or community group” (p. 41). The response to crisis also requires balance and foresight regarding possible solutions, and assistance through the crisis. It is necessary to recognize that we may not be able to solve all of the issues that arise, but we can help by giving families techniques and reminders of self-care as well as financial help. We can also help them connect back to their natural support system, as Caplan (1989) states: “it is important to foster hope, and foster mutual support inside the family, validate support by relatives, friends, community, professionals and natural helpers” (p. 16). Humanity needs to be present in crisis, families need to be validated that their issues matter, and by listening to their stories we are honoring their pain. When we are empathetic it lessens the isolation that many families experience when in crisis. As a community development crisis response team, we can support families emotionally as we help with financial crises.
Grassroots Experiential Learning and Community Change

The term “grassroots” can be defined in many ways. For the purpose of this report it is defined by Barker (2005) as “the public and those who provide the basic support for a political movement” (p. 183). Several of the authors discussed in the following section have their own version of what grassroots means, in their articles about political movements and social movements for change. Many grassroots organizations were formed in experiential learning settings, and, if successful, grassroots movements could change how one advocates and practices in social work.

The term “experiential learning” has been used throughout this report, and the authors Burbriski and Seeman (2009), Homonoff (2008), Holosko (2009), Swords and Kiely (2010), Todd and Schwartz (2009), Selekman and Ybarra (2011), and Cramer, Ryosh, and Nygyuen (2012) all contribute to the literature on diversity in practical experience in the field of social work. Their articles include topics from leadership, inter-disciplinary learning, supervision, grassroots movements, and the importance of continuing to provide social work students with the professional education that leads to development of skills such as assessment, leadership, crisis response, social change and advocacy, and awareness of educational privilege. These authors describe ways and techniques to provide both the student and the supervisor with guidance about how to teach skills that may be transformative. It is through this skill development that the field of social work becomes more diverse and richer with knowledge. However, the authors also point out that at times adhering to accreditation rules and guidelines can make it more difficult to find appropriate field placements. For example, there may be other disciplines that believe in social work values but that cannot provide mentorship to the students due to the accreditation requirements.
Other areas discussed include the social work profession being pulled in two directions, as the research of academia requires that the “soft science” of social work becomes more empirical. I find the suggestion that social work is a soft science limiting and undermines our skill sets as social workers. My professional experiences have proven to me that through both theory and practical experiences, students learn. Sometimes the theoretical frameworks are merely words on a page until the person is in the field; then they can provide the academic research to the body of accreditation. Even more transformational in social work is having an agency supervisor or educator that invests in the teaching relationship to guide the student through their experiential learning.

Todd and Schwartz (2009) note the importance of the CASWE standards, and how these need to look at transformative measures and in fact, embrace transformative practice. They explain transformative practice and their participants seemed to pay more attention to dynamic nature of quality education which emphasizes the discussion to the quality of the experience to teaching to learning and emphasized pedagogy within the learning relationship.

The needs assessment completed by Pierce and Chabot (2012) for the FSP was a perceptive piece of research that identified what areas of social services were being delivered. However, it is unknown whether people take advantage of available options or continue to try and solve their issues without outside agency help. Marlow (2005) suggests that current clients may be a non-representative sample and there should be systematic documentation to reflect who is using the services (p. 71). The families involved with the FSP had various needs, from groceries and medication to housing. The importance and relevance noted was that each family was in a form of crisis and needed short-term
intervention assistance. This will be explored in further research as the FSP seeks to strengthen its work and develop into a sustainable ongoing program.

Pugh and Cheers (2010) suggest that we move away from bureaucratic services, and find balance in the services and the bureaucracy. If a social worker needs to provide financial information to the public service sector or to private donors, it becomes more difficult to balance person-to-person services with budgets, forms, policies, and finances. Ideally, the services provided will be local to Prince George; however in the geographic region surveyed the need for more services is an increasing concern the further one moves away from Prince George. Rural and remote communities often have less financial resources and fewer professionals available to their communities. They usually have to pay high travel costs for experts to be flown into their region, which takes away service provider dollars; this then limits their budgets to provide applicable timely services.

Ethics

There is a large amount of literature written about social work ethics. Barker (2005) defines ethics “as a system of moral principles and perceptions about right versus wrong and the resulting philosophy of conduct that is practiced by an individual, group, profession” (p. 147). If we look back in history, the beginning of the profession of social work originated with charities and those with particular personal values. The Encyclopedia of Canadian Social Work (Turner, 2005) describes the reasons for code of ethics to “exist to ensure the protection of the public against the risks of inappropriate incompetent and unethical practice of social workers” (p. 71). Furthermore, when an individual begins social work and they are immersed into the field, they are taught the need for self-awareness and reminded to constantly check themselves to ensure that the services they provide are not being swayed by
some personal bias or value system. As Levy states (1972), when the situation arises in which social workers are needed, clients are admitting they are not free or to help themselves. They may be in a state of distress. This is paramount to remember when providing ethical services to people in need. Ethics are never simple and the answers often require a debate, because ethical situations tend not to be black and white, but rather a shade of grey. When working in an emotionally charged environment there is also a responsibility to the well-being of people and their families, and one must keep ethical principles at the forefront of practice to ensure no harm is done to the client.

Specifically related to the Family Support Project, there will be a need for further development and educational experiences for students with respect to ethical issues. In the future more business students are expected to participate in the multi-disciplinary panel about what crisis interventions are undertaken and why. Business students may have little knowledge of the guiding principles of the code of ethics of social work. Similarly, the social work student will likely have limited knowledge of the business world; thus, there will be several layers of power and areas of knowledge the students will need to process together. As social workers it is imperative that we continue to identify whom we are accountable to, and to continue to keep in the forefront the client’s right to self-determination and confidentiality.

As a social worker ethics are paramount, and to work with crisis response in the field is a learning opportunity to learn the skill of gathering information without asking questions and to keep in mind the difference between wanting to know versus needing to know. It is important to recognize the level of unseen power that rests with the social worker, and to be cautious about the gathering and use of personal information required to help a person in need. Families that approach the Family Support Program for assistance are in the state of
their defined crisis. Ethically, it can be challenging for those involved in assessing the situation to ensure that we screen families into the program when appropriate. To complete this type of intake screening, as Reamer (1990) discusses, it will require slower information gathering to ensure that the decisions concerning financial assistance are completed ethically. We do not want to cause more issues and difficulties for the family in a crisis situation. And the diversity within the FSP multidisciplinary team necessarily means there are those who are not aware of social work standards of ethics and practice that are central to how we undertake our work. This can complicate decision-making and information gathering. But with cooperative education and mentoring, this challenge can be overcome.

**Ethics in Multidisciplinary Social Work**

Due to the complexities that follow with multidisciplinary teams and social work, and the FSP being the practicum placement, it was important, as Reamer (1987) identifies, “to educate the staff about ethical issues that are relevant to the agency and practitioners involved” (p. 188) As the FSP continues, the team and program will encounter more ethical dilemmas, such as file storing and sharing information in regards to the families who come for assistance. Furthermore, Nelson-DiFranks (2008) reminds social workers to practice “awareness of ones behavior in congruence with the code of ethics...Beliefs are important but they do not determine behavior. Awareness of discordance though supervision could identify the disconnection between belief and behavior” (p. 174). Therefore, the supervisors’ role will continue to influence the standards of ethical practice. Moreover, with every program or service there is the potential for ethical issues to arise, as with the consent forms that clients and families complete, which include consent for follow up. At times during my practicum experience, there were ethical issues that felt like a power imbalance, such as
when asking for permission to follow up with the family. It was discussed in meetings, and as a student I felt it was my role to explain at review meetings how important it was that if the families said no to a follow up, their decision would have no influence on whether we provided assistance to them or not. In vulnerable situations people often say yes, but may have felt influenced and pressured to meet the demands of the program, thus interfering with their right to self-determination. They may have felt compelled to agree to a follow up call from the program in order to receive desperately needed financial support from the program.

**Ethics in Crisis Social Work**

Ethics is crisis social work start with multi-disciplinary professionals aligning for the purpose of the betterment of the client’s life. In this practicum, social problems became a focused discussion and trying to align the values and beliefs of social work with those of business was often a challenge. There was a common goal without the common value base for the social work beliefs and values. Ethically, social problems arise when conditions among people lead to behaviors that violate some people’s values and norms, and cause economic or emotional suffering (Barker 2005).

The four models of crisis were apparent and the challenge as a social worker was to advocate for the client so that a non-social work discipline could understand that the crisis situations were in fact valid, and the risk assessments made by the social workers were competent.

Ethically a social worker has a duty to respond to the client or family in need, and if we offer a service that has the connection to crisis, it needs to follow an ethical response in a timely manner. If we cannot help, ethically we need to tell individuals or families, or alternatively challenge the outside source that questions or does not understand our role in
the community. As a result, the FSP will need to continue to focus on ethical responses, values, beliefs, and creating an educational opportunity for a better understanding of what social workers do in the community.

The FSP is one that will undoubtedly continue to face ethical dilemmas. Suggested responses are reported in the recommendations section of the report. However, it needs to be identified that the invisible line of power influences decisions and response times. Thus, while strengthening the FSP as an educational opportunity, we must continue to be mindful of the importance of maintaining attention on the clients’ strengths and right to self-determination. As Antle and Regehr (2003) explain that “at the heart of social work is trust, either in the formation of a therapeutic relationship with clients or in a community practice with vulnerable groups. Truth telling is crucial component of forming a trusting relationship” (p. 139). Establishing rapport and truth telling is an imperative part of congruent social work practice. In this way we can provide assistance and clarity about what we can help with, and how in other cases we can guide people to other agencies that might be able to assist. In addition to developing the trust and truth telling to all parties involved in the FSP, so that egalitarian decision making can influence ethical decisions, where social workers can effectively complete their jobs while adhering to the Social Work Code of Ethics.

Reamer (2013) suggests that some ethical challenges include “practitioner competence, client privacy, and confidentiality, informed consent, conflicts of interest, boundaries, dual relationships, consultation and client referral, termination and interruption of services, documentation and research evidence” (p. 166). Throughout the vast literature on ethics in social work there are common themes, one of which pertains to the client’s right to self-determination, and another is to ensure that you do no harm. A part of the FSP was to
provide services to families in crisis. There is a continued need to educate professionals
involved and community members seeking support that they are participating in the program
voluntarily, and that although we will do everything we can as students and faculty members,
we cannot guarantee their confidentiality. This seems to be a stumbling block, however with
more planning and ethical consideration given there will be more opportunities to implement
policies to ensure that the families who offer their information receive the highest level of
confidentiality possible. Moreover, constant attention to these issues will further assist in
addressing ethical concerns of clients and decrease any sense they may have that they have to
divulge more than they really want to share, in order to get financial assistance at a time of

crisis.

Finally, another ethical consideration is the point that we were providing crisis
intervention services for families in crisis, through a voluntary program and therefore, future
agencies we may connect with need to be clear that we cannot share information with them,
nor can we forget the client's right to decline our services.

Crisis Intervention

The research illustrates that there are several models to operate from when responding
to a crisis. As described in the terminology section of Chapter Two, there are four modes of
crisis, which include the following: developmental, situational, eco-system, and existential.
Throughout the practicum there were definite variations in types of crisis that we addressed.
Crisis is not a linear reaction or process. Although treatment and intervention can be
provided in a linear way, rarely is the case or family and their response to crisis linear.
Treatment provided by a crisis social worker is, in large part, dictated by reactions from and
the particular situation faced by the person seeking assistance. It is important in crisis social
work and interventions to be mindful that people are in a state where they are no longer reacting in a “normal” cognitively functioning way. They are coping with their issues at hand and our interventions need to respect the process individual clients are going through while occurring in a timely manner.

Rapport (1962) states that crisis is a major upset to an individual, group, or family and tends to arouse supporting features. People need comfort to be able to focus on coping with the situation. Rapport continues to explain that social workers need to clarify the situation and assess how they can help the family involved. Caplan explains (1969) that not only is the immediate assistance important to a person developing coping strategies, but also social support influences and helps the person in crisis to develop defense and coping mechanisms to counteract their crisis or stressful situations. These will also influence the outcomes for families involved who choose to participate in the FSP. These authors suggest that not only is it an adequate timely response to crises that will help the families, but the social network and social supports around them are also important.

One focus of the FSP includes a re-evaluation of response to community crisis demands in conjunction with student experiential learning goals. It is also important to note, the initial assessment stages of crisis will likely continue to be undertaken by crisis social workers, hospital workers, the Ministry for Children and Family Development, and/or mental health therapists. So except in the case when families self-refer, the previously listed professional are expected to continue to be the pre-screeners before clients come to the Family Support Program. Our aim is to be involved in restoring balance to disrupted lives. Initially in crisis, there are safety assessments completed to ensure that a person is neither suicidal nor homicidal, and that they are able to respond to crisis in a safe way. Thus, as a
starting point, the Family Support Program practicum will include the need to assess whether a person is appropriate for the FSP or if there is need for a different referral. Our area of focus is, as Roberts and Ottens (2005) recommend, generating and exploring new alternatives and new coping strategies, and restoring function through implementation of planning and brief follow up. Crisis is a branch of social work with many areas that can be discussed and looked at, but for the purpose of the Family Support Program we focused on short-term interventions only.

James and Gilliand (2013) suggest that a crisis is labeled as such due to an individual’s response and their inability to cope with the situation. They explain further that individual crisis is really something of an oxymoron, because as most crises unfold, they rarely remain confined to one person. For the purpose of the FSP we are focused on which as described by James and Gilliand (2013) as “situational crisis - one that happens when a person had no idea that this was going to happen, such as job loss, sudden illness and death. The key point as explained is for social workers is to recognize crisis is random, sudden, shocking, and intense and can be catastrophic” (p. 17). We screened potential families to ensure that the support we can offer would fit their needs.

Other authors such as Roberts and Everly (2006) note that the world phenomenon of large disasters is impeding on the human capacity to react to crisis, and they point to a resulting increase in crisis responses. They describe crisis intervention as time-limited but suggest that numerous sessions to help a family process are beneficial. The Family Support Program however aligns with the notion of fewer sessions, as the goal for the program is to provide families with one-time financial assistance. At the same time, we ensure that referral to follow-up assistance is provided for those clients who may require such additional support.
However, in social work the process of intakes and the processing of grief or a traumatic life event will most often take longer than one session. “In a timely manner” suggests that we will take the time necessary to provide an adequate and informed response for the families involved with the FSP. At the same time, because this the FSP is also an experiential learning program for students, it is necessary to include and account for the pre-meetings and screening, an assessment for safety, an intake meeting, a provision of service, and a potential follow up with the family. Crisis intervention is at the heart of the Family Support Program, and it is essential to provide consistent services that will allow both the School of Social Work and the School of Business to adequately respond and plan for an intervention. A main challenge of implementing this program is working through the difficulties of time line responses to crises. The practicum provided tools to address, respond to, and lessen the long-term impact of crisis on people. The structural perspective identifies that chronic inabilities to cope with crisis will impact the larger picture of business and society. As one person recalls in Ocean (2008) “Whatever caused the crisis, I’ve been unable to get help” (p. 11).

The response to crisis and follow-up with clients is a determinant of the program’s success. As the need for programs like the FSP continues to grow the request for services from the FSP will grow too. The awareness of the FSP will increase in the next semesters to follow and the challenge will be to focus on student experiential learning opportunities while providing assistance to people in need and that be an extra benefit. Crisis is a part of social work, and as business continues to learn about crisis, it will need to be decided and regularly reviewed as to how the FSP can respond effectively to the various crises. Roberts and Everly (2006) state that “Crisis intervention can certainly provide a challenge, an opportunity and/or turning point within the individual family’s life” (p. 16). The crisis response was one aspect
in my practicum with the FSP; in addition too, there were debriefings with the families and my supervisor, the multidisciplinary team and faculty supervisors.

**Short-Term Crisis Intervention**

Models of crisis are not limited to short-term intervention. Social workers are required to understand and respond to crisis; however, to specialize in this area requires extra training that allows a social worker to function effectively in locations such as mental health or hospital social work. Furthermore, crisis has many meanings within the various disciplines.

Upon reviewing the literature, the model described by Yeager and Roberts (2003) seems to fit into the Family Support Program’s need for an appropriate time and function of response. In some cases the families were referred by outside agencies. Our response time with the Family Support Program can be from a day to two weeks. It is important to note for immediate and challenging crises such as suicide or homicide, the person would usually be assessed by other community social work professionals and in this way the clients would receive immediate services and we could follow up with them once they had received some support and were referred. While in other situations families had heard about our program and self-referred so we had to ensure that the families from all areas of the community understood that this was an experiential learning opportunity and a short term program and services. It was also important to remember that this program and participation in it was voluntary and there was no obligation for families to follow through with the FSP or to respond to a follow-up call from us, just because they were referred or had sought our assistance.
Yeager and Roberts (2003) describe the ACT intervention model, which stands for “Assessment, Connecting, and Traumatic reactions” (p.15). Through this tool social workers can look through the presenting case and specify to the Family Support Program whether the person is an appropriate referral to the FSP and, if so, how we might best assist. The Family Support Program will continue to rely on the other community programs that already exist to do an initial part of prescreening, through a referral process. Throughout the practicum we went to different agencies and provided information about the program and how their clients may fit into our criteria and services. We focused on screening in, as opposed to screening out potential clients. As both the program faculty supervisor and myself have a background in social work, and have been in the field for many years, between the two of us we knew of agencies that might be able to help the clients.

We reminded social workers to make sure that FSP would be an appropriate program for the potential clients as this would be a one-time-only response. The short-term crisis intervention would allow for brief screening, gathering more details, and would require a response and rationale as to why the people were funded or assisted (Assessment). If we could not help after assessing the situations of the families, we connected families to agencies that could assist them (Connecting). The next part of the ACT response, traumatic reactions, involved the social worker checking to make sure that the person would be safe when they leave and that there is a human connection somewhere to assist them. These are the referrals to community counselling, the hospital or a support group: somewhere that is effective and meaningful to help build resilience and ensure the coping skills and support network are built around the client’s needs. This all takes time to manage and respond to in an effective manner. As Lamb (2013) states, it is “essential that hospital social workers
develop the ability to help clients understand the roles of the different professionals in the system” (p. 21). This is equally true for any support program that refers clients to another agency, so they can understand our limitations, but also our ability to connect the family or individual with services that can wrap around and ensure continued help if needed.

Chronic crisis is different than acute crises. Acute crisis is short term and people usually can recover from it. As crisis continues to invade a person’s life it becomes chronic, picking away at their coping mechanisms. The client responds and tends to spiral downward, no longer believing that they can find a way out. Our primary focus was to assist families so they could regain their strengths and support them the best way we could during their crisis. Short-term intervention in crisis response needs to be meaningful to the situation and client, as well as helpful and supportive. The FSP has limitations to its scope of practice; however the program was initiated not to duplicate other services, not to become a new agency but rather, for student learning and one time support for those facing a crisis situation. Short-term intervention can be helpful, and it is something needed in our local community.
CHAPTER FOUR: Organization Information

My practicum took place at the University of Northern B.C. downtown campus in Prince George, BC. The location was chosen because there was space available and it seemed to be an easier place to access for the local community.

The Family Support Program focuses on short-term crisis response within the local community and surrounding area. There was a partnership created with generous donations from the Schwab family and IDL company and its employees bringing together the Schools of Business and Social Work. The driving force of this program has been the dedication of faculty members committed to seeing this project flourish because they believe in it.

The formulated vision statement released March 7, 2014 to the IDL employees reads as follows:

The FSP helps families who find themselves unexpectedly in crisis and in need of short term assistance otherwise unavailable, so that they can emerge from crisis and continue with productive and proud lives (IDL presentation group, March 2014).

Although the statement suggests that only families are included, the FSP is also available to people without families and is inclusive of most people in need at the time of crisis.

The partnership with UNBC provided the location and faculty to teach the students in an experiential setting. As described in one of the presentations to the donors, UNBC is uniquely positioned to develop and deliver the FSP because the university provides an environment where social entrepreneurship can flourish also engaging students and faculty in the challenges and benefits of a rich experiential learning opportunity.

Most of my time at the FSP office was spent participating in the organization and delivery of services to families in crisis, attending the office daily to get it launched and off
the ground. Once it was up and running, it was decided at a panel meeting to deliver services one to two days per week, so that we could ensure we had appropriate staffing and space for people to come and see us. My supervisor oversaw the foundational pieces and directed me to help and focus on getting the program launched. Once we launched there was a feeling of success. We continued to develop a multi-disciplinary panel of business and social work students and faculty, to share in discussion and in the decision-making process.

As a graduate student with the School of Social Work my role focused on helping families in crisis navigate the system of supports available and to move forward from their crisis situation. This required both the critically needed financial support, and the professional skill set and empathy of the social work profession. My role included daily management and assessment of the crisis calls, completion of intakes, networking and connecting families to appropriate programs when necessary, and maintaining statistics regarding calls and people assisted. Although initially I had wanted to have a clinical counselling caseload to be a part of my practicum experiences, this could not be arranged. However, there were opportunities with the families that came and needed a safe place to debrief and be heard, which are parts of clinical counselling, and therefore some of these educational pieces were provided.
CHAPTER FIVE: Practicum Learning Contract

The timeline and the multidisciplinary team involved in launching the program made it at times, difficult to define specific goals. Moreover, what I anticipated I would learn changed as I became more familiar with what was needed and expected from me. In the following pages, I will provide an overview and summary of what I accomplished while in my practicum with the Family Support Program.

Practicum Overview

During the first few weeks of my practicum I was in contact with my supervisor continuously, learning about the program and the desired outcome for the FSP. My goal was to learn about business and budgeting, to facilitate client intakes and assessments, and to provide short-term crisis intervention. However before this could be done, we had to build the program, and implement it. How could we best use the donations and time of the students and faculty involved, and meet the expectations of community agencies who were involved in the initial needs assessment? How did we want the program delivered? This development process had to align with the funders’ vision and how business understood their contribution, to help make this program a self-sustaining project.

This was a huge learning curve for me; I have a variety of practice experiences, but limited experiences with professionals other than social workers, teachers, or other helping professions. I had little business skill or knowledge, and little understanding of the potential role of the University in providing services as part of educating students. It was imperative to begin to understand the people involved and what would be considered critical to keeping the program sustainable and have a positive practicum experience.
Social Safety Net

My previous experience as a child protection social worker helped me with the knowledge and awareness of what was currently available to families in the local area. However, there was a need to continue to educate myself on other programs in the community that were not mandated by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). As we began to connect with more agencies and social workers, I was able to take some time and ask them what they saw as barriers to their clients seeking assistance. One example given by a social worker was that they had patients who were living at the hospital, and they could not go home because their care included a need for medical supports to assist in their lives that they could not afford. Therefore, they couldn’t leave the hospital because there was no money or funding to help purchase the required supports. Ironically, the social safety net of the medical system could pay to keep them in the hospital, but not pay for less costly medical supports. This was more evidence of another gap in the social safety net. It was also a prime example of where the FSP could be of assistance. Another social worker explained that time frames are imperative in social work practice and that if we couldn’t respond quickly enough, it wasn’t helpful to them because in a crisis, a response would be needed faster than we could provide it. A housing support worker shared with me that there is a constant need for affordable housing in the city, and the cost of rent for some places is too high, not to mention, not up to standards. People would be evicted, or they would get behind on rent and then go to a cheque-cashing place in town, entering into a perpetual cycle of owing either the landlord, or the cheque-cashing company due to high interest costs.
Intakes and Closure

A substantive amount of time was spent on developing forms and statistical information while waiting for the business department to find a student willing to embrace such a new and diverse learning opportunity. After significant preparatory work we launched the program before Christmas and were immediately busy. A small part of the social work community had heard of the Family Support Program and began referring families our way. This began the client interactions and more significant learning opportunities for my practicum.

My previous practice experience assisted with completing the intakes and pre-screenings required to begin to provide service to clients. I learned quickly how best to respond, specific to situational crises. I could immediately prioritize on the level of immediate crisis, and who had time to wait. It is a difficult part of crisis response to triage and decide with supervision which people had to become a priority. As this is a new project, initially my supervisor and I were involved in the daily delivery of services. As the School of Business came on board, the business faculty member, and a business student joined the program. We worked well as a team and we could see the strengths of the families involved. My faculty site supervisor and I had connections throughout the community to help assist the families with appropriately timed responses. A part of triaging and delivering the services required was ensuring that we were not duplicating existing community services. In these instances where there were appropriate services we connected clients to these agencies for assistance.

Although I have been in the social work field for eight years as a practicing social worker, primarily in the field of child protection, it was important that I remove that lens and
focus on the crises and the issues that lay before the families. I had to learn about brief interventions that included a beginning, an intervention or service, and an ending, all within a short period of time period.

This learning was evident when one client attended the program and shared more of their situation than was asked of them. The person described their battle with their health and their desire to continue to work even though the work was impeding their ability to heal. It was apparent that this person had a long journey of fighting to keep their self-worth intact. Previous interactions with possible services had resulted in little assistance or opportunities for this client to be helped. The medical system could only help to a point. When we were able to assist the person was incredibly grateful to not have to endure many detailed screening forms only to hear that, they weren’t able to get assistance. After years of struggle the person finally heard a ‘yes’. They were appreciative that a person (social worker) would listen attentively to their story, hear the trials and tribulations, and the very real health scares that they had experienced. They had given up hope for receiving any help but they hadn’t given up their self-determination to continue to keep focused on staying positive and trying to stay healthy. The social safety net had a hole and this client fell through and just needed a bit more support so that they could remain working. That was a phenomenal experience in social work and I think for this program because it provided evidence that there were people in our community who could benefit from the FSP. Another area of my learning included self-reflection, as critical thinking was important in the process. I also learned more about closure with clients. At long last there was a successful ending for the client.

Previously in my professional experiences, the families unfortunately did not have that ending; usually their file was passed on to another social worker. The ability to assist the
client get back to work was powerful and moving and I was honored to have that experience. This was social change; this was social entrepreneurship working together exemplifying how the program could help others through collaborative practice. This situation required me to listen, validate, and provide an accurate assessment of a crisis situation to my site supervisor. Payne (1991) explains that “Assessment involves identifying objective and subjective facts, making hypothesis to be tested while remaining open to further information and responsibly to the client’s wishes” (p. 142). Through this sharing of information, I could confidently suggest that this was an appropriate candidate for the FSP.

**Short-Term Crisis Intervention**

Reamer (2005) recommends that “to avoid over documentation during crisis social work, do not have excessive detail, and to balance it in the context of the records” (p. 329). Reamer further explains and encourages social workers to think about ‘who’ the audience is, or will be, if the information is shared or needed for court. Additionally, protecting the clients’ identity (p. 332) helps the workers continue to focus on the red flags that occur within the crisis and not to focus too much on other issues that may not be as urgent to address at this time. In this way, the focus remains on the current crisis, and the short-term intervention will be more effective. Another factor that contributed to the practicum was the ability to be available to community members, and be accepted by the social work community. A plan for the continuation of the FSP program will need to include a section that further strengthens this credibility in the community. The plan will need to be concise, practical and obtainable, and ensure agencies understand the specific role of the FSP.
Debriefing

It became apparent during my practicum learning that times of debriefing would be needed to ensure that we could leave the clients’ issues at the Family Support Program. Thielman and Cacciatore (2014) discuss compassion fatigue and encourage being mindfully aware of “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the moment non judgmentally to the unfolding of the experience” (p. 33). Moreover, debriefing supports the maintenance of ethical client service in addition to providing a separate time that allows professional social workers to have a safe environment in which to release some of their emotions that can be associated with crisis work. For example, it was a struggle for me when I had to say no to so many people that needed housing costs covered. The housing issue in the community is growing and homelessness appears to be on the rise in the local community. From the information gathered from the calls coming into the FSP, I would assess that about 70% of our calls were related to housing costs. This began to impact me; but the knowledge of the budget became helpful because I knew the amount of money we had to work with. However I also knew that if we gave everyone their full rent or mortgage payment, our program would be shut down within a month. This knowledge helped keep the focus of the delivery on situational crisis screening rather than on rescuing people. We were focused on helping people while providing the clients information about different services available including resources, and funding (if appropriate) that fit within the vision of the FSP. This was a meaningful part of my experiential learning because I more fully understood why my previous employers had to be accountable and responsible with the budgets and couldn’t always fulfill requests. Although at times it felt uncomfortable it was helpful to discuss this with my supervisor and learn how to reframe and revise the situations through a
lens focused on the positive and strengths that the clients already had and continue to connect our housing calls to other agencies.

**Grief and Loss**

At the beginning of my practicum I assisted families facing grief and loss issues, sometimes over the loss of family members, but also over loss of a way of life, the client had become accustomed to. These changes in health impact lifestyle and can also impact a person’s well-being. The previous client example illustrated to me that their experiences taught them to take nothing for granted and to live with fervor and their relief was very apparent when they were assisted. It is similar with most crises, with grief and loss, and with tough financial situations; and it is important to remember that these challenges do not know any boundaries of race or ethnicity. None of us are immune to crisis. This is illustrated in the families that attended the FSP. I believe everyone can use help at some point and our coping skills are all different. It was important for me to remember that my primary role there was to offer support and referrals, and as much as I wanted to do more for the families, it was their crisis and their life to work and manage through. Near the end of the program I learned that one of the families we had worked with would face further crisis, and due to our assistance being one time only, we could not re-engage with this family. It was difficult at times to see them leave, knowing that I may never see them again, and the family would be changed forever. It gave me time to reflect that owning the families’ issues was not my role, and that was another layer of learning that I had not expected. That was an area of grief and loss, and a moment when having a supervisor nearby to check in and debrief with became paramount.
CHAPTER SIX: Experiential Learning

Derezotes (2000) explains that the “experiential paradigm in social work has a focus of self-actualization through self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-expression in the here and now” (p.115). Experiential learning for a student, especially through a grassroots movement, can present both a challenge and a risk, as there can be fear of inadequacy when embarking on an unknown endeavor. Some of the strengths noted by Derezotes (2000) in the experiential learning environment include the relationship, as it tends to bring energy into the helping relationship as issues are experienced in the moment. The Family Support Program challenged all my current skills as a social worker, to take risks and be uncomfortable and learn something outside of social work from the business involvement in the FSP. It required patience and the ability to work collaboratively. A key point with this program will continue to be the development of a strong collaborative plan that works for both the School of Social Work and the School of Business but that also meets the needs of the families in crisis. The decision for me to participate in experiential learning is driven by my vision to engage in a diverse learning opportunity.

The University of Northern British Columbia supports student opportunities for experiential learning. Such learning opportunities require professors, who are willing to commit extra time, utilize their skills, and mentor students not just from a theoretical but also from a hands on perspective. Homonoff (2005) suggests that professors who work with students in an experiential learning environment demonstrate their leadership and enjoy lifelong learning as they tend to learn from their students as well. As a student, it can be risky to move into an unknown project with broad parameters, engage in it, and be measured for
social work competency, but for that reason it is also an interesting and accredited Masters Practicum placement.

Developing the Family Support Program is in many ways a grassroots initiative. The term "grassroots organizing" is defined by Barker (2005) as a "strategy of helping at the local level the members of a neighborhood, or geographic regions develop stronger relationships, common goals and an organization that will help them achieve those goals...This involves educating and mobilizing people for action toward agreed-on goals" (p. 183). The insight and foresight that this practicum allows both continued in the front-line experiences but also in the involvement that allows one's voice, experiences, and knowledge to be validated and valued as a result of becoming a key member of the team. Moreover, there is time to discover areas that one may not experience in the front line as a social work professional. As the practicum themes became evident, there were organizational communications, balancing client's needs, confidentiality needs, and addressing the crisis situations that families faced. As a result a lot of the planning still resulted in troubleshooting about what and how the FSP work will develop further. Undoubtedly, students will continue to have opportunities to explain their ideas and ways to address these issues along with the entire team, making the changes at a grassroots level.

The experiential learning process requires collaboration, defined as “working together and in partnership usually seen in participatory research. The main advantage is collaboration allows for many different perspectives to be shared” (Marika, 2002, p. 59). The process of this practicum included meetings and discussions that contribute to developing and learning from each other. This relationship may continue to develop and provide more avenues of networks for both the School of Social Work and the School of Business, and what each
embodies. Swords and Kiley (2010) explain that a key part in education is that “critical reflection shifts the focus of reflection from self-discovery, student learning and practical dimensions of service to examine how relations of power influence stakeholders” (p. 151). Through this reflection the student is able to identify strategies and areas for growth.

Cramer et al. (2012) suggest several benefits of experiential learning, one being that it requires the student to give more of themselves and challenge their practice, and to broaden their understanding of social issues at both emotional and cognitive levels. Depending upon the practicum setting a student can expand and develop new insights on diversity and oppression through various exercises, field practices, artistry, poetry, and cultural knowledge. This experiential learning opportunity not only focused on collaboration but on understanding the culture of multi-disciplinary practice, while maintaining social work values.

The Family Support Program’s focus on short-term intervention required the students to engage with the client and family in a manner that can quickly establish a connection so that the person is engaged in services in a timely manner. As Roberts and Otten (2005) recommend, establishing this rapport is a way to gain necessary information to help assess whether we can assist, or if the person needs a different referral or immediate assistance from a crisis team. It is through experiential learning that this work will also be further developed and modeled especially with respect to assessing, rapport building, planning, follow up, and completion. Over time, it will be interesting to see if the work of the Family Support program can be viable and can further reflect upon the fine balance necessary between assisting and rescuing.
Finally, quality of a field placement creates an environment of safe learning where there are opportunities to reflect and think critically about the experiences, and the direct processes of a practicum; as Carey and McCardle (2011) state, “Practicing self-awareness, tolerating ambiguity when faced with ethical dilemmas and applying knowledge gained from many sources” (p. 338). Experiential learning is an important part of professional training, and it is important to note that often there are limitations to the experiential method due to a person or community not being at the place where they are ready to move forward in the process of learning, growth, or change. Derezotes (2000) also notes the experiential model is individually driven by the person or group participating in change. Delgado (2000) also explains that there needs to be an investment by the key players to ensure quality opportunities for students: “A tremendous amount of time and energy will be required to create these new learning opportunities for social work students” (p. 217). This suggests that the supervisor is as involved in the experiential learning environment as the students.

From the strengths perspective in social work, the professional involved seeks to provide a response focused on what has helped people stay resilient. The strengths perspective is described by Smith (2006) as “looking at the positives about a person, and see[ing] the glass as half full instead of half empty, focused on a person’s assets rather than deficits” (p. 16). A part of strengths at times is as Caplan (1989) notes, the natural support people in clients’ lives tend to be who they draw their strength from; however, in many crisis situations people will need both the natural support and professional support. Natural supports can provide time for families to reflect on what other help they may need. The professional has a responsibility to assist where appropriate but also must have awareness that there are other support networks for families to access when in crisis. For the purpose of
experiential learning, strength based learning must be meaningful learning not only to ensure adequate competencies but to resonate with the person’s mindset about how their focus of experiences can impact their learning. Through this awareness and experience there can be transformative learning.

As Carey and McCardle (2011) suggest “An increasing body of scholarly work supports the need for change in field education structures arising from the number of intractable internal and external trends that create obstacles to optimal student learning” (p. 357). For my practicum we had to respect that the FSP mandate was narrowly focused, and although we were to assist with crisis management, we remained focused on the strengths of the support system of the family in need. We were aiming to help with the personal issues but with the awareness that this also impacts larger macro issues, such as: poverty, unemployment, and other related concerns.

The families and clients that came to seek assistance were motivated by continued crisis in their lives and they responded in a healthy way to seek assistance to cope with the crisis. While meeting with clients, it became evident that the everyday routines can be taken for granted, but can also become impacted by crisis. The clients were grateful for the assistance, and the gratitude showed in their faces that they weren’t being oppressed and they were being given another chance at the next step in their lives. The crisis was momentarily controlled and contained. Furthermore, the experiential learning process extended from the students to the families involved with the FSP, as they were not stigmatized or oppressed when reaching out for assistance. We were not challenging them or questioning their motives; we were not assessing their finances to qualify them. We were empathetically hearing their stories, validating their issues, and providing assistance in the most effective
and timely manner. People were leaving with a look of relief on their faces that they could get back to life and focus on future planning. The crisis didn’t have to take over their lives. This was significant for all involved.

Another positive part of experiential learning was the process of discovering that because this was a new program, we could be flexible with how we could provide assistance. We could be creative and empathetic and validate our client’s feelings. In my previous experiential learning opportunities there were set out policies and procedures and therefore much less flexibility. The FSP seemed to be giving hope to families and social workers in the community. The interest in the FSP began to increase, people were curious and wanted to refer, but they were also cautious about letting their hopes get too high. In my experience in social work practice, there is significant time spent in referring and creating a paper trail to ensure that people meet agency standards. There was an invisible financial cut off line that nobody wanted to cross, yet many at some point needed supports-regardless of their location in relations to this cut off line.

As the semester continued more FSP panel members came into the practicum, adding diversity to panel planning, discussion and decision-making. Once the student from business was engaged it was interesting to have meetings and learn from her and the business supervisor what terms they used and perspectives they held. I have provided examples in the terminology section of this report. It was important for my learning process that I understand some of the business language so that I could work with their discipline in the practicum and also in the future. As part of my learning and eventually my career I wanted to gain knowledge about what businesses look for in funding proposals and what agencies require when designing their budgets. This opportunity was like starting at the beginning of my
degree: the language and jargon of social work compared to business is very different. In business, the thought of power appears as a welcome one; in social work you are taught that power needs to be used with caution. The different perspectives taught me how and why we as Schools of Social Work and Business were so different. The FSP meetings involving both disciplines often could be lengthy and the discussions were sometimes frustrating because we could be using the same language but with different meanings. At this point, working with the business student and faculty member as part of my practicum began to assist me with understanding terms, such as “business plan”, “contingency plan”, and “the 5 steps to control”. These were uncomfortable terms to me. I had to reflect on each concept for a while as to why they were uncomfortable. For example, in social work we are taught that we have huge responsibilities and the idea of control versus social work’s idea of self-determination were polar opposites. How would we come together to educate each other?

**Business Goals**

What were the goals of business? It was my perception that the goal of business was to provide the business student with the experiential learning of what it is like to be a part of a social mission, “to operate in a way that actively recognizes the central role that business plays in society by initiating innovative ways to improve the quality of life locally, nationally and internationally” (Althouse, Rose, Allan, Gitma, & McDaniel, 2011, p. 207). The business side was very oriented towards marketing and managing what time frame we were completing tasks in and being fiscally responsible. Within the meetings there were many questions due to the misunderstood view of social work and not being fully aware of social work roles in the community. The business goals included measuring cost effectiveness, and how to keep this program sustainable for 5 years. This began the process of information
sharing: how and why does business make these decisions? It is relevant to note that previous to this I had small business experience, but no knowledge of business plans, contingency plans, operational costs, the 5 steps of control, efficiency, effectiveness, planning leading, organizing, and controlling. It was evident in my practicum learning situation that business had plans, evaluations, and ways to control companies, managers, and subordinates. This could be part of why there could sometimes be miscommunication in the meetings. It felt at times like we had a language barrier, as both disciplines aimed to meet the needs of the program, but the meaning of the words were sometimes lost in translation.

**Barriers to Service**

Although it was beneficial to work with business, sometimes the two disciplines needed more time to recognize what the other needed to deliver a successful service to the clients, and what each discipline needed to operate efficiently and effectively. The summary of the previous discussion of what the roles of each discipline involved was reflected in some ongoing challenges observed in my practicum. There sometimes seemed to be a lack of understanding of what social workers were professionally trained to do and the ways in which their value to the program was essential. Moreover ethical issues arose when the wish for increased marketing clashed with the requirement for client confidentiality. After several meetings members of the team began to understand better why and where people needed to compromise and collaborate, and to reflect upon their own experiences. This was a critical learning opportunity for me because I could see the growth in each of the disciplines and in my own educational experience. My supervisor encouraged my reflection about the meetings and to remind me to stop and remember they were not social workers and the beliefs and values were not always aligned. By the end of the practicum the business student and faculty
member could see how important social work was to the program and how much time was invested into the learning opportunity and delivering a program and I had a clearer perspective of business.

At times, it was difficult and it felt from a student’s perspective that the focus was mainly on what business could learn, provide, and accomplish. After three months of social work developing, and facilitating the program set-up, it felt at times like a barrier to moving forward. The business mindset is very different than the social work mindset. At my request I was provided a textbook by business faculty and I could see the differences in curriculum: some words were similar but the focus was much different. The experiential learning increased and exposed my social work mindset to a whole new comprehension of the beginnings of the business perspective. This textbook and interactions with the student and business faculty helped form a new understanding of their mindset and what they may have envisioned as success.

A final barrier to service was the accessibility of the program to clients, as we were opened for a limited time during the week. It became difficult to follow up and through with services, clients and agencies to provide the intake, referral, assistance and or follow up meetings. This is something that will need to be further reflected on by those involved in the continued FSP work in order to ensure that their vision for the future can address some of these issues.

**Business and Social Work**

The languages of business and social work sometimes could become barriers to each other when communicating. For example the word “marketing” rarely plays into social work front line work; however “networking” does play a huge part in a social worker’s ability to
help and deliver services. Networking in business is essential because this is where students in business receive the help they need to succeed. This is similar in social work because although we network to get help for our clients, we also help each other by learning about a social worker's specific practice or agency and their ability to help succeed.

Further challenges included the definitions of other words such as “control”, “power”, “crisis”, “confidentiality”, and “outcome”. All those have very different meanings in business and social work, and here we were working together to redefine a relationship and our languages. I feel that this is important to note because communication is the key to any successful program. How were we as a program going to educate and promote social change, and develop social entrepreneurship? This is an example of learning that occurred and became important, evident and meaningful to me as a student and I think to the business student as well. A part of this educational process was committing to an idea, but also having the flexibility to work within the framework to be part of a progression of short-term intervention that was developed with perspectives of both social change and social entrepreneurship.

The future of the program lies in the hands and minds of the next students and faculty members who carry on this work. Will they find this as meaningful or inspiring as I did, or as the business student did? Will they risk being uncomfortable in their profession to learn about something very foreign to many? The next group of students may have different ideas about how things can work with a one-time-only, short-term crisis intervention, from both the business and social work perspectives. But I hope they will be able to build on the foundation that was built over the last year with the pilot program.
Reflections on the Program

In a discussion that is inclusive of multidisciplinary perspectives there is an expectation with the FSP that we will provide assistance to help with the family in a social needs crisis. Social needs are described through Maslow's hierarchy of human needs as follows: physiological needs, security needs, social needs, ego needs, and self-actualization (Grinnell, Gabor, Unrau, 2012, p. 121). The FSP will continue to sort out which needs are the ones we will focus on to help families, and how we can assist to ensure they have a response, assistance and success. It is important to understand that if one cannot meet their basic life needs then they will have a difficult time progressing towards self-actualization and continuing their journey of well-being.

Moreover, when the FSP begins again following the summer break, revised explanations will have to be provided to the agencies in the local community. These may include underlining that we are not a new agency in the traditional sense, but rather a program that has the key focus of student experiential learning while at the same time providing crisis situation support. The Family Support Program will have to be reframed and ultimately aim to be consistent; in how it moves forward. Consequently, over the past few months we have tried several models of service delivery. At one point there was a slow period, however, my supervisor and I explained to our Business partners that as people heard about us there would be more demand for our services. And there was.

The families that became involved with the FSP were in various states of crisis and struggle did not necessarily understand that the program's main mandate was focused on a student experiential learning model that included service provision. Not surprisingly families tended to view the FSP as a service agency. The challenge to provide service to the clients as
well as complete the experiential learning tasks needs to be further discussed as the program continues. A suggestion for future research could be an examination of what the FSP looks like through the eyes of the person in need. As a student, it became challenging to try to ensure that we were helping the family while meeting the requirements of the Program and only being there a limited number of days per week.

The question remains about whether limiting the number of days when the FSP can be accessed is the best plan. At the same time, we have to take into account the ability of students and faculty members to provide additional hours. A key question might be do we want to offer a limited or a different type and amount of services? Another question that I think needs to be addressed is with respect to the programs definition of a crisis situation and realistically the extent to which the FSP can meet crisis situation needs, including how quickly we can respond. We’ve made a good start but there can be expectations that we provide immediate services, when in fact we need more time to process requests.

Another issue is working to further ensure that each discipline involved – Social Work and Business—better understand each other’s strengths and knowledge base. Part of this, I think is respecting the expertise of each discipline, while at the same time learning from each other. I’m sure this process will get stronger over time as my practicum took place in the development and launch of a program that is still very much in its infancy. Finally, as structural social workers and professionals we make informed decisions that change the lives of families’ every day, and we have budgets from people in the community that we are socially and ethically accountable for. The position of power is recognized in my practicum that we have influence over lives and we need to continue as social workers to wield that
power carefully and try our best so as we do not impede a person’s right to self-determination and confidentiality.
CHAPTER SEVEN: Implications for Social Workers

Implementation of a vision for social change takes time, money, and energy. The process of change can also require shifts in perspective from those involved in the implementation. The close examination of a social issue or problem helps identify the multifaceted, complex strategies one must be prepared to encounter. In the case of the Family Support Program a purpose and a plan with the aim of helping families in crisis started by a vision by donors to UNBC who had the vision to have social work and business schools work together to meet a community social need. The vision of this newly launched a short-term crisis-oriented Family Support Program will undoubtedly shift and further develop as the program continues to be offered. Nothing is ever static; life is a constant chain of action and reaction. But I feel confident that the program will continue to require social work to be central to this work and in a role that continues to examine, critique, and question how best to meet the needs of the Program, practice ethically, and keep it student focused while at the same time, client-supported and grassroots-driven. As Piccard (1988), stated more than 25 years ago: “This is where the social worker differs from the rest of society. They expect to find strengths and capacities in clients who appear to have only problems” (p. 142). Although the focus of the FSP is on crisis situations, the social work perspective will ensure that the program also continues to look more broadly at what is working for the family, including referring them to additional, longer term supports as necessary.

Additionally, I believe that crisis and crisis response will need to be reviewed to see if the program can continue to offer crisis services. If so, troubleshooting needs to occur regarding how to assess the individual person in crisis and the ability to respond to that crisis in a timely manner; there is no script of right or wrong way to respond. Crisis is defined by
Barker (2005) as "an internal experience of emotional change and distress or a social event in which a disastrous event disrupts some essential functions of existing social institutions" (p.103). This definition explains the meaning of crisis; however, when a person is in crisis and we ask them to process information, do they have the capacity to follow through with some action? We do not want to rescue people but instead allow for the follow through of self-determination, without allowing self-determination to interfere with crisis support. In some instances families saw us as crisis support. In other instances they were frustrated with how long it took to respond to their crisis situation. At times the response time was one to three weeks due to the time constraints and the amount of work that was required to ensure the family could get an appropriate answer that would address their situation.

**Implications, Outcomes, and Suggestions for Social Work**

"Be the change you wish to see in the world" —Mahatma Ghandi

When I decided to be a part of the practicum to help develop the Family Support Program and have the opportunity to learn and enter into a new learning environment, I was filled with curiosity and excitement about what huge change we could make in two semesters. I had not realized that my eagerness could also be a barrier to my ability to see how many steps were involved and would be required to set up a program up and have it running. One of the biggest social work educational pieces for me was learning that the FSP was not necessarily going to be everyone’s top priority. I could see welcome and even anxious signs from the local community but I did not anticipate the challenge of having many people involved. The need for decision making about the overall direction and planning of the project had to come from many locations-Business, Social Work, and the UNBC Development Office. This isn’t a criticism of the program; it is an observation that when
working in inter-disciplinary teams, everyone must be viewed as an equal partner and contribute their part as they are able to follow through. As Delgado (2000) suggests, "A serious commitment to develop community capacity enhancement strategies in urban areas cannot be easily created" (p. 216). The multi-disciplinary work provides insight as to why it was not an easy task to coordinate so many professionals to ensure a smooth service delivery and common goal.

A suggestion for reflection involves each party involved must take that moment to think three things: What can I offer to the program? How can we best collaborate and communicate effectively? How will the focus of the student remain clearly on learning while the FSP also addresses the interests and immediate needs of those receiving services, donors and community agencies?

Crisis was a word that was discussed but not necessarily well understood by everyone involved, so a part of the educational process was to try to understand more fully what crisis meant in the context of the Family Support Program. When taking calls from families in need we as social workers had to ask: How high of a priority is this crisis? When do we scale a response? When do we refer? Throughout the development of the practicum proposal and then the practicum experience itself. I read and learned a lot about what crisis was and what it could be, and how to respond. I learned how important it was to decide in the context of the practicum how we were going to address crisis situations. When this literature was applied to the context of the intake meetings with families, the responses from families fit with the literature available to me. Their coping mechanisms (Caplan, 1989) were not effective, many were of a scattered mindset, but they were willing to follow through with what we needed from them.
Another surprise was how open families were to help and guidance, and how willing they were to share. However, of equal importance was the characteristic of vulnerability in each situation and family. Schulman (1991) suggests that a strength of a social worker includes the “Non critical kindness, client directed clients feel accepted not judged feel safe of complete confidentiality, express willingness to help” (p. 220).

I was also surprised by how I felt about this program, how I could see what a success it had become in a few families’ eyes, and how we did help and transform a view of the Schools of Business and Social Work. Short-term intervention impacted those families’ lives and positively. In the process of the practicum there was a statement from the Minister of Industry, James Moore, released in the media with the headline “Canada’s poor children are not Canada’s problem”. This impacted me as a person who was out on the social work frontline, reviewing literature about how the Canadian social safety net is collapsing, and Canadian families are losing benefits everywhere. To hear Moore’s statement perpetuated by the media felt defeating, yet perhaps bittersweet because we were developing a program from an institution of higher learning, private donors, workers, faculty and students, working together to make an impact. And in my view our work spoke volumes and said, ‘Yes they do matter and here is how we can help make the change. We can respond to short-term crisis and be impactful in families’ lives’. As Humphrey (2008) states, “I believe that the big picture approach consists of stepping back to see all that is in front of you the whole big picture” (p. 114). Success of a program like the FSP means success in the expansion of the social safety net and examining the larger contextual issues as well as the interpersonal ones that were discussed throughout this report.
Outcomes

Were we able to solve the local communities’ issues all in a short period of time? In short, no. Unfortunately change takes time, patience, and understanding. I believe that the future outcomes will predict success for social work, and also for business. When I first ventured into social work, I was younger and impressionable; I wanted to change the world. I still want to change the world, but I understand that the change that we can see in our own minds may not align with others’ beliefs. I also understand that changing a system that has been around for hundreds of years isn’t going to happen in two semesters. Given time and understanding of what each of the disciplines can bring to the FSP, a relationship will develop, and a key anchor person will be important to ensure that when the students change over, there is still a consistency to the delivery of service. As with any agency or business, service providers and families need to have people who understand what they are doing so they can help meet the needs of the families in crisis. If there is to be a consistent person attached to the program, my recommendation is that it be a social work person so that they can provide the services while at the same time working with the business, social work students and all involved.

Other challenges will need to be discussed that informed my educational goals: confidentiality must be kept, and the files need to be protected. Other issues that arose include how we can teach people without impinging on a client’s right to confidentiality. A thorough conversation in every panel meeting needs to include social work defining a concept for business and business defining a concept or term for social work. I think an equal exchange of knowledge needs to be present in the future of the program. The business plan needs to be shared with the business and social work students, and rationales provided as to
why things are completed in this way. This will help build the bridges so that each discipline understands the process of the other. This is why a social work student would sign on to get the additional exposure to the business knowledge. Moreover, I think the social work students should help inform and develop in policies and procedures for the program. This is again an integral part of what social workers can do when given the opportunity. A stream of financial social work might be something the university wants to consider attaching as part of an undergraduate or graduate level degree. As well, courses can be offered as cross listed courses for social work students so that they not only receive the benefits of social work knowledge but begin to understand related budgetary needs and planning in community agencies, and obtain an even more diverse scope of knowledge. Such a process, I believe, allows for an expansion and dedication to social change, a chance to learn, and a chance to teach other disciplines about what social work does in mainstream society. This also allows for social work to learn about other areas (such as business) that can help expand the social safety net.

**Education and Learning**

In social work it is important to continue to develop your practice as you grow professionally. The FSP was able to offer a ‘yes’ and a source of validation to people in crisis situations. One person explains in Ocean (2008), “When given the opportunity, I feel good about myself for the sake of what I might do for others” (p. 12). They were given a chance to contribute by having a chance to help someone else through a situational period of crisis.

As a social worker, if one becomes stagnant, it is reflected in our practice. Reamer (2013) says, “Creative and fruitful innovations in a profession requires its practitioners to push the boundaries of traditional practice in a constructive effort to create, implement and
evaluate, new, yet effective ways of helping people who struggle with life” (p. 171). Social workers who have new knowledge are willing to share it with those who will listen. It is important to continue to work in mainstream society the best that we can. In my view, it is vital that the future students involved in the FSP have the opportunity to provide more services, and have the support necessary to provide clinical counselling under the supervision of a faculty member. This program could become a practicum with a much broader scope. If the students are inspired they will become educated in short-term crisis intervention as well as a business perspective, which can provide a good foundation for a social worker’s career. The FSP provides support and expands the social safety net to members of the local community who could not access services before this program was developed. However, it is also important to remember that with all services there will be limitations, and barriers to offering assistance in that some people will not qualify. A student will need to have in mind that this is short-term intervention that requires us to assist at the one point but also connect families to other agencies that could supplement the services. It is in this way that the families/clients receive a wrap-around service.

**Crisis and Support**

As social workers we tend to respond to families in need on a daily basis; that is part of our field and we understand what is meant by potential crisis for a family. We see that families need outside support and the natural support systems to work collaboratively to keep them from slipping from stable everyday life into one filled with constant crisis. Part of this program’s outcomes and future research could include gaining a better understanding of assessing crisis, in a way that ensures families’ rights to self-determination. This Self-determination means giving the person or family the right to refuse our assistance and
knowing that they do not have to consent to their information being shared with other professionals that are not in social work, and understanding that they have every right to do this without impacting their right to receive a service.
CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion

According to UNICEF, Canada is ranked in 2013 as having the twenty-fourth worst child poverty rate among thirty-five industrialized countries (www.unicef.org). That means the children of Canada and their families are slipping through the social safety net for myriad reasons. It is important that social workers and mainstream society continue to be aware of the needs of these Canadian children and families, and that we do everything we can do to consider how we can help. The Family Support Program can help, as discussed throughout this practicum report. There are areas of support that we can provide, as the families need a hand up, not a hand out in areas not currently covered by other agencies. The focus of the FSP has been mainly on helping those not already in the system of the social safety net or who have managed to get very close to no longer needing social safety net services. However, as social workers and future practice it would be inspiring to develop a program with funding as a project to also help those who are not currently being met by other agencies?

Poverty is a significant issue for Canadian families; thus it is beneficial to provide this Family Support Program to as many families as possible. As the literature reviewed illustrated, poverty is hard to escape but resilience is a common thread that many people have, and if we start with one we can continue to change our social safety net slowly, one family at a time, the FSP has a role to play.

When people came to the FSP they felt validated; they felt heard; they appreciated the assistance; they wanted to say thank you. How often do we ever hear ‘thank you’? How often as social workers do we provide a service that is perceived from a positive strengths perspective? No social worker joins the profession to receive thanks but how often do we
join and hope to help only get told we are not helping and that we are bleeding hearts?

Helping society isn’t about being a bleeding heart, it is about caring enough about society to challenge the status quo, to help where and when nobody else wants to help. We dig in and we find a way to help, we invest in each other and our community strengths. The FSP is and I believe will continue to be successful. How does one measure success? Is it by quantity or quality? Is it providing the finances or providing the finances and the services meet the need? I think it involves all of the above and more areas of research.

After reviewing the needs assessment of 2012 completed by Pierce and Chabot it was clear that locally our community could use assistance in the area of the expansion of the social safety net, especially with respect to unexpected crisis situations. The Family Support Program offered a one-time crisis assistance service. Nationally, there has been a rise in poverty, and a government trend to cut back programs that middle and lower class families need to survive. A program like the Family Support Program can be a welcome addition to the social safety net, and it offers a number of possibilities for one-time assistance support.

The experiential learning that one receives during a practicum becomes invaluable knowledge. The social work student now has new tools to use in their fieldwork. Upon reflection of the process and engaging fully in the FSP one must stop to respond to my original question: How can short term intervention help expand the social safety net? Moreover now that it is completed, can it happen through experiential learning?

As Reamer (1990) suggests, “social planning and policy have spent considerable time and effort mastering skills related to decision making, administration, fostering smooth working relationship between and within organizations, budgets and community
The experiential learning provided by the FSP exposed me to all of those opportunities, in different cases.

The experiences exposed the very realistic picture of the structural issues of poverty in the local community, the need for other social safety net programs to assist more often, and specifically the very realistic view of homelessness in the Prince George, BC community. The FSP will not solve all the community crisis response interventions but there is potential for an expansion of services. One woman describes that the response she received from community agencies made her feel like she is invisible, and felt that people do not see what she can contribute.

Although there are layers of structural issues that compound structural poverty through various forms of oppression, I believe the FSP has lifted a veil of awareness and given knowledge to citizens that were not aware of what social workers do in the field while at the same time making a difference in people’s lives. Holosko (2005) has a perspective that encourages leadership in social work, which includes having a vision and ability to inspire change. I agree with that perspective.

Further research and continued consistent provision of this program is needed, as well as clearly identifying a time frame of crisis response. The practicum allowed me to discover areas of social work that resonate with me as Wharf and Mackenzie (2004) description of a model social worker as follows:

Give hope to students and professionals that there might be a model of social work with the following attributes: the person who will listen, shows respect to citizens, educates, analyzing information with the pros and cons, communicates in plain language( speaking and writing), prepares draft reports for discussion, organizes
meets times and locations convenient to all, chairs meetings when appropriate, ensure all can participate and have leadership opportunities, and finally knows the community they work with (p. 161).

Each family that I met impacted my education and experiential learning, as they shared their situations and still had hope in their lives. I will carry forward these experiences and they will help me to continue to implement and strengthen in my practice as a social worker. Their sharing exposed the realistic and moving views beyond profits for numbers, and measuring success by statistics. The needs in the community are so vast from health care issues, rent, mortgage, food, shelter, transportation, crisis counselling, and we saw almost every scenario because we screened people “in” as opposed to screening them “out”. As a result, the families had hope and as one person said “their faith restored in humanity”.

Another participant said we listened when everyone else said ‘no’. These occurred after short but significant interactions. Investment in people and crisis can be meaningful for a person in crisis when they are: validated, comforted, guided, and supported to continue to face their crises. The crises will still occur for some families, but we listened and they felt like a piece of their lives had been given back to them; their self-respect and dignity were intact. The look of relief on their faces said more than a thousand words written on a page. Moreover, for this experiential learning, if we had only helped one family who can help themselves and then help another, I think the power of the program would have a long-lasting impact. In fact many more were helped, and most asked if they could pay it forward to others in their community when they were again able to contribute outside of their family. This is what powerful grassroots work can do: it can change our system, our beliefs, and people’s values. Another success for social work was the people not typically involved with our profession
got witness, how we can assist and that we work hard to instill change for the hope of a better life for the community and society.

Finally, identifying what success means for this program comes down to individual values and beliefs. We helped families stay out of the social safety net in Prince George and helped them continue to remain in their homes, at their jobs, and parenting their children, isn’t that a measure of success? The largest barrier will be to continue to be educating each other on what the FSP roles are in the community and the value of the service of social work, and experiential learning. The value of service and what is then provided in productive terms of reciprocation to the larger community is immense and can be powerful, if we allow it and embrace the social changes required from us individually and collectively. In my opinion we expanded our social safety net and looked beyond numbers and the Family Support Program will continue to develop its work and student experiential learning opportunities
References


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