

Indigenous Social Work Student Experiences in the Child Welfare Specialization: Exploring
the Field Education Encounter

by

Cheryl Lavern Aro
B.S.W., University of Victoria, 2004

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Abstract

The practicum is regarded by many as the most important part of social work students' program experience. The literature pertaining to Indigenous social work student experiences in field placements is minimal, as is the literature relating to the health and wellness of Indigenous students engaged in social work field education. This thesis is designed to begin to address the gap in the literature. Child protection services have been a destructive force in Indigenous communities in BC. Some research shows that frontline child protection workers suffer negative health consequences due to the stress of the work (Gold, 1998; Reid, 2006). The research questions that directed this study are as follows: How is the holistic health and wellness of Indigenous female students impacted during, and directly following, a government child protection practicum? What factors contribute to an Indigenous student's resiliency in a Child Welfare Specialization field placement? What coping strategies do Indigenous students employ to stay healthy and balanced during the practicum? The ultimate goal of this thesis research is to create a space for the knowledge and voices of Indigenous women in social work, and to create knowledge that will be used to support future Indigenous practicum students.

This research is a qualitative study. Five Indigenous women courageously shared their fourth year child protection social work practicum experiences in respective two hour interviews. All the participants were recent graduates of an undergraduate social work program in British Columbia. All of the study participants were enrolled in a Child Welfare Specializations program. The Indigenous women's stories were documented using a blend of Indigenous and narrative qualitative methodological approaches. The findings of this thesis reveal that Indigenous student holistic health is significantly impacted during child protection practicum placements. All of the Indigenous women who participated in this thesis experienced stress at different points of the practicum, which had an impact on their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health.

A significant theme that emerged in the women's stories was the importance that the supervisor plays in the child protection practicum. The findings of this study suggest that Indigenous students are more vulnerable to stress and ill health in government placements. Therefore particular care needs to be taken to ensure that Indigenous students are placed with supervisors who are sensitive to their needs. Students employ a number of strategies to rebalance their holistic health. Good attention to self-care, engaging in cultural practices and development of support networks are themes that emerged as strategies for coping with the stress of the practicum. This study concludes with recommendations to educators, MCFD policy makers and others who work with Indigenous students.

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Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to the following women; to the five remarkable women, who contributed to its creation, named in this thesis as Janice, Dawn, Sonya, Ava and Sara. Pseudonyms were used in this thesis to protect the study participant's confidentiality.

And to my grandmother Matilda Danes and my mother Kathleen (Gladys) Danes whose guidance and support, from here and the spirit world, make everything I do possible.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Researcher's Story

Prologue

I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am a visitor in Coast Salish Territory. I am grateful to the Coast Salish people for allowing me to study, work and play on their traditional territories. In her PhD dissertation, Indigenous scholar Margaret Kovach (2007) noted Dr Graham Smith's advice to Indigenous researchers.

Maori scholar Dr. Graham Smith suggests we write our story in a prologue right at the front of our dissertation. The story we share in the prologue is *relational*, it is here where we say we are qualified to speak because of our relationships with our kin, kith, tribe, and community. It is here where we introduce our bloodlines and cultural influences as best possible" (2006, p. x).

I realize that it is important that I situate myself in this research and introduce myself properly as this is a protocol in my Gitxsan community. My First Nations ancestry is Gitxsan First Nations from the Gutginuxw House and the Fireweed Clan. Although I feel a strong connection with my culture and ancestral roots, I have never lived in Hazelton BC where my mother and grandmother were born and where many of my family still reside. Like so many other Indigenous women, my mother was removed from her auntie's care as a child and forced to attend residential school. Child welfare policies and practices disrupted the culture and identity of my family of origin and it has been a long journey back to regain my Gitxsan identity.

My identity and personal and professional experiences have motivated me to pursue this study. At the present time I have the privilege of being the Field Education Coordinator for the Indigenous

Specializations¹ at the University of Victoria's (UVic) School of Social Work. In this capacity I am responsible for helping to organize the undergraduate field placements for Indigenous students in the BSW program at the University of Victoria. I am also an Alumnus of the program I work in. I was accepted into the newly developed First Nations Specialization undergraduate program in 2001, and I was the first graduate of the First Nations Child Welfare Specialization in 2003. In order to fulfill the requirements of the Child Welfare Specialization, I completed my fourth year child protection practicum at the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD).

Due to the nature of protection work, child protection practicum placements can be psychologically challenging for students. My experiences as a student and Field Education Coordinator have led me to believe that Indigenous students face unique struggles in mainstream child welfare placements as a result of the oppressive history our people have had, and still have, with provincial child protection services. Over half of the clients in the MCFD office where I completed my practicum were Indigenous children and families, and statistics show that Indigenous children in the care of the Ministry are over-represented in every region of British Columbia. Shelly Johnson notes, "Today in BC, more than 51% of the approximately 9,400 children in the BC Foster care system are Indigenous...." (2008, p.9).

Even though a large percentage of the clients at my own practicum placement were Indigenous, there were no Indigenous social workers or people of colour on staff. Although I witnessed many situations that affronted my mental, spiritual and emotional health during my field placement, there were few people who I trusted to share my feelings with. In short, the practicum was stressful and there were times that I wondered why the Creator led me to take a practicum that was so difficult for my spirit. When I started my practicum I was optimistic about working in an Indigenous child and family services area, but by the time my practicum came to a close I was certain I would not work in this field. I was,

¹ The First Nations Specialization Program was renamed Indigenous Specialization in 2007. This shift reflects the schools desire to be inclusive of Métis and Inuit students and community.

however, left with a deep respect for the social workers that do frontline work in both MCFD and fully delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services agencies. The Hon. Ted Hughes (2006) wrote,

Child protection is not every social workers first choice. Beyond the formal skills, the job requires toughness, warmth, intelligence, compassion, decisiveness and determination. It has been called the hardest job in the government (p.142).

I concur with Ted Hughes, and I also believe that field education placements in a child protection are amongst the most challenging placements for social work students.

My personal experiences with field education have influenced my desire to act as a change agent for future Indigenous students. My story is a critical part of this work as it would be impossible to separate myself from this research. I believe that there is a need to develop our knowledge about how we can support and empower Indigenous practicum students in mainstream agency field placements. I am confident that the findings of this study will contribute to my emerging pedagogical and clinical practice. In this respect, my goal is to develop skills and knowledge that will enhance my ability to support Indigenous students. As well, I am confident that my research findings will be beneficial to Indigenous students and others who work with Indigenous students.

Introduction

There is no question that provincial child protection policies and practices have been a destructive force in Indigenous communities across Canada. Most Indigenous social work students in British Columbia (BC) recognise the impact that non-voluntary child protection services has had on their own family, community and nation, yet a growing number of Indigenous social work students chose to complete field placements in government child protection agencies. The focus of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of the impact that government child protection placements have on the holistic health of female Indigenous students. As well, student resiliency and the coping strategies students used to successfully complete their practicum are explored. The literature pertaining to Indigenous social work student experiences is minimal, as is the literature relating to health and wellness of Indigenous students engaged in social work field education. The following section describes the purpose, significance and questions that served to guide this study as well as a statement of the problem and a discussion about the terminology used in this study.

The Purpose, Questions and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the needs of social work practicum students so that strategies could deliberately be created to better support students as they navigate through the field education encounter. Some studies have shown that child protection work has a negative impact the health of female front line workers (Gold, 1998; Reid, 2006). To date, I have not located any research that explores female Indigenous student experiences in child protection social work field education placements in BC. In fact, I did not locate any literature that explores Indigenous student experiences in any social work practicum location.

A specific goal of this study is to critically analyse the ways in which child welfare policies, laws and practices impact Indigenous female student health during practicum. The research questions posed explored student holistic health, resilience and coping strategies during the practicum. The research questions that directed this study are as follows: How is the holistic health and wellness of Indigenous female students impacted during, and directly following, a government child protection practicum? What factors contribute to an Indigenous student's resiliency in a Child Welfare Specialization field placement? What coping strategies do Indigenous students employ to stay healthy and balanced during the practicum?

A final important goal of this research is to create a space for Indigenous women to share their stories, knowledge and perspectives about child welfare education. I was intent on constructing a research project where the worldview and wisdom of Indigenous female students would be honoured and validated. Indigenous women have taken on leadership roles in BC Indigenous communities for the past thirty-five years. They have struggled to have a voice in the social, political and economic processes that impact their families and their children (Umpleby, 2007). The five courageous Indigenous women who participated in this study had a unique viewpoint and knowledge to share with me, and I felt privileged to record their narratives.

A Statement of the Problem

The effect of colonization on the health and wellness of Indigenous people and their communities in Canada has been well documented (AFN, 2007; BC Government, 2001; BC Government, 2007; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1996). Many scholars, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, believe that social justice for Indigenous people will not occur until Indigenous people attain independence from the state and become self-determining. And, as a

means of supporting the goals of self-determination, there has been a movement towards reclaiming jurisdiction for child welfare services in British Columbia (BC) for the past few decades (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002; K.J. Associates LTD, 1992). In Canada each province has a distinct legislation that dictates the way that child protection services will be delivered. In BC this legislation is the *Child Family and Community Services Act* (2002), and through this Act the province can delegate authority to a particular group to provide child protection / child welfare services² (Thomas & Green, 2005). Since the 1980s Indigenous agencies have been delivering a wide range of child and family services pursuant to delegation enabling agreements. Currently there are eight Indigenous child and family service agencies delegated to provide full child protection services in the province of British Columbia. As well, 156 of 200 First Nations Bands in British Columbia are either actively planning to assume, or operating within, some level of delegation enabling agreement (Hughes, 2006).

While Indigenous communities face many obstacles in their path to reclaiming child welfare services, one significant challenge stems from the requirement that Indigenous child and family service agencies are staffed by individuals with undergraduate degrees in health related disciplines. Due to the deliberate genocide of Indigenous people and systemic racism there are fewer Indigenous students graduating from post-secondary institutions in Canada than non-Indigenous students. Statistics from the 2001 census confirm that non-Indigenous people are five times more likely to complete a university degree than an on-reserve Indigenous person and nearly three times more likely to complete a degree than an Indigenous person who lives off reserve (British Columbia Government, 2001). Presently there are too few Indigenous social workers in BC to occupy the positions available in Indigenous Child and Family Service Agencies (Bruce Parisian, Personal Communications, May 8th, 2007). As BC Indigenous

² Please see Appendix E for a detailed description of the tasks involved in each level of delegation.

communities continue to gain control of child and family services the need for Indigenous people with Baccalaureate Social Work (BSW) degrees will continue to increase. From this standpoint, Indigenous students who are committed to working with Indigenous children and families are precious to Indigenous communities. Despite this, I have noticed that many of the Indigenous students who I place in government child protection offices do not decide to work in child and family services agencies, either Indigenous or non-Indigenous, when they complete the Child Welfare Specialization. I believe it is important to find out why.

Indigenous students are often drawn to doing a practicum in an Indigenous environment and there are many Indigenous agencies with a level 4 delegation, who offer student practicum placements. However, students must do their practicum in a fully delegated (level 6) agency to be eligible for future work at the MCFD and there are fewer opportunities in that area with only nine fully delegated Indigenous agencies in the province. Most of the fully delegated Indigenous agencies are located on reserve in First Nations communities in BC. One of the nine agencies, Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society, is the only urban agency and it is located in Vancouver. All the other eight fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies (ICFSA) serve First Nations on reserve communities (BC Government, 2009). Further, students who complete a practicum at the MCFD are eligible to work at a fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services Agencies when they graduate, but the reverse may not be true unless an MCFD Regional Coordinator has organized the practicum. Students sometimes do choose to complete their fourth year practicum in an ICFSA even though they it will limit their future employment options. As well, ICFSA are overworked and understaffed so they may not always have the resources to support practicum students. In short, there are a lot of barriers that prevent a student from choosing to do their fourth year placement with an ICFSA. Indigenous

students often find that they must complete a practicum in a system that has historically failed Indigenous families in British Columbia. Residential schools and government child protection interventions have been a source of trauma and pain for Indigenous communities across the country for decades (Johnson, 2008). Due to the high number of Indigenous apprehensions in BC it is most likely that every Indigenous student who enters into a child welfare practicum has had some family history with government child welfare services in the past. The historical context of Indigenous child welfare in BC will be further discussed in chapter two.

Field placements take place outside of the academic environment in the community, therefore some of the challenges that students face may be invisible to Field Education Coordinators and Faculty Liaisons. While the social work curriculum has shifted in the past twenty years to include anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice theory, little attention has been paid to ensure that there is an articulation between the theory and practice in field placements (Razack, 2001). Some Schools of Social Work in BC, such as the Indigenous Specialization at University of Victoria and the First Nations Specialization at University of Northern British Columbia also include Indigenous worldview and approaches to social work practice as a part of their core curriculum. Little attention has been paid to ensure that there is an articulation between the Indigenous theory that we teach and practice in a government protection field placement. Very little research has been done to understand the tensions that students face when they attempt to put theory into practice in this context.

My intention in this study is to gain more knowledge about how to better support Indigenous Child Welfare Specialization students. Some authors contend that Indigenous people who are knowledgeable about the culture and dynamics of the Indigenous community provide the best services to Indigenous children and families (Brown, Haddock & Kovach, 2002; Walmsley,

2004). In the area of child welfare practice, new graduates with both academic and traditional Indigenous knowledge are highly regarded in both government and Indigenous community agencies (Hughes, 2006; Molly Wilson, Personal Communications, March 20th, 2007). Schools of social work in BC have been shifting to decolonize the curriculum and it is essential to ensure that field education reflects theory and teaching presented in the classroom. Indigenous social work students are the future healers and helpers in our communities. Retaining the students who enter child welfare work is essential for the goals of self-determination.

Terminology

Throughout this study I refer to the five Indigenous graduates who participated in this study as students. Although the participants had already completed their social work Child Welfare Specialization degrees, the stories they shared with me were recalled from a time when they were still students. As well, the use of the word Indigenous is used frequently throughout the thesis to represent Indigenous people/students who have ancestral roots in the continent I know as Turtle Island, or more commonly North America.

The word Indigenous is a broad definition for First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. The word Aboriginal is repugnant to many Indigenous scholars "...because it fashions "the people" as a symbol or a concept constructed on, and totally amenable to, colonialism. (Alfred, 2005, p. 126). I feel that the term Indigenous is a more respectful term as it represents the connection of the first people to their traditional territories. Therefore, although the word Aboriginal is a commonly used word in the present day, I chose to avoid it in this thesis. The only time the term Aboriginal is used is in relation to government policies and direct quotes as that language is commonly used in BC government documents and other scholarly studies. First Nations is also a

term that is used in this thesis to describe individual Bands and Nations in BC. As well, the terms First People or First Nations is used when I am referring to the time when Europeans first settled in BC. At that time First Nations people were the only occupants of the land.

Another term that requires clarification and definition in this work is the phrase “holistic health”. The “*Collins Essential Canadian English Dictionary*” defines holistic in the following way; “considering the complete person, physically and mentally, in the treatment of an illness” (Gilmour, 2006, p.392). But for Indigenous people holistic health usually expands to include spiritual and emotional elements of the person as well as the mental and physical (Hart, 2002). I realize that different people might interpret the phrase “holistic health” in different ways. To create a definition for this research that was inclusive I asked the participants how they define holistic health at the beginning of each interview to develop a definition that reflected the participant’s collective perception of this concept. The following is a compilation of the participant’s responses when I asked them what the phrase holistic health meant to them.

Holistic health incorporates all the elements of who we are as human beings. Caring for our holistic health means that we are attending to our physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health. We must also recognize that all of these elements are interconnected and when one element is out of balance our holistic health is out of balance. Therefore, holistic health is the maintenance of balance of our physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health.

This definition of holistic health was used in this study. In addition one of the participants wisely noted that our past, present and future are part of our holistic health.

A discussion concerning the key players involved in the practicum and their roles in the practicum is also necessary for clarity. In this study the term Field Education Coordinator refers

to the person who is employed by the university to organize and help set up the practicum. The educational institution also employs a practicum instructor to support the student and agency supervisor once the placement has begun. In this document the practicum instructor will be referred to as the Faculty Liaison. The agency supervisor is employed by the social service agency and they play a key role in the day-to-day mentorship of the student. The agency supervisor plays a critical roll in the practicum.

Study Overview

In this section I provide a brief overview of the chapters in this document. Chapter two of this thesis includes an examination of the ways in which, patriarchal colonization has disrupted the lives of Indigenous women. In this chapter, I discuss the way that racist patriarchal state laws and policies have impacted Indigenous women in Canada. A review of Indigenous feminist literature and reports and other literature pertaining to the lived reality of Indigenous women helps to place the participant's stories in context, and further honours the worldview of the participants. The *Indian Act* has altered Indigenous women's identities and created undisputable social and economic hardships for Indigenous women across Canada. The unjust labelling of Indigenous women as "bad" mothers along with child welfare policies has injured the hearts and spirits of Indigenous women. The final section of chapter two contains a discussion on Indigenous women's health. In this segment I present statistical information concerning Indigenous women's health and social wellbeing from the most recent articles and reports.

Chapter three includes a review of the literature that looks at child welfare work, child welfare education and social work field education. Much of the child welfare literature indicates that social workers have experience negative health due to the stress involved in frontline work

(Gold, 1998; Reid, 2006). The literature also affirms that the culture and approach to practice is dissimilar in Indigenous community child welfare organizations and MCFD, even though they work under the same legislation, (Brown, Haddock, & Kovach, 2002; Ormiston, 2002; Reid; 2006; Walmsley, 2005). Additionally, chapter three includes a description of the conditions that led to the development of the Child Welfare Specialization in BC. The BC government first began transferring funding to post –secondary institutions for Child Welfare Specialization programs following the tragic death of Mathew Vaudreuil and the subsequent *Gove Inquiry* in 1995. Even though over fifty percent of the children in care in BC were Indigenous when the Child Welfare Specialization was created, the needs of indigenous people were largely overlooked (Armitage, Callahan & Lewis, 2001). Chapter three concludes with a review of relevant field education literature. Peer reviewed literature concerning social work practicum contained a couple of major themes. Many explore the relationships between students and supervisors (Garner, 2006; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Knight, 2000; Marshack, Hendricks & Gladstein, 1994), while other consider the emotional challenges that students face in practicum (Barlow & Hall, 2003; Barlow & Hall 2003b; Barlow & Hall, 2007). In essence this literature reveals that students experience a variety of difficulties in practicum settings. Students report that they have a better learning experience when they do their practicum with a supervisor who is knowledgeable and available. Some of the practicum literature discusses the challenges student's from multi-cultural backgrounds come across in mainstream organizations (Longres & Seltzer, 1994; Razack, 2001). The literature asserts that students from diverse backgrounds often face unique struggles when they do their practicum placements in large mainstream organizations.

In chapter four I discuss the methodologies that guided this study and the methods that I used to complete the research. A qualitative research methodology was chosen in this project because it is an epistemologically appropriate choice when the goals of the research are to gain knowledge about a particular groups' lived experience. An Indigenous methodology and approach was also utilized in the design of this research as a means of honouring the values and beliefs of the researcher and the participants. Research on Indigenous peoples and communities has historically been harmful and exploitive (Smith, 1999). As a Gitxsan researcher, I sought to conduct this study in a culturally relevant way that included ceremony and cultural protocols. I used a blend of Oral History and Narrative Inquiry methodologies in this thesis. Some of the methods employed in this research were drawn from Indigenous knowledge and some were drawn from a Narrative Inquiry methodology as described by Heather Fraser (2004). More specifically I used Fraser's methods for data analysis which involve analysing the stories "line by line". Five Indigenous women shared their stories with me in two-hour interviews. Data collection involves sharing, listening, journaling, and finally documenting the students' stories (Smith, 1999).

In chapter five I present the themes that emerged in the study. The main themes that emerged in this research are; **Feelings** – sub-themes: motivated by love, underestimating the difficulty of the work and feelings of powerlessness; **Negative Holistic Health at the Mid-Point**– sub-themes: program burnout, financial stress, **Supervisor is Key** – sub-themes: the agency and power. These themes were related to the students' experiences with holistic health over the practicum placement. **Culture, Self- Care and Support Networks** are the final themes and they are related to the student's experiences of coping and resiliency. The findings are presented using many of the student's own words to share their knowledge. All the students

who participated in this research project reported that they experienced health impacts due to stress from a number of factors. Many of the students stated that they were felt exhausted at the onset of the practicum. Some noted that their fatigue was due in part to defending their identity, worldview and experiences in social work classes. Financial stress was also named as a catalyst for stress which in turn affected the students' personal wellbeing. The supervisor played a key role in the students' assessment of stress during the practicum experience and this is discussed by all the participants. Not surprisingly, students who sensed that the supervisor was pleased to mentor them had much better experiences than those who were told at the onset that they were not wanted. The students felt a sense of belonging at the practicum site and settled in more quickly when their supervisors were inviting and available. Students employed a variety of coping mechanisms to get through the practicum. Chief amongst those coping strategies was a connecting to the natural environment, engaging in cultural practices and maintaining good self care. The study participants also said that strong support networks had helped them cope with the stress of the placement.

Chapter six includes a discussion of the research findings. The finding of this thesis clearly show that Indigenous students who do their practicum in child welfare practicum settings are more vulnerable to stress and ill health. Canadian Indigenous women are more exposed to multiple forms of stress in their day to day lives (Iwasaki, Mackay, & Mactavish, 2006). Consistent with an Indigenous feminist analysis, the women in this study reported that they had experienced economic hardship during the placement. The historical oppressive relationship between Indigenous women and families and state protection services contributed to the stress and discomfort that students' experienced while in a Ministry practicum.

A seasoned and well informed supervisor can offset the difficulties Indigenous women face in practicum. However, the system for matching Child Welfare Specializations students with MCFD supervisors in BC creates problems for supervisors and students. MCFD social workers are often notified that they must take students. In this study three of five supervisors or team leaders disclosed that they did not want to take a student. The supervisors were too busy with their regular case files to provide guidance to students but they were forced to do so. Students do not fare well when they are paired with a supervisor who is not invested in the placement. It is clear that there is room for change to this system. Schools have a responsibility to work with MCFD to create a better system and training opportunities for supervisors.

Chapter seven is entitled “Completing the Circle” and it is designed to share final thoughts and recommendations for future research and policy. In this closing chapter I discuss the implications of this research on social work pedagogy and MCFD practicum policies. The most significant part of the final chapter is the recommendations for change made by the student participants themselves. There is room for educators and the Ministry to re-examine our current practices and create learning opportunities that support Indigenous student retention in child welfare work in professional settings.

Summary

In this introductory chapter I provided an overview of the purpose, questions and significance of this study as well as a statement of the problem. I defined some of the terminology used in this document. As well, this chapter included an overview of the contents of this thesis. In this chapter, I suggest that the voices of Indigenous women must be heard. Space must be created for women to share their wisdom and practicum encounter. This thesis provides

that space but there is a need for more research that includes Indigenous women's issues and perspectives.

At the present time there are few opportunities for Indigenous students to do practicum placements in fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services. Students often find they must take a practicum in an MCFD office to complete the Child Welfare Specialization even though the relationships between Indigenous communities and MCFD have historically been marked by distrust (Walmsley, 2009). This study was designed to gain insight into Indigenous women's experiences with their holistic health during their Ministry practicum and to begin to address the gap in the literature concerning Indigenous social work practicum student experiences. At present there are a number of articles that discuss the need to decolonize social work education (Dumbrill & Green, 2008; Richardson; 2009; Thomas & Green, 2009: 2005). There is little or no literature that explores Indigenous students experience in practicum placements. Research in this area is critical to ensure an articulation between Indigenous social work theory and practice. Indigenous social work students who have the heart and spirit to work in child welfare are precious and highly coveted. It is imperative that we develop the knowledge necessary to support them during their social work practicum placements.

Chapter 2: Herstory

Aboriginal women are the guardians of the values, cultures and traditions of their people. They have a vital role to play in facilitating healing in families and communities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 1996, ch. 2, s. 9).

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the purpose and goals of this study and I presented an examination of the challenges Indigenous students face. I defined some of the terms that will be used throughout this document. In this chapter I turn to discuss what Indigenous feminist literature, as well as other related literature and reports, reveal about Indigenous women's lived experience in a patriarchal colonial system. An analysis of the social, political and economic realities of Indigenous women's lives helps to further contextualize the research participants' practicum stories. As noted earlier, an important goal of this research is to create a space to honour the wisdom and voices of Indigenous women. To fully appreciate the research participants' stories it is necessary to juxtapose them with the historical legacy of colonization. Further, examining the ways that patriarchal colonial policies and practices have impacted Indigenous women, provides an opportunity to shift racist perceptions and celebrate Indigenous women's strength, determination and courage (Reid, 2006).

To clarify, I chose to examine literature that pertains to Indigenous women's lived reality to create a framework to better understand the women's stories. Umpleby (2007, p.5) notes that, "...Aboriginal women have been leading community development initiatives for the past thirty five years; education and health are the primary beneficiaries of their efforts". Further, it is women who predominantly attend social work programs and work in child and family services agencies. But while Indigenous women have been carving the path to health and wellness in

British Columbia Indigenous communities, very little research has been done to analyse the holistic health needs of Indigenous women who do the frontline work in our communities in BC. Sayers & MacDonald, (2001) argue that any study of Indigenous women's experience must include an analysis of the ways that oppressive colonial state policies and patriarchy have impacted the research participant's lives. Indeed, most Indigenous women live with varying forms of oppression resulting from sexism and racism that is inherent in the dominant society. Indigenous practicum students who chose to do a practicum at MCFD are entering into an organization that has historically played an instrumental role in the advancement of policies of assimilation and cultural genocide. The relationship between the MCFD and Indigenous communities is also fraught with tensions (Walmsley, 2009). For that reason, an analysis of Indigenous women's historical relationship with this organization is essential in this research.

The following sections look at racist state policies and the wellbeing of Indigenous women. In particular, government child welfare legislation in BC is explored as well as Indigenous motherhood, and parenting practices in the midst of colonisation. Racist European policies and practices have contributed to the health realities that Indigenous women live with (Fiske, 2006). I conclude this chapter with brief examination of the factors that contribute to negative health and a statistical analysis of Indigenous women's health.

Indigenous Women and State Policy

A number of authors argue that Indigenous women's power and position in their communities, and in Canadian society, have been altered substantially since contact with European Settlers (Alfred, 2005; Fiske, 2006; Joyce Green, 2007; Maracle, 1996; Smith, 1999). Colonial social policies such as the *Indian Act* have played a key role in forcibly altering

Indigenous women's roles, identities and the ability to participate in their community governance structures. Patriarchy is deeply embedded in the ideology and practices of the European culture. Patriarchal values and beliefs were forced on Indigenous communities through the creation of the *Indian Act* creating conditions of economic disparity between Indigenous men and women that did not exist prior to contact with Europeans (Joyce Green, 2007). Before the *Indian Act* was legislated First Nations communities in BC were largely matriarchal (McIvor, 2004; Joyce Green, 2007). Women had equal rights to land and resources, and they held prominent positions in the community (Brant Castellano, 2009).

Reid, (2006) notes that the *Indian Act* has been amended six times and each time women have lost more of their rights and identity. Discriminatory laws and social practices have disrupted Indigenous women's right to inherit traditional lands and participate in a meaningful way in the political and social aspects of the community (Brant Castellano, 2009; Fiske, 2006). Thomas (2009, p. 6) sums up some of the more significant shifts in women's power in the following passage.

In yet another attempt to destroy women's roles in the community, in 1869 the *Indian Act* was amended to forbid women from participating in the management of our communities. Only men were able to run for positions of power – chief and council. As well, all property that women held was now controlled by her husband and wills and estates were transferred from the father to the children by-passing women altogether. Amendments to the *Indian Act* have privileged Indigenous men and caused women to be dependent on their fathers and husbands for their Indigenous identity. Through the *Indian Act* the state disenfranchised thousands of women from their nations and communities. Until 1985, section 12(1b) of the *Indian Act* effectively removed native status from Indigenous women and

their descendants if they married non-Indigenous men (Fiske, 2006; Joyce Green, 2007). Indigenous men have not been similarly treated. In fact, when status Indigenous men marry non-Indigenous women, the women automatically become part of the Band (McIvor, 2004). The significance of this inequity is that Indigenous women and children suffer from the socio-economic realities of being cast out of their communities. Access to Band housing, educational funding and other health and social programs that are available to Band members are not available to Indigenous women who have been removed from the Band registry. This sets the stage for poverty, social exclusion and violence. Moreover, it creates a vulnerability to increased surveillance by MCFD.

In 1985 the *Indian Act* was amended to allow Indigenous women the right to keep or regain their status when even if their partner was a non-status person. This amendment was debated in Parliament as Bill C-31. Children born to women who were affected by Bill C-31 were granted Indigenous status, but their grandchildren were not (Big Eagle & Guimond, 2009; McIvor, 2004). Thus, although the amendment seemed to address injustice it really did not. In addition, the struggle to amend the Act was met with resistance by male dominated Indigenous organizations. Women who openly support equity between men and women are labelled as feminists and it is suggested that their struggle against inequality takes away from the collective drive for self-determination (Joyce Green, 2007; LaRocque, 2007). Thus, Indigenous women are often chastised in their communities when they speak up for women's equality. Even now there are few women in leadership positions across Canada.

Real property laws have also created inequity and hardship for Indigenous women. Since the implementation of the *Indian Act* in 1876 Indigenous women have had fewer opportunities for the scarce funds that on reserve band councils receive (McIvor, 2004). Because the *Indian Act*

gives the federal government exclusive authority over Indians on reserve provincial matrimony laws often do not apply to on reserve women. Indigenous women may find that they have no legal claim to and equal share of their own home and marital possessions if the relationship has become violent (McIvor, 2004). Without a home the women risk losing their children to MCFD. An analysis of the overrepresentation of Indigenous women and children in health and social statistics confirms the price of the attack on Indigenous women and children in Canada. Households headed by Indigenous women are amongst the poorest in the country (O'Donnell, 2005).

Indigenous Child Welfare Policies in British Columbia

In Canada, the theft of Indigenous Peoples Nationhood occurred, and continues to occur, with the theft of our children. Indigenous children have historically been the battleground on which the struggle between Indigenous Peoples and newcomers has been waged (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002, p.8).

Many Indigenous scholars discuss the ways in which child welfare polices have been used as a tool of assimilation (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Rhonde, 2005; Cull, 2008; Monture-Angus, 1995). This colonial strategy to eliminate Indigenous people has left scars on the hearts and spirits of Indigenous women across Canada. Although not expressed as such, residential schools were the first child welfare policy directed at Indigenous children in BC. Residential Schools were introduced by the Canadian government and churches in the 1890s with the goal of assimilating Indigenous people and eradicating the First Peoples culture, values and beliefs. The utimate goal of exterminating Indigenous people was to gain access to their land and the

resources on the land (Alfred, 2005; Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002) . The introduction of residential schools was set out in *Indian Act* policy by the government as a means to assimilate Indian people into the “civilized” white society (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996). Women were forced to watch helplessly as their children were taken away to institutions where a myriad of abuses took place, and culture and language were lost forever. Public criticism led to the gradual closure of residential schools in the 1950’s but a new assimilation strategy emerged – child protection services (Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley, & Wien, 2005). Although residential schools have been closed for the past two decades, the negative affects of these schools will be felt by Indigenous communities for years to come.

Child welfare was not included within the *Indian Act* of 1876. However, in 1951 the federal government revised the *Indian Act* (Sec. 88) to provide the provinces with authority to provide child protection services to on-reserve families. Prior to 1951 the percentage of First Nations children in care was about 4%, by 1963 the percentage of First Nations children increased to 34.2 % (Union of BC Chiefs, 2002). Patrick Johnson developed the phrase the “sixties scoop” in 1983 to describe the huge increase in child apprehensions in Canada at that time (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007). As previously mentioned, approximately 52 % of the children in the care of the Ministry in BC are Indigenous (Johnson, 2008). The number of children in care in BC and across the country has continued to increase over the last decade. The alarming number of children in care in Canada led the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nation Child and Family Caring Society to jointly launch a Human Rights Complaint in 2007 calling the 27,000 Indigenous children in care in Canada a “national disgrace” (Amnesty International, 2009; Johnson, 2007). Blackstock et al. (2005, p. 8) note that “There are approximately three times the numbers of First Nations children in state care today than there were at the height of residential

schools in the 1940's". The trauma and pain that has resulted from these child removals is unimaginable to most mothers. Monture Angus (1995, p.196) writes, "...First Nations children continue to suffer. That truth is a reality that First Nations women carry, for we are the ones that continue to watch the children suffer".

Constructing Indigenous Motherhood

It is the woman who stands at the centre of the nation because women are the caretakers of children. The children are the women's responsibility first (Monture Angus, 1995, p.194).

As victims of colonial patriarchy, Indigenous Canadian women have been stereotyped, objectified and dehumanized (LaRocque, 2007; Maracle, 1996). One of the most damaging stereotypes that Indigenous women face, however, is the belief that they are unfit mothers. These negative stereotypes have been particularly harmful to Indigenous women's wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities and nations (Cull, 2008). For Indigenous women, there is no more important role than the role of motherhood. Yet, there is no ethnic group in Canada whose mothering practices are more scrutinized. The sheer numbers of Indigenous children in care in BC and across the country is evidence of this fact (Johnson, 2008). Single mothers in northern rural communities in BC face even more aggressive forms of scrutiny with regard to their parenting abilities (Fiske, 2006; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007). In some northern communities in BC as many as 79% of the children in the care are Indigenous children. In these communities the Indigenous population is generally larger and more visible (British Columbia Government. Provincial Health Officer, 2009).

The most common reason for apprehending Indigenous children is the assessment of neglect (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Rhonde, 2005). Yet, the assessment of neglect is highly subjective and it can be influenced by personal experiences, worldview and culture. Blackstock et al. (2005, p. 8) argue that, “When neglect is unpacked – poverty, poor housing and substance misuse are identified as key drivers”. Kline (1993) similarly states that structural oppression, colonization, imperialism and racism are the real reason that Indigenous families struggle. However, the real root of the problem is obscured when individual Indigenous mothers are ‘demonized’ and blamed for the problems that they face with child rearing.

Cull (2008) asserts that the state has been instrumental in creating and sustaining negative stereotypes about Native women’s worth and their ability to parent. According to the literature, the construction of Indigenous mothers as unfit is not a recent phenomenon; it has roots in early colonial relations between the Settlers and Indigenous communities (Cull, 2008; Moffat & Herring, 1999). Moffat and Herring (1999) note that discourses in early reports by the Department of Indian Affairs demonstrate that there was a tendency to blame Indigenous mothers for high rates of native infant mortality in northern Manitoba in the early 1900’s. The following excerpt demonstrates the racist attitudes that dominated the early twentieth century.

Probably much of this infantile mortality may be traced to premature marriage, which result in weakly offspring, and to ignorance of inexperienced mothers as to what constitutes suitable nourishment for their children, and as to their care when sick.

(Canada, 1911, as cited in Moffat & Herring, 1999, p.1828).

Socio-economic disparities that resulted from poverty and malnutrition were the most likely determinant of infant mortality, yet there was little documentation of that in the medical literature of the time (Moffat & Herring, 1999). The racist Eurocentric attitudes towards

Indigenous women that are expressed in the aforementioned passage have not simply disappeared. As Narda Razack (2001, p.219) notes, "...racism and discrimination are embedded in all the structures in society". Negative stereotypes concerning Indigenous women and their parenting skills are deeply ingrained in our society, they have been passed from generation to generation. Therefore, it is imperative that social workers learn to think critically about where they developed their beliefs about Indigenous women's parenting skills.

Indigenous Women's Health and Wellbeing

In recent years a number of reports and studies have been published about the health of Indigenous Canadian people (AFN, 2007; AFN, 2007b; British Columbia Government, 2007; British Columbia Provincial Health Officer, 2009; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996; Health Canada, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2008). The health and wellbeing of Indigenous women is mentioned in all of the recent Indigenous health literature and some reports focus solely on Indigenous women's health and safety (Fiske, J & Browne, A. J., 2001; Fiske, J., & Browne, A.J., 2008; Hull, J., 2006; O'Donnell, 2005; Status of Women Canada, 2002). Almost all the literature reports that racist policies and practices have resulted in poorer health outcomes for Indigenous people in general, but Indigenous women and children have suffered disproportionately. Inadequate housing, poverty, and family violence are, but a few of the fundamental issues that continue to disadvantage Indigenous women and their children.

Researchers have irrefutably demonstrated the association between the socio – economic status and health, wellbeing and longevity. Socio-economic wellbeing is regarded as the most important determinant of disease (AFN, 2007; O'Donnell, 2005). Many Indigenous women across Canada live in extreme poverty due to the socio-economic implications of colonization

and patriarchy. As a result Indigenous women in Canada have a life expectancy that is over five years less than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Poverty results in social disadvantage, which in turn results in poor health (O'Donnell, 2005). Sharon McIvor notes,

Today Aboriginal women are among the poorest people in Canada. Forty three percent of Aboriginal women live in poverty in Canada, not taking into account on reserve poverty and poverty in the northern territories (2004, p.109).

Low academic graduation rates result in underemployment and poverty. In the 2001 census only 7% of the Indigenous women polled held a university degree compared to 17% of their non-Indigenous counterparts (O'Donnell). During the 2001 census 17% of the Indigenous women across Canada were unemployed compared to 7% of the non-Indigenous female population (Hull, 2006). Sadly 42% of the Native population in Canada earn less than fifteen thousand dollars annually, while only 27% of the non-Indigenous population fall into that earning category (AFN, 2007).

In addition, Indigenous people across Canada continue to experience sub-standard housing conditions. Crowded living conditions can contribute to the transmission of infectious disease, mental health problems and family violence (Statistics Canada, 2009). In a report prepared by the Federal – Provincial – Territorial Ministers responsible for *the Status of Women (Canada) (2002), Assessing Violence Against Women: A Statistical Profile*, it is noted that, Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to violence. Shockingly, spousal homicide rates are more than eight times higher for Indigenous women than for non-Indigenous women. Statistics Canada (2006) reports that 21% of Indigenous women reported being victims of spousal abuse in 2004. Violence often leads to mental health issues and a break down in the family. A report prepared

by the Assembly of First Nations states that, “nearly one in five Indigenous women have attempted suicide at least once in their lives” (AFN, 2007, p.20).

Indigenous health statistics in British Columbia paint a similarly bleak picture for Indigenous women. In 2005 the federal and provincial governments signed an agreement with Native leaders in BC entitled the “*Transformative Health Accord*”. This agreement signalled the governments’ commitment to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health outcomes in BC (Fiske & Browne, 2008). However, a recent report by the BC Provincial Health Officer (2009) reveals that in the period between 2001 and 2009 the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health has worsened or remained the same in many areas. In the fifty-seven health indicators examined, eighteen have shown improvement since 2001 and ten of the categories worsened. Eight of the categories showed increasing rates of chronic disease and 23 of the health indicators had not changed since the first provincial health report that was conducted in 2001.

There have been some improvements in health statistics in the last decade. For example, in 2001 the life expectancy of Indigenous women in BC was 6.7 years shorter than their non-Indigenous counterparts. In 2009 Indigenous women’s life expectancy has improved to be five years less than non-Indigenous women. Still, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s health in BC is significant in many areas. For instance, Indigenous people are hospitalized with symptoms relating to psychoactive drug abuse five times more frequently than non- Indigenous people in British Columbia. Indigenous people are still two to four times more likely to die from external causes such as accidental poisoning, motor vehicle accidents and alcohol related deaths. Indigenous women still struggle to access health programs and

experience racism at the hands of the medical community (BC Provincial Health Officer, 2009; Fiske & Browne 2008).

Summary

A review of the literature that focuses on Indigenous women in Canada reveals that patriarchal colonial social policies and practices have deprived Indigenous women of their rights to enjoy an adequate standard of living. The *Indian Act* has been instrumental in stripping Indigenous women of their rights and dignity. In this study, an examination of the ways in which negative stereotypes of negligent mothering intersect with the historical context of aggressive assimilation policies and the *Indian Act* was particularly relevant. The negative perceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous women affect Indigenous social work student practicum experiences as they carry these negative stereotypes with them into government protection placements. The racist paternalistic attitudes that were present in the early part of the century have not vanished they have simply changed to accommodate the colonial agenda in the present day. Systemic marginalization has resulted in socio-economic disadvantage. Indigenous women are far less likely to access the halls of higher learning and earn a decent wage. This translates to an increased risk of poverty, chronic health issues and in many cases premature death.

Chapter 3: Child Welfare, Child Welfare Education and Field Education Literature

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the literature that addresses the social, economic and political conditions that have historically disadvantaged Indigenous women and continue to do so in contemporary times. In the next section, I consider the literature related to child welfare practice and theory, child welfare education and field education. I begin by briefly discussing feminist child protection literature and previous studies related to child welfare worker health that have inspired and will inform this thesis work. In the section that follows I discuss child welfare education in BC, in particular the creation of the Child Welfare Specialization at the University of Victoria. I follow with a review of field education literature.

Child Welfare Literature

Through the years a notable body of literature has helped to re-conceptualize social work practice and theory from a feminist perspective (Collins, 1986; Dominelli & McLeod, 1986; Russell, 1989). A large body of literature has emerged that offers a critique of the gendered nature of child protection work and the negative impact that this work has on the women who perform it (Anderson, 2000; Callahan, 1993; Gold, 1998; Gutterman & Jayaratne, 1994; Reid, 2006; Swift, 1995). This literature has challenged the ways in which, child welfare work has been theoretically rooted in patriarchal principles and assumptions. In terms of health, stress has

often been identified as a by-product of frontline protection work, an occupational health hazard that negatively influences the workers emotional health (Anderson, 2000; Drake & Yadama, 1996; Horwitz, 2006).

Gold (1998) identified that there was a gap in the literature with regard to the mental and physical health impacts of frontline child protection work and she undertook a study in 1998 to explore these health factors. The findings of her study concluded that stress from a variety of differing factors was a catalyst for both negative mental and physical health. The research findings indicated that structural inequality is often at the root of the stresses and health issues that women experience in front line social work jobs. Women experience a double workday with their home and work responsibilities, and often occupy the lower status positions in an agency. Gold (1998) observed that women's awareness of their own relative lack of power and control in the child and family service work place often contributes to negative mental and physical health outcomes.

First Nations scholar Michelle Reid replicated Gold's study in 2006 using a qualitative participatory community action methodology and a First Nations gendered analysis approach. First Nations women who were employed in fully delegated on reserve child welfare agencies in BC were interviewed to explore the holistic health impact that frontline child welfare work has on First Nations women. Reid's study encompassed a traditional Indigenous approach to health which included mental, physical emotional and spiritual responses to child welfare work. The study participants noted that stress from issues such as dual accountability to the government legislation and community had a detrimental affect on their holistic health (Reid, 2006). The First Nations women in Reid's study stated that the sexism and racism they experienced working under a delegated model contributed to the stress and feelings of powerlessness they experienced

on the job. Similar to Gold's (1998) findings, the women reported that multiple roles and working within a patriarchal system contributed to stress and compromised health. Reid (2006:) noted that frontline child protection work had huge impacts on aspects of the holistic health of the Indigenous women who participated in her study "because the act of resisting the dominant mainstream child welfare system and other colonial mechanisms while advocating for their own systems to be validated creates stress and takes a great deal of personal and professional time and energy" (p. 57).

The women in Reid's study also reported that they derived strength from the belief that their jobs were meaningful.

The FNWCFSSW also believed that their work can be extremely positive and that their strength and power comes from working within First Nations communities and cultures and witnessing the beneficial changes for their community members. They further believe that their continued advocacy toward self-government and determination for First Nations peoples and their creativity and innovation in finding strategies to bridge their community and cultural ways of caring for children is their strength (Reid, 2006, p.56).

Clearly Indigenous women who work in Indigenous child and family services in British Columbia are dedicated to the health and wellness of their communities. Their love for their families, community and nation is a motivating factor that keeps them going.

A number of strategies were employed by the participants in Reid's (2006) study to rebalance and restore their holistic health including systemic, individual and collective strategies. The participants stated that self – determination and working with adequate resources would be helpful to their holistic health because they would be freer to practice community and cultural approaches in their work. Many of the women in this study suffered from chronic health issues

and they connected behaviours such as chain smoking, eating poorly and irregular sleeping patterns to occupational stress. They noted that good attention to self – care including spiritual cleansing is important aspect of maintaining positive health. In addition, finding time to debrief with co-workers, having supportive networks, and creating healthy boundaries between work and their personal life was a method of rebalancing holistic health.

Michelle Reid’s study inspired me to wonder how female Indigenous social work students fare in terms of their holistic health during child protection placement. Is there any commonality in the experiences of Indigenous child welfare frontline workers in BC and Indigenous Child Welfare Specialization students at the University of Victoria? A few studies have also looked at child welfare work from the perspective of Indigenous frontline workers who work in BC Indigenous community agencies (Brown, Haddock, & Kovach, 2002; Ormiston, 2002; Walmsley, 2005). There are common themes in the literature that feature the voices of Indigenous frontline child protection workers in BC. Racist colonial policies and practices create many of the difficulties that Indigenous communities, agencies and workers face. Some researchers note that Indigenous social workers and agencies take a community approach to child protection work and this approach is quite different from government top down approaches. Social workers experience challenges that resonate from the lack of funding for preventative services and working within restrictive legislation and policies (Brown et al, 2002; Thomas & Green, Walmsley, 2001).

For example, Brown et al. (2002) discuss the work being done at Lalum’utul’smun’eem Child and Family Services (LS) on Vancouver Island. The goal of LS is to provide child welfare services that facilitate a community empowerment approach. While this approach to community healing has proven to be effective, the main barrier to providing culturally appropriate services to

the Cowichan people has revolved around working under a state delegated authority model. Brown et al. (2002) argue that one of the biggest challenges for the agency is promoting community healing with limited financial resources. Provincial policy provides resources to MCFD that focus on protection services for children at risk of harm. Government employs a similar strategy with regard to First Nations on reserve funding and within this funding framework there is very little financial support for community development initiatives. Thus, prevention services that are the central focus of community empowerment approaches are desperately under funded. Funding policies reflect the mandate of mainstream child welfare agencies to focus primarily on protective services for individual children and families who have been deemed at risk. Conversely, the mandate of Lalum'utul'smun'eem Child and Family Services is to care for the holistic health and wellbeing of all children and families within the community not just the children and families identified as being at risk.

In another informative study Christopher Walmsley (2001) interviewed nineteen frontline child protection workers in British Columbia to gain a better understanding on the ways in which Indigenous fully delegated community agencies and MCFD agencies differ in both organizational structure and practice. The Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) has undergone many structural changes over the past ten years. The frontline workers in this study described the work environment in MCFD offices as both stressful and uncertain (Walmsley, 2001). Conversely, Indigenous agency workers noted that they although they worked within a colonial system with insufficient funds they felt more supported by their supervisors. The hierarchal relationships that guide frontline social work practice in government child protection offices are not as visible in Indigenous on reserve community agencies. While the frontline workers in both agencies reported that the work was stressful, Indigenous frontline

workers also reported that they felt that their jobs were meaningful even though they were overworked, while the frontline workers in MCFD offices simply reported that the work was very stressful (Walmsley, 2001).

In (2002) Ormiston conducted interviews with 18 First Nations child welfare frontline social workers in British Columbia to discuss what knowledge and skills should be introduced into the First Nations Child Welfare Specialization courses at the University of Victoria. All the social workers in Ormiston's study worked within BC Level 15 (now known as Level 6) delegated agencies. The Indigenous child welfare agency workers reported that that policy and legislation are barriers to effective practice in First Nations community agencies. The participants suggested that traditional community approaches to child welfare be part of the curriculum. As well, the participant in this study recommended that Indigenous students should be taught skills to advocate for social and political change for First Nations people. This study informed the Indigenous Child Welfare Specialization curriculum at the University of Victoria.

The Child Welfare Specialization in British Columbia

Following the publication of the *Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection* in 1995, schools of social work in BC began discussing the ways in which BSW programs could better prepare students for work in child protection (Armitage, Callahan & Lewis, 2001; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006). Section 55 of the *Report of the Gove Inquiry* recommended that the BSW degree be the entry qualification necessary for new child protection employees (Gove Inquiry into Child Protection, 1995). Later, this was amended to include other degree programs as acceptable entry qualifications for employment at the Ministry (Armitage, Callahan & Lewis, 2001; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006). The development of the specialization was based on

recommendation 57 of the Gove inquiry which suggested that Schools of Social Work in BC increase child welfare content in the curriculum. The schools developed a Child Welfare Specialization (CWS) Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program to specifically prepare social workers for child protection work. Schools proceeded with their CWS program planning after comprehensive consultation with the BC Ministry for Children and Family Development with regard to their competency requirements for new employees at MCFD (Armitage & Mitha, 2000). A framework for the CWS was established which included BSW core courses, child welfare core courses, relevant electives and a child protection fourth year practicum (Armitage, Callahan & Lewis, 2001). Still, schools of social work entered into this relationship with the Ministry cautiously.

A number of tensions were created with new collaborative relationship between the social work programs and the MCFD (Armitage et al., 2001; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006). Even in the present day there is on going discussions about what should be included in the curriculum. Schools of social work are committed to teaching skills that will enhance the student's ability to think critically and advocate for social justice, and social change. The Ministry's interests have always been to gain new BSW employees who have been taught the competencies and skills that will ensure that they are job ready for frontline work in child protection (Armitage et al., 2001; Bellefeuille & Schmidt, 2006). The schools of social work were keen to retain academic control over the content of the curriculum within their programs. Armitage et al. note that,

The schools of social work and their parent institutions went to some length to ensure that the Child Welfare Specialization was developed and funded at "arms length" from the Ministry for Children and Families. Measures taken to guarantee that the Ministry was not in the position to control educational content included ensuring that program ownership

remained with the school and parent institution and the funding followed the standard procedures through the Ministry of Advanced Education and not through MCF (2001, p.16).

This funding was rolled into the universities base funding in 2003 (Susan Strega, November 14th 2009, Personal Communications). Universities continue to work with the MCFD to ensure that Child Welfare Specializations students are prepared to work in child welfare but they maintain complete control of the curriculum content. This includes a critical analysis of the child welfare system in BC and the impact that the child welfare system has had on Indigenous children and families.

At the onset of the new Child Welfare Specialization in 2000, the MCFD approved several practicum placement locations in MCFD offices in BC as “good learning sites” for CWS students (Armitage & Mitha, 2000). Although some Indigenous faculty were eager to organize a parallel Indigenous system to match Indigenous students in the Child Welfare Specialization with Indigenous child welfare agencies, no structure was created (Jacquie Green, Personal Communications, January 10, 2009). As Armitage et al (2001, p.14) note, “the Gove Inquiry overlooked First Nations child welfare, except to disagree with sections of the BC Family Child and Community Services Act that recognized the importance of Aboriginal origin”. At the time there were few fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies in BC and the needs of Indigenous students and agencies were not included in early CWS planning discussions (Armitage et al., 2001).

At present a complex system exists in BC for placing Child Welfare Specializations students from schools of social work and schools of child and youth care into fourth year practicum with MCFD. Five MCFD Regional Coordinators receive applications from schools across the

province and ensure that the students are placed in MCFD offices as close to their homes as possible. There is no similar system in place to ensure that students have access to practicum placements in fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services Agencies. In fact, schools of child and youth care policies prevent them from placing Child Welfare Specialization students in fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services Agencies without the assistance of an MCFD Coordinator (Sheila Macaulay, Personal communication, May 2nd, 2008). In schools of social work, however, the CWS fourth year practicum can occur at a MCFD office or a fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services office. There are structural barriers that influence students to take a practicum at MCFD rather than an Indigenous agency. Employee salaries are smaller in Indigenous fully delegated agencies and students who do their final practicum at an Indigenous agency may not be eligible to work at MCFD.

Field Education Literature

The social work practicum is regarded by many as the most important part of the student's professional education. It is the learning site where students develop their practice skills and incorporate social work theory into practice (Barlow & Hall, 2003; Razack, 2002; Knight, 2000). There is, however, an absence of peer-reviewed literature on the topic of Indigenous field education experiences. Across Canada there are a few Master of social work reports that describe projects done by MSW practicum students with Indigenous content (Drakul, 2000; Fisher, 1993; Jonstone- Makinauk, 2000). However, these works do not describe the challenges that Indigenous students face in their field education placements with holistic health, or the strategies that students use to cope and succeed.

Many of the articles reviewed discussed the importance of the relationship between the agency supervisor and the student (Garner, 2006; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Knight, 2000; Marshack, Hendricks & Gladstein, 1994). Agencies supervisors play an exceptionally important role in the students learning. Generally, supervisors who demonstrate a high level of practice knowledge and sensitivity towards the clients and others in the work environment are positively regarded by practicum students (Knight, 2000). Agency supervisors must possess the skills to step out of their regular role as agency practitioner to become teachers and role models (Garner, 2006). These skills are not inherent in every social work practitioner. In recent studies, students identified several supervisory styles that they felt contributed to a positive field education experience. For instance, students are most likely to report that they had a greater level of satisfaction with their practicum when the supervisor was open and supportive (Knight, 2000; Garner, 2006). Agency supervisors are also rated highly by students when they encourage students to be self reflective, invite students to engage in learning activities and provide constructive feedback. Knight (2000) also notes that there is a “multi-dimensional” aspect to field education. Students have different learning needs at the beginning, middle and end of the practicum, and supervisors who adjust there supervision approach to support students learning needs at each of these points in the practicum are most successful.

When students experience tension and conflict with their agency supervisor communication between them can become strained. Giddings et al. (2003) note a number of circumstances that commonly lead to student/ supervisor conflict.

- (a) conflict related to differences in theoretical orientation and beliefs about effective interventions;
- (b) conflict related to supervisory style (e.g., too little supervision, a lack of positive reinforcement, the absence of constructive criticism, or little opportunity to observe one’s

supervisor actually doing the work); and (c) conflict related to personality differences that interfere with the supervisory relationship or situations in which there are varying perceptions of the relationship (2003, p. 5).

Conflict between the practicum supervisor and student is more common than one might think. When it does occur it causes “stress, anger and doubt” for both agency supervisor and student (Barlow & Hall, 2003, p. 2663).

This leads to another significant theme in the field education literature. Several of the articles reviewed discussed the tensions and emotional feelings that arise for students at the onset and during their practicum (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003, 2003b; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Razack, 2001). Students enter into the practicum with a wide range of emotions from anxiety to excitement (N. Razack, 2001; Barlow & Hall, 2007). There is often some discomfort in going from the comfortable atmosphere of academia to the murky unknown area of community practice (Barlow & Hall, 2003b). Barlow & Hall (2003b) argue that inexperienced practicum students feel vulnerable. A number of issues can contribute to a practicum student’s perception of vulnerability. Students may believe that they are ill equipped to deal with the emotionally charged situations that occur in social service environments. They may worry about sustaining a personal injury at their practicum site, or they may feel deep, genuine sadness if they are placed in the position to witness “human despair” for the first time (Barlow & Hall, 2007). Students may question whether they have the personal qualities to do the work. It was noted that personal assessment of vulnerability was enhanced when students felt powerless and devoid of social supports (Barlow & Hall, 2003b). Narda Razack (2001) argues that students from diverse backgrounds experience additional emotional challenges in the practicum. She writes

that, “Students often report feeling anxious, fearful, incompetent and powerless in this learning process”.

Some of the articles explored the concept of power relations in greater depth (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Hackett & Marsland, 1997; Marshack, Hendricks & Gladstein, 1994). There is always a power differential in the practicum dyad that privileges the supervisor (Barlow & Hall, 2007). Hackett & Marsland also observed that in child protection placements students have the least power in the student, supervisor, and Faculty Liaison triad. Students fear that if they speak out in a way that is deemed inappropriate they may be seen as “unsuitable” candidates for the field of social work (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003; Hackett & Marsland, 1997). In addition, few agency supervisors have been trained to recognize the power dynamics that are at play when race is added to a relationship, where power differences already exist (Hackett & Marsland, 1997).

When the power relationship is upset further by an agency supervisor who is displaying “power over” behaviour, the student typically resists. The literature suggests that student resistance can take on a number of forms (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003; Hackett & Marsland, 1997). Students may reject the supervisors’ knowledge or they may develop other support networks within the agency and go to for practice mentorship. In recent reports students reported that their means of coping when faced with severe conflict with a supervisor was to remain silent (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003). One student stated that she felt her best option was to “get through it and get out” (Barlow & Hall, 2003:8). Giddings et al. (2003) states that the concern increases when conflict between the supervisor and student is not reported or discussed. They state that “The pairing of egregious violations and field educations has the potential to cause harm to student” (2003, p.8).

Some authors note that field education occupies a marginal status in social work education because it takes place outside of the regular academic environment (Goldstein, 1994; Lyter & Smith, 2004). Making sure that the learning that takes place in these distant environments is congruent with the curriculum can be challenging (Razack, 2001). In this context, field instructors/liaisons play a vital role in ensuring that minority students are supported in practicum. Some research shows that minority students are more likely to be successful in their social work program if they develop supportive, trusting relationships with their field education liaison (Longres & Seltzer, 1994). However, the practicum Faculty Liaison's role is two-fold as it involves developing strong relationships between the university and the agency, in addition to student support (Razack, 2002). With an increasing demand for practicum placements and competition for placements from many different health related disciplines, there is a danger that practicum liaisons may feel compelled to overlook specific student needs to retain a collegial relationship with the supervisor and the agency.

Some field education studies have explored the challenges that educators face in preparing students to work with clients from multicultural backgrounds (Beckerman & Burrell, 1994; Van Soest, 1994) while others discussed the challenges that students from racial minority groups face in social work field placements. Narda Razack (2001), for example, examined the challenges that social work students from racial minority groups in Toronto confront, in field education experiences. She found that racially diverse students often reported both subtle and deliberate forms of racism, and prejudice, at their practicum site. While immigrant and refugee peoples do not share the same social history with Indigenous people, it is conceivable that some of the intolerance towards Indigenous people that exists in Canadian society may also cause spiritual pain for Indigenous social work students in a community agency practicum.

Integration of theory into practice is the ultimate goal of the practicum but one recent study revealed there is lack of articulation between what is taught in the curriculum and the practice competencies desired by the community agency. Ultimately this can create difficulties for the student learner (Lyter & Smith, 2004). Marshack, Hendricks & Gladstein, (1994) proposed that agency supervisors often avoid discussions about diversity with students especially when the student is a member of a marginalized group. Many schools of social work teach anti-oppressive, anti-racist, Indigenous and critical theoretical approaches to practice. Putting these theories into practice requires that the student dialogue with mentors, critically reflect upon their practice and, when necessary, make shifts in the way they practice. Students feel comfortable about discussing issues such as racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism openly with agency supervisors to gain a quality learning experience at their practicum.

Summary

To conclude, a review of child welfare literature shows that the stress involved in child protection work has a detrimental impact on the health of frontline social workers (Gold, 1998; Reid, 2006). In Reid's study, the women who participated believed that the work they did was meaningful and fulfilling, even though they reported stress and negative health. Even though Indigenous frontline workers are overworked they see the work they do as important for the community. Although this study does not attempt to replicate Reid's (2006) study it is inspired and informed by it. Other studies that make room for the voices of Indigenous frontline child protection workers in BC are also very informative. When BC Indigenous frontline workers speak about their practice in BC, some common themes emerge. Colonial relationships between Indigenous people, the state and society are at the root of the challenges that Indigenous child

welfare agencies face. Inadequate funding and legislation that is difficult to work within creates barriers for Indigenous child welfare agencies. Frontline child protection work in BC is difficult, and stressful, due in part to the ever-shifting politics, policies and procedures in government child protection offices.

A literature review of the history of the Child Welfare Specialization shows that when the CWS was developed in the early part of the 21st Century, there was no consideration of the needs of Indigenous students and agencies, even though the majority of the children in care at the time were Indigenous children (Armitage, 1998). Practicum students provide a constant stream of new employees in a system where there is an extremely high employee turnover due to burnout. The present system for placing CWS students in practicum in BC privileges MCFD because most of the new employees, Indigenous or not, are funnelled in their direction. Indigenous fully delegated agencies must struggle to meet their staffing demands.

Much of the field education literature reviewed discussed the intricacies of the student and supervisor relationship (Garner, 2006; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Knight, 2000; Marshack, Hendricks & Gladstein, 1994), and the emotional challenges that students face when they enter into the practicum (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003, 2003b; Giddings, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Razack, 2001). Students report that the practicum is one of the most important parts of the learning and the supervisor's skill and sensitivity can greatly influence the student's learning.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology and Methods

Introduction

In the previous chapter I reviewed the literature that informs this study. In this chapter the methodologies and methods used in this study are discussed. Chapter four begins with a description of qualitative research and Indigenous storytelling methodologies. An introduction to the Indigenous approach used in this study is provided, along with a rationale for the use of this method. An Indigenous research method is the most appropriate methodological choice for conducting research with Indigenous people. This methodology creates safety and meaning for both the researcher and participants and includes culture and ceremony as part of the process (Smith, 1999). Further, the use of a storytelling methodology is attractive to researchers who are conducting research with women, because it creates room for the voices of women who have been silenced in the past (Gluck & Patai, 1991). In this research, the use of an Indigenous storytelling methodology was a means of honouring the history and worldview of both the participants and the researcher. Indigenous storytelling methodologies incorporate the worldview, culture and customs of the people into the methodology. Storytelling has played an important role in the transmission and creation of knowledge in BC Indigenous communities for millennia (Archibald, 2009). Therefore the use of a storytelling methodology was a natural choice for research with BC Indigenous women.

The next sections of this chapter describe the methods that were used to invite students to participate in this study. I further discuss the methods that were used in this study to document and, analyse and present the women's stories. Indigenous scholars are careful to respect the protocols of each individual community when they conduct research. The final section of this

chapter is contains a discussion about the ethical guidelines that were followed in this research study.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative or interpretive methods are especially suitable when the intentions of the research are focused on understanding the ways that a particular group make sense out of their experiences (Carriere, 2007). I was interested in the experiences of Indigenous social work students, so the use a qualitative methodology in this study was most suitable. Strega (2005, p. 206) mentions that the purpose of using a qualitative research is to “give those who read the research a feel for others’ social reality by illuminating the meanings, values, interpretive systems and rules of living they apply”. In this sense qualitative research designs work well with people who have been oppressed and marginalized. They allow the researcher an opportunity to illuminate the stories and realities of ordinary people for the purpose of drawing attention to issues of social justice.

Indigenous Oral History/Narrative Methodology

An Indigenous storytelling methodology was originally chosen for this study because it is respectful of the researcher and the participant’s culture, and worldview. Thomas (2005, p. 242) states, “A storytelling methodology honours the traditions of our ancestors”. Traditionally most of the communities in British Columbia used storytelling as a means of knowledge transmission. As a Gitx̱san graduate student I struggled at first with how to do research that did not repeat the oppressive relations of past research in BC communities. I finally realized that I could bring my teachings, culture and worldview into the research process through the use of an Oral History

methodology. In my Gitxsan culture Oral Histories – *adawaaks* – have been used as a means of transmitting knowledge since the beginning of time. The legal validity of Oral Histories was further established in the final Supreme Court ruling of *Delgam’Uukw v R* in 1997 (Mills, 2008). As a Gitxsan woman, the use of an Oral History method to learn, teach and research is a right that has been passed down for generations from my ancestors. Indigenous knowledge’s and worldview are critical components of an Indigenous methodology (Kovach, 2006). Indigenous people may have different cultural protocols, languages and customs but we share the same relational understanding of the world and its cosmology. Indigenous people have a shared belief system and worldview and it is that worldview that informs our Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2006; Little Bear, 2002).

But, although I am Gitxsan, I am also European on my paternal side and I have been socialized through various European social systems. This relationship with colonial knowledge has influenced my research methodology. As I Strauss & Corbin (1998: p.3) state, “a research methodology is a “way of thinking about and studying a social reality”. My original intentions in this research were to use a traditional storytelling methodology. However, I soon realized that the methods in my research design did not reflect a storytelling methodology. The Indigenous methodology that I used in this project is really a blended model as it flowed from my personal epistemology, or how I make sense of the world and research. As a result, some of the methods employed in this research were drawn from Indigenous knowledge and some were a reflection of traditional European research designs, in particular Narrative analyses. So, what is Indigenous about this methodology and what was not, and how did I incorporate my teachings into this research?

The methods that I employed during this study were based on the teachings and protocols I have been taught by Elders, spiritual mentors and other Indigenous researchers. Prayer, dreams knowledge and ceremony were incorporated into my methods. I invited my ancestors to guide me in this work at each point in the process. My goal was to make the process for participants one that was respectful safe, and meaningful, and would create an opportunity for any negative perceptions about research to be shifted and replaced with a positive perception of research. These aspects of my methodology flowed from a Gitx̓san worldview.

As well, I strived to carry out research that would be relevant and valuable for the community. Linda Smith states that Indigenous storytelling methodologies are “conversations amongst ourselves as Indigenous people, to ourselves and for ourselves” (Smith, 1999, p.145). This research was designed to develop knowledge that would support future students and thus, it was designed to give back. The intensions of the research are an important part of an Indigenous research methodology. Wilson (2008, p. 77) states “...the Indigenous researcher has a vested interest in the integrity of the methodology (respectful) and the usefulness of the results if they are to be of any use in the Indigenous community (reciprocity)”. Thomas (2005, p.224) similarly notes that Oral History methodologies “provide[s] an opportunity for First Nations to have their histories documented and included in written records”. The students were active participants in the creation of knowledge in this study. The stories in this research are their stories and I was careful to include the participants’ words where ever possible. Their wisdom and recommendations are now documented and will be used to inform future Indigenous student practicum placements. The participants expressed satisfaction knowing their stories would be used to for this purpose.

In some Oral History methodologies there is minimal direction from the researcher in the story sharing process. I chose to use a semi-structured interview in this thesis research because there were some very specific questions that I hoped to answer. The interview guide helped to ensure that the responses from all five of the participants were consistent. The data collection and analysis in this research was an Indigenous methodology blended with a Narrative design as described by Heather Fraser (2004).

Fraser (2004) makes a number of suggestions for conducting interviews and analysing research data that I found fit well with an Indigenous approach. She asserts that it is important to understand the participants' social and historical history and develop a relationship of trust with the participants. These elements are also intrinsic in an Indigenous methodology. As an Indigenous woman I shared a socio-historical reality with the participants as and trust was therefore much easier to attain. Fraser (2004) also suggests that we reveal our investment in the research, share some of our interpretations with the participants and allow participants a chance to ask questions. All of these elements were built into the interview design.

Sample and Recruitment- Inviting

A purposeful sampling strategy was used in this study to invite female Indigenous students who had completed a Child Welfare Specialization fourth year protection practicum in the past two years in a post-secondary institution in British Columbia to participate in this study. I knew that these particular students would possess a rich body of knowledge with reference to my research questions. Potts & Brown (2005, p.269) note that "Sampling is a power laden decision and seen as one of many political acts in research". I entered into this research knowing that Indigenous female students held valuable insights into the child welfare field education but they

often do not have a voice in the issues that affect them. Creating a space where their knowledge was a way of honouring their collective wisdom. My choice of sample also provided me with an opportunity to politicize and put into perspective the structural barriers and social realities of Indigenous women, thus strengthening my own practice.

I began this study by contacting various social work Field Education Coordinators in British Columbia to discuss the research. I attend bi-annual provincial Child Welfare Specializations meetings and in some cases I was able to talk to Field Coordinators in person to explain the research project. I emailed my “Call for Participants” and “Research Information Letter”³ to various Field Education Coordinators in Schools of Social Work across BC. I requested that they distribute my “Call for Participants” to Indigenous students that they had worked with in the past who had completed a child protection practicum at MCFD within the past two years.

With permission from the Director of the School of Social Work, at the University of Victoria (UVIC), I reviewed the UVIC social work student database and generated a list of past Indigenous undergraduate BSW students (and their email addresses) who had completed a fourth year practicum in the Child Welfare Specialization placement in the past two years. I asked a Field Education Coordinator in my department if she would distribute my “Call for Participants” and she kindly agreed. This colleague had never worked with Indigenous child welfare students; therefore she was not in a position of authority over the potential participants. Five Indigenous women responded to my call for participants through email. In each case, I replied via email and asked for permission to telephone and provide more information about the project. I also attached an “Information Letter” and an “Informed Consent Form” in my reply and I encouraged potential participants to review these documents.

³ Please see Appendices A- Call for Participants & B- Information Letter

I called each potential participant at a time that was agreeable to them and shared information about the research project. All of the participants indicated that they would prefer it if I travelled to their community to conduct the interview, so I made arrangements to take two weeks off from work to travel around BC to conduct the interviews. Interviews were arranged at places that the participant identified as being the most comfortable for them. I was careful to offer options for interview location that would be privacy thus maintain the participants' confidentiality. This was a deeply spiritual time for me. I prayed daily and gathered medicines during my travels.

Data Gathering Process – Sharing and Listening

The method of data collection that was employed in this study was personal interviews. Anderson & Jack in Fraser (2004, p.7) state that "...the interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women's lives and women's formulations". Personal interviews using an Indigenous approach involve sharing, listening and collaborating to create knowledge. The students shared their stories and I listened intently. I created an interview guide to ensure that the stories that students shared with me would answer the research questions. I believed this group had much to share with educators and other stakeholders, but most often their voices are not heard, so I was excited about entering into the research with them. I felt so grateful that each of the graduates had agreed to share their stories with me. I encouraged participants to tell me their child welfare practicum story using semi-structured interview questions and I actively listened. Some closed questions were used at the beginning of the interview to acquire specific information about the participant's social and educational history.

The Informed Consent Form”⁴ was reviewed and signed by each of the participants immediately following each interview.

The first questions (Part I.) were of the interview guide⁵ were designed to gain a personal profile of the participant and to provide some time for the development of rapport and relationship with the participants. Developing comfortable relationships with each participant was important to me in this study, but it was also challenging. Even though I had shared conversations over the telephone and exchanged numerous emails, I was a stranger to many of the participants. In Part I. of the interview guide, participants were invited to help develop a definition of holistic health. I also let them know that they would have an opportunity to edit their interview after it was transcribed. I shared some personal things at the start of the interview to create a relationship of trust. Before the interview started I asked the participants for permission to record our conversation. All of the participants agreed.

At the end of the interview I asked the participants how they felt. I asked if they were upset by anything that we discussed. As a social worker and a Gitx̱san woman, I have an intuitive sense when people are troubled. If the participants would have seemed upset, or indicated that we had triggered memories that were upsetting, I was prepared to debrief with them before leaving. As it was though, all of the participants seemed to be grateful to finally have the opportunity to talk about their experiences at their Ministry practicum. I thanked each of them for sharing their stories with me and gifted them with a handmade medicine pouch and a card. Each medicine pouch contained some of the sage I had gathered as well as an abalone shell from my personal supply.

⁴ See Appendix C – Informed Consent Form

⁵ Please see Appendix D – Interview Guide

Data Analysis - Reflecting and Documenting the Story Themes

As mentioned earlier, I chose to draw from the narrative approach to analysing personal interview stories that is presented by Heather Fraser (2004) in her work "*Doing narrative research: Analysing personal stories line by line*". It was practical and possible to use this method with a small group of participants. Fraser (2004) suggests that the researcher should journal their own feelings after the interview as well as any emotions that the participants showed. At the end of each interview I spent time journaling my thoughts and feelings about the interview and the participants' reactions. I noted when participants had made similar comments about their experiences and some of the themes started to emerge in these early journal entries. Fraser (2004) also suggests that there are benefits to the researcher in transcribing the interviews themselves. Thus, I transcribed the interviews verbatim and this process was useful for analysis and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the women's stories. I made journal entries while I transcribed noting when similar phrases, words, or thoughts were repeated by more than one of the participants. I emailed the transcripts to the participants for editing and approval. I wanted to make sure that I had written the stories correctly and that the participants felt respected in the process. The research participants emailed the transcripts back to me and in some cases the participants highlighted sections of the interview that they did not want me to include in the written work or in any subsequent presentation of my work. Fraser (2004) provides a seven phase framework that includes scanning each individual interview transcript line by line. This framework for analysis also includes linking the personal to the political, scanning the stories for commonalities and differences. I was also looking at the

interview transcripts through an Indigenous feminist lens and I found that I could weave Fraser's (2004) data analysis phases and an Indigenous feminist framework quite effectively.

I read the transcripts several times and I drew out a list of preliminary themes. These themes were drawn from similar reflections that were mentioned by all or most of the participants. Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggest that you should "step back" from the data at this point in the analysis process so that when you return to it you will have a fresh outlook. I did pull away for a little longer than expected due to work and family obligations. When I returned to reflect on what the stories were telling me I realized that some of the preliminary themes could be conflated to create sub-themes. At this time I became very involved in the women's stories. I re-read the transcripts and used highlighter pens to colour code words that were used repeatedly. During this period I woke up in the middle of the night and blurted out "a circle of themes". In my dream I had arranged the themes around a circle diagram. I got up and quickly wrote down my dream. The next day I started placing the themes on a circle chart (please see Chapter 5). I could immediately see how some of the themes should be arranged moving clockwise from the north to the west. In the coming weeks I arranged and rearrange the themes on my circle chart. As a visual person arranging the themes on a chart was immensely helpful. The visual aid helped me see the bigger collective story. I was grateful to the ancestors for helping me with this process. During the whole process I prayed, and was thoughtful about my holistic health in every way. I reasoned that to truly be open to what the stories were saying, I had to be healthy and focused myself.

Ethical Considerations

An ethical issue considered in this research project was the potential for participants to become troubled in the process of telling their practicum story. I was prepared to provide emotional support and discontinue the interview if it was necessary. I have a social work degree and my supervisor has a PhD and years of experience working with people. As it turned out the participants did not experience any discomfort in the interview. Rather, they all seemed happy to share their stories and their insights. In terms of ethical considerations I designed this research with the knowledge that Indigenous research has extremely high ethical standards one must adhere to. In this context I followed the ethical guidelines presented by the Canadian Institute for Health Research while throughout this research (CIHR, 2009). I shared my research with the Caring for First Nations Children Society to gain ethical approval and support for my research. I understood that I have a responsibility to my community my cultural teachings when I conduct research. The cultural teachings that guide my life which include showing honour and respect for all things shaped the approach I took to conduct this research. Failure to adhere to these values and principles would have discredited me and potentially made the results irrelevant for the academic community.

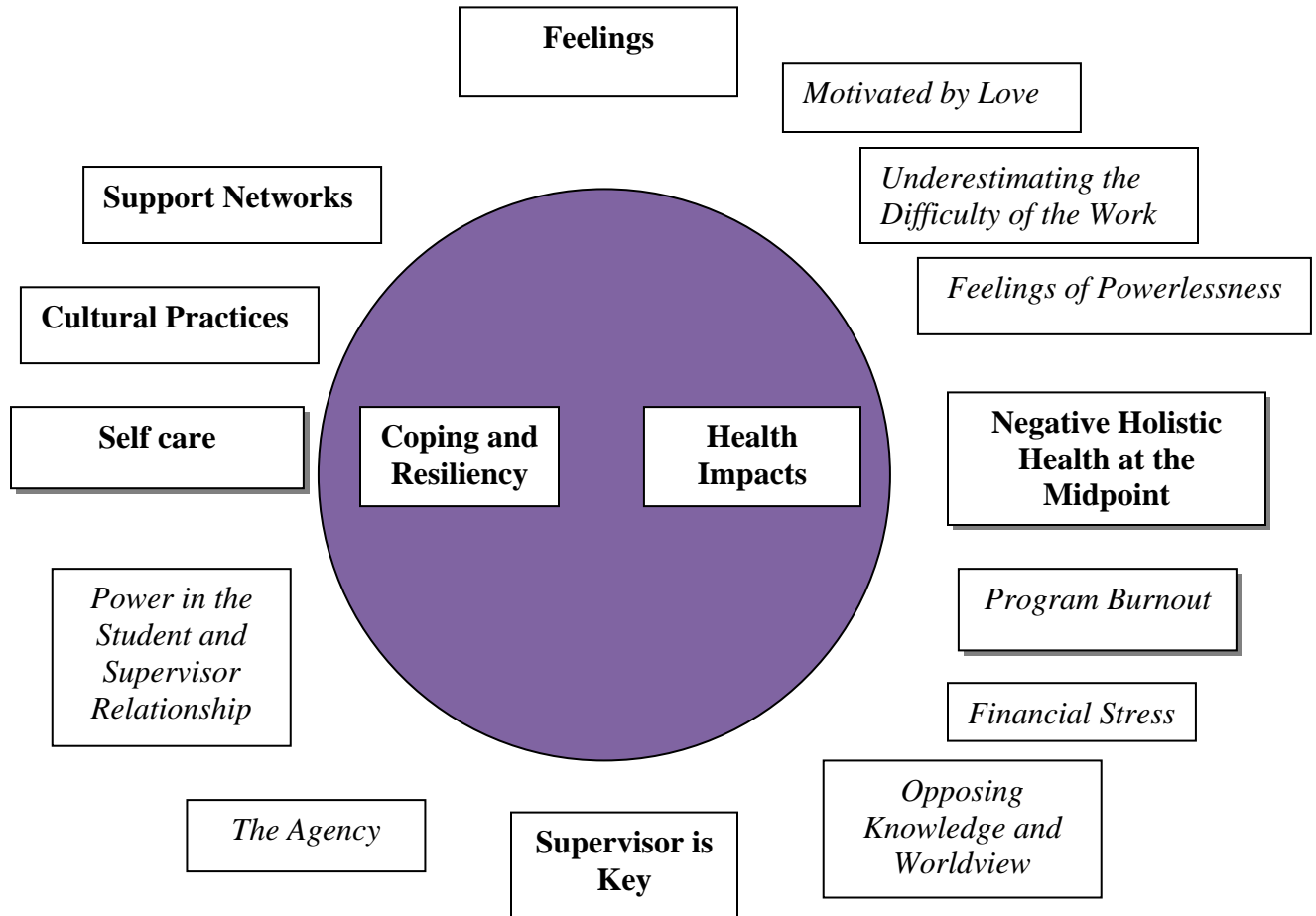
Summary

In this chapter I discussed the methodology and methods that were used to answer the research questions. Indigenous Oral History and narrative methodologies were blended to create a research design to answer the research question. Originally I intended to use Indigenous approaches exclusively but I found that the methods I was using also stemmed from my European education and beliefs. In this study I used an Oral History methodology which aligned

with an Indigenous methodology and an allied methodology of doing narrative research. I chose to use the personal interview as a method for answering my research questions because interviews allows the researcher to showcase the lives and realities of women whose voices may otherwise be silenced. The methods and design of this research also provided an opportunity to politicise the indigenous women's experiences.

Linda Smith, (1999) asserts that Indigenous research takes into account the legacy of colonization and the ways in which research has been used as a tool to justify the oppression of Indigenous people. Fraser (2004) instructs the researcher to know the social history of the people you are researching. In many ways narrative inquiry and Indigenous methodologies fit nicely together. Indigenous research strives to put Indigenous issues and concerns at the centre and create a transformative action that will benefit Indigenous communities (Smith, 1999). I worked hard to create a research project that would be useful to the Indigenous academic community. I always intended that the research would conclude with a list of recommendations, so that there is an **action** component to the work. My research design was created with the goal of sharing, listening, documenting and presenting Indigenous student experiences, so that others could know more about the struggles that students face in practicum. This research approach was informed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. In the next section the participant's stories are presented using many of their own words.

Chapter 5: Research Findings - A Circle of Themes



Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the methodology and methods that were used in this study. In this chapter I look at the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants stories. The research findings offer rich information and insight into the experiences of the Indigenous female students who participated in this study. The participants articulated that they felt this research was needed and they were pleased to have the opportunity to share their insights

about this important issue. There were many similarities within the student's stories. Most of the participants noted that they were very tired going into the final practicum. The fourth year child protection practicum is typically the last requirement of a four year degree program. All the participants reported that they had experienced the most difficulty with their holistic health at the mid-point of the practicum. Similar to the research done by Reid (2006) and other frontline child welfare workers, all of the students in this study experienced a negative impact to their health during the practicum and this was directly connected to stress. Some of the students mentioned that they experienced stress at the beginning of the placement due to the immense challenges of absorbing so much new material at once in the risk assessment training. This is a week long pre-practicum training that is facilitated by MCFD. The midpoint of the practicum was reported by all as the most difficult time of the practicum. At the end of the placement, all of the students were counting the days for the practicum to end. In general, these findings are similar to the findings in the child welfare literature which name stress as a catalyst for negative health in frontline child protection workers.

I have included a number of quotes in this chapter to ensure that the research participant's voices are at the centre in the discussion of the findings. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I awoke in the middle of the night after a dream where I envisioned the presentation of the themes in this research in a circular diagram. I am a visual person, so I created a chart to illustrate the themes and sub-themes. The themes in this chart are bolded, while the sub-themes are italicized. I believe that all things are relational and interconnected, thus the themes in this chart are inextricably linked to one another. The main themes that emerged in this research were; **Feelings** – subthemes: motivated by love, underestimating the difficulty of the work and feelings of powerlessness; **Negative Holistic Health at the Midpoint**– subthemes: program burnout,

financial stress, apposing knowledge /worldview; **Supervisor is Key** – subthemes: the agency and power in the supervisor / student relationship. These themes were directly related to my question about whether the student’s holistic health was impacted during the practicum. The final themes **Self care, Cultural Practices & Support Networks** are related to my questions regarding coping and resilience. The students consistently said that that incorporating these elements into their life helped them to cope with stress and survive the placement.

The students who participated in this research ranged in age from early twenties to mid-fifty’s. Three of the students identified as First Nations while the other two identified as Métis. Only one of the students had children, and this is uncharacteristic of a group of Indigenous women this size. Most of the women reported that they had a strong connection with their Indigenous culture and traditions. One of the students mentioned that she was still learning about her culture and Indigenous identity. All the students occupied multiple roles within their families. Pseudonyms have been used in this chapter to protect the students’ confidentiality.

Feelings

A theme that emerged early in the participant stories was feelings. All of the participants courageously shared moments of frustration, fear and uncertainty. In the journal entries and transcripts it was evident early that the students had all experienced a number of strong feelings during their practicum. One feeling that shone through was love for family, community and nation. Due to the historical relationship with government protection services, all the students in this study expressed strong feelings that drew them towards child protection work.

Motivated By Love

All of the participants in this research had a story to tell about the ways in which, government child protection services had impacted their lives and the lives of their families. One thing that was mentioned repeatedly by all the remarkable Indigenous women who participated in this research was that they got involved in child welfare because they hoped they could make a difference for Indigenous children and families, but at the mid- point some of the participants realized they would be restricted by policies. A couple of the participants had grown up in foster care homes and these personal experiences had motivated them to choose to do child welfare work.

When I first started social work I came into the profession because my mom is a MCFD foster parent, so I had a lot of children coming into my home and leaving and coming back. And there are second-generation children now in my home, and so that always bothered me in my life just why this was happening. So that is why I came into social work and when I came into university I actually wanted to stay away from child welfare because it felt too close to home (Dawn).

Janice shared a similar experience:

...my parents were a foster home...probably 100 kids went through our house... that is my interest in child welfare because I was raised with it... Both of my parents are non-indigenous... they adopted several children and we are all Indigenous.

Others mentioned the devastating effect that the child welfare system had on their parents, aunties and uncles.

It is personal, like my dad had a big family of 16 siblings and when he was younger his mom died at a really young age and they all went into foster care. And just the horrendous stories that each of them have – it's awful. And I just thought that somebody that is healthy and can feel the impact should go into this work just because it is coming from another perception. I mean I am not just coming from school but my family has had this experience (Ava).

Some of the students talked about the impact that state child welfare had on their family's cultural identity. Sonya mentioned that the child welfare system had disrupted her family's cultural identity.

Well, I think I entered into it hoping to be a child protection social worker because my mother was adopted at birth against her parents will in something comparable to the 60's scoop but in Manitoba. That really had an impact on my family and on my upbringing and my mother's upbringing (Sonya).

Sara had grown up in a troubled abusive home and as a teen she asked for help from child protection services. "I grew up in a home that was violent. I grew up in a home where I wished that someone had stepped in and helped". Sara knew how difficult foster care could be for youth. She said, "...as soon as your 19 you are done. I mean you've got nobody. The Ministry is not there for you at all". She hoped the work that she would do would make a difference for other Indigenous children.

A couple of the students also mentioned that they were drawn towards the practicum because working a MCFD pays well. The promise of a good salary does motivate many students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to enrol in the Child Welfare Specialization and to work in this field, even when they are uncertain whether this is really the type of work they want to do.

It was also financial. The bottom line was me wanting to be able to take care of my family. Even though it is not the work that I wanted to do, I need to pay off my student loan and I need a good job that pays well. I was not quite sure what to expect (Sara).

Students who work for the Ministry for three years immediately following their practicum are eligible to have the provincial portion of their student loan forgiven. It is an incentive that draws students to the Ministry and there is no such incentive if students take a practicum at a delegated Indigenous child and family services agency. Other feelings and emotions also emerged in the student stories. For example, most of the students remarked that they were not completely prepared for the level of difficulty the practicum would present. Most of the students had a strong emotional response to working within an agency that has historically been the cause of pain and injustice to their families, communities and Nations.

Underestimating the Difficulty of the Work

Some of the students mentioned that they did not really know what to expect in when they entered into the first few weeks of the practicum and this created feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Further, when they did get a grasp about what was expected of them they felt overwhelmed and uncertain about whether they could do the practicum. Underestimating the amount of new material that would be presented contributed to the student's experience of stress in the placement. Ava felt overwhelmed by the new learning in the first couple weeks. This led her to worry that she would not be successful in the practicum.

It was awful – totally awful! I went home, I mean... the first couple weeks were spent in training. And the training because child protection is such a huge area you can not learn it in a week and a half and that is what they wanted to do. Like they brought out the

comprehensive risk assessment which is a twenty page document and they wanted us to learn it in two days and then interviewing children in two days and interviewing parents and what are you going to expect from the Ministry and all this legal stuff.. And of course the Ministry has jargon that they use and acronyms and of course the Ministry are so accustomed to using it that it is like, I did not even know what they were talking about half the time during the training. And the computer system was really boring and I went home really questioning myself whether or not I could make it through the practicum (Ava).

I could feel the participants stress as she recollected her first few weeks at her practicum. These feelings were common amongst the study participants.

Some students mentioned they knew that the practicum would be challenging so they started taking caring for their holistic health before the practicum started. They believed that they were mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually prepared for the placement. However, once in the practicum they realized that they were not. Dawn, for example stated “I knew it was going to be difficult. I knew it was going to be very challenging. And, I just knew it was going to be a challenge, academically, personally and professionally. I just was not aware of how difficult and challenging it would be”. Sonya similarly shared that she was not totally prepared for the reality of protection social work in an MCFD office.

I think it was far more challenging than I thought it would be. Because you have no idea what goes on in the office and you have no idea about what social workers have to go through on a daily basis until you can see it happening and it was sort of a reality check for me because you read about all the glorious things you can do when you are a social

worker but really when it comes down to it you realise that you often can't because you under the team leader who may not have the same views as you (Sonya).

One of the students noted that the feelings of uncertainty she experienced at the beginning of the practicum when she was not paired with a mentor or supervisor due to ambiguity about who would supervise.

...they are going through a huge change at the ministry... I was supposed to be mentored by someone and he said no, I don't want to mentor anybody. I was feeling unsure about what I was supposed to do. I felt that I should know what I was supposed to do but I really didn't know (Sara).

Not knowing who she would work with and having very little orientation in the first few weeks of the practicum set the student up for a stressful practicum right from the beginning of the placement. Janice, on the other hand, had worked in the human service field for years and she felt confident going into the practicum. She did not anticipate that the practicum would be stressful or that it might harm her holistic health. She said, "I thought it would be a walk in the park ...I have years of experience". But she did struggle. Some of the struggles that students faced were reflected as feelings of powerlessness.

Feelings of Powerlessness

Students in this study reported that they experienced feelings of powerlessness in the practicum for a variety of reasons. Sonya noted that she did not feel free to articulate her knowledge in the practicum. She stated "that was a really big challenge for me and it was definitely more challenging than I thought it would be to be powerless and not have a voice". She mentioned that she would have shared more of her knowledge about working with

Indigenous people with the MCFD staff if she would have felt more comfortable to do so. Other students were reluctant to ask questions or ask questions about practice because they feared negative repercussions. In the following passage Dawn states that she did not question the practices she was uncertain of for fear that she would not get through the practicum. She felt that she may be ostracized by others in her practicum office if she were perceived as a trouble maker.

At least in class when I felt like saying something I felt that I could but in my practicum I couldn't because I was in a position where I knew my life would be hell in that office if I challenged some of the intolerance I witnessed (Dawn).

Other students shared that they felt powerless or inadequate because they did not feel ready to practice. They were uncertain about their professional identity and place in the practicum. Sara sums up her feelings of inadequacy in the following passage.

I was nervous when I first started. I was thinking here is this professional place and I don't feel professional, I just feel like who I am. So I was feeling inadequate walking in". In my own insecurity, I felt incompetent and I did not want anybody to know. I was worried that if I complained too much I might not pass the practicum (Sara).

Sara stated that she did not share her feelings of incompetence with anyone for fear she would not pass her practicum. Although she felt that she had a good relationship with the practicum coordinator and liaison she did not reach out for support. In this instance there was no one else that the student could trust so she kept her feelings to herself. This contributed to her feelings of stress and unease.

Negative Holistic Health at the Mid-Point

All of the students in this study noted that by the mid- point of the practicum they were experiencing difficulties with their holistic health. Some of the students reported poor physical health at the midpoint of the practicum. For example Janice noted, “so, you are just exhausted...it feels like you have the flu. So it is, go to practicum or stay home”. Sonya used the word exhausted as well to describe her physical health at the midpoint of the practicum. She said:

I think at the mid- point I was really kind of exhausted and just kind of maybe a little bit fed up and just wanting it to be over. It was hard to believe that it was just the mid-point (Sonya).

Other students shared heartfelt stories about their, spiritual, mental, and emotional health. With reference to financial issues Ava said “I cried in the Deans office one day and I cried at home. I always found a way; I always found a way through but...” Dawn noted that “by the midpoint of my practicum I was severely stressed out and I was very emotional. I was starting to feel like my spirit was broken...I was very unhappy”. These words were particular difficult for a Field Education Coordinator to hear. To Social work educators, the safety and wellbeing of our students is paramount.

A few of the students mentioned that stress interfered with a number of their self care practices including sleep, exercise and eating a healthy diet.

It was difficult to get enough sleep, I found myself not being able to sleep when I wanted to... some things just did not sit well with me I guess and I just could not calm down (Sonya).

Sara similarly notes:

The thing I remember the most is that I was not sleeping because I was going downhill and stress would keep me awake. I was worried every day going to my practicum. Honestly I was and by that point [midpoint] I really felt inadequate in my practicum and I was struggling. Usually when I do that I do not sleep properly, start drinking more coffee, eating more doughnuts, less healthy stuff. I stopped swimming and at the beginning of the practicum I knew I needed to do that kind of healthy stuff (Sara).

When asked how her holistic health was at the mid-point, Janice said, “oh it was terrible, the midpoint of the practicum was probably one of the most challenging times in my life”. Some of the struggles that students experienced were attributed to the exhaustion they felt from being at the end of a four year degree program.

Program Burnout

Many of the students said that they were “burned out” from the months and years of study. In this study the term burn out refers to complete fatigue as a result of years of studying. The fourth year social work practicum is typically about four hundred hours and it comes at the end of the students’ degree program. A couple of the students noted that they felt that their health was already somewhat compromised before they began the practicum. Ava noted that the intensity of her school work often resulted in illness once the semester was over.

At the end of the semester I would write my finals and then I would sort of let my guard down cause there was always that two to three week period where I would not have to go back to school and I would get so sick during that time (Ava).

Racism in the classrooms was also reported by two of the students as an element that influenced their health and perception of being “burned out” prior to the start of their practicum. Part of the CWS includes preceding classroom components that also contribute to the student’s sense of wellbeing during the practicum placement.

I don’t think I was in very good shape. Just prior to the practicum there was a lot of stuff happening in the classrooms? Sometimes you can’t help but feel singled out when subjects like residential school come up. It felt personal to me I was very tired mentally. It seemed like I was always working hard in the classroom. When other people would make assumptions or the jokes, there were a lot of negative jokes... (Dawn).

In relationship to the social work curriculum Dawn said, “I think it is not just mental for Indigenous students. It becomes emotional and it becomes spiritual. Sonya reported having similar struggles in the classroom prior to the start of her practicum.

I was still taking courses and still going through all of those hardships that you go through in your classes... I felt constantly in a position where my thoughts were being compromised and my being was being compromised just because people did not quite understand my place (Sonya).

One student felt that she had been attacked for her beliefs and values in the classroom.

Dawn said, “I think probably my biggest struggle was being sometimes directly and most times indirectly attacked in my classrooms. It was a challenge not to lash back...” Some students stated that they knew that they may have had a better experience if they would have taken a semester off to rest before doing the practicum. Financial obligations often motivate students to push through the social work program rather than taking a semester off.

I found it harder and harder to keep up and to do the things that I needed to stay healthy. I had been going to school for 4 years but I also did summer semesters so I never took breaks, and that was tiring me out (Ava).

Janice also mentioned that she did not take time for a break even though she was aware that she was starting to burn out.

... it would have been better if I would have taken a break. My headspace was not good. For example, I know it is not one of your questions but I missed many days of my practicum. I was just tired (Janice).

Janice said she just kept going without a break because she was tired of being a student and she just wanted to work. She did have some financial support from her partner but she was struggling financially to make ends meet and that was a source of stress.

Financial Stress at the Mid-Point

Financial struggles were reported by most of the participants as a factor that influenced negative health at the mid-point. In this study four of the participants were younger than forty years old and single only one participant was over forty and married. Naturally finances played a bigger role for the younger single students because they had less time in their lives to work and save for their education. One of the younger students said;

My family has a lot of kids and not a lot of money to send me to school.... I just wanting to be finished at the mid- point I just wanted to be out of school and I was getting to a point where I was getting broke again and I needed some money and I had to pick up another job outside of practicum....I found my self crying in the Deans office because of this (Ava).

Only one of the five participants was eligible for band funding for all four years of her education.

Two of the students were Métis and only one of those students received financial support

through the Métis Nation. Three of the students reported that dwindling finances were a significant source of stress. One student mentioned that although she felt stretched at the midpoint of the practicum she took on an additional paid job.

I think the middle out of all my time in the practicum was the hardest. – at that point I just wanted to be out of school and I was getting to a point where I was getting broke again and I needed some money and I had to pick up another job outside of practicum.

So yeah, I was just stretching myself too thin you know (Ava).

Doing a fulltime practicum with a part-time job is difficult on the health. Sonya reported that she was in a similar position.

I could not believe that I still had another month and a half to go. And not knowing what that was going to look like because of the financial stress was difficult. You have to go and do your thing at practicum and classes and yet you're worried about money. It's just really difficult (Sonya).

Janice similarly reported that she pushed through without taking a break even though she felt exhausted. She said that she would have had a better experience and missed less days of her practicum to illness if she would have taken a break. Economics played a part in her decision to push through and finish.

Opposing Knowledge and Worldview

Some of the participants in this study noted that the knowledge that the practice concepts they learned in their course work (theory) was not practiced in the practicum site. The lack of articulation between the course work and practice contributed to confusion and frustration for one of the participants. Sonya said, “they have the risk decision model and all these policies and models that they follow that don't incorporate any anti-oppressive practice. In addition, Sonya

stated that the Indigenous approaches to social practice were difficult to practice at her practicum.

...there were a few things that came up that fit with the theory we learned in class but most of the time it was very sort of ... it was structured in a way that sort of attempted to follow anti- oppressive practice and integrating indigenous ways of knowing but that was all a façade because you would go in and the social workers are practicing in a total different way and it was really kind of confusing (Sonya).

Another student stated that she did not believe that the curriculum prepared her adequately to do the practicum. She believed that the school she attended was responsible for training her in specific MCFD policies and procedures.

Yeah, my practicum instructor was very good and she was very interested in learning from MCFD so I felt when we were in seminar she would call on me and another student who was doing his practicum at MCFD as well and that part was good but the actual program coordinator, no. And learning at school what I need to know for this practicum – No. (Ava).

Ava erroneously believed, as many students do, that the school is responsible for training her to be job ready.

Several of the students noted that they struggled with the Ministries approach to protecting children. They felt that Indigenous ways of knowing and working with children and families was absent from Aboriginal Services.

There were a lot of challenges for me in the practicum. For one thing, the practicum was protection, and so there were apprehensions and investigations. Although I do believe in

protecting Indigenous children, I do not always necessarily always agree with apprehension (Dawn).

Students mentioned that there was little room in the practicum for cultural practices. For example, Sara noted that, “if I wanted to bring some culture or tradition or a different way of approaching something the TL is actually shaming”. Opposition to the Ministries practices and procedures created emotional stress for most of the students. One student noted that she was surprised how difficult it would be to work within a system where the underlying practice philosophy was so different from her Indigenous practice.

I thought it would be a walk in the park ... I feel I have an advantage because I have been in the field for years. I have done all kinds of different things so I have come into contact with other systems. MCFD is no worse than any other system – the heart thing is what hurts. Because I have to stand on the other side and apply their policies and their standards and acts. And I just don't support them (Janice).

Most of the students also commented that they could not wait until the practicum was over. This is likely a common response by all students, Indigenous or not as the end of practicum usually signals the end of the degree and freedom.

The Supervisor is Key

The students' stories revealed the importance of the supervisor in the students' perception of having a good learning experience. Having a strong relationship with the supervisor reduced the student's spiritual, emotional, mental and physical stress. Three of five of the participants reported that the supervisor assigned to work with them was knowledgeable and supportive. One student reported that her supervisor was disinterested in supporting her and that she had minimal contact with him while another reported that her supervisor was emotionally abusive. The

students who were mentored by supportive supervisors reported learning more and feeling more comfortable in their practicum environment. Sonya noted that her supervisor created structure which was helpful.

My supervisor made me feel as comfortable as possible she would go over things and meet with me once a week to go over things. We would figure out some kind of structured timetable for me to follow. But, other staff members were reluctant to help me and take me out or give me work to do.... if I had another supervisor it could have been much worse (Sonya).

Alarmingly three of five of the students mentioned that they did not know who their supervisor was at the start of the practicum. They arrived at their practicum placement for the orientation and the office was still uncertain who would supervise the student. All three of these students were also informed by the supervisor or team leader that they did not want to take a student.

For example Janice said, the team leader did not want a practicum student, he was too busy. So then how does that feel – you don't want me here... the team leader told me he did not want a practicum student.

Sara and Dawn had similar stories. Sara said, "I was supposed to be mentored by someone and he said no I don't want to mentor anybody. So instead of having this discussed without me present, it was all discussed in front of me". Dawn similarly noted,

I came back to a supervisor who told me he did not want to supervise me and he basically told me I could do whatever I wanted. My supervisor, he basically only took me out with him when it was convenient for him to do so.

Dawn also mentioned that she knew that she would have had a better experience if she would have had a supervisor who was interested and involved in her learning process.

I know that some MCFD supervisors that actively debrief with the student and talk to them before and after. It really helps in the student's ability to learn and grow when they have an opportunity to communicate with the supervisor. I did not click well with my supervisor and I think my experience would have been better if I would have had a better relationship with my supervisor (Dawn).

It is difficult to avoid character conflicts between students and supervisors but when problems do arise it is possible to assign another supervisor to ensure the student is supported. The students in this study reported feeling somewhat anxious at the start of the practicum. That anxiety was compounded when supervisors were not invested in the learning process.

Power in the Student and Supervisor Relationship

Most of the students mentioned that they were uncomfortably aware of the power differential between themselves and the supervisor and other staff at the agency. Dawn stated, "...the power thing in the relationship. It is very know between those at the team leader level and the supervisor level ... you know your rank. It is very hierarchal and when you are a practicum student you are at the bottom". Two of five of the participants reported that they had a particularly difficult practicum and they both had uncomfortable relationships with their supervisors. One of the supervisors was not invested or available. The student paired with the unavailable supervisor struggled through the whole practicum and her holistic health was very compromised by the end of the practicum.

... Spiritually and emotionally I felt like I had dropped but the other parts of me pulled me through that part of my practicum and by the end of the practicum I just... I felt that my spirit was broken at that point. I did not care anymore.

Probably in the last 3 or 4 weeks it was just about getting the hours done and getting out of there (Dawn).

Sara reported that her supervisor used her power in inappropriate ways which created stressful situations for the student.

During my practicum my supervisor came up to me and she said were you sexually abused as a child? I said yes I was and then her next question was, if you are afraid of me how are you going to work with these clients (Sara).

In addition, the same student noted that she was subject to tokenism at her placement. At a team meeting the team leader insisted that she “*say a prayer*” at the start of the meeting. The student was insulted and she rightly refused because she felt she was being treated like a “token Indian”.

These experiences were difficult and traumatizing for the students involved. Sara noted that:

She actually scared me. She also did learning experiences that were very shaming. In front of the team she would say “do you know what standard such and such is”, and I was still learning the standards. I would say “no I don’t” and then she would say “well you should know and I am going to tell you”. She would put me on the spot, in front of our team she would say things like “you put our children at risk; you have not left them safe”. She would not give me an example but she would say this in front of the entire team... It was embarrassing and I felt incompetent. That is how she talked to me in front of everyone on the team. I was scared every day going to my practicum (Sara).

Sara’s story was particularly disturbing. She should not have been placed in a situation where her emotional and spiritual wellbeing was so compromised. I asked her why she did not contact her school to seek support. Sarah said “In my own insecurity, I felt incompetent and I did not want anybody to know. I was worried that if I complained too

much I might not pass the practicum”. Janice made a similar comment when I asked her whether she contacted the school for support when she felt herself struggling at the midpoint. Janice said, “I was being graded at school in terms of the practicum completion. I felt I had to be guarded because I was being tested to determine if I had the ability to do the work”. Janice said she would not have talked to her faculty liaison about the struggles she encountered because she was concerned it would affect her grade.

The Agency

Throughout the interviews it became apparent to me that some MCFD agencies are healthy environments for student learning, while others are not. Two of the students reported that they felt welcomed and supported by the staff at the agency where they completed their placement. Ava could not say enough about the friendly supportive environment that she had encountered.

Yes, the high point was that the people were really nice to me. I felt they were willing to train me and willing to test me. ... The staff was great very supportive, amazing.

They were there; somebody was there throughout the whole practicum whenever I needed them (Ava).

Even though Janice had struggled with the practice standards and underlying ideology at the Ministry she reported that the environment she had done her practicum in was a comfortable friendly learning environment. Janice said, “The actual working at MCFD was quite nice. The people were friendly and I could not say there was anything that was negative in terms of interaction “.

It really made a difference to the students to feel that they were welcome by the staff at the agency. In other agencies the students reported that the staffs were “*stressed out*” and “*unfriendly*”. Sonya reported that at her agency the staff was reluctant to engage with her.

The other people at the agency like the other staff (team leader for example) said a grand total of 10 words to me during my practicum. "...people were reluctant to help me and take me out or give me work to do. I would have to go around in the morning and ask people if they had any work for me to do and they would say no, come back later (Sonya).

Sonya noted that she felt uncomfortable about the staff's response to her. This student could sense the difficulties and stress that the staff were under at this agency and this also put her on edge.

...there was a lot of conflict and a lot of sadness. Within the whole agency I mean even among the staff. They were not happy, they were not laughing and joking and stuff they were very, very serious. Humour plays a huge role in my present job and I am glad (Sonya).

Humour is part of Indigenous approaches to work and life. Sonya also noted that there were a couple other Indigenous people in her work environment who did support her learning.

There was a couple of staff there who identified as Aboriginal and who were very supportive. They took me out on home visits and gave me work to do. There were others who did not acknowledge me more than saying good morning. They actually happened to be mostly non- indigenous staff (Sonya).

Several of the students noted that if there was an Indigenous social worker in the agency they migrated towards them. Similarly Sara noted that she felt drawn to the few Indigenous staff in her agency. Sara said, "...there were a couple Aboriginal people in our office and I tried to connect. It was really nice actually that that there was a couple of Aboriginal people in the office where I did my practicum". Dawn also mentioned that there were two people in her office that

were Indigenous who made her feel comfortable and who supported her in her practicum. She said, “There were two indigenous female social workers that worked in the office that I had a good relationship with”. There were no Indigenous people in Janice and Ava’s offices; however Janice said she would have been grateful if she would have had the opportunity to be mentored by Indigenous staff.

In one office two students noted that a social worker in a higher position at the agency put students at the agency in an uncomfortable position by inviting them into her office and quizzing them. She was interested in learning more about Indigenous approaches to child welfare and the curriculum they were learning at the school, but encounters with her always made the student feel uncomfortable and powerless. “She would put her head into our door and ask us questions and try to get information from us and stuff like that. That was kind of interesting because again feeling powerless not being able to tell her to leave or stuff like that”. Another student also noted that she felt she was being observed by someone in the office who had a higher position of authority than the team leader or the supervisor. She said “I was being watched clinically by somebody who should not have been watching those things and then I would hear things in the office about the work that I was doing so that made for an uncomfortable relationship”. Both students were made to feel uncomfortable by these persons in authority because they felt they were being singled out and treated differently just because they were Indigenous.

One student reported that when she tried to bring her culture into her work she was met with racist attitudes. Sara noted that, “In our office I experienced a bit of racism.... you have to do things the same way – there is no room to do things even a little bit differently”. Many of the students felt that they would have had a less stressful learning experience in an Indigenous

delegated agency. It was also noted that, in most cases a practicum at an Indigenous Child and Family Services agency would not have been possible due to their geographical location.

Self care, Culture & Support Networks Enhance Coping and Resiliency

All of the students struggled with holistic health issues but all of them graduated due to their own amazing courage and determination. Some of the consistent strategies for coping with the stress of the practicum that were mentioned were practicing self care, cultural practices and seeking out support networks. These themes were repeated by all of the study participants.

Self Care

Most of the participants mentioned that they were conscientious about maintaining their holistic health at the beginning of the practicum but as the practicum progressed their self – care routine diminished to a certain degree. All of the students reported that they exercised or spent time connecting with mother earth. Janice noted that she would take time to “sauna and do recreation- walking and that were probably the most important thing as well as smudging”. These activities supported her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Dawn walked daily and reached out to her family and other people she loved over the weekend. Ava took long walk and Sarah spent time on the weekends with her children. Sonya took time out for herself every day and spent time alone doing something she enjoyed. Sarah hiked with her family on the weekends and Janice went on long adventures into the bush with her partner to cope with the stress in the practicum. Both of the students incorporated physical exercise in nature to restore balance to their health. All the students said they tried to eat well, get enough exercise and sleep and engage in spiritual practices which helped them maintain their physical and spiritual health.

Cultural Practices

Many of the students in this study said that their connection to the earth and ceremony was a means of coping when the practicum became extremely stressful. A connection with culture was mentioned by most of the students as a means of rebalancing their spiritual health and enhancing their ability to cope with the stress of the practicum. Dawn and Ava mentioned that when the practicum got really stressful they would go to a quiet place near the water. Dawn said,

... spiritually I would go to a river or a beach and just sit there and listen to the water for an hour, or I would go for a walk in the mountains. If I knew that there were any cultural activities going on in the community I would participate (Dawn).

Ava similarly mentioned that she was drawn to the mountains and the water when she was having the most difficult moments in her practicum.

For my emotional and spiritual health – I think I feel very connected when I am in nature especially being around water cause that is one of my favourite places. It is so peaceful there and I can sit for forever and sometimes even in [the city] if I had a bad day I would drive to someplace in the river because I find it so peaceful (Ava).

Most of the students also mentioned that regular prayer and spiritual practices helped them to cope when the practicum became difficult and stressful. Smudging, brushing off ceremonies and sweats are all spiritual practices that were mentioned as ways that the students stayed healthy.

Support Networks

When asked how they coped with the practicum students commonly identified a variety of support systems as an important coping mechanism. As already mentioned, supportive supervisors and other Indigenous practitioners in the office were helpful in offsetting stress.

Students also said that having another student in the office and having supportive relationships with the school were helped them survive the practicum. A few of the students were fortunate enough to be assigned to an office where other students were also assigned. Peer support was highly rated by the students who had the opportunity to work with other students. This is what Sonya said about her experience.

I often talked to another practicum student in the office because she knew about what I was talking about because she could see it happening. She really took an understanding approach and I felt supported that way ... It was really supportive to have another student in the same office because when you go home at night you can't really talk to your family or your friends because they don't really understand. You need some one who is right there (Sonya).

Similarly Dawn said, "I had another student in the office with me that made things less difficult because I had someone to turn to every day". Ava also noted that, "there was another practicum student in my office. She did her practicum with me and we became really close. Our learning curves were very similar and we shared an office. ... A support system was critical". Peer support in some form was mentioned by most of the students as a helpful part of the students coping network.

In addition, all of the students also mentioned that support from the school and their Faculty Liaison had been important during the practicum. For example Dawn noted that she felt she could contact the school any time she needed support.

The school was supportive, if I had a problem I knew that all I had to do was call and even just make a meeting with my liaison and my supervisor and it would be hopefully be

resolved, or at least steps would be taken to resolve the problem. I felt very supported by the Liaison, Coordinator and other Indigenous instructors (Dawn).

The student participants in this study reported that practicum seminars were helpful way to debrief and discuss challenging practice issues. Ava noted that she found her practicum seminar to be helpful in the following passage. “Debriefing – both of my mentors and my instructor was really good and then we had the seminar at university as well which was a debriefing session and that was important”. All the students noted the importance of having someone they trusted to debrief with. A couple of the students did not feel comfortable with sharing their struggles with representatives from their schools. One of the students mentioned that she brought a lot of her struggles home with her and that her partner was her best support.

Janice said she was “drained” [spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically] ... except my husband was my rock. He was saying don’t let them get to you. ... Another part of it is how it impacts the family. I didn’t breach confidentiality but I would come home frustrated and tired and question self about how come I am this way are these people crazy. How can they think that way? There is lots of debriefing with your spouse (Janice).

Sarah reported that she had few people she trusted to debrief with and that was particularly distressing because her practicum story was so shocking. Considering my professional role as a Practicum Coordinator it was very difficult to hear Sara’s story but necessary.

Summary

In this chapter I presented the Indigenous women's experiences with holistic health during and immediately following their child protection practicum. I recounted the students' experiences using many direct quotes to show my reasoning for choosing the themes and honor the women for the courage they showed in sharing their troubling experiences. All of the students in this study reported that the practicum had been challenging and difficult.

The themes were presented on a Circle diagram to show their relationship to the questions that directed this study. To reiterate the questions directing this thesis were: How is the holistic health and wellness of Indigenous female students impacted during, and directly following, a government child protection practicum? The students' stories revealed that all the students experienced stress and challenges to their wellbeing during the practicum. The themes that were closely related to this question were named Feelings, Stress at the Mid-Point and the Supervisor is Key. All of these themes helped to illuminate the issues that contributed to stress and ill health. The final three themes, Self care, Culture and Support Networks were consistently mentioned by the participants as elements that helped the students cope and succeed in the placement. These themes helped to answer the final questions driving this research: What factors contribute to an Indigenous student's resiliency in a Child Welfare Specialization field placement. What tactics do Indigenous students employ to stay healthy and balanced during the practicum? For the most part, the student stories show that students are aware of the need to care for themselves while they engage in the practicum. There are a number of elements that make Indigenous female students more susceptible to stress which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: The Stories - Analysis

Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented the themes that emerged in the participants' stories and shared many direct quotes to make sure that the women's voices were a present in the chapter. In this chapter I turn to discuss how I feel the student stories inform educators and other interested parties. The arguments I make in this chapter are informed by the study participants, the literature, my personal educational experiences and my experiences as a Field Education Coordinator. Consistent with the literature on the health and wellbeing of frontline child protection workers, all five of the participants reported negative health as a result of stress. Socio-economic conditions resulting from colonization and patriarchy contributed to the pressure and unease that the women experienced. The study participants all shared that the role their supervisor played in their practicum was critical. Supportive supervisors who were enthusiastic about mentoring students were highly rated in this thesis. Cultural practices, careful attention to self care, and support networks were reported by the participants as a means of coping. As well, when students encountered racism at the practicum site they employed a number of tactical responses to get through the practicum including silence and speaking out.

In this chapter I discuss the women's stories and I relate the findings of this study to the Indigenous feminist, child welfare and field education literature reviewed earlier in this document. I argue that Indigenous students are more vulnerable to stress and ill health due to the historical social and cultural realities of Indigenous women's lives. As a consequence MCFD and Schools of Social Work need to work together to create positive supported child

welfare placements for Indigenous female students at Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies and MCFD.

Indigenous Student Vulnerability

The findings of this thesis indicate that Indigenous students are more vulnerable to stress in child welfare practicum settings. Strong emotions or feeling were mentioned by all the participants. A number of the field education articles reported that practicum students commonly experience a wide variety of feelings and emotions when they enter into their practicum environment (Barlow & Hall, 2007, 2003; Razack, 2001). As well, practicum students often report that they experience feelings of vulnerability when entering into social work practicum. Students are uncertain about what to expect and how they will perform in the unknown field of social work practice (Barlow & Hall, 2007).

Similar feelings of uncertainty and excitement were also reported by the participants in this study. The participants' stories, however, indicate that Indigenous women have unique reasons for experiencing an array of strong feelings when they enter government child welfare placements. These emotions translate into a greater vulnerability to stress and ill health in the practicum. All five of the students reported negative experiences with their holistic health during and immediately following the child welfare practicum. Consistent with the literature relating to Indigenous women, all of the Indigenous female students who participated in the study had families that had encountered stress and negativity in the child welfare system. All throughout history, encounters between Indigenous women and the state have been traumatic for Indigenous women, but this is particularly true of encounters between Indigenous women and the

child welfare system. Unfortunately the number of Indigenous children in care has grown to a chronic proportion in the past few decades. All of the students who participated in this study were well aware of the statistics regarding Indigenous children in care. Many of them noted that once they were inside the organization they felt limited in their ability to bring their cultural knowledge and worldview into their practice. This led to frustration and feelings of powerlessness for many of the study participants.

An important topic that emerged in the women's stories was their deep love for their own families, communities and nations. Realistically, the desire to work in an area that paid well was a motivating factor for the student participants, but so was their love for home communities and families. Barlow & Hall, (2007, p. 400) note that, "empathy is considered the basis of caregiving, and an essential aspect of social work practice". Indigenous women come to child welfare work with open hearts. They understand the damage that has been done to Indigenous communities due to oppressive racist policies and practices, and they hope to make a difference. Who could be a better fit for working with Indigenous children and families? We must be vigilant to ensure that these deeply felt emotions do not result in harmful practicum encounters.

Stress and Health

Many of the Indigenous students in this study reported that they had experienced significant stress due to financial struggles at the midpoint of the practicum. Only one of five student graduates interviewed qualified for Band funding. Two of the students were Métis and one of the Métis women had qualified for two years of funding in college through the Métis Nation of British Columbia, but she was cut off when she reached University. When students do qualify for Band funding it can be very helpful. However, educational funding is only available to

Indigenous women who are members of their Band registry. Consistent with an Indigenous feminist analysis, most of the students in this study had been dislocated due to child welfare practices or disenfranchised from their home community. The socio-economic realities that Indigenous women face definitely impacted the students in this study and created a greater vulnerability to stress and ill health.

If students do qualify for financial assistance from their home community they may still experience struggles with their Band during the practicum. Band Education Coordinators often threaten to rescind monthly living allowances when the student is involved in practicum. They mistakenly believe that the student does not require financial support when they are working outside of the university in practicum and this creates additional stress for Indigenous students. As a Field Education Coordinator working with Indigenous students, I often find myself advocating for students so their monthly allowances will not be discontinued while they are engaged in practicum. Practicum Coordinators must assume a supportive role and liaise with Bands on behalf of Indigenous practicum students.

The findings with regard to coping strategies and resiliency are backed up by peer reviewed literature which notes that culture, self care (especially exercise) and social supports are a buffer for the negative health outcomes associated with stress in Indigenous populations (Iwasaki, Bartlett & O'Neil, 2005; Iwasaki, Mackay & Mactavish, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2002). One of the students in this study mentioned that she would have liked to have connected with cultural activities but she did not have well established relationships within the local Indigenous community. She was just beginning to understand her history and identity as a Métis woman, and her experience is not uncommon. As a result of “historical oppression, Eurocentrism and racism” many Indigenous people are still learning about and creating their Indigenous identities

(Richardson, 2009, p.117). Indigenous students are often still learning about their Indigenous identity when they enter into their social work programs. This student struggled even further because her MCFD practicum supervisor made an assumption that she was an expert in Indigenous culture. It was particularly uncomfortable for her when she was asked to “say a prayer” in this context. Practicum supervisors should never assume that students are well versed in Indigenous culture just because they identify with their Nationhood. The lesson for me in this is that Practicum Coordinators need to make sure that Indigenous students do have connections to Indigenous mentors and cultural outlets while they are engaged in a Child Welfare Specialization practicum.

When the student participants encountered racism and cultural ignorance at the practicum site they employed a number of tactical responses as a means of protecting themselves. Barlow & Hall (2007) argue that students do respond to “power over” situations with resistance. In this thesis the student’s resistance took the form of silence during the practicum and speaking out about their experiences later through participation in this study. Two of five of the student participants noted that they feared that they would be isolated further, and branded as a troublemaker, if they spoke out about the oppressive practices they were witnessing. Rather than risk failing the practicum they chose to remain silent and “get the practicum over with”. This is consistent with the Field Education literature (Barlow & Hall, 2003; Razack, 2001) and it is extremely troubling. The aim of the social work practicum is that students thrive and learn in a supported environment. This disclosure by the students indicates that there is a need to re-evaluate the policies driving the child welfare specializations practicum.

The Role of the Supervisor - An Analysis of Power

The participants' stories reveal that the supervisor can make the difference between a very difficult, stressful practicum and one that is a good learning experience. This finding is consistent with the field education literature reviewed (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Giddings et al., 2004; Knight, 2000). In view of the historical relationship between the Ministry of Children and Families, and Indigenous communities, it is crucial that MCFD adopt a policy to ensure that students will be mentored by supervisors who have strong supervisory skills and the time to provide support through the orientation, middle and final phases of the placement.

In practicum placements students are often keenly aware that there is a power hierarchy within the agency and they are not at the top of the ladder (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Razack, 2001). The power hierarchy is especially pronounced in large mainstream organizations (Razack, 2001) such as the MCFD. In this study some of the students discussed their feelings of powerlessness in the practicum. One student reported a relationship with a supervisor who repeatedly demonstrated a "power over" orientation which was quite disturbing. Hackett & Marsland (1997) note that the supervisor holds a large degree of the power in a child protection student and agency supervisor relationship. The learning curve is great and there is an overwhelming amount of new information to take in and absorb. Supervisors possess knowledge that is critical for the students learning. Students are therefore heavily reliant on their supervisors for support and mentorship, which places supervisors in a tremendous position of power in the practicum relationship. As one of the research participants noted, "Students can feel stressed out because the team leader and supervisor have a lot of power and because of the structure of the practicum".

It is essential that the mentors who are chosen to supervise Indigenous students are capable of analysing and reflecting on their power in the practicum relationship. As Van Soest (1994) notes, we encourage students to examine power relations, but we don't ensure that practicum supervisors have the same vital skills. Ultimately Practicum Liaisons' from the various schools must create more opportunities for Indigenous CWS students to talk openly about the power differential at their placements. Practicum Coordinators need to collaborate with MCFD Regional Coordinators to create more opportunities for supervisory training in anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice frameworks. At the present time the work that takes place between MCFD supervisors and students in a practicum placement is largely invisible. To equal the balance of power, Practicum Coordinators must conduct exit interviews with Child Welfare Specializations students to give them an opportunity to have a voice. We can not continue to place Indigenous students in practicum placements where they may be emotionally and spiritually harmed.

In this study over half of the students were told that their supervisors were too busy to be an effective mentor. There is an expectation that MCFD supervisors will take students even if they do not have time in their schedule to provide the student with adequate supervision. In a large hierarchal organization, like MCFD, frontline workers often feel powerless to say "no" to someone who is more powerful than themselves (Walmsley, 2005). In this case supervisors must have felt powerless to let the Regional Coordinator know that they did not have the time or energy to support a practicum student. Instead of discussing their concerns with others in higher positions in the organization, the supervisor shared their feelings of frustration with the student. Two of five students did not know who their supervisor would be at the start of the practicum which left them feeling uncertain and anxious. Student's sense of belonging at the practicum site

was disrupted when supervisors let students know that they were not wanted. This confession by the MCFD supervisors set students up to have difficult practicum encounters.

Considering the important role that the supervisors play in the practicum, and the amount of information that students are expected to absorb, it seems ill advised not to match every student with a seasoned sensitive mentor. Some of the students in this thesis reported that their supervisor was amazing and helpful. Not everyone has the skills to teach and mentor students but those who do should be rewarded for the work they do. Supervisors who regularly supervise practicum students should have limited case loads and additional training that is provided by the schools and the MCFD. The people who really care about teaching and mentoring students need to be supported to ensure that they will continue to do this important work and not suffer exhaustion as a result of it.

Child Welfare Specialization Curriculum

A policy document between the schools, The Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, The Ministry of Education and MCFD entitled, "*Provincial Child Welfare/Protection Practicum Project Policy, Procedures, and Evaluation of Child Welfare /Child Protection Specialization Practicum for All Post Secondary Institutions in British Columbia*", outlines the procedures that should be followed by the schools and the Ministry when organizing a CWS practicum in BC. A quick look at this document reveals that there is no policy or procedure for placing Indigenous Child Welfare Specializations students in child welfare agencies in BC. Indigenous students are placed in a pool with all mainstream students with no regard for the special challenges they face. There is no procedural process outlined for placing Child Welfare Specialization students in delegated Indigenous Child and Family

Services agencies. The fourth year CWS practicum acts as a launching point for students into professional child welfare practice. At the present time there are no policies in place to ensure that Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies will receive a constant influx of practicum students from schools of child and youth care and schools of social work. Indigenous fully delegated agencies will continue to need more new BSW graduates to meet their staffing demands as Indigenous communities continue to assume control over their own child and family services. It is time to review this policy document and to ensure that the needs of Indigenous agencies and students are being considered.

Many of the students mentioned that they were faced with an overwhelming amount of learning in the first weeks of practicum that contributed to their stress. In this study the three of the students mentioned that the theory that they learned in class did not reflect practice in the field. Two of the students noted that practice did not reflect the anti-oppressive, anti-racist theory that they learned in their classrooms. One student mentioned that she did not learn what she needed for her practicum. It is important to note that when the Child Welfare Specialization was first created a Ministry training centre in Richmond BC was closed down, and pre-hire training was shifted to the Justice Institute of British Columbia. Prior to the start of the CWS, Ministry pre-hire training was six months and that was reduced to three weeks with the advent of the CWS. It was expected that the schools would provide the extra training that students need to be “job ready” (Susan Strega, 2009, Personal Communications). But Schools of Social work are also concerned with teaching critical thinking skills in addition to MCFD competencies, practice standards and managerial skills (Armitage et al, 2001). Some social work programs in British Columbia also integrate Indigenous knowledge and practice into the curriculum. There are some critical pieces in every social work CWS curriculum that are specific to MCFD, but the schools

are not training centres. The learning expectations of the schools and MCFD are clearly different and this disconnect may be adding to student stress. There students stories suggest that there is a need to do more research to find out how students view the articulation between Indigenous Child Welfare Specializations social work curriculum and CWS practice.

Summary

Field placements can be stressful at the best of times, but the student stories in this thesis indicate that Indigenous students are faced with unique challenges, which increase the level of stress during the CWS placement. The historical colonial relationship that Indigenous women have with government child protection services creates vulnerable to stress and ill health. Love played a part in the study participant's choice to enter into child welfare work. The incredible depth of feelings that Indigenous students have for Indigenous children and families make them ideal candidates for child welfare work. However, strong emotions and empathy also create a vulnerability to stress and ill health. The students who participated in this thesis experienced racism and oppression during their encounter with government child protection services. They adopted a number of tactical responses to oppression at the practicum site. Chief amongst those tactics was silence and speaking out. Students also mentioned that they practiced self care, engaged in cultural practices and sought out support systems to cope with the stress of the practicum.

The field education literature indicates that practicum students fare much better when they are paired with a supervisor who is knowledgeable and supportive. I believe that the students' stories show that the current system for matching students with MCFD supervisors should be re-evaluated to ensure that supervisors and students are consistently supported. Similarly, there is room

for more research to ensure that there is an articulation between social work coursework and MCFD pre-practicum expectations so that social work students will not be set up for a stressful encounter.

Chapter 7: Closing the Circle

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the significance of the research findings. In this chapter I discuss the recommendations that the study participants made to schools of social work, the Ministry of Child and Family Development and other students entering into child protection practicum. The findings of this study indicate that we need to work harder to ensure that Indigenous students are adequately supported during their practicum placements at MCFD. In this closing chapter I explore the implications of this study for Schools of Social Work and the Ministry of Child and Family Development. Limitations of this study are discussed as well as recommendations for future research. Ultimately we need to create more opportunities for Indigenous Child Welfare Specializations students in Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies. The government of British Columbia has an ethical obligation to support and fund initiatives that will strengthen Indigenous community's ability to assume jurisdiction over their own child welfare services and provide resources to strengthen Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies capacity to support practicum.

Student Recommendations

Recommendations to MCFD

The students in this study had an opportunity to make recommendations to schools of social work, the Ministry and future students. Some of the Students suggested that changes take place to the hiring policies at MCFD to ensure that there are opportunities for Indigenous students to work with Aboriginal service teams when they graduate. Indigenous practicum students are

often placed with MCFD Aboriginal Services Teams but there is no affirmative hiring policy to assure that Indigenous students can apply and work with Aboriginal services when they graduate. One student said, “I get frustrated because I did this training and I did not plan to work for the mainstream that is not what was intended. I want to help my own people”. The ultimate goal is for Indigenous people to assume jurisdiction for their own child and family services but in the meantime students must be given preferential hire on teams that work directly with Indigenous children and families.

Students thoughtfully challenged schools of social work and MCFD to work harder to ensure that students were supported throughout the placement. Dawn said, “I think that the MCFD Regional Coordinators should find supervisors who really want to supervise students”. This sentiment was also echoed by another student who had benefited from the strong support she had received from her supervisor. Sonya said, “My practicum supervisor did want to have a student and that was really helpful”. Students noted that the Ministry of Children and Families to transform their present system into a system that ensures that students receive the support and guidance they need. One student mentioned that MCFD needs to be sensitive about where the student wants to do their practicum. Ava noted that “I was emotionally not ready to go on an Aboriginal team yet, just because of what had happened to my family. I needed to ease into it and it could have shut me down”. The MCFD needs to continue to dialogue and develop relationships of trust with Indigenous child welfare specializations students so they can be sensitive to their feelings.

Recommendations to the Schools

A couple of the students recommended that schools of social work organize a mentorship program between CWS graduates and new practicum students. It is easier for students to talk about the struggles that they encounter with other students who have gone through a similar experience. In my capacity as Indigenous Field Education Coordinator for the Indigenous Specializations at the University of Victoria, I have already set up a mentorship program so that students can receive some support from other graduates who have gone through a protection practicum and know what it feels like to be there. This was a simple recommendation to put into place. I ask students as they are finishing if they are willing to talk to future Indigenous students before they enter into a protection placement. I have found that Indigenous students are more than happy to support each other in this context.

Two of the students also noted that it would have been helpful if the school would have created opportunities for the student to meet with respected community members and Elders. At the University of Victoria we now have an Elders Voices group who are available for students during the week at the campus. Other schools also have respected community members who support students. Some may say that it is not realistic to think that students to leave the demands of their practicum to meet with Indigenous mentors in the community on a regular basis. However, I believe we can build community teachings from Indigenous community meetings into Indigenous students. Similarly, students noted that they would like to spend some time at Indigenous delegated agencies to learn first hand how community approaches are integrated into practice. With some planning and flexibility on the part of MCFD supervisors, students could do some of their learning at Indigenous agencies. Creating opportunities for Indigenous students to

learn and be supported by other Indigenous mentors and professionals is something we need to strive towards in the future.

Recommendation to Future Students - Self care

Student participants also made a number of recommendations to future CWS practicum students. For example Dawn said “I would encourage students to maintain contact with family, friends and supportive professionals”. Sonya suggested that students find a way to take time off at the mid-point of the practicum. “In that mid-point week students should take some time for themselves. That was a mistake I made I should have taken some time for myself then”. All the students advised that students should pay attention to their self care throughout the practicum. Some of the students mentioned that they starting paying attention to their holistic health a full month before the practicum started. Sonya also noted that “students should seek support from the school because the school is there for students”. Students should definitely contact their schools for support when they are struggling with their practicum.

Implications for Social Work Pedagogy

Indigenous students and the Practicum Liaisons from the educational institutions may be reluctant to challenge practices that impact student health. Field Education Coordinators must work with Faculty Liaisons to ensure that they are prepared to provide an extra level of support to Indigenous students in MCFD placements. When asked what the school could do for students in protection placements one student noted, “*They need to make sure that there is some thought about the student’s support*”. It is critical that schools of social work build in extra supports for Indigenous students to ensure that they are successful in child welfare practicum.

The work that students do in their practicum is critical in preparing them for work as professional practitioners. Many of the students in this study stated that they would like to have had an opportunity to do some or all of their practicum experiences in Indigenous agencies. Protection work is always difficult but the Indigenous child welfare literature, and the students in this study suggest, there is some comfort in doing this work with others who share your worldview and approach to practice. As one of the participants asserted “the practicum was very stressful... it was the MCFD philosophy daily... maybe it would have been different if I would have done the practicum in a delegated authority”. Social work Practicum Coordinators and Faculty have an obligation to work with Indigenous delegated agencies to create collaborative relationships and future practicum opportunities.

Implications for MCFD Policies

Greater care needs to be taken to ensure that Indigenous students are matched with supportive supervisors in healthy MCFD offices. Indigenous female students are more vulnerable to stress and ill health than students from the general population because of the history that Indigenous people have had with child protection services in BC and all over Canada. MCFD needs to adopt a policy to match Indigenous practicum students with Indigenous supervisors where ever possible. Many of the Indigenous students in this study indicated that they would have preferred to be supervised by an Indigenous practitioner. In the Ministry of Children and Family Development document *Strong, Safe, and Supported A Commitment to BC's Children and Youth*, the Ministry states that “ Between January and March 2008 the Aboriginal MCFD staff doubled – increasing from 119 to 239” (2008:27). Still, in my experience as a Field Education Coordinator, the Indigenous students I have worked with have

never been matched with Indigenous supervisors in their MCFD practicum. MCFD has a policy of placing Indigenous students in the Aboriginal services offices, but there are usually only a few Indigenous people employed in those offices, if any. This is because there is no affirmative hiring policies to ensure that Indigenous graduates have an opportunity to apply for employment on Aboriginal services teams once they have completed their degree program. Due to union regulations, new Indigenous hires may not be assigned to Aboriginal Services offices. The priority should be to match Indigenous students with Indigenous mentors not necessarily Aboriginal Services offices.

At the present time the system for organizing student and supervisor practicum matches in BC does not ensure that students will have a good learning experience. Regional Coordinators inform offices that they will receive a student and often supervisors are notified that they must mentor a student even if they have an overwhelming case load. MCFD workers often do not have a choice about whether they will supervise practicum student. In addition there is no direct benefit to the supervisor for mentoring students. With this system in place supervisors may feel resentful and consider the student an extra burden. In this study three of five students learned that they were not wanted during the orientation phase of the practicum. This should never happen. This system does not work for Indigenous students and it does not work for MCFD supervisors. Ultimately it does not work for MCFD because when students do not have a good learning experience they are often not retained as future employees.

There is a need to create more funding opportunities for Indigenous students who are engaged in child welfare specialization field placements. There are often financial incentives available for students who want to do their final practicum at MCFD, or work at the agency after graduation. Government incentives must be created to support Indigenous students to do their

practicum in child and family services, whether the practicum takes place at MCFD or and Indigenous Child and Family Services agency.

Directions for Future Research

The significance of this study is that it began to explore the gap in the literature with regard to Indigenous social work field education but more research is needed to fully understand the way forward. The voices of Indigenous women must continue to be heard and there is a need for more research with Indigenous women in different social work practicum locations. There is also a need for research with Indigenous men involved in social work practicum. The students in this study noted that they would prefer mentorship from Indigenous agency supervisors, but Indigenous supervisors are not always available. In this study some of the students did report that they were well supported in their practicum by non-Indigenous supervisors and non-Indigenous Faculty Liaisons. Future research is needed to explore the relationships between non-Indigenous supervisors and Indigenous students to gain insight into what is needed for a successful learning experience. Additionally, some students mentioned that they felt burned out as a result of defending their worldview and culture in general social work classes. Their stories left me feeling some concern about Indigenous student's safety in social work classes. There is a need to explore this issue with research in the future.

Indigenous Practicum in Indigenous Agencies – The Way Forward

As mentioned earlier, the University of Victoria and the University of Northern British Columbia do have Indigenous Child Welfare Specialization programs. The University of Victoria started a First Nations Specialization when Child Welfare Specializations were first

introduced in this province. It was expected that the Indigenous CWS would grow to meet the needs of the Delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services agencies (BC Government, 2003). At the time, Indigenous social work CWS planners consulted with the Caring for First Nations Children Society to ensure that the program was not overlapping with the Society's training. They agreed to work collaboratively to organize Indigenous practicum between educational institutions and Indigenous delegated agencies (Jacquie Green, 2009, Personal Communications). Presently I attend bi-annual Provincial Child Welfare Specialization meetings. A representative from the Caring for First Nations also attends these meetings. We both agree that it is time to create a more organized system for placing Indigenous in Delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services (Linda Lucas, 2008, Personal Communications). The Caring for First Nations Children Society would welcome an opportunity to take on the role of developing a practicum matching system in the province but they would require a commitment from the MCFD to provide resources. At the present that commitment does not exist.

Some recent BC government reports recommend that government Indigenous communities attain complete jurisdiction over their own child and family services in British Columbia (Hughes, 2006; Office of the Provincial Health Officer, 2009). On the MCFD webpage the Ministry suggests that they will work collaboratively to assist Indigenous communities to attain jurisdiction of child and family services.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development supports and recognizes Aboriginal people to exercise jurisdiction in delivering their own child and family services. The Ministry is committed to working collaboratively to implement changes and new approaches to improve the care, safety and well-being of Aboriginal children and families (BC Government, 2009).

If the Ministry was really committed to supporting Indigenous students they would work with Caring for First Nations Children Society and the Indigenous CWS educators to create creative supported opportunities for Indigenous Child Welfare Specializations practicum students.

All of the participants in this study noted that their motivation for choosing a Child Welfare Specialization was to make a difference in Indigenous communities. It was a deeply felt love for their family, community and Nation that motivated students to enrol in the Child Welfare Specialization. Students noted that the approach to protecting Indigenous children within Aboriginal services does not flow from Indigenous ways of knowing. Students rightly shared that, for the most part, there is nothing Aboriginal about Aboriginal Services except the name. This reality was difficult for students because they were keen to work with their own people using methods that flow from their culture and traditions. Ultimately, we must all work harder to ensure that Indigenous students have opportunities to do their final Child Welfare Specialization practicum in Indigenous agencies. The provincial government must provide the resources that Indigenous agencies need to support practicum students in the future.

Closing Words

At the present time Indigenous students find that they must complete their child welfare practicum at the MCFD due to the shortage of opportunities in fully delegated Indigenous Child and Family Services Agencies. The findings of this thesis confirm that while some students reported positive experiences in their practicum, Indigenous female students do encounter racism and oppression during child welfare specializations field education experiences. Many of the students in this study reported that they employed a number of tactical responses to get through

the practicum. In the future we must improve the experience of the encounter so that students can focus on their learning rather than self protection.

Social justice in Indigenous communities in BC will not occur until Indigenous communities attain independence from the state and become self-determining. There is a strong will by many Indigenous women to assume jurisdiction of community child and family services and thus improve the experience of child welfare workers in the field and Indigenous families. At the present time government child welfare workers are, “94% White; 80% female; 97% with English as a primary language; 70% between the ages of twenty-six and forty-four and only 2 % Indigenous (Fallon, MacLaurin, Trocme & Felstiner study as cited in Strega & Carriere, 2009:19). Strega and Carriere (2009:19) note that “non-Aboriginal social workers often do not understand the depth of feelings and the impact that past historical policies and practices have had on First Nations people today”. It was clear in this thesis that the Indigenous female study participants understood the damage that racist child protection policies and practices have had on their community’s families and Nations. Indeed, it is love for family, community and Nation that drives Indigenous students to enter into the child welfare specialization field education encounter.

Epilogue

As this thesis comes to a close I find myself reflecting back to the participant interviews early last summer. I remember the strength and determination on the faces of the Indigenous women who participated in this research. I put my hands up to the students for the courage it took to share their stories. In 2003, I was the first Indigenous person in BC to graduate from an Indigenous Child Welfare Specialization. My personal encounter with a Ministry practicum

was difficult and I hoped that the participants' stories would not reflect the same struggle, but they did. My people believe that all things come around full circle and I now find myself in the position of placing students in Ministry practicum's' in BC. I am so grateful to the students who participated in this thesis. Their stories were heartbreaking but I needed to hear them. The students showed me that there is still a lot of work to do to create culturally safe child welfare field experiences.

The stories presented in this thesis provided me with new hope. I know that Indigenous women will continue to resist oppression because of their love for their children, families communities and nations. I want to end this thesis with a quote from Sara.

I want to hear the stories. I want to hear how important language is, and how important culture is, and how to reconnect with my own culture and share it with my children. I want to know about how to strengthen my community.

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APPENDIX A: Call for Participants



Call for Research Participants

I am writing to inform you about a research study I am conducting to fulfil the final requirements for my Master of Social Work Degree at the University of Victoria. I am a First Nations graduate student. My ancestry is Gitksan from the Gutginuxw House and the Fireweed Clan. With support from my thesis supervisor Jeannine Carriere, I am conducting a qualitative research study that seeks to enhance our understanding of the experiences of Indigenous social work students, within child welfare specialization practicum. I am seeking Métis, First Nations or Inuit social work students who have completed a fourth year child protection practicum at a Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) office in the past two years, through a social work baccalaureate program in British Columbia.

If you chose to participate in an interview, you will be asked to share your personal insights about the challenges and high points that you experienced while you were involved in the practicum. Specifically, I will ask you to share stories about how your holistic health was impacted during, and immediately following your fourth year social work practicum and the tools that you used to rebalance and remain healthy. The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours of your time, and it can take place at a location of your choice. An additional 2 hours of your time may be required to review the transcripts of your personal interview when they are completed and provide feedback about the accuracy of your words.

Indigenous women are the focus of this study because women so often take up caring occupations such as social work and child welfare practice. Presently there is a gap in the literature with regards to the lived experiences of Indigenous female students engaged in social work field education. One of the advantages of participating in this research is that you will have the opportunity to contribute to the creation of new knowledge. This work will generate knowledge that will inform social work educators who are working with Indigenous practicum students across Canada and elsewhere. Should you decide to participate you would be free to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. You will be given the opportunity to review and edit the transcripts from your interview, and to provide critical feedback on the initial research findings. For more information please contact me at my private telephone number 250. 721-8040 or by email aroc@uvic.ca.

All my Relations,
Cheryl Aro

APPENDIX B: Information Letter



Information Letter

Cheryl Aro MSW Candidate
University of Victoria
School of Social Work
Telephone: 250. 721-8040
Email: aroc@uvic.ca

Purpose:

I am a Graduate student at the University of Victoria and I have created this research project to fulfil the final requirements of my Master of Social Work degree. The purpose of this study is to provide (past) Indigenous students with the space to discuss and share their knowledge about field education in a child welfare context. The impact that child welfare field education has on the holistic health of students as well, as healthy support mechanisms, will be discussed and explored in this research project. I am confident that this study will uncover information that will be valuable to the Indigenous community and future practicum students.

Study Procedures:

As a part of this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview that will last approximately 1-2 hours long. You will be asked to share your information about your experiences in practicum in a child welfare setting. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed but I will only use a tape recorder if you agree to its usage. I will be taking notes during the interview but I will not use your name on any of my notes. Instead, I will use a pseudonym to identify your information. Once your interview has been transcribed, I will forward you a copy of the transcribed interview for your approval. At this time you will have an opportunity to edit any of the text that does not reflect your beliefs or intended contribution to the research. Your total time commitment to this research will likely be about 5 hours including the interview, and the time it takes to review the interview transcripts and provide feedback. Finally, your name will never be used in any public document.

Confidentiality:

All documents, tapes and transcripts will be kept strictly confidential. In addition, your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Information about this project will not be made public in any way that identifies the individual participants. The results from this study will be reported in a research thesis and an oral report during my thesis defence. As well, parts of this research may be used in a journal article in the future. It is the University of Victoria's policy that the transcripts and tapes from this research be securely stored for five years. After five years the transcripts will be destroyed.

Participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It may be discontinued at any time for any reason without explanation and the data will not be used. No negative repercussions shall result if participation is discontinued. Your stories will not be used in any document if you choose to discontinue your participation in the study.

I can be contacted any time at 250. 721-8040 or aroc@uvic.ca if you have any questions.

Thank you

Cheryl Aro

APPENDIX C: Participant Consent Form



Informed Consent Form

Research Title: Indigenous Social Work Student Experiences in the Child Welfare
Specialization: Exploring the Field Education Encounter

Conducted By: Cheryl Aro MSW Candidate
School of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria BC
Telephone: 250. 721-8040
Email: aroc@uvic.ca

Supervisor: Dr Jeannine Carriere
School of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria BC
Telephone: 250. 721-6452
Email: carriere@uvic.ca

The University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Office can be contacted by telephone at 250. 472-4545 or through email at ethics@uvic.ca

Participant Consent

Please circle your answers:

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| Have you read the Research Information Sheet? | Yes | No |
| Have you had an opportunity to discuss the research and ask questions? | Yes | No |
| Do you know what your story will be used for? | Yes | No |
| Has the researcher explained how your confidentiality will be protected? | Yes | No |
| Has the researcher explained how your personal information will be handled? | Yes | No |
| Do you understand that you can leave the study any time? | Yes | No |

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that you wish for a pseudonym to be used to protect your identity in any written reports. Your signature also indicates that you understand that this research for a graduate degree and as such will be used in a thesis, which is a public document.

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of the participant signing above

Signature of the Researcher

APPENDIX D:

Interview Guide

Hello:

Thank you for agreeing to share your 4th year social work field education story with me. In this research I am using a traditional Indigenous Oral History methodology. This means I will encourage you to share your story with me by asking some guiding questions. When I have finished transcribing your words I will attempt to summarize your story. I will send it to you for verification. You will have the opportunity to edit out anything that does not accurately reflect your thoughts or words. You may choose not to answer a specific question and that is completely acceptable. If you are feeling uncomfortable at any time we can discontinue the interview and schedule for another time. Please remember you can choose to withdraw from this research at any time without penalty.

Part I.

I would like to start with some general questions.

What school did you attend and when did you graduate?

What Indigenous group do you identify with?

Do you incorporate cultural teachings into your professional practice and your life?

Are you working in a child and family services agency now? If so are you working in an Indigenous agency or MCFD?

Is there anything at this point you would like to ask about the research or about the researcher?

I would like to know more about how you define holistic health. I will create a definition of this concept using all of the participant's responses and email it to you for your feedback and approval.

What does the term holistic health? Probes explored the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional definitions of health.

Part II.

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences doing a fourth year practicum at the Ministry for Child and Family Development.

I am really interested to hear about why you decided to enter into the Child Welfare Specialization.

How would you describe your holistic health prior to the fourth year practicum? Probing questions will ensure the participants consider spiritual, mental, emotional and physical parts of their health.

Did you have any expectations about the 4th year practicum before you started?

Tell me about your first few weeks in the practicum?

Can you tell me about your relationships with the staff at the agency? How about the people who accessed services?

What were the highpoints of the practicum for you?

What were the most challenging aspects of the practicum?

How did you cope with these challenges?

Can you tell me about how you practiced self care during your practicum?

How did you feel at the mid-point and end of the practicum?

Can you talk about your holistic health (mental, spiritual, emotional or physical) during these points in the practicum?

What issues contributed to your health status during and after the practicum?

If you had an opportunity to speak to other Indigenous social work students about staying healthy and balanced during the protection practicum what would you say?

Is there anything you think the schools of social work should consider when they are placing students in child protection placements?

Is there anything that I have missed that you would like to talk *about* with regard to your fourth year practicum?

Appendix E:

Delegation Matrix for BC Government Child Welfare Agencies

C3 Resource Development

Agencies with a C3 (Formerly Level 12) Delegation Enabling Agreements can provide the following services.

- Provide support services for families
- Voluntary care agreements for children including temporary in home care
- Special needs agreements, including those for children in care on no fixed term
- Resource development: foster home recruitment, home studies and approval

C4 Guardianship

Agencies with a C4 (Formerly Level 13) Delegation Enabling Agreements can provide the following services.

- All the services listed in C3 and
- Guardianship of continuing custody wards
- Development of comprehensive plans of care
- Legal documentation
- Permanency planning for children in care
- Preparation of older children for independence

C6 Full Child Protection

Agencies with a C6 (Formerly Level 15) Delegation Enabling Agreements can provide the following services.

- All the services listed for C3 and C4 and;
- Receive assess and as required investigate reports of abuse and neglect
- Decide the most appropriate course of action if a child is deemed in need of protection
- Where necessary, remove a child and place the child in care
- Obtain court orders or take other measures to ensure the ongoing safety and wellbeing of the child

Student/ Partial Delegation for Practicum in an Agency with Level 6 Delegation

- A short 3-4 day training that is usually taught by MCFD representatives
- Ensures competency with MCFD practice policies and procedures, child development and the Child Family and Community Services Act.

Provides students with the ability to take on more responsibility in the practicum

British Columbia Government. (2009b).