

The Connection Between Culture and Wellness for Indigenous Social Workers: How
Culturally-Grounded Practice Can Impact our Work with Children, Families and
Communities

by

Alysha Kerry Anne Brown
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2008

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

In the School of Social Work

© Alysha Kerry Anne Brown, 2019
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by
photocopying or other means, without permission of the author.

We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the
university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical
relationships with the land continue to this day.

The Connection Between Culture and Wellness for Indigenous Social Workers: How
Culturally-Grounded Practice can Impact our Work with Children, Families and
Communities

by

Alysha Kerry Anne Brown
Bachelor of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2008

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Robina Thomas, (School of Social Work)
Supervisor

Dr. Jeannine Carriere, (School of Social Work)
Committee Member

Abstract

Reflecting on my own experience as an Indigenous social worker, and a thorough literature review of mostly other Indigenous researchers, I addressed the following questions: What can wellness look like for Indigenous social workers? Does connection to culture contribute to wellness for Indigenous social workers practicing from an Indigenous way of being? And does this connection to culture impact my approach to practice and how? By exploring the literature, current policy and legislation, and social work practice in this province, I will discuss how I navigate my work and how I ensure that my practice continues to be grounded in traditional ways of being. In addition, recent shifts in policy, legislation and practice, urge us to practice in a way that honours traditional systems of decision-making, planning and caring for children within child welfare in BC. Given this, this research is timely. I will explore cultural and permanency planning for children and youth in care and how my own experience plays a vital role in how I approach this area of practice. I will discuss the integral role of culture in my life and how it keeps me grounded to continue walking alongside the Indigenous community in a good way. Ultimately, though, the foundation of this research is centered around wellness. Wellness for Indigenous social workers directly impacts the work we do, how we approach children and families, and our ability to continue doing the work in a good way.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv-v
Dedication.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Niya Nehiyaw Iskwew.....	5
Chapter Two: Knowledge-Keepers: Literature Review.....	11
2.1 The Power of Language and Words	
2.2 Indigenous Child Welfare Today: Current Challenges and Forward Movement	
2.3 Culturally-Grounded Practice	
2.4 Policy and Practice	
2.5 Indigenous Social Worker Wellness	
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	29
3.1 Participant Gathering	
3.2 Data Gathering: Auto-Ethnographical (Storytelling) Research	
3.3 Data Analysis: Qualitative Research and Meaning-Making	
3.4 Limitations	
3.5 Ethical Considerations and Protocol	
3.6 Reciprocity: Gifting	
Chapter Four: Wellness and Culture.....	45
4.1 Culture	
4.2 Wellness and Protective Factors	
Chapter Five: Kiyam: Walking Gently. Culture is a Protective Factor for Indigenous Social Workers.....	50
5.1 Physical Wellbeing	
5.2 Mental Wellbeing	
5.3 Emotional Wellbeing	
5.4 Spiritual Wellbeing	
5.5 Holding Space for Others in the Field	
Chapter Six: Kispêwêw Awasowin: She Defends Children. Culture is a Protective Factor for Children and Youth.....	63
6.1 Legislation, Policy and Practice	
6.2 Cultural Support for Indigenous Children and Youth in Care	
Chapter Seven: Wahkohtowin: We Are All Related. Culture is a Protective Factor for Families.....	71
7.1 Legislation, Policy and Practice	
7.2 The Significance of Traditional Care	
Chapter Eight: Kisâkihitin: You Are Loved By Me. Culture is a Protective Factor for Nations.....	79
8.1 Developing Respectful Relationships: The Benefits to Social Workers and Community	
8.2 Legislation, Policy and Practice	
8.3 Informal, Authentic, Roles in the Community	
Ekosi: Conclusion.....	88

References.....91
Appendices
 Appendix A.....98

Dedications

For all of the lost children, their families and communities, who are left with empty spaces in their hearts: past, present and future.

For my family, who have been so patient with me over the years as I work through my own disconnection.

And for my ancestors who have given me the strength to reconnect, to nurture my spirit and to find my way back.

Introduction

Social services in British Columbia are failing children and families and have been for quite some time, particularly within the field of Indigenous child welfare. Indigenous child welfare has been a popular topic of conversation within Canadian families, communities, academia, politics and the media, for the last several years. This is largely due to the inordinate number of Indigenous children and families involved in the child welfare system today and has us, as a broader society, starting to question the role of systemic racism and western standards of care. It is estimated that far more than half of the province of British Columbia's children-in-care are Indigenous (Representative for Children and Youth BC, 2013; Blackstock, 2015; Walmsley, 2005) and the number continues to increase. There has been a plethora of studies focusing on Indigenous child welfare, which critically analyze both historic and current systemic issues and address the importance of reclaiming traditional ways of caring for our children. Past research has typically focused on topics like traditional decision-making, safety planning and permanency planning for children and youth in the care of the provincial Director of Child Welfare (Sinclair & Carriere, 2015; Strega & Carriere, 2009).

However, the link between the social worker's own Indigenous identity and connection to culture has only briefly been explored in the literature, as it relates to wellness (Absolon, 2009; Baskin, 2016). Indigenous social workers often find ourselves caught between having to follow provincial standards, policy and legislation, while arriving to work every day trying to hold onto our traditional values and ways of being. It is like an intricate balance, while always upholding our children's wellbeing over anything else.

Over the past few years, I have embarked on my own journey of reclaiming identity and culture while working with Indigenous agencies: all the while being determined to discover that balance of wellness, practice that is rooted in culture, and policy-adherence. During this time, I have learned firsthand how to stay well in a field that contributes to high rates of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout (Baskin, 2016; RCYBC, 2015). I have also been given the opportunity to experience what it feels like to reconnect, nurture my own sense of belonging as an Indigenous person, and feed my spirit. This directly impacts not only my ability to continue to practice healthfully, but also to remain grounded in culture throughout my practice. I feel honoured and privileged to be able to share this journey and to have had so many opportunities to engage in cultural ceremony with Elders, to share stories of resiliency and to learn to sing and drum. I have found wellness as well as figured out how to stay well in a field that needs us, as Indigenous people, now more than ever. I will explore how this intricately weaves through my approach to social work practice and how it contributes to nurturing the cultural identities of Indigenous children-in-care.

Throughout this research process, I first explore how we have arrived in a state of crisis in Indigenous child welfare. I then dissect my own need as an Indigenous social worker to reconnect to culture and community and how this has influenced my wellness and practice. I focus on my relationship to my traditional drumming and singing group, for which I have had the privilege to be a part of for the last four years, and how this integrally relates to practice and my own well-being. Our group is called All Nations Strong Women for Education and Reconciliation, or ANSWER for short. It has allowed me to connect with other urban Indigenous women, some of whom I have known for

years throughout my time at the Victoria Native Friendship Center and other engagements in the urban community. All of these women are Indigenous and hold helping roles in this community. My engagement with this group has supported me to connect to my culture and ancestors as an urban Indigenous person. It has given me the confidence to participate in ceremony in a meaningful, life-changing way and has supported my own prioritization of inherent Indigenous rights within my practice as a social worker. This has been particularly impactful when we consider the inherent right to culture, language and familial connection of Indigenous children-in-care (UN, 2008; CFCSA, 2006; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

As the only subject of this research through storytelling and its overlap with autoethnography, I am privileged to have an insider voice: that of an Indigenous person as well as a practicing social worker in the field of Indigenous child welfare. I feel my story is relatable. As Indigenous social workers, we share many commonalities in our experiences both personally and professionally: similar struggles, acts of advocacy and commitment, and resiliency. Through utilizing anecdotal experience, and other research by mostly other Indigenous researchers, I hope to have answered the questions: What does wellness look like for Indigenous social workers? Does connection to culture contribute to wellness for Indigenous social workers practicing from an Indigenous way of being? Does this connection to culture impact our approach to practice and how? And how do we support Indigenous social workers to stay connected to their families, communities and cultures when that is what we expect of them in the field? I intended to deconstruct the current issues, where they have risen from, and how we can move towards better outcomes for both the Indigenous social worker, and the children and

families we work with. I interweaved literature throughout the telling of my story and have composed a song that will not only compliment this research, but will act as a form of reciprocity where anyone in any helping field can sing, if they need to reconnect to a ceremonial place.

For reference, the term “Indigenous” applies to status and non-status First Nations, Inuit and Metis; however, it is important to acknowledge here that the term “Aboriginal” is widely used, interchangeably, to describe Indigenous peoples particularly within governmental structures and will appear in this work from time to time. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and some Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) are responsible for administering child welfare services in this province. Child welfare is governed by legislation in BC known as the *Child, Family and Community Services Act*, or the *CFCSA*. While legislation is slowly evolving and arguably improving, there is also space for social workers to practice in a way that culturally supports families, honours tradition, and respects ancient laws that govern how we care for our children. In order to do so, I believe we need to consistently work on building our own cultural identities and connection to community.

Because this research involves telling my story, which will hopefully translate well to other Indigenous social workers, I am committed to making it accessible in language, format and distribution from beginning to end. Part of making this project accessible involves locating myself within the research.

Niya Nehiyaw Iskew: Self-Location

Many Indigenous researchers place themselves in the center of their research as it is commonly acknowledged that this is integral to an Indigenous research paradigm (Absolon, 2011; Absolon & Willett, 2005; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2008) believes that it is easier for knowledge to be understood if the researcher's location is made clear, particularly when the research draws on the researcher's knowledge. I am an Indigenous social worker: this is important as this is the location from which I tell my story. I am Swampy Cree from Grand Rapids (Misipawistik) Cree Nation in Manitoba on my mother's side and English on my father's side. Until I was in my late teens, I refused to acknowledge my Indigenous roots and always identified with the settler. This is a difficult thing to admit: the shame that I felt, that I believe all Indigenous people have carried at some point or another. Throughout the last decade, I have come to know that this was a direct result of internalized racism and assimilation tactics that continue to be present for our young people. This realization has helped to reduce the guilt that I felt during my undergraduate degree process where I struggled for years to accept my identity. It serves as a valuable reminder that, as social workers, we need to support our young people in navigating the complexities of identity and belonging, which is perhaps the very purpose of this work.

Throughout my childhood, my mother would put beaded moccasins on my feet and would sit me down against my will to braid my hair; my aunt would bring us to powwows and community events; my grandfather would yell "astum" and I would come because I knew better not to. At the same time, I was raised in middle-class urban settings in Ontario and internationally, before settling on Lekwungen territory when I was fifteen.

As a young child, maybe six or seven, I started to believe that I didn't have to identify with the Cree part of my identity and life would be easier. This seems to be a pattern amongst many of the youth with whom I work, as well. I could 'pass' and I would choose to do so for several years, moving through young adulthood thinking this was the only way to be successful. I resented my mom and her family because I wanted so badly to fit in to mainstream culture; it was admirable to dismiss those roots and identify as anything but Indigenous. I acknowledge the privilege that also comes with being able to pass as something else. This perception was validated by some of my family members who continue to struggle with their own identity as a result of adoption, assimilation and, most likely internalized racism. Child welfare has had a significant impact on my family and every family I know personally and professionally, which has added a layer of meaningfulness to my work.

When I think of my journey of becoming who I am at this moment in time, I think of the role of policy and oppression on all of our lives as Indigenous people. The experience of longing to belong is common (Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Carriere, 2007; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009) and sadly, is the root of many identity issues that Indigenous people face as a result of systems of oppression. These issues often take the form of addictions, mental health issues, gang involvement, etc. and these issues run rampant in our communities (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 2005). Four summers ago, I returned to my territory, or the territory that I am eligible for registration with, about five hours north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Although this is the land my ancestors occupied, my mother's biological family has been displaced for a very long time. By displaced, I mean, our family has moved away from our traditional territories for a

variety of reasons, contributing to a sense of disconnection from land, community and culture. As a result, what my maternal family considers to be home is all over Northern Manitoba: The Pas, Cormorant Lake, Thompson, and Lynn Lake.

It is such beautiful land and I cannot describe in words what I felt when I stood in the Saskatchewan River that flows, reliably, into Lake Winnipeg nearby. I listened intently to stories and any recollection anyone had about those who have passed on, or traditional ways of caring for children. I got up early and listened to the waves on the lake and the call of the loons, and stayed up late to witness the dance of the northern lights. These profound experiences that continue to keep me connected to this land, along with the stories of my maternal family inspired this research. I feel very privileged to have had this experience because, within my work, I am witness to far too many children who never have this same opportunity and the devastating impact that lack of cultural connection can have on children and youth.

When I explore the impact of child welfare on my family and my ancestors and the ancestors of my urban community, I know that this research is important. This research has the potential to inform how we prioritize culture for ourselves and for the children and families we work with. The struggles that myself, and seemingly most of my peers, are facing as young Indigenous adults are directly related to displacement and societal and systemic oppression. My peers and I are part of a generation of displacement and disconnection. Some of us are the children of parents and grandparents who moved away from their communities in an attempt to receive education and sometimes, in an attempt to assimilate. We have worked tirelessly to reclaim pieces of our story, our land, our culture and ourselves by seeking out and nurturing our sense of family and

community. There is a dichotomy that exists when I think about driving in a car in my moccasins and ribbon skirt to ceremony, which I will discuss throughout this project. It is like a melting pot of tradition and modernity and it is unique, powerful and beautiful. Cree knowledge-keeper, Doug Cuthand (2007), expresses that “there has [long] been a school of thought in the First Nations world that someday the old way of life would return” (p. 25). While we work to shift practice and walk in a culturally-grounded way, we are still young people trying to find our place. We are still social workers trying to navigate life for ourselves, our own children and families, and the children and families we work with.

I am privileged to be able to say that I have only worked for Indigenous teams in the social work field. I started my career almost twelve years ago as a Youth and Family Counsellor with a non-profit Indigenous organization, then moved on to child protection social work on an Aboriginal family service team, and finally, to a delegated Aboriginal agency as a guardianship social worker and presently, a team leader. There seems to be a collective goal among Indigenous helpers I have crossed paths with, to avoid contributing to any further generations of lost Indigenous children, born out of our own common experience. Supporting wellness for Indigenous social workers is imperative to creating better outcomes for children and youth in care, their families and communities. We cannot continue to function on exhaustion, disconnection and lack of supports as all of these contribute to practice that is careless at best. I am continually guided and impacted by my experiences within child protection and guardianship. These experiences working alongside Indigenous children and families for the last decade have led to an insatiable desire to contribute to better outcomes for Indigenous children and families within the

child welfare system. I refuse to settle with this norm that most children-in-care are Indigenous, or that those in-care continue to be faced with a lack of cultural support.

It seems so backwards to think that sibling groups are still being separated at alarming rates, or that Indigenous children are still being adopted by non-Indigenous parents without adequate cultural training, after a myriad of research confirming the inter-generational trauma that such practices cause (Blackstock, 2015; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009; Sinclair, 2016). It is ludicrous that children are placed in non-Indigenous homes sometimes hours away from their families because there is no other option. I firmly believe, there is always another option. This has become my passion and motivation within my practice to contribute to change: change that may inspire other workers to explore other options to mitigate risk, place children within family and community, and restore the integrity of our families within the child welfare system. I am hopeful that the research highlighted within the *Literature Review* will address some of the ways we can go about shifting practice, and the reasons why we have to.

The capacity of our communities and families has never been stronger (Anderson & Lawrence, 2003). And where extended family or community is deemed unhealthy, capacity almost always can be built in some creative way. There is strength in community to reclaim a traditional way of caring for children and to plan for children in an inclusive and collaborative way; this is notable when we consider the success of kinship-care programs that envelope a traditional way of caring for our own while adhering to provincial legislation around permanency (Carriere & Richardson, 2017). Research shows the need for systemic change around nurturing cultural and familial identities

particularly for Indigenous children-in-care, as well as an acknowledgment and fundamental shift in racial bias (Sinclair, 2016).

Having said all of this, Sinclair (2009) argues that practice with Indigenous communities is becoming more accountable over time, yet we have a lot more work to do. I am continually inspired by my work in a delegated Aboriginal agency. There is a shared commitment among the staff there to move forward in this field in a good way – to carry out child welfare services differently than previously done by mainstream government services. This starts with recognizing our cultural differences and honouring our own connection to family and culture. I am honoured to work with people who share a vision for our future generations. This commonality has helped to support this research endeavor in more ways than I can explain here but most importantly, it has allowed me to see how wellness can perpetuate itself, and how practice can organically shift, when we center culture in our lives. This is the very purpose of this thesis.

Knowledge Keepers: Literature Review

The Power of Language and Words

I want to take a moment here and talk about words, the Cree language and the deliberate choices I have made throughout this research. When I talk about wellness, I am referring to that sense of balance that comes with taking care of ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. In social work, and particularly within child welfare, this seems to be increasingly more difficult to achieve with workload demands, personal pressures and finding a way to work within the parameters of our jobs while trying to do the very best work we can with children and families. We often find ourselves impacted by the work we do long after we leave the office for the day. Linklater (2014) explores wellness as it relates to our position in Creation, care for ourselves and for our communities. Wellness, for social workers, often means finding a way to move through trauma and center ourselves so that the impact does not spill over into our personal lives and to ensure we can continue doing the work in a good way.

When I talk about culture, connectedness and reclaiming cultural identity, I am talking about elements of my own experiential journey. At the end of reading this thesis, I am hopeful that the reader will have a sense of what these terms mean on a deeper level that cannot, in my opinion, be summarized in a few words here. However, Graveline (1998) suggests culture is almost entirely environmental and “self-creat[ed] by the necessity to respond to given conditions” (p.20). For me, this speaks to how I had identified a need within my identity as an Indigenous person, and sought out elements of community and culture, creating what I needed. Graveline (1998) goes on to discuss the

pride attached to culture, and also how this translates into forms of resistance or resilience, which in my case, equates to wellness.

Culture connects us to our spirit, sense of belonging, our ancestors and ultimately, our ability to heal. This is evident in the increase of Indigenous healing modalities that explore identity development and belonging, within healing practices for and with Indigenous people (Linklater, 2014). Culture is therapy. Cree writer, Doug Cuthand (2007), explores our soul's connection to the land and how this deeply affects our sense of belonging to a culture; he goes on to discuss how language is intricately linked to who we are as Indigenous people, our creation stories and our sacred ceremonies. The effects of culture and belonging to a culture are infinite. Again, the topic is far too complex to attempt to explain in its entirety here, but these ideas hopefully describe a bit of a foundation for the sections to come.

Language is often seen as the foundation of culture: Words of Indigenous origin are unifying and connect groups of people to clan systems, places and the people that have come before them (Cuthand, 2007). Throughout my research journey, I have been attempting to learn the Cree language. This has been a significant part of reconnecting to my culture. I want to acknowledge that I'm still in the beginning stages of learning, and attending Cree language classes. These classes, and a quest to seek out Cree speakers, have helped me to build my sense of belonging in this urban community. I embrace a sense of excitement when I come across others from Northern Manitoba and feel particularly drawn to online resources that help support my learning (Apihtawikosisan, 2011; Smith, 2019; Nehiyaw Masinahikan, 2019; Ratt, 2016). These are the resources that I have used to compose the language parts of the song.

I apologize in advance to my Elders and ancestors if I make a mistake. I hesitated with the decision to include language within this research or in the song, for fear of being wrong or offending Cree speakers out there. But I have come to an understanding that it is better to try and fail at something than not to try at all, particularly given the facets of my journey of reconnecting with my culture that have come from a place of great courage. That fear of saying something wrong is ever present because of traditional protocols around correction. Many young people I have encountered have been too afraid to connect, and part of this decision is a feeling that the intricacies of following certain protocols are so overwhelming that they avoid connection to culture altogether. As long as the intention comes from a good place I believe we need to create space for people to learn, make mistakes, and come out unscathed. This especially includes our younger generations, particularly those who have experienced time in care, who are often disconnected from family, community and culture. I will probably make some mistakes along the way but I am excited to listen, learn and grow.

Indigenous Child Welfare Today: Current Challenges and Forward Movement

Throughout the twentieth century, a horrific systemic approach to assimilation was implemented in an attempt to extract Indigenous children from their families and communities, and move them into mainstream society. Child welfare policy played a significant role in this attempt. Residential school policies inflicted vast amounts of damage to Indigenous populations, much of which continues to perpetuate as violence and inter-generational trauma within communities today (Thomas, 2000; Blackstock, 2015). Some believe similar systemic and damaging approaches continue to exist within child welfare (Blackstock, 2015; Sinclair, 2009; Walmsley, 2005). In addition to the

residential school system, what has been known as the 60's Scoop formed a landscape of Indigenous child welfare that has been, and continues to be, immersed in trauma and mainstream standards of care (Anderson, 2000; Strega, 2005; Walmsley 2005). Current research continues to show disproportionate numbers of Indigenous children in government care both on and off reserve. Furthermore, the Public Health Agency of Canada released the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (2008) showing that Aboriginal children and families are involved with child welfare services at a rate of four times that of non-Aboriginal children. In 2018, it is reported that 63% of children-in-care in this province are Indigenous (RCYBC, 2018). This is massively disproportionate given that the most recent Census indicates Indigenous people make up only about 5% of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Given that these statistics continue to be hugely concerning, it is important for Indigenous social workers who have this lived experience, shared trauma and resiliency, to work with our people. This is particularly important when we consider that, based on my first-hand account of social work practice, most Indigenous children-in-care are placed with non-Indigenous caregivers, outside of their communities and separated from their families and cultures. Despite the implementation of new policy around out of care options, family placements and new funding opportunities to promote cultural connection, many of these children-in-care continue to suffer the losses of connection to family, community and culture (Feduniw, 2009; Carriere, 2010).

Today, we are left with the responsibility, as Indigenous social workers, to ensure we are doing everything we can to mitigate these abusive cycles for the children and families we are privileged to work alongside. Much of the research within the realm of

Indigenous social work that exists today suggests the importance of culture because connection to culture provides opportunities for community support, relationship-building, healing and, often, safety – which in turn can create a sense of belonging (Sinclair, 2009; Kirmayer, Tait & Simpson, 2009; Carriere, 2010; Thomas & Green, 2015; Hart, 2002). There are several studies on the importance of connection to family, culture and community for Indigenous children growing up in the foster care system, particularly when it comes to permanency plans like adoption (Sinclair & Carriere, 2015; De Finney & Di Tomasso, 2015; Carriere, 2010). These studies relate to how we practice as professionals; they inform how we approach our work, how we gather people together, how we integrate culture into our decision-making processes and how we mitigate safety in a culturally-appropriate way. We also know that the outcomes for children and youth in care are much better when they maintain their cultural identity and are supported to do so through cultural safety agreements, culturally appropriate services, and plans that involve family and community (Carriere, 2010).

Child protection mandates, policies and legislation have been under scrutiny in British Columbia over the last few decades. As a result of this, there have been some attempts by the province to shift practice to be guided by traditional teachings. For example, there has been more significant weight assigned to the importance of placement within family, community and culture through legislation, standards and the new Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework (MCFD, 2017). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) is a sound starting point when we, as social workers, consider child-safety within Indigenous communities. The Declaration states that we must recognize “*in particular* the right of indigenous families

and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child” (2008, p. 3).

As aforementioned, Indigenous authors have explored both historical and current issues within Indigenous child protection social work and how it continues to profoundly affect Indigenous families and communities (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Feduniw, 2009; Peacock, 2009, Anderson, 2000; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009; Baskin, 2011). There have been many published pieces of work addressing the importance of decolonizing social work practice in general. Some have gone as far as addressing the notion of re-traditionalizing practice (Baskin, 2011; Strega & Carriere, 2009; Hart, 2002; Linklater, 2014) as a means of addressing the disproportionate rates of removal and adoption of Indigenous children. This has largely been framed as it relates to intergenerational trauma caused by assimilation agendas like the residential school system and the 60’s Scoop. We are still dealing with the trauma caused by these systems today (Blackstock, 2015; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009).

The research on “why” and “how” we have come to this dire and colonized child welfare state, has been done and done very well. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) outlines its child welfare recommendations, or Calls to Action; these are based around the acknowledgment that intergenerational trauma within Indigenous communities is the very core of our child welfare issues today. The ongoing reports of the Representative for Children and Youth in BC, have also highlighted the need to shift many facets of social work practice in response to their research around Indigenous child welfare in this province (RCYBC, 2013 & 2018). The current and practical suggestions from these studies have varied from prioritizing the placement of

Indigenous children with family or in community, to cultural competency training for caregivers, to the implementation of elaborate Cultural Plans that follow Indigenous children-in-care (Bennett, 2015; Carriere, 2007; De Finney & Di Tomasso, 2015; Sinclair & Carriere, 2015). Many of these studies mentioned within this literature review, serve as major attempts to address the problematic loss of culture across generations within child welfare. Indigenous approaches to practice have also been researched and written about in terms of decolonizing western modalities and working with Indigenous families in culturally-appropriate, holistic ways (Baskin, 2011; Linklater, 2014; Thomas & Green, 2015; & Hart, 2009). But, what about the toll this takes on social workers who have experienced these losses firsthand? Are we more likely to experience the effects of vicarious trauma, or burnout? And, are we more likely to practice in a culturally-centered way if we ourselves are culturally-centered?

As Indigenous social workers, we are responsible for many children in care who are more often than not placed in non-Indigenous homes (Feduniw, 2009). I am privileged to work with children and youth after a continuing custody order is granted; this means that they have already experienced years of child welfare involvement before we work with them. Sometimes, they come to us with deep-rooted hatred for their families, communities and culture. Some of the children we work with do not identify as Indigenous or do not know where they are from, while others refuse to engage in cultural services that DAAs offer. While this is problematic for many reasons, there is also this constant theme of not having enough resources to support the legislation and policy that urges us to prioritize family-placements at the onset of removal, placements with

Indigenous caregivers, or cultural programming in general. Yet we are still mandated and rightly so, to prioritize placement within family, community and culture.

This expectation to “fix a broken system” sits with all Indigenous social workers at one point or another throughout our careers and can become a major source of frustration. It is a tall order for us to bear and often feels like a heavy and impossible task. It is a human responsibility to approach practice in a culturally-informed way, and one that is often overlooked by some non-Indigenous social workers who may not have that inherent value system that honours the strength and inter-connectedness of community. It is an inherent choice that is made in terms of approaching practice in a culturally-grounded way. But this choice also means working harder and longer hours, walking in a good way outside the office, committing to community events on weekends, and often sacrificing elements of our own wellness (Baskin, 2016).

As part of the Signs of Safety framework, Turnell (2004) explains that “the people who know most about building relationships in child protection practice are the service deliverers and service recipients” (p. 14). He argues that these relationships are the “heart and soul” of social work in the protection field and are necessary to overcome systemic problems within practice to build safety within families (2004, p.14). However, as inclusive as Turnell’s ideas are, they do not acknowledge the Indigenous ontology that holds up that way of being – the ontology that guides the practice of Indigenous social workers to build those relationships and ultimately, to support better outcomes. It also does not acknowledge the commitment that this type of work requires: the longer hours, the extra planning, the arduous note-taking, etc. and the effect these things have on social worker wellness. Combining self with the work is not a sign of poor boundaries, or

decreased work-life balance, especially when it comes to cultural connection. I will often find myself picking up a drum and singing to children who are having a really difficult time. It grounds us all. I remember sitting in a talking circle with a group of professionals and opening it with a song about calling children home. It's that reminder that we are all working towards a common goal: to ensure Indigenous children and their rights always remain at the center of our decision-making processes.

Retention of Indigenous workers within MCFD is bleak (RCYBC, 2015) and many cultural practices that are inherent to Indigenous workers cannot be easily translated to non-Indigenous social workers because of the disparity in worldviews, or values. The former Representative for Children and Youth, Mary-Ellen Turpell Lafond had made a significant recommendation to the province to recruit and retain higher numbers of Aboriginal staff (RCYBC, 2015); however, the results of this recommendation will likely not be noticeable for years to come. In the interim, all social workers working within the Indigenous community need to be given the tools necessary to approach families in a traditional and culturally-respectful way. But can we teach culture?

Culturally-Grounded Practice

It is agreed across the board that Indigenous families need specialized services to address their culturally-specific needs and the nurturing of ongoing connections to culture (Walmsley, 2005; Hart, 2002; Episkenew, 2009; Linklater, 2014). Carriere (2010) discusses the impacts of disconnect for Indigenous children who are adopted or who spend their formative years in-care, resulting in young adults who struggle with their identity and sense of belonging. She argues, though, that adoption is not necessarily a

negative experience but must include love, community and connection to land, culture and family of origin (2010). I firmly believe that this must be our approach as social workers from the moment we come into contact with family. We are not the experts – we are just facilitators in creating safety and support. Again, a tall order if this is not something we inherently practice in our day-to-day lives. Further, policy sometimes does not allow social workers to hold anyone accountable to adhere to these values. For example, there are openness agreements that speak to access to biological family members post-adoption, but these agreements are not legally-binding. Adoptive parents can agree in theory but there is no way for social workers to hold them accountable to following these agreements after an adoption is completed. So, even if social workers prioritize this in their practice, there is no guarantee that others will, particularly those with significant roles in ensuring inherent cultural rights of Indigenous children are consistently met.

Sinclair (2009) asserts that the loss of identity children experience when they are removed and displaced from family systems leads to much deeper and more complex societal issues. Many of our youth age out of the child welfare system at nineteen years, not prepared for what lies ahead of them and find themselves in violent relationships, homeless or in the throes of addiction or mental illness. We see this all the time in our work but it has also been the focus of a few reports released by the BC Representative for Children and Youth; for example “Relationships Matter for Youth Aging Out of Care” (2018) and “When Talk Trumped Service” (2013).

Often Indigenous social workers share these experiences: that loss of identity, belonging and connection to culture that negatively impacts our lives and is sometimes

the driving force behind our choice to become social workers in the first place. We often find ourselves immersed in mainstream society as social workers working within the context of colonial legislation, and trying to navigate a system that was never created to build identity, belonging or culture for the children and families we serve, let alone ourselves. I am speaking as an urban Indigenous social worker here, and this may look different for those practicing in land-based delegated agencies.

Policy and Practice

There are imminent amendments being made to the *CFCSA* that speak to a more autonomous approach to child welfare for Indigenous communities. These changes were born out of the concerns raised in Grand Chief Ed John's Report, "Indigenous Resilience, Connectedness and Reunification – From Root Causes to Root Solutions" (2016). They are very promising in terms of the potential to support kinship placements, self-determination, and have the potential to shift the trajectory of rates of Indigenous children-in-care. But critically, at the end of the day, we will still answer to a government and court system that are not our own, for those child welfare decisions that we need to make. We are still expected to make these changes within the confines of the resources that are provided by the province and decision makers in provincial office.

MCFD has indicated the proposed changes here, which in principle, have been agreed to (2018). The Ministry has already taken some steps to implement the following:

1. Enabling the routine involvement of Indigenous communities in child welfare matters prior to a child's removal
2. Supporting increased measures to keep children at home or in their community with the support and involvement of their Indigenous community
3. Ensuring Indigenous communities receive continued notification of legal proceedings impacting their children

4. Enabling greater information sharing between MCFD and Indigenous communities
5. Ensuring Indigenous communities are meaningfully involved in planning for their children in care
6. Enabling MCFD to refer child protection reports to an Indigenous government, if an Indigenous government has laws respecting child protection

The proposals align with the objectives of UNDRIP, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the Métis Nation Relationship Accord II. The proposed amendments are responsive to the following Grand Chief Ed John recommendations:

Recommendation 6 – MCFD to regularly provide a list of all their children who are under a custody order to each First Nation

Recommendation 8 – MCFD to take immediate action to ensure all Nation-to-Nation Partnership Protocols are implemented

Recommendation 9 – Components of each protocol agreement to include emphasis on rights of the child, and communities per UNDRIP; a joint commitment to alternative dispute resolution in advance of removal; jointly agreed-to-obligations and responsibilities, joint planning, monitoring and review and for periodic review

Recommendation 12 – MCFD commit to a more collaborative approach at the start of a child protection file, more access to information on a nation's children, a notice for each hearing and serve notices by fax and email

Recommendation 18 – MCFD to support further alternate dispute resolution processes

Recommendation 41 – Province to amend the CFCSA to strengthen children's rights and permanency planning and jointly develop permanency plans

Recommendation 44 – MCFD regional offices provide quarterly progress updates to indigenous communities on permanency plans for each child

Recommendation 50 – MCFD commit to legislative amendments in order to provide support for customary care

Recommendation 70 – The Province offer legislative support to indigenous communities that have developed, or are seeking to develop strong community-driven initiatives

Recommendation 71 - The Province amend the CFCSA to provide additional least disruptive measures (2018).

Further attempts have been recently made by our province to implement a framework known as the Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework that supports these recommendations. The framework gives context to working appropriately with Indigenous families, as well as circle teachings and the importance of implementing

family and culture into planning (MCFD, 2017). I have some critiques about this initiative though, in that proper training has not been done with social workers expected to use it and it doesn't seem to venture too far from some surface concepts. It calls for social workers to work in a way that may be foreign to them, which perhaps is a good start. However, without living that way day in and day out, I would imagine it would be difficult to practice that way. And without extensive historical context, cultural agility training, and training on the framework itself, it will likely end up on the proverbial shelf in social workers' offices.

The framework also fails to acknowledge that walking in such a way would not only positively impact practice, but would also likely contribute to social worker wellness. Further, it is impossible to implement the kind of suggested practice within the framework if caseloads continue to be as high as they are. There needs to be a commitment to Indigenous wellness at the provincial level to allow social workers to practice in the way that we need to. Having said all of this, it is certainly a start to a more culturally-grounded approach to practice; ten years ago, nothing like it existed.

Cyndy Baskin (2016) discusses the concept of cultural safety as it relates to our approach to practice and urges us to practice from a place that is rooted in an Indigenous worldview; she discusses that cultural competency is simply not enough. Logically we know that culturally-grounded work is influenced by the individual worker and their worldview and how much they prioritize connection to culture in their own lives. Social workers often call this "walking your talk". The research on how this worldview and connection to culture influences social worker wellness has also been explored but

mostly, without tangible examples or personal anecdotes. It is usually talked about in very general terms.

Linklater (2014) discusses how helpers in Indigenous communities are supported by their own healing journeys and outlines that “identity development and cultural healing has become vital in the movement for healthier Indigenous communities and nations” (p.87). Social workers, as dually accountable community members, need to be acknowledged here and supported to connect in any way we can. Cyndy Baskin delves into the causes of burnout within social work as a general profession and discusses the link between our own trauma and, often, the desire to be a social worker. This is a recipe for disaster if we are not able to take care of ourselves. However, Baskin (2016) goes on to discuss the role that ceremony can play in our holistic self-care plans.

Our work with families is always bound by provincial legislation but Delegated Aboriginal Agencies also work from the Aboriginal Operational Practice Standards and Indicators (AOPSI, 2005), which give realistic guidance on how to carry out the work of child welfare with culture at the center. Neither the legislation nor these standards speak to cultural connection for social workers, however they focus on the needs and rights of the child and expect the social workers to prioritize culture, regardless of their own connection to culture.

Indigenous Social Worker Wellness

I have noticed in my time as a social worker that burnout is among the leading causes for Indigenous social workers to leave their positions. This was also addressed in “The Thin Front Line” (RCYBC, 2015) when we consider the influence this has on practice within this province. It certainly was the reason I made the decision to leave

child protection. It can stem from a feeling of hopelessness, whether we are tired of ‘teaching’ non-Indigenous caregivers how to understand and commit to family and cultural connection, or we feel unsupported by non-Indigenous decision-makers, or we encounter the heavy burden of hundreds of years of colonial oppression within our jobs. I found myself burning out when I worked on an Aboriginal team for a non-Indigenous child welfare agency. I was unsupported, trying to do the work differently and being met with opposition and denial at what felt like every corner. As Indigenous social workers, we are at times expected to be teachers: to lead the way in decolonizing practice by explaining protocol, for example, or how to address certain issues in a culturally appropriate way. This is problematic for lots of reasons. We are expected to conduct investigations on families who are similar to our own. We are expected to follow non-Indigenous decision-making tools that rate our families’ faults on a numbered scale, and all in the presence of a majority of non-Indigenous social workers, supervisors, and managers. It can become too much, very fast.

Bride (2007) believes that roughly 15% of social workers experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder because of their practice experiences. My guess is, this rate would be higher for Indigenous workers. Baskin (2016) poses the question of the employer’s role in mitigating this issue and argues that if we are practicing from an Indigenous and holistic place, then management absolutely has a responsibility in addressing this. I will discuss later, some of the ways DAAs have implemented strategies to ensure their staff are kept well. This will mostly be focused on spiritual wellness and how this has also had a profound impact on my wellness and the way I practice within my agency.

Pragmatically speaking, trauma is linked to all of our learned coping mechanisms and can be a contributor to a lack of wellness. This can really impact our practice in ways we may not even be aware of. Dr. Gabor Mate (2004) has done extensive research on the concepts of trauma and how it is linked to almost every mental illness, addiction or health issue: basically, any decision we make for ourselves and how we respond to the world around us. This would especially be an important consideration for social workers who are responsible for making decisions for others. I attended a conference facilitated by Dr. Mate in 2018 and our drum group opened with a couple of songs and dances. He sat and drummed with us and told us that when he dies, he would like to come back as a drummer and a singer, recognizing the healing that organically happens at the drum (G. Mate, personal communication, May 26, 2018).

Kim Anderson (2000) talks at length about women's wellness, and women as traditional helpers in contributing to health and wellness in community. She argues the need to recover tradition while discarding the tendency to romanticize what this means. She discusses the impacts of displacement and how we, as urban Indigenous women, seek out other Indigenous community members, almost as if to say we long to create our own community wherever we are. Anderson (2000) further talks about how "as women reclaim and reconstruct their identities, they are better able to move out into the world and nurture others" (p. 233). I truly believe this is the foundation to maintaining wellness for Indigenous social workers walking alongside our communities, in healing, and is the foundation of my own healing journey.

Baskin (2016) describes spirituality as "wholeness, making meaning, and creating inner peace," that impacts our sense of self and our outer world, which in this case,

relates directly to practice (p.171). It intricately relies on a connection to land, and other people. It is safe to say that our spirits, as Indigenous social workers can be tested at times in this work and finding that sense of inner peace and mindful connection remains pertinent. I believe, too, that spirituality is broad and complex, and includes parts of ourselves that we do not talk about. I am certainly not the right person to delve into this too much, nor is it within the scope of this research. I want to highlight though, that how spirituality presents itself within each of us is very subjective and differs greatly between people. In *Strong Women's Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* (Eds. Anderson & Lawrence, 2003), Schwager describes native identity as “culture, tradition, language and values...[and] it is a feeling, an inner energy” (p.51). This feeling and inner energy is what I experience when I feel culturally grounded with my Indigenous brothers and sisters by my side, or any time I sit down at the drum or enter into ceremony. It builds my sense of identity and connection to spirit.

My best hope is to translate this feeling into words and hope that I explain how it contributes to my wellness and my social work practice. In terms of the actual practice of drumming and singing, there is an incredible article by Zainab Amadahy (2003), within this same book, that addresses the healing power and ceremony that happens when people engage in drumming and singing within community. Each time I am situated with my Indigenous sisters at the drum, I am in ceremony. Amadahy (2003) discusses how music, historically, has been a form of “communicating thoughts and feelings,” (p.145) which is arguably perhaps, similar to the foundations of counseling. She goes on to say that drumming and singing are forms of medicine (2003). Our drum group's Elder, a beautiful and wise Nuu-chah-nulth woman named Jessica Sault, will often refer to our voices,

dancing and regalia as medicine, the grandmother drum (known as Kokum) as our teacher, and the ancestors as our best source of guidance. The privilege of walking in ceremony lifts me up, every day, and my best hope in all of this is to show how this can improve wellness and approaches to practice for myself. I hope that it can translate well to benefit other Indigenous social workers in trying to figure out the balance between wellness, cultural safety and overall practice.

Methodology

“Methodology refers to the theory of how knowledge is gained” (Wilson, 2008, p. 34). Indigenous methodologies hold us accountable to where we have come from, where we are now, and acknowledge how these experiences affect our research (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009). Methodology is how we approach our research. This cannot be taught as it is almost existential to who we have come to be, unless we come to a place of awareness around needing to unpack our biases, unlearn, and relearn. We have no control over who we are or what might bias our responses to, say, child protection concerns but these experiences affect how we make meaning every day, which in turn, dictate how we practice and conduct research. For example, social workers have a certain methodology that formulates how we assess risk for children: how we make meaning of what is going on within family systems and how we make decisions from there.

As aforementioned, I have never lived on-reserve or near my territory. I identify as an urban Cree woman, and have found and formed community for myself within these urban centers, with other urban peoples. Linklater (2014) describes the Indigenous worldview as evolving and argues that it has “expanded to include the more recent experiences, particularly those that arose from the colonial experience” (p. 28). Not unlike generations that came before me, my generation is a product of colonization: a significant number of my peers have parents who were adopted or raised in care, parents and grandparents who went through residential schools, parents who moved to cities to get educated or to provide “better lives” for their children, and parents and grandparents who have walked with such a heavy burden of shame, guilt and oppression.

There have been times throughout my journey that I have realized that my sense of dislocation and disconnect is actually very common among Indigenous people of my generation. The urban Indigenous community, which I belong to, consists mostly of those with mixed-ancestry, some of whom are more connected than others. This has normalized my experience as urban and somewhat disconnected and for that, I am grateful. I am eligible for registration but I'm not registered because of poorly written documentation and a system of oppression that has made it too difficult. I have come to prefer this because of what the Indian Act really signifies: a government system imposed to tear apart rather than build up senses of unity, identity and community. I have had to navigate systems of oppression but I still persevere and am learning more and more about my Nehiyaw heritage each day. This willful journey is motivated by my sense of disconnection and a desire for better outcomes, not only for myself but for all Indigenous children and families and future generations. I recognize that I am not alone in my experience.

My experience informs my passion and my biases throughout this research journey and will affect how I make meaning of my experience. Kovach (2009) discusses how so much research is based on interpretation of information, or making meaning, and as an Indigenous researcher, my meaning-making has to be able to translate to the non-Indigenous community as well. As Indigenous people, we assume inter-generational trauma because it is all we know, yet the non-Indigenous researcher or social worker beside us may not have that same lens. I am conscious of this moving forward with this topic. The research questions how connection to culture informs my social work practice as an Indigenous social worker, how it helps me to approach the work in a more critical

and culturally-responsive way, and how culture can help us as Indigenous social workers to navigate a system that is often too personal given our collective history.

An Indigenous methodology is pertinent to these questions. The research questions rely on my beliefs as a Cree person, the traditional values I hold as well as the values I hold as an urban Indigenous person, and how that can impact my engagement in Indigenous child welfare moving forward. I plan to tell my story using a storytelling method, linking my story to existing literature regarding culture as its own method of healing, and the importance of culture and connectedness in our work with Indigenous children and families. This will be explained more in the *Data Gathering* subsection later.

Participant Gathering

After working in the urban Indigenous community of Victoria BC for the better part of the last decade in both voluntary and mandated social work roles, I have developed long-lasting and meaningful relationships within this community. I have become frustrated with the child welfare system as it is now, while remaining hopeful that statistics can change with better practice. As a non-profit and voluntary service worker, I felt under-consulted, undermined and uninvolved in decisions relating to child safety and this seems to be a common perception. I carry these experiences, while also carrying the experience of a child protection social worker on an Aboriginal team with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. This experience was challenging as I was one of only two Indigenous social workers.

I currently work as a team leader for a Delegated Aboriginal Agency providing guardianship services to urban Indigenous children and youth in the continuing care of

the Provincial Director of Child Welfare. The last ten years have afforded me the ability to feel balance in my social work experience: the idea that I have done fully, partially and non-delegated social work practice, all within the urban Indigenous community in Victoria, British Columbia. I considered having more research participants but at the end of the day, my varied experience lends a voice that is rounded and inclusive. Much of the research relates to my participation in drum group; the decision to not involve the voices of other members of the group was born out of problematizing research within a small, established group, with participants that are well known to the urban community. Including their voices had the potential to limit what was shared and protecting anonymity would be next to impossible. I believe my voice to be valuable in translating to the broader community of Indigenous social workers as I believe it is reflective of the experiences of many Indigenous social workers, particularly those working under child welfare legislation and policy in this province.

Further, this research focuses on wellness and culture, which of course is interconnected with practice in many ways, but is also quite subjective and broad and can be applied to anyone working with Indigenous children and families. The nature of this research allows it to be more generalized than, say, research that focuses on particular elements of policy or practice.

Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson (2002) discuss the importance of sampling within qualitative approaches to reflect the voices of those “who can best inform the study” (p. 726). I believe my voice reflects someone who could inform this study as I have direct, lived experience as both a displaced Indigenous person and also as an Indigenous social worker within the complex field of child welfare. The story I tell

and what I have come to know can be used by other Indigenous social workers. However, I need to acknowledge that using only my voice presents a limit to the broader applicability of this study. I only carry my worldview as an urban Cree and English, cis-gendered, heterosexual, woman. The same ceremonial connection and cultural needs would likely look very different to a social worker from a Coast Salish nation, for example (see *Limitations*).

My goal is to reflect on the last few years of my life as it related to this organic and inherent need to connect with other Indigenous healers in the urban community, seek out cultural opportunities and learn to sing and drum. I have performed, journaled, debriefed and created works of art and regalia and I will continue to do so. My best hope is to be able to show that cultural connection for Indigenous social workers is imperative to their health and wellbeing as they navigate the system of oppression in child welfare that affects both our personal and professional health on a daily basis. I address the spiritual connection that we need to continue to honour as part of our work. We cannot forget who we are, where we come from, or the spirituality associated with being born Indigenous. If we do, we become just like the rest of the province in their approaches to child welfare – and the cycle continues.

An esteemed Elder in the community once advised me that when I receive a report, to go in to the home and relate to the family as if they were my own nieces and nephews. I don't believe in the eleven years I have been doing this work, or in the four years in which I completed my degree, that anyone ever gave me more solid advice about Indigenous social work practice.

Data Gathering: Auto-Ethnographical (Storytelling) Research

“Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience” (Adams et. al, 2015, p.1). Using this method, I was both the researcher and the researched. Indigenous researchers often relate more to storytelling and the terms are used somewhat interchangeably here. I hesitate to call it autoethnographic research as I was born a storyteller, with ancestors who exclusively related to others and the world through oral tradition. I started this research by journaling with a focus on autoethnography as a broader way of analyzing and presenting information. I soon realized that storytelling was more suited to this research, while I took note of poignant examples of my experience, conversations with others, and interactions with the community. Robina Thomas (2005) highlights this innate way of being as it “played an essential role in nurturing and educating First Nations children,” in particular (p. 237). It is intentional and purposeful and is a traditional means of exploring a particular topic as a teaching tool. Ultimately, I will explore how culture and connection to spirit have impacted my wellness as an Indigenous social worker and how it informs my approach to practice, which in turn may be used as a tool for learning. Given this, the story that I tell here is targeted, specific, and is based on my experiences in the world. It is presented in a conversational way: as though I am speaking with, or telling a story to, the reader.

This is my story and my best hope is that even one social worker out there will read it, and seek out the innate support of their culture or community as a result. As a form of giving back to the community, I am composing a song for any Indigenous social worker to be able to sing as they continue on their healing journeys. My intention is to

perform this song as part of the conclusion of my thesis. The research topics are bundled into themes around culture as a protective factor for social worker (or self), children, families and nations. I will begin each theme by introducing the verse of the song I have composed that relates to that theme. I will then discuss facets of policy, legislation and practice, as well as my own stories for each, and how connection to culture is the foundation of any type of shift in practice.

Fraser (2009) asserts the importance of acknowledging the researcher's own "investment" in the topic (p.184). This is a pertinent part of this research because the political landscape of child welfare in Victoria is very contentious. In addition to this, I hold a leadership role in a Delegated Aboriginal Agency. The practice of DAAs is scrutinized now more than ever, as we start to explore full delegation more and more across the province. I do believe, however, that there are less political implications now that government and community agencies are starting to work together to implement cultural agility training, for example. There seems to be a common understanding that culture is imperative not only for the children and families with whom we work, but also in the workplace, with recruitment strategies and the implementation of new policy. With the recent development of the Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework (2017) within MCFD, this research is timely. I have a particular investment in this topic due to my leadership role both among provincial officials and my own team at a DAA. My investment extends to a passion for creating better outcomes for Indigenous children and youth in care. Given the history of child welfare, Indigenous families deserve practice that is rooted in culture and traditional ways of being. Our children's wellbeing has always been a priority and as such, I will continue to advocate for opportunities to build

capacity in the field: capacity for social workers to practice in a way that is rooted in culture and traditional ways of being.

Fraser (2009) discusses a qualitative narrative approach to research as one that is fluid, and not attached to any outcome: open to contradictions to what is anticipated. A narrative, which includes storytelling, creates space and opportunity for natural experiences to be explored, analyzed and communicated. This seems the most organic way to gather information. As Indigenous people, we are taught from a young age to speak from the heart and that is what I try to do here, by recording personal anecdotes of how I feel after engaging in cultural ceremony and how this translates to social work practice. Most of this ceremony will be centered around my involvement with my drum group; every time I sit at the drum, this is considered ceremony and continues to be a profound influence on my wellness and social work practice. It continuously serves as a reminder that our children-in-care have an inherent right to their culture and interchangeably, their wellness. Storytelling is a means of collecting this information, interpreting its meaning, and passing it on to others. This method will be interweaved with literature supporting the topic, as well as research that may challenge the notion. Funding opportunities and programs for Indigenous communities are limited and it could be argued that supporting connection to culture is not a priority for the province. All of this comes with its own set of ethical considerations, which I will address later.

Data Analysis: Qualitative Research and Making Meaning

Potts & Brown (2005) problematize researcher-led data-analysis and the power imbalance this inherently creates: who has the privilege to make meaning? In this case, I am both the researcher and the researched so there really is no power imbalance there. I

look for commonalities among journal entries, and relate these themes to my ability to manage stress overall and noting how my practice continues to shift. I have taken note of how I cope with balancing this research, a full-time social work position in leadership and my connection to culture and wellness. I explore what works and what does not, consistently reflecting on that connection between ceremony and social work. I write about recurring themes as they relate to my own wellness and how they inherently impact practice. And ultimately, I tell my story and interject with what has already been written or told by esteemed Indigenous authors and allies alike.

Delbert Majore (2013) examines his research using a medicine wheel approach where self, family, community and nation are all integrally connected to everything else within his research journey. I have used pieces of this approach to ensure I am being held accountable to where I come from, who I am working for, and how I continue to be guided by many forces including those who have come before me. I found this approach to be very relatable and I have used the foundations of it, when addressing broader themes outlined later on. These are presented in this work as protective factors for self, children, families and community, which are very much interwoven. This approach encompasses an Indigenous and holistic framework to both research and social work practice. It seems to have had more of an impact on how I present knowledge in this work than I had initially expected, particularly when it came to honouring my community, mentors, ancestors, and experiences. I am mindful of remaining accountable as I move forward in this research, acknowledging that what I say here can affect those who are important to me.

Limitations

There are several limitations I have become increasingly aware of throughout this research process. Any research done that relates to personal inquiry or a narrative approach can be criticized by those used to more western or scientific, academic, methodologies. But, some work has been done in recent years to counteract this view (Thomas, 2005; Archibald, 2008). The most significant limitation for this research is the fact that only my voice is being captured. Having said this, I am constantly being informed by conversations with others, and by interacting in the world. I am always being guided by my ancestors and am constantly reminded that I am intricately interconnected with those who I have crossed paths with, particularly in my field, making this work a culmination of knowledge informed by many. I am truly grateful for the work I am able to do in this community. The Indigenous children and families I have the privilege of working with have given me the passion to engage in this thesis, as well as to continue my work in the social work field. Remaining in this field and honoring those interconnections has also allowed me to reflect on the importance of culture in my own life. This web is vast and I am so grateful.

Wilson (2008) describes this web of relationships as imperative to Indigenous research, as well as the accountability that comes along with this. The knowledge that I carry comes from years of learning from others, from my own mistakes, and from seemingly ordinary conversations with others. Adams et. al (2015) discuss the importance of these every day, mindful, conversations and how they influence autoethnographical work; they encourage taking field notes which I have done as part of a journal. As Indigenous people, our knowledge is not just our own. I am humbled and privileged to walk alongside some incredible knowledge-keepers and teachers, Elders and

peer helpers. They will have an inordinate impact on this work and for that, I am forever grateful. It is almost like I am a conduit of information and the telling of the story is my interpretation of information I have gathered along the way and of the world around me.

Storytelling is often challenged as a legitimate form of research to the extent that some scholars refuse to even evaluate it (Adams et. al, 2015). The concern seems to mostly stem from how narrow in scope one person's story can be, written from one perspective with little acknowledgment that each one of us is informed by other people, communities and cultures, every day. This is particularly true of social workers. I plan to challenge this notion of limited perspective by presenting alternative truths throughout, as well as the ideas and research of others. Storytelling is a highly personal form of research and it is important to approach it this way including the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual contexts. For example, the presence of my ancestors in the sweatlodge is a very real experience and one that continues to inform my connection to the spirit world. I am consistently mindful to move forward with genuineness, integrity and the ability to speak from the heart.

In addition, the ability to be critical of and vulnerable to myself and the work of others, is a powerful way to examine and present knowledge. Dr. Robina Thomas (2000) challenges the notion of invalidity or bias in storytelling by indicating that "First Nations people come from an oral society" (p.21). She reminds us that storytelling honours our ancestors, our traditional ways of knowing and being, and challenges the idea that this type of research is not worthy of an equal position in academia. When we consider that oral tradition was often the only form of record-keeping our communities had prior to contact, stories are arguably of utmost importance for Indigenous communities. When we

consider walking in an Indigenous worldview, how can research done in this way not be valid?

Kimpson (2005) warns to move forward with mindfulness as a participant in the cultures we study. I do acknowledge some of the privilege that comes along with being exposed to culture and ceremony as a displaced person, but also as a person who visibly looks Indigenous. I also know that one does not have to look far to find opportunities to become immersed in culture, at least in this city: I will discuss this further within the project itself. Another limitation that exists includes the possibility for misinterpretation when this type of research is so personal, while still very much relying on my participation in group settings: as a social worker on a team, or as a singer within a drum group, or as a displaced person in a community. Wilson (2008) writes about this as being potentially problematic but also highlights the benefits of this type of research on strengthening relationships too. We may not always agree but as long as we are open to conversations, we enter into a realm of respectful engagement. I am also Cree and not from this territory. At risk of presenting in a pan-Indigenous way, I am hopeful that the research will have a broader application to any type of social worker, and to any type of connection to culture, ceremony and spirituality. I have several cultural mentors from across Canada but I will mostly be drawing on the teachings from my local knowledge-keepers and those I consider to be family members. The process of gathering for drum group is very informed by our Nuu-chah-nulth Elder, Jessica Sault, as well.

Ethical Considerations and Protocol

In consultation with Absolon, when discussing Indigenous methodology, Kovach (2009) claims that participants' stories are "powerful, and their sacredness must be

respected” (p. 155). She continues by addressing the need to consult local protocols and ways of conducting business in order to practice ethical Indigenous research (2009). Agencies have their own protocols and policies around sharing information for the purpose of research initiatives. Because I am writing from a personal place as an Indigenous social worker and not as a social worker attached to a specific agency, this separates me from any accountability to a governing body. This separation allows me to share more candid information based on personal experience, rather than having it based on my employment. While the intention continues to be centered on sharing my story to hopefully support other Indigenous social workers in the process, I move through some of my more critical thoughts with mindfulness. The Indigenous community in Victoria is very small and the Indigenous child welfare community, smaller yet. I am committed to approaching practice questions or critiques from a good place, and am always conscientious of language, that my intentions are not to harm anyone, and that I do this work from a place of respect and humility.

I would also acknowledge that narrative research and the essence of storytelling research is personal in nature and will namely include the voice of the researcher. Researchers cannot remove themselves or remain objective from the writing of their own stories, nor the meaning-making (Absolon, 2011) and that is what makes the process so unique. Having said all of this, the Executive Director of my DAA is very much aware of this research and supports it wholeheartedly. Further, I am honoured to be supervised and guided throughout this whole process by my thesis supervisor, Dr. Robina Thomas and my committee member, Dr. Jeannine Carriere, who both have extensive research experience within Indigenous communities and specifically with storytelling methods.

The most significant ethical weight I carry with this research is around ownership and my place in telling my story, or discussing how anyone else has impacted my story. This is because my story is probably very similar to the stories of others. My intention is never to assume that all Indigenous social workers deal with the same issues, while I acknowledge that maybe there are some common themes or experiences. I have struggled with the idea that it is not my place to talk about tradition, culture and language. I struggle because I feel like someone could do a much better job than I can. I am constantly humbled by these feelings of unworthiness. At the end of the day, I have realized though, it is my story and that is all. It has worth, even if just one social worker picks it up and takes one part away with them.

At times, I have found it difficult to find the words to describe processes that often cannot easily be described in words, particularly around ceremony, feelings of belongingness and community. Perhaps this is because they were never supposed to be described in words and just felt. Still, I have attempted to do them some justice here.

Reciprocity: Gifting

Reciprocity is an innate part of our lives as Indigenous people and as part of an Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008). Everything we do requires giving back to the community in some way and this is part of the sacred teaching around generosity within our development as people. Any work that is conducted on traditional lands dictates sharing knowledge because knowledge is not owned by just one person or group of people. In western academia, participatory action research is similar to anti-oppressive models, in that it embodies this sense of giving back, of sharing knowledge and of having the research participant be actively involved in how the research is shared and utilized. It

must serve to influence community in meaningful ways (Kovach, 2009). This involves presenting findings and results of the project back to the community to which the research relates (Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow & Brown, 2005). I intend on presenting my research to anyone interested in learning more about integrating culture and wellness into the workplace, for example. Or how the recruitment and retention of Indigenous social workers is important to address the overwhelming number of Indigenous children and youth in care. Or how this research relates to a more culturally-grounded approach to practice. As aforementioned, I composed a song, which will be gifted to any social worker, or anyone for that matter, needing to sing it.

This research is organized into themes, or topics, which relate to each verse of this song. With the exception of the first and last verses of the song, the Cree words that precede each theme represent a feeling that I have when addressing my personal journey and how it has impacted my practice. These words are the first words of each verse. It's an honour song called Hay Hay, which means "thank you" in Cree. It honours the children and families we are privileged to walk alongside on their healing journeys and thanks them for their patience in our learning and unlearning when we attempt to undo child welfare's distinctive role in creating past harm and trauma.

The song reminds us, as social workers, to keep the sacredness of children at the center of our work and the decisions we make. It also honours ourselves when we sing it: the hard work that we all do, every day, and how that work can often bring us to a place of lack of connection for ourselves. It reminds us to walk in ceremony as much as we can. When we started to sing in my workplace, social workers and support staff were able to gather without ego or agenda, and center our practice. The song does not come along

with some of the local protocols around song ownership either, which can be a discouraging factor for people wanting to engage in singing and drumming; I would be more than happy to teach it to anyone and to hear anyone sing it, at any given time. My intention and promise is to teach it to new workers entering into the field, to staff at my DAA, to social service workers at conferences that I am asked to sing at, and to anyone wanting to learn. The first verse is about honouring self.

Wellness and Culture

Way-ah-hay-ah-oh, way-ah-hay-ah-oh, Way-ah-hay-ah-oh-way-ah-hiya. This is the first half of the first verse. It is sung twice and introduces the singer and listener to the phonetics of the song, which carry on throughout until the end. This verse also bookends the four language verses, and as a result, represents the introduction or setup of this research topic which is really an explanation of what culture and wellness means to me. Refer to Appendix A for the sequence of phonetics for the whole song.

Culture

Maybe the most difficult task on this research journey, is trying to capture the profound feelings of being connected to one's culture, in appropriate words and academic language. As I was writing the following sections, I had a realization that I was using drum group, interchangeably, with practicing culture. It was an assumption and I now need to delve into what drum group really is and how it is the closest thing that I have found to my culture, living three provinces away from my nation, in a city center. The surface concepts of drum group include singing, drumming, gathering with other urban Indigenous community members, engaging in ceremony, making and wearing traditional regalia, honouring protocol, learning our traditional languages, harvesting traditional food and medicine, attending local events often in solidarity, and exploring my own artistic expression as a Cree woman.

Deeper than these external practices, however, are those inherent feelings of community, sisterhood and, ultimately, belonging. These feelings come with encompassing unconditional support and an inherent connectedness to one another. Culture is embedded in the ability to call on traditional knowledge keepers, or offer to

help at any opportunity to do so. It can be as complex as engaging in ceremony or as simple as a visit to one of my sisters' homes and having bologna sandwiches over conversations about dismantling the system. It has shown up in my decision to become a present and active member of my community, whether that is within a nation or an urban community.

In her exploration of Indigenous womanhood, Kim Anderson (2000) explores the concepts of culture and tradition at length. According to Anderson, they are fluid concepts that are based on our relationships with the land, with each other, and a willingness to move through years of colonization while holding onto our old ways of being. There is a thread of misconception that exists within some cultural practices today that have been influenced by patriarchal, western worldviews. Anderson (2000) deconstructs many of these examples in order to empower women to engage in culture in a way that "reaffirms the feminine" (p. 39). I believe that what we do with ANSWER is exactly this; despite some rhetoric we hear about being women who were not raised on our reserve or on our territories, women who drum on a round drum when some think this is not right, etc., we continue to do it because it builds our sense of belonging, community and connection to culture. The modern optics of one's connection to their culture does not have as much significance as that authentic feeling of connection to something outside the mainstream and rooted in one's heritage, bloodline, language and sense of community, regardless of gender.

Drum group, for me, merges concepts of tradition with a sense of modernization. I think about this a lot: the modern or urban worlds simply do not allow us to practice culture in the way our ancestors did but that should not make it any less meaningful. We

have full-time jobs, some of us are in school and have family commitments, we are busy, we need to travel in cars and on planes, we get stuck in traffic, etc. I had the great privilege of witnessing a performance by Maliseet singer and composer, Jeremy Dutcher, on March 8, 2019, in Victoria BC. He has extracted archival songs from his nation and has added modern elements like the piano and uses technology to create loops, for example. He spoke about culture as a fluid concept, how it has evolved and is still so beautiful (J. Dutcher, personal communication, March 8, 2019). I certainly relate to that on many levels. We do what we can with the resources we have and the inter-generational trauma our families have endured, and at the end of the day, culture is the hope we carry of making our ancestors proud.

Walking in this way though, is difficult for a number of reasons. As I write about drum group and that commitment to community, I am also reminded that this can often create fatigue and sometimes resentment. I attended the Strengthening Capacity in Indigenous Research Dialogue in Ottawa in March 2019. Senator Murray Sinclair was a keynote speaker and he was talking about all of the work he has been involved in and his recent attempt to retire, which only lasted for about one week. One of the participants who identified as a member of the Enoch Cree Nation, stood up and asked about the fatigue that comes as a result of being a part of the reconciliation movement and of walking in a traditional way. He gave examples like needing to engage in ceremony, community events, and family business every weekend, for example, while watching his “mooniyaw” peers on social media spend their weekends relaxing at the lake. Senator Sinclair did not know what the answer to this problem was, but did infer that the benefits of walking in a traditional way far outweigh the struggles of those moments of fatigue

and that the work we are doing now will hopefully take some of the pressure off of the generations to come (M. Sinclair, personal communication, March 13, 2019).

I would like to think this is true. In reflecting on the last few years especially while working full time, attempting to complete this Master's program, and being part of a dynamic drum group that involves a lot of travel, I have felt tired. I got very ill recently and that served as a good reminder to slow down and to set some boundaries when those are needed for my own wellness. But this journey certainly has been worth it, and continues to be worth it for myself and for the children, families and nations I have the privilege of walking alongside in my work. It has something to do with finding balance.

Wellness and Protective Factors

In Cyndy Baskin's (2016) book, *Strong Helpers' Teachings*, she discusses the absolute necessity of creating wellness for ourselves as helpers, with ideas ranging from avoiding isolation, to channeling anger into action when feeling disempowered by systems, to engaging in acts of self-reflection. Of course, wellness is also subjective and can look different for each individual so I will not even attempt to define it here. I am conscientious of making broad generalizations of what wellness might look like. I am merely talking about my own journey in figuring out what it looks like for me, and what wellness could look like for others in the field.

In British Columbia, social workers are taught to use certain language within our work and I would like to use similar language here so that social workers can better relate this piece of writing to the work they do. One of the most common idioms is the notion of protective or safety factors within child welfare assessments. These are pieces of assessment data that indicate levels of wellness, safety or protection within family

systems. Culture is one of them. Family and community support is another. But social workers also need these. The use of the term “protective factor” really just equates to an indicator of wellness.

Wellness is the ability to move forward in our practice in a way that feels good. I have yet to meet a social worker who can easily remove a child from their parents. I have heard of people losing sleep over decisions that have been made. It is very emotionally-charged work with lots of implications for wellness if we don't have our own support networks or protective factors in place. As both a child protection and guardianship delegation trainee, guardianship delegation educator, and team leader, I am keenly aware that one of the gaps in social worker training is a lack of tangible examples so my best hope here is to present those tangible examples. These are based on years and years of my own learning and of making my own mistakes. They are also based on things that I have been taught along the way.

Kiyam: Walking Gently

Culture is a Protective Factor for Indigenous Social Workers

Kiyam-way-ah-oh, way-ah-hay-ah-oh, kiyam-way-ah-oh-way-ah-hiya. This is the first line of the second verse of this honour song. The reader will notice that the word kiyam is followed by the same phonetic sounds as the first verse. It is sung twice.

Kiyam is a Cree term that is difficult to translate to English. Some online resources tell us it means everything from “let it be”, to a way of saying “walking quietly or gently.” For me, kiyam is a sense of inner-peace that comes along with walking in a way that is grounded in traditional values, knowledge and ways of being. It shows up when we are walking in a way that is grounded in culture or ceremony. It is the ability to correct mistakes when they happen so we do not have to carry those around with us, or have to worry more than we need to. I chose this word because it is what I feel when I arrive at work knowing I am walking my talk, doing the best I can to effectively support children and families in a culturally grounded way. In this chapter, I will discuss what connecting to my own culture looks like, how it has had a significant impact on my spirit, how this translates to my own social work practice and perhaps the practice of others, and how I find kiyam through culture, song and ceremony.

On November 14th, 2018, I attended an event at the University of Victoria where Cindy Blackstock was the keynote speaker. She is a community matriarch and an instrumental advocate for Indigenous children’s rights in Canada for the last few decades. Dr. Blackstock has travelled across Canada and around the world, to raise awareness about the shortfalls around access to clean water, housing and fair education and opportunity, among other systemic child welfare issues in Indigenous communities.

Blackstock has been instrumental in the successful human rights' tribunal hearings, involving holding the federal government of Canada accountable for the equitable care and treatment of First Nations populations (Blackstock, 2018). Needless to say, Dr. Blackstock would be susceptible to burnout or fatigue as a result of her complex and dedicated work.

An audience member at this event had asked Dr. Blackstock what she does to take care of herself and she said, in a very honest and frank way, that she didn't feel it was necessary to give a lot of attention to self-care when one is walking in one's own values (2018). I have thought a lot about this perspective and it really makes sense. If we are grounded in our values and worldview within our work with children and families, and if the decisions we are making are truly in the best interests of children, why would we need to spend so much time on taking care of ourselves? The problem lies systemically where, as social workers, we are sometimes directed to conduct our work in a way that can be contradictory to our values. At times, this is due to overwhelming caseload sizes or policy that is not rooted in Indigenous ways of being. People in leadership positions particularly in agencies working with Indigenous children and families, need to commit to working with Indigenous communities in a good way: in a way that is grounded in cultural values and traditional worldviews.

This is not to say, however, that we will never be directed to remove children from their homes even if our leadership prioritizes culturally-grounded social work. The reality of protecting children becomes very apparent, very quickly, as a social worker immersed in a high-demand caseload. When we witness a baby being born on the streets to a mother who is struggling with a meth addiction with no community support, we

understand the need for intervention. We often struggle to find that line between old-school social work that would dictate immediate removal, and a place of empathy and compassion and alternative planning. I have been very honoured to be asked to facilitate part of the guardianship delegation training (C4) with Indigenous Perspectives Society over the last few years. This is a mandatory training for all delegates of the Director of Child Welfare in BC, working in delegated Aboriginal agencies. One of the things I always tell these new social workers during their delegation training is that even if we are the best social workers on earth, and do everything right and strive to meet our own values every day, children will still need to be removed. I want them to move forward in their work knowing that *how* we remove children is what creates the foundations of a relationship that could be built on trust and hope rather than mistrust and trauma. Again, this responsibility to practice in a good way, to attempt to undo what has been done in the past, is a heavy burden for Indigenous social workers with impacts on our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

Comprehensive self-care plans have been pushed on probably every social worker emerging into the field of child welfare; they are part of undergraduate curriculums, delegation training modules and are even a part of some agencies' annual performance evaluations. I am certain this stems from the correlation between stress and burn-out rates for social workers, which at the end of the day, affects retention rates, relationships with community, and comes at a significant cost personally and professionally. Cyndy Baskin (2016) discusses concepts of stress and trauma, within our work and our own experiences, and urges us to approach helping in a holistic way, which includes care and healing for the helper and not just the client. I am also keenly aware that self-care is a

very individual endeavour; what works for me may not work for others. One of the most significant things we can do, according to Baskin (2016), is to avoid isolation and this greatly involves building a sense of community.

Physical Wellbeing

Physical health is a determining factor for overall wellness and is certainly the first thing we think of in western modalities of healing. It includes factors like sleep, the food we eat, physical exercise, medications, the poisons we choose to ingest or not, etc. Our drum group's Elder, Jessica Sault, continually holds us accountable to maintain our personal wellness. When we are sick, we are not to be at the drum. When we have ingested alcohol, even the night before, we are not to be at the drum. These boundaries are not only in place for us, but for the wellness of the group as a whole, and to protect our grandmother drum. They also come from traditional teachings about the sacredness of ceremony when we sit at the drum.

One of the expectations in drum group is dancing. I am personally full of gratitude when I think of the masks and dances we have been gifted as a group. A lot of these dances require some level of physicality. The dance I have been privileged to learn is the medicine dance, which includes actions of collecting berries, gathering medicines, cleansing in the water and gifting tobacco. This is a physical representation of these traditional practices and when I dance in this way, I feel immediately grounded in culture. This dance is performed in ribbon skirts, moccasins and beaded regalia. When I wear this regalia, I feel grounded. The act of placing yourself physically in your culture, or items that represent your ancestors, is a feeling beyond what I can explain in words. It lifts me

up and reminds me that I have the strength of thousands of years of ancestral love and guidance behind me.

Walking in ceremony is another part of this quadrant of physical wellness. When we participate in sweat-lodge or naming ceremonies, for example, we commit ourselves to walk in ceremony for four days and nights prior, meaning we take care of our physical bodies by avoiding toxins, becoming more mindful of our health overall, and committing to walking gently in whatever we do including our practice as social workers. For some, this is a difficult task and does require some level of discipline. But it is more than just avoiding things, and I will discuss this more in *Spiritual Wellbeing*. Physical stamina is tested when the first round of that sweat-lodge ceremony begins and the door closes, or when an Elder insists on getting up before the crack of dawn for a bath in the river. I would not consider this arduous by any means, but it does require mindfulness to overcome the body's physical norms.

The food we eat directly impacts our physical feelings of wellness. When we meet weekly for practice as a drum group, we meet at 6pm. Most of the participants have just worked a full day in the helping field, many of whom skipped lunch or went through a drive-through. It is a common joke around social media and among my peers that social workers never eat well, that we are all overweight because of stress hormones like cortisol, etc. While this may be true, we have to make balance a priority in this area. Our Elder will often bring us fresh salmon, or insist on cutting up fresh fruit and vegetables. I am so grateful that she takes good care of us, and am glad to help her out when I can, in other ways.

One of our drum group members, a Mi'kmaq woman named Sarah Rhude, grows her own traditional medicines including sweetgrass, tobacco, calendula, skullcap, mugwort and goldenrod. She makes tinctures that help with every physical ailment imaginable and is a wealth of knowledge in this area. When we complain about anything from sore throats or sleepless nights, Sarah always has something for us. We were also privileged to be able to spend some time learning from Jean Smith, a Kwakwaka'wakw Elder from Alert Bay who has worked extensively with the devil's club plant. Traditional medicines are made readily available to us as social workers at the DAA I work with as well: rat root, sage and sweet grass, to name a few. This seems like a small notion toward creating a culture of wellness for social workers but it has profoundly supported my wellness and notion of connectedness to my drum group and to my social work team.

Gregory Brass (2009) explores the use of traditional medicines in healing Indigenous people in recovery and the role they may play in creating personal narrative around Aboriginal identity. I can attest that medicines are some of the first items youth in care get excited about: they are tangible items that can serve to connect them to their cultural identity, to creator and to their homes. Sweet grass and sage are often requested by youth struggling with addiction, mental illness, or by youth entering a potentially heated meeting with social workers. It is not uncommon practice for a team member to slip a tobacco tie into someone's hand when we know they are struggling.

Taking care of our physical selves certainly comes from that sense of community; it seems to be more centered around an idea of taking care of each other. The act of blanketing is another way we are physically taken care of. This has been a learning curve for me being on the west coast of Canada. As part of drum group, it is a way to honour

members who have worked particularly hard at something, or who have achieved something. At work, blanketing serves as a way to honour social workers who have gone through something particularly difficult, as a physical way of wrapping them in protection and support. We have also used this practice as a way to apologize for wrongdoings, or to acknowledge that someone has been hurt. When we think of this act of showing support, it seems simple. But it is anything but. Having been blanketed myself, I felt immediately wrapped in support and love. This can have profound effects on our children and youth in care as well. We blanket our children and youth when they transfer to our agency, and when they age out of care during ceremony to show that we will always care for them, that they have support networks in place to help them through a transition, and to show our love for them. This practice has stemmed from the traditions of the local Coast Salish nations, where blanketing is a very honourable ceremony that is conducted for similar reasons.

Mental Wellbeing

I mentioned the notion of feeling grounded earlier and I have chalked this up to a physical feeling in the body but I also feel it has to do with a mental acknowledgement of the process one is involved in. When we are about to perform in front of a larger crowd, like at Gathering our Voices Youth Conference, for example, where there are a thousand or so youth, we gather together and breathe. We talk about the intention of our songs and dances, and mentally-ground ourselves wherever we may be. This practice can also be translated to social work practice, where we gather as a team and hope to start meetings in a culturally-grounded way. This has morphed into a conscious effort within our agency to speak about our children as if their families and ancestors were in the room with us.

Being part of drum group has also created opportunities to connect to cultural learning and some dialogue when some things are not so clear. We share ideas, teachings from across Canada and any traditional knowledge we have picked up. We attend language classes together to expand our knowledge of where we are from. We consistently practice the values of gratitude and humility and find ourselves more and more conscious of the impact we have as community members, helpers and matriarchs. These are the kinds of practices that I see social work teams undertaking as part of their overall commitment to work together in a better way. The need to deepen conscious practice involves constantly reflecting on that power we all carry and becoming more mindful of our responsibilities to future generations.

Emotional Wellbeing

We begin most drum group practices in circle, meaning we sit in a circle where everyone takes a figurative breath together, we acknowledge the traditional territories of the people who have cared for the land we are on since time immemorial, and we check-in with ourselves. This has been an honest practice in vulnerability and trust, and has everything to do with the depths of the relationships we have built with each other. Graveline (1998) explores the sense of power balance and inter-connectedness that working in circle creates. The acknowledgement that we are all related is something that happens organically when we sit in circle. The drum guides us to sit in balance with one another. Michael Hart (1999) discusses how this act of sharing in circle is the foundation of an Aboriginal approach to healing and helping but focuses more on our relationship as helpers to clients, rather than as helpers to helpers. I believe it goes both ways and can be a powerful tool to care for each other.

Many times, one or more drum group members are struggling with something: the loss of a loved one, illness, feelings of exhaustion from working in the field, etc. I can only speak for myself here, but one day I had learned that someone I had known intimately had overdosed and passed over into the spirit world. I had been crying on and off throughout the couple of days prior to drum group, when I found out this had happened. It was a very difficult thing to process. I felt helpless, hopeless and sad. I still have tears in my eyes as I write these words. But I knew at that moment that I needed to sing a specific song which we are not supposed to sing in performance, based on respect for local protocol. But I knew I needed it and within our small private group, I knew people would support singing it behind closed doors. I do not believe I would have been easily able to move through that grief I was experiencing without this experience. I could not bring myself to sing and just cried.

Support from those who have similar shared experiences is invaluable. Indigenous people have all dealt with issues beyond comprehension when we consider our inter-generational trauma. Baskin (2016) discusses group support in terms of needing to avoid isolation for helpers. She discusses relatively simple concepts like laughing together, sharing stories and food, and how these can have profound effects on how helpers navigate and feel supported in their complex work. I have witnessed this organically occur in team meetings where our peers are used as sounding boards, or for encouragement, and sometimes new ideas. I cannot imagine not having processes like these within social work practice and drum group is no exception.

Spiritual Wellbeing

Spirituality is difficult for me to define but Baskin (2016) says it “is about wholeness, making meaning, and creating inner peace. It is a sense of being one with both one’s inner and outer worlds...[and it] embodies an inner-connectedness and interrelationship with all life” (p.171). When we sit at the drum, we are in ceremony and this encompasses all of the above. It is a very conscious acknowledgement that we are involved in something outside of ourselves. There are ways in which we call our ancestors in, and we do this because we need them for protection and guidance. I am so grateful when my ancestors are present; I can feel them behind my shoulder or in corners of rooms. I know they are proud, not because I have scientific evidence, but because I can feel it when I sing. Our people did not need scientific evidence to prove why they did what they did, or why decisions were made based on the best interests of family and community. During the defense of my thesis on December 13th, 2019, I was privileged to integrate elements of ceremony and spirituality into the presenting of this story and the song. My ancestors were very much in the room with me and I gathered strength from them, from the drum, and from my family and community. I could not have possibly completed that process without this intentional commitment to walk in ceremony.

Dancing is also a part of entering into a ceremonial space. As a drum group, we practice turning into the spirit world when we enter the floor to begin our dance, and consequently, we turn out of the spirit world when we exit. This signifies our inherent connection to the spirit world when we dance. It allows us to channel whatever spirit we are dancing and leave behind anything that impedes this: ego, agenda, heaviness we are carrying, etc. These dances include animal skins of the grizzly bear, wolf, cougar and

black bear. They also include spirits that are connected to masks including the thunderbird and eagle. I recognize I need to learn more about dancing with masks, as they are not familiar to me. I have been nervous and scared even with strong teachings and encouragement, but I will get there. When we put animal skins and masks on, we take on that animal spirit, we acknowledge their struggles and triumphs and channel their behaviours into dances. We acknowledge the seasons where these spirits are slower or tired, when they hunt or when they are more playful. This connects us to the land as well and acknowledges all of those interwoven relationships.

Cultural identity very much relies on nurturing spirit. Anishinaabe researcher, Renee Linklater (2014), describes how connection to spirit, or “cultural and ceremonial resources”, allows us to walk in a more grounded way; they provide avenues to build our own community and sense of belonging, particularly in urban communities where isolation is often a product of cultural disconnect (p. 88). Our spiritual connection is what sets us apart as people with ancestors who come from different parts of the world. Spirit presents itself in our feelings of connection to land, language, culture and to each other. As social workers, we are held to the task of nurturing our children’s spirits, particularly when we see that disconnection is a significant trend for Indigenous children-in-care who are placed in urban, non-Indigenous homes.

It becomes very clear to social workers working with youth with high-risk behaviours like drug addiction or gang involvement, that their spirits need nurturing. Any social worker can tell there is a clear correlation between cultural and familial disconnect and increased high-risk behaviours. This concept has been explored as the effects of trauma, or medically as “adverse childhood experiences” (Felitti et. al, 1998). For

Indigenous families, high-risk behaviours and health issues are intricately linked to disconnection from healthy family, community and culture. This is essentially what Brendtro et. al refer to as a sense of belonging (2005). It should be acknowledged here that Indigenous people have known this before it became a medical revelation.

Holding Space for Others in the Field

One of the aspects of integrating culture into professional duties that I have found to be challenging at times, is that people seem eager to learn which creates a sense of reliance or dependence on leadership. This keenness to learn signifies such a significant leap from where we have come in child welfare, and shows that growth which we so desperately want to see in how we approach the work. But it is also time-consuming in the midst of the chaos that comes with child welfare work. While the province has invested serious resources in policy change, there is little in the way of changing caseload sizes to actually be able to act on these changes. As a team leader with a DAA, we end up doing a lot of educating off the side of our desks. Many non-Indigenous social workers so badly want to learn what they can do differently in their practice and are almost hyper-aware of being culturally-appropriate. Again, this is a really positive step in the right direction but it seems to be causing some to become resentful of the new changes.

For example, some child protection social workers recently brought some Indigenous social workers to a meeting around an investigation, to discuss how to better move forward in our work together. They acknowledged the way they conducted their work was unsupportive and not as collaborative as it could have been. The meeting was wonderful and full of vulnerabilities and learning. Again, this is something we do not

always see and it is so promising. However, we cannot always be expected to contribute to this work, or this learning. It is important work and while contributing to better practice with Indigenous children and families, the work is already demanding enough with high caseloads. It can be exhausting but needs to happen, which is a tricky dichotomy; I certainly feel a sense of obligation to participate in this work, while it is technically outside the realm of my job and often, my ability. While we need to hold others accountable to practice in a culturally-grounded way, we need to advocate for other avenues of making this happen, or furthering the resources allotted to policy, into education around practice.

As a DAA, we are inclusive when we gather to sing and drum by inviting our colleagues from MCFD and sister agencies to join us. We are attempting to start initiatives to bring us all together to network around programming and case planning. We are doing what we can to show how we can move forward by nurturing our own spirits, by trying to find and maintain our own sense of kiyam. This is all we can do for now. This is how we show how nurturing our own spirits and wellness as social workers, translates to our practice with Indigenous children, families and nations.

Kispêwêw Awasowin: She Defends Children.**Culture is a Protective Factor for Children and Youth**

Kispêwêw-Awasowin, way-ah-hay-ah-oh-way-ah-hiya. This is the first half of the third verse and is sung twice, similar to the verses preceding it. The root of the Cree word *kispêwêw* is similar to the English verb “to defend.” Or more specifically, it means: he or she defends or protects. *Awasowin* (root: “awasis”) is the Cree word for children and is actually the name of the child and family services agency that serves several nations in Northern Manitoba. These words combined in the Cree language make up the third verse of the song that accompanies this work.

“Of primary importance is understanding the sacredness of children. ... Holding the center spot in the circle of humanity, children help people to see their purpose and to recognize their responsibilities to the many generations to come” (Hart, 2002, p. 48). As Indigenous adults who are emerging from the complex effects of inter-generational trauma, we now have a responsibility to our younger generations to ensure that their levels of trauma are minimized, to ensure they are protected and safe, and to ensure they continue to be connected to their families, communities and cultures. In this chapter, I will discuss how policy, legislation and practice are shifting to better support Indigenous children involved in the child welfare system in BC, including initiatives that are grounded in traditional ways of being. I will also explore the role of culturally-grounded practice in improving outcomes for Indigenous children and youth in care.

As a child protection social worker, we were required to write on a white board where we would be if we left the office, as part of our team’s safety protocol. I remember one day, about seven years ago, a coworker had written on the whiteboard that he was

“out protecting children” instead of saying where he was. I had just started working as a child protection social worker. The team joked around about it and I remember thinking to myself: is that really what we do here? I had no idea at the time, what I was getting myself into or how this role would profoundly affect my life in the years that followed. I never thought I would be passionate about policy but when I saw some of the impacts that disruptive, or culturally unsafe, policy has on children and families, this shifted for me.

Legislation, Policy and Practice

The recent rollout of a new practice framework, the *Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework*, or APPF, is MCFD’s recent attempt at trying to ensure that social workers in this province are all approaching our practice from a place of respect, integrity and collaboration (MCFD, 2017). This policy shift to a culturally-grounded approach to practice is the closest attempt to re-traditionalize practice that I have seen in my career thus far. The framework “identifies a pathway towards restorative policy and practice that supports and honours Aboriginal peoples’ cultural systems of caring and resiliency” (MCFD, 2017, p.3). It focuses on circle teachings as they relate to collaboration, equality and the foundations of building respectful relationships. It urges social workers across the province to practice in a way that is grounded in cultural values. It focuses on how this type of practice can be beneficial for the children and families with child welfare involvement but I would argue that it goes beyond that and could, if used appropriately, contribute to social worker wellness at the same time.

In addition to the changes in policy, this is an exciting time that is full of promise for Indigenous child welfare and Indigenous social workers. There are amendments being

made to the *CFCSA*, which include legislated responsibilities to include nations in planning. This is monitored through statistics entered into MCFD's web-based program that every social worker working for MCFD (and some DAAs) uses. This means, there is a new level of accountability here. Further, one of the most significant changes to legislation includes the ability to transfer the assessment of child safety and family planning to the nations themselves through Section 92 Agreements (CFCSA, 1996). This change is too recent to know if the decision will benefit children and families, but it certainly holds promise that services will be more rooted in culture and the ways of being that are specific to nations. There will need to be significant resources and infrastructure allotted to the rollout of these agreements to ensure preparedness. There is opportunity here for our province to really invest in the future wellbeing of Indigenous children and families with child welfare involvement.

Provincial adoptions policy and procedures in BC have not changed in many years. There is a significant amount of change this year, however. These changes reflect the intention behind the APPF and the direction MCFD is investing time and resources in, to ensure permanency is grounded in collaborative decision-making and cultural safety. These changes include an expectation for social workers to facilitate adoptions circles, which are integrated meetings prior to placement. These meetings are to include nation representatives, biological family members, potential adoptive parents and other professionals with significant roles in the child's life. This means, adoptions simply cannot move forward without front-end consultation from the community. This ensures that thorough work is being done to mitigate concerns around loss of culture, language and connection to family post-adoption, which we know improves outcomes for

Indigenous children and youth placed in non-Indigenous homes (Carriere & Richardson, 2009, 2017; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009; Sinclair & Carriere, 2015). I should note here that many areas of social work around the province were already engaging in this type of collaborative work pre-adoption prior to this shift in policy, particularly those working with Indigenous populations.

Policy has also shifted in how we support family caregivers who are caring for their children. Family caregivers used to receive just a little more than half of the financial support non-family caregivers received as part of the Extended Family Program (Province of BC, 2019). This never made any sense to me. Legislation clearly indicates preference for placement with family, yet we were not supporting this in many ways. Again, this increase in support represents a shift in the direction of honouring traditional systems of caring for children.

At the end of the day, though, these are figuratively just directions on paper and do rely on a shift in personal social work practice. In January 2019, I was honoured to be asked to present the work of my team at the Walking Together Conference in Richmond BC. This conference was hosted by MCFD and included elements of ceremony and tradition, including the important act of witnessing. It was aimed at MCFD and DAA team leaders, directors of operations, directors of practice and executive directors from across the province. I heard many seasoned colleagues make comments that alluded that there has never been a conference like it, throughout their careers anyway. It focused on MCFD learning from the Indigenous community about how to practice differently, and how to practice in a more culturally-grounded way. This, in itself, is an indicator that the province is taking these new practice directives and legislative changes, seriously. There

finally seems to be this realization out there that the work needs to change in order to address the over-representation of Indigenous children-in-care. I want to acknowledge here that this is what the Indigenous community has been saying for many years, at the very minimum since I was in undergraduate social work classes at the University of Victoria, twelve years ago.

The presentation my colleague (who identifies as Mohawk) and I facilitated was focused on the importance our agency places on ceremony and how it impacts our permanency planning and social work practice. We discussed how sometimes culturally-grounded practice is complex and requires outside guidance from Elders, for example. But how culturally-grounded practice can also be as simple as getting in the car and driving for six hours to a child's isolated community in order to involve them in cultural planning in a meaningful way. It can look like sitting with families for hours when child welfare involvement is occurring, to answer questions even if we do not have all of the answers. It can include collaborative efforts where the community comes to decisions around cultural safety and consenting to permanency. All of these require a conscious effort to work in a culturally-grounded way.

For this presentation, we sang and drummed and showed our colleagues how to introduce ceremony into court proceedings to signify the important and meaningful work that families engage in. We showed them how we have created an agency culture that is rooted in traditional values and teachings. We highlighted the impacts this has had on our practice and increased rates of permanency with family members for Indigenous children-in-care. When I reflect on the work of culturally-grounded social workers and the incredibly difficult work this involves, however, I am not entirely sure it can be done

on a global level with high caseload demands and minimal resources allotted to support these changes in policy and practice. I am not sure if it can be done well if leadership is not supportive or properly trained. I am also not sure it can be achieved by unwilling social workers attached to very different worldviews. I will do my best here to outline how a shift in perspective can profoundly benefit the children and families with whom we work, create opportunity for lower caseloads and improve overall outcomes.

Cultural Support for Indigenous children and youth in care: Setting foot on the land

I feel lucky that I work for a DAA. This is because we have leadership that advocates for resources that support adherence to lower caseload sizes, for example, or programs that support cultural connection for Indigenous children and youth in care. We prioritize the hiring of social workers who are Indigenous or who are true allies in the community. We are creative in the allotment of resources. For example, we have built a program called the cultural continuity program. This worker's role is to ensure there is cultural safety in the homes of our children, as well as involvement of their respective nations in planning.

The cultural continuity worker travels to nations with children-in-care and supports foster parents to provide access to ceremony, language, traditional food, art, music, etc. within their homes. This worker facilitates ceremonies and calls on knowledge-keepers that can guide these processes. Effort is made to ensure ceremony is centered around the specific cultures that children are from and range from brushing-off to coming of age ceremonies. These are foundational processes that urban Indigenous youth all too often miss out on. The absence of these opportunities can contribute to all kinds of misconceptions around Indigenous identity and can contribute to a sense of

disconnection. St-Denis & Walsh (2016) discuss the significance of engaging in ceremony and the profound effects this has on the rebuilding of cultural identity within oneself.

The common theme of disconnection that exists today is not always because of years of inter-generational trauma: maybe youth have mixed heritage and have not experienced a connection with their culture by choice, some are from so many different nations that they do not identify with any one in particular, while others are not able to verbalize where they are from but somehow know they are Indigenous. The work involved in the cultural continuity program has an immense impact. For example, youth who are entrenched in city life, when given the opportunity to sit around a table with their Elders, can acknowledge that they need to return home more often and in some cases, permanently. It is the most powerful kind of work I have witnessed in terms of supporting Indigenous children and youth in care. I firmly believe this work is impacted by personal experience of nurturing our own identity. If we do not come from a place of either experiencing the impacts of cultural disconnection, or being very close witness to it, how would we know how it is an imperative part of building our sense of belonging? This translates to practice in many ways, especially practice that involves working with Indigenous children and youth in-care.

Much of the research on the importance of connection, particularly for Indigenous children and youth in-care, is centered around the idea of building cultural safety agreements. These documents are not legally-binding, nor are openness agreements. This adds pressure to social workers having to assess genuineness of character sometimes, or taking time to see caregivers prove they can and will follow the expectations outlined in

the documents. Further, one of the realities of social work practice in this province is that these documents are rarely completed unless there is an adoption that is close to finalization. This means, the vast majority of Indigenous children and youth in care without permanency plans do not have cultural safety agreements. We try our very best to prioritize this work but realistically, we are over-burdened and this type of optional paperwork is the last thing to be completed even at the DAA level.

I have come to know that how I choose to walk in the world directly relates to my practice. As a social worker, it guides everything from something as simple as how I speak to people to something as complex as gathering community together to plan for children in a family group conference. The way I walk in the world guides the types of cultural safety agreements I complete, or expect my team to complete, the risks I took with advocating for family placements that did not necessarily meet western standards of care, and the advocacy I undertook when I was met with systemic barrier after systemic barrier to ensure children were kept in their family's care. As a team leader now, I have expectations of social workers that far outweigh typical social work practice, or practice that I have witnessed over the years. Again, we need to be better supported to remove those barriers for social workers to practice in a good way.

Wahkohtowin: We Are All Related.**Culture is a Protective Factor for Families**

Wahkohtowin-way-ah-hay-ah-oh, wahkohtowin-way-ah-hiya. This is the first half of the fourth verse and is sung twice, similarly to the verses preceding it. Wahkohtowin is a Cree word, which in English is the closest term to denote kinship relationships. It encompasses the idea of interconnectedness and relationship to others. I was particularly drawn to learning this word because we often hear a resounding “all my relations” as part of protocol during many different ceremonies, celebrations, greetings or at the end of a prayer. It serves as a reminder that we are all related, and that our spirits are interconnected.

Throughout my work, I am consistently reminded of that Elder advice that good social work is about approaching families as if they are our own nieces and nephews, siblings, grandparents. We simply cannot contribute to poor practice with this in mind. Drum group has taught me this to its very foundation; when I approach my community, it is as if they are family. In this chapter, I will discuss shifts in legislation, policy and practice that focus on supporting families to maintain care of their own children, how walking in a culturally-grounded way supports these initiatives, and ultimately how a commitment to acknowledging wahkohtowin impacts our wellness as social workers.

Legislation, Policy and Practice

In recent years, MCFD’s structured decision-making tools (or SDMs) have changed quite significantly. These SDM tools are used by child protection social workers to assess risk to children and weigh, on a points-based form, the areas of protectiveness (strength) against the areas of risk (weakness) within family systems. At the end, a social

worker should have an idea of how much risk is involved in keeping children with their families, which opens up the discussion around mitigating risk. As aforementioned, culture is now considered a safety factor on these tools and counts towards the complete assessment. This can include attending ceremony, events, and being actively engaged in community. For our families, this is often the most meaningful safety factor and one they have built themselves.

The assessment tools inform the family plan, which is a set of attainable goals around mitigating risk, with target dates and outlined support services. It is important that families have a say in what is included on these. I remember working a lot with addictions issues and often one would see a goal around attending a recovery program. Recovery programs are proven to be very effective for those wanting to achieve some level of sobriety. The work of Dr. Gabor Mate (2009) and now other scholars (Hari, 2015) indicates that sobriety is more about addressing trauma and building connection than focusing on ceasing to drink or use drugs. Social workers tend to impose expectations around reducing risk but if these plans are not done in a collaborative way or in a trauma-informed way, families can be unsuccessful. So, it is imperative that this is a collaborative tool, with realistic and agreed-upon content that acknowledges the unique and ongoing healing journeys of the people we work with. If we are going to acknowledge the inclusion of cultural healing modalities for families, the family plan is where we should be focusing on this.

Culturally-sensitive support services are not easily accessible with waitlists for Aboriginal child and youth mental health services usually sitting at around six months, for example. The referral process is arduous for social workers when they finally find

time to complete this work. And even then, there are not many services providing support that is grounded in culture even when they exclusively serve Indigenous populations. However, families are able to incorporate those informal cultural supports that already exist for their families.

We know culture is a protective factor for families but I am not certain social workers know what this really means. I have found in my time teaching social workers, and presenting on the work of my agency, that social workers want to practice in a culturally-grounded way. For the most part, they acknowledge that this needs to happen to create better outcomes for Indigenous children and families involved in child welfare. There is a desire there to make change. But they far too often do not know particularly *how* to practice in this way. One of the pieces of feedback I received from a seasoned non-Indigenous social worker after presenting at MCFD's Walking Together gathering in January 2019, was that they appreciated the tangible examples we gave when addressing culturally-grounded practice.

When a continuing custody order, or CCO, is granted, parents lose parental rights and this is no longer on a temporary basis. This type of order will often be granted between one and three years after a child comes into care, depending on their age and in accordance with the *CFCSA*. It is common practice among social workers to reduce access to prepare children for permanency and to avoid giving false hope to children and their families of ever returning. Reunification with biological parents has only become a valid permanency option within the last decade of child welfare practice and to this day, is still uncommon. Having said all of this, we know that it takes Indigenous families a lot longer to mitigate risk, or to heal, because of the generations of healing they often need to

address. A CCO cannot be considered the end of the road for families. I have seen these orders cancelled several times now, after parents worked diligently on their health and stability, sometimes over periods of up to ten years. I often find myself questioning whether the legislated timelines for Indigenous families working to have their children return home, are realistic given our histories of trauma. Indigenous families often need more time to address risk than the maximum two-year rule that social workers have to work within, under temporary custody orders (*CFCSA*, 1996).

At the conference, when we talked about continuing to support access and often times increasing it post-CCO, this was a new concept to some. I believe one of the questions that was asked was around how we maintain connection to family, community and culture when we are supposed to reduce access post-CCO. This shows that some of those old mentalities around permanency and adoption still very much exist. At the same time, children do not deserve to stay in-care their whole lives and age out of the system. This is where concurrent planning plays a significant role in finding a solution.

Practicing in a culturally-grounded way ensures that any type of permanency includes the family, extended family and community. If reunification is not an option, or is a secondary option, adoption can be another plan. But this needs to be viewed more like growing a child's family rather than replacing it; it is not a new beginning, it is a continuation. With greater expectations placed on applications to the provincial exceptions committee (for placement of Indigenous children in non-Indigenous homes) and openness and cultural safety agreements, we can ensure this continues to be the direction of permanency in this province. Again, this requires an entire province of social

workers and those in leadership roles to be on board with committing to traditional ways of caring for our children.

The Significance of Traditional Care

Practicing social work in a culturally-grounded way begs us to consider placement among family members before considering any other permanent arrangement. It is right there in legislation (CFCSA, 1996). My mom was raised by a Metis family, who knew of her biological family and raised her to be a proud Indigenous person. Elements of Metis artwork have made their way into my own as a result, because that culture has informed my identity regardless of blood. Being from the north is unique. People in Northern Manitoba know each other or at the very least, know of your family lineage and connections. I do not know what would have happened if my mom was removed from the north. I see such damage to spirit when children from back east, for example, end up in-care in Victoria for one reason or another. When I think of the Indigenous children and youth in care on our caseloads, my heart breaks as some are provinces away from their home territories and traditional family systems. There is a sense of longing that exists.

We live in a world now where technological advances have really helped to support connection. Children and youth in care are finding family members on social media, they are Skype calling them, and visiting their territories on planes. Family finders and roots workers are tasked with building genograms and putting together family stories, often pulling data from internet resources. We are urging our caregivers to put together life books for children to make sense of where they came from and to use language

applications in their homes. There is an ability to cook traditional foods from recipes found from a simple internet search.

However, we still face barriers. Non-Indigenous caregivers, even with mandatory cultural competency training, still often lack the motivation and confidence to bring elements of culture into their homes. There is resistance to bringing children back to their territories or to visits with family because of preconceived notions of what life on the reserve looks like, or because of a sense of ownership over children that very much shows up in the language they use. It is up to social workers to mandate a high-level of connection to family and this needs to be rooted in our vision and mission statements so that caregivers know this is what they are committing to when they decide to become caregivers to children with complex family and cultural systems.

We know that at age nineteen, when youth leave government care, most of them find themselves seeking out family and/or other informal (unpaid) supports. And when they do not, they often find themselves involved in unhealthy peer relationships (RCYBC, 2018). This speaks volumes about that inherent connection to family. It may waiver based on messaging from peers, or from caregivers, or even from social workers. This messaging often includes themes of lack of safety, stability and unwellness. But that draw is always there and present. We have children as young as three, wondering where their mom is, or if she still thinks of them. This longing is often only mitigated by either being around family consistently, or by being placed with them. It creates a sense of security and belonging, or closeness to the thing that is most familiar to everyone on the planet: family.

I have worked with young children in stranger care who have been pathologized as having slower speech development, skin conditions, and boundary issues, for example. After being placed with family for a few months, somehow these issues are no longer presenting themselves: they are caught up in school, skin rashes have cleared up and boundary issues have become ways of showing love and affection toward family. That connection profoundly affects their spiritual, emotional, mental and even physical wellness. We see these patterns in our work all the time.

However, westernized standards of care have created further barriers to placements with family. Social workers who have an innate cultural lens will know that holes in the walls of a home, or broken windows, are not necessarily indicators of an inability to safely care for children. But we need those who have home study responsibilities to arrive to their work in a culturally-grounded way. I have advocated for Indigenous social workers to conduct home study assessments when I know the potential family caregivers live on-reserve. This is important not only to the families being invasively studied around their trauma and having to discuss in detail how they have dealt with it, but to ensure we are not walking out of that home with preconceived biases of what it means to live on reserve.

Of course, our allies play a significant role in this too. The more time that is spent working with Indigenous families, the more we get to know what community-standards really look like and what it means to work from a culturally-grounded place. One of the most empathic social workers whom I ever had the privilege to work with was an Irish man named Brendan Elliott who insisted the work be done differently when approaching Indigenous communities, almost at the expense of his own career advancement. He is the

epitome of an ally. His family comes from generations of cultural genocide that is similar to our own and this, I believe, informs his practice.

Drum group is a tangible example, not of culture itself, but as a conduit to the significance of cultural connectedness. If I could bottle up this feeling of connectedness and family, I would. My hope is that all social workers have the opportunity to experience it on a personal level, so that they know the importance of connection for children-in-care, and the integral role family holds in caring for young people. I am not certain, without those lived experiences that relate to culture, that social workers can truly understand this. This begs the question: can we teach this concept and how?

Before I joined drum group, I had a vague idea. I knew the concepts and the benefits of family placements, the scientific research and the policy. But when I felt that sense of unconditional love and support from my community, my view on the subject changed from doing the best I could, to making family connection an absolute must. As a team leader, it has given me the ability to challenge social workers who say they cannot get hold of family members. I have asked social workers to drive to isolated communities to build those relationships that are key to a young person's very survival in a system that is not set up to nurture their spirit. I will continue to advocate for our children's cultural needs to be met, and will continue to support others in the field to do the same. These approaches have allowed me to insist families are together, even if this cannot involve caring for their own. And seeing the outcomes of prioritizing wahkohtowin in the decisions we make as social workers, has had an immense impact on my own wellness and motivation to continue doing the work.

Kisâkihitin: You Are Loved By Me.**Culture is a Protective Factor for Nations**

Kisâkihitin-way-ah-hay-ah-oh, kisâkihitin-way-ah-hiya. This line makes up the first half of the last language verse and again, is sung twice. Kisâkihitin loosely means: “I love you” in Cree, but actually means: “you are loved by me.” This is one of my favourite Cree terms I have learned throughout my journey to reclaim pieces of the language. I have always felt this unconditional sense of love for our children, families, communities and nations. Being able to work in, and being embraced by, community has honestly been one of the greatest privileges I have experienced in life. It is difficult to explain but I would do anything for this community, for my community, because of the love I hold in my heart for every resilient being I see every day. Children nurture my spirit when they run up to me, yelling my name. I feel it when a mother, who had great disdain for me years ago when I was a child protection worker, can now approach me in the community and tell me about how well her children are doing and how big they are.

Kisâkihitin encapsulates all that I feel when I am surrounded by love, which to me, means being surrounded by community. Yes, social work is extremely challenging work. We are not always liked, nor should we be liked all of the time. But there is so much to be said about building relationships that are grounded in respect and love. Social workers in this province are in the process of learning about building respectful relationships with communities. This is the foundation of many training and education initiatives happening now and within the last few years within child welfare practice. But what does building respectful relationships really look like? This chapter will explore the tangible ways we can use current shifts in legislation, policy and practice to walk in a

way that is grounded in culture, which contributes to the wellness of community.

Ultimately, this equates to our own wellness, as we cannot continue to see ourselves as separate entities.

Developing Respectful Relationships: The Benefits to Social Workers and Community

I recently went to a training initiative held by MCFD. The concept of the training was around integrating culture into assessment tools, particularly home study assessments. There were some examples given that were grounded in traditional ways of being. There was a large focus on bringing food and possibly gifts to meetings with family caregivers, for example. Being a critical learner, I wondered if social workers haven't already built a bit of a relationship with families, this gesture might not be comfortably received. To me, it might even appear condescending and present an assumption that that family needs food especially when one is wearing that proverbial MCFD social worker hat. We need to be careful about making sweeping generalizations when we consider what building relationships really means.

I acknowledge that there is no definitive way to build respectful relationships that will work for every family, community, social worker, etc. every time, but I feel like part of it is about arriving to community as one's authentic self. This concept is not really present in the literature or in any materials released by the province, perhaps because it is impossible to measure. As an Indigenous person, I have become keenly aware of when inauthenticity presents itself: I shut down and am not able to move forward in a respectful way at least internally, until that is corrected. When I attempt to push this aside, I am able to present in a respectful way but we cannot expect this from families who carry with them years of inter-generational trauma.

The most significant way I have been able to develop and maintain relationships with this urban community is by showing up and being my authentic self, which sometimes means going against some of the learning I have received. Being authentic is so much easier than putting on any type of façade that comes with having the role of social worker. It has allowed me to never feel that I have led anyone astray, or given misinformation, or put court processes before the need to communicate honestly with families. This, in itself, supports my own sense of wellness in this work. We do not always need to be serious; when we are serious, it is ok to cry; it is ok to experience grief with families; it is preferable to show emotion than to show nothing at all. In the absence of authenticity, none of these examples will mean anything to families, however.

This concept involves unlearning or adapting many of the practice approaches we have learned as social workers in this province, especially regarding setting boundaries and avoiding taking work home with us. We can show this unlearning by being present in community and at events, by being legitimately excited to see people out and about, waving to children as we drive by them on their way to school, noticing family connections and remembering them, and by truly caring for the people we work with, even on our days off. All of these ideas are fundamentally rooted in Indigenous ways of being and that centering of interconnectedness in how we live our lives.

Legislation, Policy and Practice

When it comes to placement of Indigenous children-in-care, the *CFCSA* highlights the need to seek placement in community: first within the child's family, then within their nation and then within the larger Aboriginal community which often means the urban Indigenous community (CFCSA, 1996). Despite this legislated policy, the

majority of these little ones are still placed in non-Indigenous homes of strangers in city centers.

There are lots of reasons for this but the one I most commonly see is a lack of recruitment and lack of resources committed to recruitment, and a lack of willingness of leadership to be creative in recruitment strategies, or in building capacity. Some DAAs and nations themselves have invested resources into creating safe houses on reserves for when a removal is necessary and there are no family members able to assume care. The children get to stay in community with family nearby. These are a result of collaborative efforts with community members, chief and council, band designates and social workers. It is a beautiful concept and one that I imagine is quite successful. I cannot seem to think of any reason that this wouldn't be common practice, other than the fact that it utilizes resources that are supposed to be allocated elsewhere.

As briefly aforementioned, there is new legislation that has been implemented within the *CFCSA* that necessitates nation involvement in planning. Section 92.1 of the *CFCSA* indicates that the Director can transfer delegated authority to nations for assessment of child protection reports (CFCSA, 1996). While this is a very significant forward step in ensuring self-determination over child welfare, there has been little training or resources allocated to making this a reality for nations. There will also need to be assessments around readiness, which still infers that nations are incapable of taking on this important work. However, separate from this, the new pieces of legislation hold social workers more accountable to being more actively collaborative with nations than ever before, even if the family is not engaging in services. This ensures that despite the wellness of families, there is always a community advocating for the best interests of

children based on traditional values. Tools for measurable outcomes in this area of service have been implemented as a means of tracking this. On some pages of the provincial computer database, you cannot even save data unless you identify that the community has been involved in planning, for example.

Informal, Authentic, Roles in the Community

The urban Indigenous community comes with its own unique set of challenges in terms of building connection with others or being accepted as part of the community. There is risk of pan-Indigenous ways of thinking. However, finding resources in the community that celebrate the diversity of urban residents from various places across Canada is relatively easy. The friendship center movement has played a very significant role in bringing Indigenous people together and providing opportunities for us to gather in a culturally-safe place. The whole movement was founded on creating a sense of community for those leaving their reserves and finding themselves lost in big city centers (NAFC, 2017). The local friendship center and places like it, do not have to simply be resources we refer families to for support. They can also serve as places of support for us as social workers.

I started attending the Victoria Native Friendship Center (VNFC) during the final year of my undergraduate degree. I felt the need to connect and perhaps this was motivated by my thinking around almost being done school and not having that community to rely on anymore. I then successfully applied for a job as the Youth and Family Counsellor at the VNFC before moving over to MCFD as a social worker. Ever since that time and even as an MCFD social worker, I continued to attend events there. These included loonie-toonies and other fundraising events, reconciliation initiatives,

lunches, Cree language class, ceremonies, etc. I now consider many of the people I met along the way as close friends or sisters. The literature talks a lot about the importance of creating a support network, or relational permanence, for children and youth in care (RCYBC, 2018), but it is equally important for social workers to not only have their teams to rely on. That informal, community-level support network is invaluable and translates well to planning for children and youth in care, or safety planning with families, when we have experienced the benefits ourselves. One does not have to look far nor be part of a drum group to experience a sense of community, belonging or nationhood. My participation in drum group certainly has provided that ability to rely on an informal support network for anything. This goes both ways too. I love being called on to help process fish, or pick children up from school, or to attend the hospital to sing for someone we know who is struggling. As social workers, involving ourselves in activities like these can both help to support our own wellness but the wellness of communities at the same time.

When I attended the performance by Maliseet singer and composer, and Juno award winner, Jeremy Dutcher, on March 8, 2019, I was reminded of the existential way culture and music is helping us to reclaim who we are. In one of Dutcher's songs called Eqpahak, there is a background reel of an Elder from his nation, Maggie Paul, speaking about the return of songs and culture to their nation. I cannot imagine doing it justice here, in writing, but I will type out a piece of the interview within that reel that really spoke to me about reclamation on a nation-level and how it is such an exciting time for Nations.

Maggie Paul: "I'd like to learn all the songs that the people sang here, I'd like to listen to those and sing those. People will be singing. You know,

there's not only me, there's a lot of people bringing the songs back and when you bring the songs back, you're going to bring the dances back, you're going to bring the people back, you're going to bring everything back. It would be just like when we first started, we brought the music back, we brought the drum back, sweat lodges are here, tipis are going up all over the place; wigwams, people are making wigwams."

Jeremy Dutcher: "So you think music had a lot to do with that, bringing that back?"

Maggie Paul: "oh yea, you got that right, yea, it sure does! Music will bring you back... the ancestors that have [gone] before know the songs. They're listening. And they're so happy because we're singing them again...because they thought that they would never hear them again. That's right, that's what they thought" (Dutcher, 2018, track 3)

Here, from the perspective of a community Elder, we can see how powerful connection to culture is (which in this case is the practice of song, dance and language). The community, in this case, is being revitalized by a commitment to bring culture back to the forefront. Maggie Paul (2018) suggests that when we sing, it is as far-reaching as our ancestors and that they too benefit from the reclamation of culture and traditional ways of being. Something that has this level of impact has to be forefront in our lives if we are ever going to be able to reclaim those traditional ways of caring for children and to ensure that future generations are taken care of.

The harm caused by residential schools and the 60's scoop has not come to an end, especially with what is now being coined as the "Millennial Scoop," born out of a very recent statement of claim on behalf of Indigenous youth, filed this spring (Sotos LLP, 2019, March 08). This refers to those children removed from their families within the last almost thirty years, with rates being higher, at times, than they were in the 1960's. Perhaps these considerations were the motivation for shifts in practice. I hope that I have highlighted how and why policy and practice is shifting, and how this creates hopefulness for change and what this may mean for our communities.

That age-old adage of “it takes a village to raise a child” certainly resonates with me and many others based on rhetoric I continue to hear in the community, at conferences and other training initiatives. This is directly related to those traditional teachings around caring for our own young ones. I have witnessed, first-hand, the benefits over the years of family and community placements and even regular trips to home communities. From what I have witnessed, children-in-care who feel completely comfortable walking into grandma’s house on the reserve for a visit and a chat, for example, are more likely to be grounded in their own sense of belonging and seem to have better outcomes. It sounds like a small gesture but belonging is such an integral part of wellness (Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009). Our nations are founded on the wellbeing and nurturing of children, as our most precious and sacred gifts (Hart, 2002), and their families have a significant role to play in that. We need to do better. Communities should not have to feel that they are losing children. Having most of our children placed in stranger care, or in non-Indigenous homes is not acceptable. Building capacity in the community requires a commitment and resources that are currently grossly under-funded, and often requires creative, “outside-the-box” thinking.

We have a responsibility to practice care and support for everyone, within both our own lives and those in our communities. People in positions of power within nations also have a responsibility to build positive relationships with their community members, and particularly those in leadership roles within the child welfare field. This requires practice shifts that come from consultation with team leaders and directors. If social workers are not urged to practice this way from a place of supervision, it likely will not happen.

As a child protection worker, I relied heavily on nation support to ensure safety. Collaborative planning, or so it is called these days, is the most efficient way of developing any kind of safety plan that includes family and community. Family case planning conferences can serve as a way to bring people together in decision-making: a process that has existed in Indigenous communities for far longer than we know. Signs of Safety, which MCFD has steered clear from in the last decade or so, speaks to the efficiencies of collaborative decision-making processes (Turnell, 2004). These can include plans for a chief or council member to supervise visits in a home down the street, or for a cousin to step forward to care for a child in their family on an interim basis, or for social workers to be held accountable to consultation with the nation with a third-party and non-biased facilitator. When social workers have given that time and energy to building relationships and are active members of the community, these collaborative processes are built on a strong foundation of trust and respect and are often started by simply picking up the phone. They are organic ways of ensuring the best interests of children, families and nations are met and that no Indigenous child ever has to experience the same types of trauma that their parents and grandparents may have experienced.

I am so fortunate to have the role I have within an agency that really prioritizes wellness on all levels. I am grateful to be a part of a drum group that works to heal the community in a way that is separate from social work practice but also very close to it. I am also so grateful to the wonderful teachers I have encountered on this journey both personally and professionally in the field of Indigenous social work.

Ekosi: Conclusion

I think we can all agree that, given our history in this province and commitments to reconciliation, Indigenous children, families and nations deserve better. It is our responsibility as social workers to ensure that generations of trauma caused by the child welfare system is rectified and that further harm is avoided. There is such strength and resiliency that exists within Indigenous culture, and within ourselves. My experience with nurturing my own cultural identity has urged me to embrace traditional values on a very personal level. Composing this honour song and writing my story has been a very grounding and humbling process. Every time I sing the song, I am reminded to move forward in a way that is grounded in traditional ways of being: honouring relatedness and connection, holding children at the center as our most sacred gifts, keeping culture at the center of decision-making, and keeping families together using everything in our power.

Approaching social work in this way directly impacts my own wellness, and vice versa, when I leave work knowing I adhered to my own values and the values of my community. This impacts every facet of how I walk in the world and ultimately, my social work practice. I leave work in a grounded place, knowing that I have made decisions that have kept culture at the center. This keeps me focused, and well; I do not often feel burnt-out and when I do, it is largely due to frustration with systemic barriers and has little to do with the presenting safety issues or the children and families I work with. We need to (and be supported to) approach practice that is grounded in traditional ways of being if we are ever to be expected to engage in reconciliatory practice or any type of meaningful healing. Knowing and feeling what connection and belonging has meant for me, as an Indigenous person in an urban setting, has embedded itself within my

practice. This is particularly true for ensuring cultural safety for Indigenous children and youth in care.

Through explaining my personal experiences, my best hope is that social workers from all walks of life can really and truly take the time to explore their own wellness and how this might translate into their practice. Wellness is subjective and certainly does not have to look like what I have described here. At the very least, I hope that workers take time to learn what connection to family and culture really means, what it looks like for the families we work with, and how it needs to be the foundation of our practice as social workers. Managers, supervisors and directors are being encouraged to explore a shift in practice in this province and I urge those in positions of power to explore their own impact on front-line work, and how their direction can either form trusting relationships or completely ruin them.

When I reflect on this process of putting these thoughts into words, I am truly humbled by the opportunities I have been given that have contributed to getting to this place. If I could continue this work, I would likely want to interview people: service providers and service recipients, to get more of a global sense of specific and tangible changes that could positively impact experiences and wellness. When I think of the level of this kind of work, I imagine it would require a research team, a significant budget and a whole lot of time. But for now, I am committed to move forward in my work as a team leader in a good way, to encourage the social workers I work with to continue walking in a culturally-grounded way, and to sing! I will continue to engage in meaningful conversations with those I work with at a provincial level and will continue to provide opportunities for social workers to engage in their own healing as it relates to culture. I

will make best efforts to teach the song to social workers around the province through opportunities I have at conferences, training initiatives, and during visits to agencies, MCFD offices and provincial office.

My hope is that social workers can find kiyam in whatever form that sense of balance and peace comes in. My hope is that we can continue defending children (kispêwêw awasowin) and their rights, particularly when it comes to the right to be connected to family, community and culture. My hope is that families will continue to be supported to step forward and care for children through familial systems of wahkohtowin, as we know outcomes are better for those children and youth with a strong sense of identity and belonging. And my final hope is that we keep that love (kisâkihitin) in our hearts for the children and families we walk alongside even if this involves unlearning, or expanding what we know to be good social work practice.

I had a manager once, who said: “you can only support your clients as far as you have gone yourself”, which rings more true to me now than ever before. The song is a good place to start.

References

- Absolon, K., & Willett, C. (2005). Putting ourselves forward: Location in Aboriginal research. In Brown, L., & Strega, S. (Eds.), *Research as Resistance* (pp. 97-126). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Absolon, K. (2009). Navigating the landscape of practice: Dbaagmowin of a helper. In R. Sinclair, M.A. Hart & G. Bruyere (Eds.), *Wicihitowin: Aboriginal social work in Canada* (pp. 172-199). Black Point, N.S.; Winnipeg: Fernwood Pub.
- Absolon, K. (2011). *Kaandossiwin: How we come to know*. Black Point, N.S.; Winnipeg: Fernwood Pub.
- Adams, T. E., Holman-Jones, S. & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography: Understanding qualitative research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Amadahy, Z. (2003). The healing power of women's voices. In K. Anderson & B. Lawrence (Eds.), *Strong women stories: Native vision and community survival* (pp. 144-155). Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Anderson, K. (2000). *A recognition of being: Reconstructing native womanhood*. Toronto: Second Story Press.
- Anderson, K. & Lawrence, B. (2003). *Strong women stories: Native vision and community survival*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Apihtawikosisan (2011, October 24). Cree kinship terms [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <https://apihtawikosisan.com/2011/10/cree-kinship-terms/>
- Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body and spirit*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Baskin, C. (2011). *Strong helpers' teachings: The value of indigenous knowledges in the helping professions*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Baskin, C. (2016). *Strong helpers' teachings: The value of indigenous knowledges in the helping professions* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Bennett, K. (2015). Cultural permanence for indigenous children and youth: Reflections from a delegated aboriginal agency in British Columbia. *First Peoples' Child and Family Review*, 10 (1), 99-115. Retrieved from: <http://journals.sfu.ca/fpcfrr/index.php/FPCFR/article/view/243/232>
- Blackstock, C. (2015). Should Governments be above the Law? The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on First Nations Child Welfare. *Children Australia*, 40, 95-103.

- Blackstock, C. (2018, November). Spirit bear's guide to reconciliation: Talk by Dr. Cindy Blackstock. University of Victoria, BC, Canada.
- Brass, G. (2009). Respecting the medicines: Narrating an aboriginal identity. In *Healing Traditions: The Mental Health of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, L. Kirmayer and G. Valaskakis (Eds.), 355-80. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Brendtro, L. K., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (2005). The circle of courage and positive psychology. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 14 (3), 30-136.
- Bride, B. E. (2007). Prevalence of secondary traumatic stress among social workers. *Social Work*, 52 (1), 63-70. Retrieved from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com>
- Brown, L. & Strega, S. (2005). *Research as resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Carriere, J. (2007). *You Should Know That I Trust You: Cultural Planning, Aboriginal Children and Adoption*. Retrieved on August 6, 2016 from: <http://www.metiscommission.com/PDF/You%20Should%20Know%20that%20I%20Trust%20You%20Phase3%20March%2030%20Edits.pdf>
- Carriere, J. (2010). YTSA families: Their experiences and recommendations for practice. In J. Carriere (Ed.), *Aski awasis / children of the earth* (pp.105-120). Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Pub.
- Carriere, J. (2015). Lessons learned from the Yellowhead tribal services agency open custom adoption program. *First Peoples' Child and Family Review* 10 (1), 39-51. Retrieved from: journals.sfu.ca/fpcfr/index.php/FPCFR/article/download/241/222
- Carriere, J., Richardson, C. (2009). A Drop of Longing: Attachment Theory, Connectedness, and Indigenous Children in Canada. In *Passion for Action in Child and Family Services Voices From the Prairies*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center University of Regina.
- Carriere, J., Richardson, C. (2017). *Calling our families home: Metis peoples' experiences with child welfare*. Vernon, BC: JCharlton Publishing Ltd.
- Carriere, J. & Sinclair, R. (2009). Considerations for cultural planning and Indigenous adoptions. In S. Strega & J. Carriere (Eds.), *Walking this path together : Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice* (pp. 257-272). Black Point, N.S: Fernwood Pub.
- Child, Family and Community Services Act (RSBC 1996) (enacted).
- Cuthand, D. (2007). *Askiwina: A cree world*. Coteau Books: Regina.
- De Finney, S. & Di Tomasso, L. (2015). Expanding notions of permanency with

- indigenous youth in care. In J. Carriere and S. Strega (Eds.), *Walking this path together: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice*. (2nd ed., pp. 240-266). Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood.
- Dutcher, J. (2018). Eqpahak. On *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*, [Record]. Toronto, Ontario: Union Sound, Studio PM.
- Episkenew, J. (2009). *Taking back our spirits: Indigenous literature, public policy and healing*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Feduniw, A. (2009). Supporting youth in care through anti-oppressive practice. In S. Strega & J. Carriere (Eds.), *Walking this path together : Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice* (pp. 158-172). Black Point, N.S: Fernwood Pub.
- Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P. & Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 14 (4), 245-258.
- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., McDermott, F. & Davidson, L. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 36 (6), 717-732.
- Fournier, S., & Crey, E. (1997). *Stolen from our embrace: The abduction of first nations children and the restoration of aboriginal communities*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Fraser, H. (2009). Trying to complete socially just, politically sensitive social work research. *Journal of Social Work* 9 (1), 87-98.
- Graveline, F. J. (1998). *Circle works: Transforming eurocentric consciousness*. Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood.
- Hari, J. (July, 2015). *Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong* [Video file]. Retrieved from:
https://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong/up-next
- Hart, M. (2002). *Seeking mino-pimatisiwin: An aboriginal approach to helping*. Halifax, N.S: Fernwood.
- Hart, M. (2009). Anti-colonial indigenous social work: Reflections on an aboriginal approach. In R. Sinclair, M.A. Hart & G. Bruyere (Eds.), *Wicihitowin: Aboriginal social work in Canada* (pp. 25-41). Black Point, N.S.; Winnipeg: Fernwood Pub.

- John, E., Grand Chief. (2016). *Indigenous resilience, connectedness, and reunification: From root causes to root solutions*. Retrieved from: <http://fns.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Final-Report-of-Grand-Chief-Ed-John-re-Indig-Child-Welfare-in-BC-November-2016.pdf>
- Kimpson, S. A. (2005). Stepping off the road: A narrative (of) inquiry. In Brown, L., & Strega, S. (Eds.), *Research as Resistance* (pp. 73-96). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Kirmayer, L. J., Tait, C. L., & Simpson, C. (2009). The mental health of aboriginal peoples in Canada: Transformations of identity and Community. In L. J. Kirmayer and Gail G. Valaskakis (Eds.), *Healing traditions: The mental health of aboriginal people in Canada*. (pp.3-35). Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press.
- Linklater, R. (2014). *Decolonizing trauma work: Indigenous stories and strategies*. Halifax: Fernwood Pub.
- Majore, D. (2013). *Medicine wheel journey: An autobiographical approach to developing an Indigenous-centered helping framework* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada.
- Mate, G. (2004). *When the body says no: The cost of hidden stress*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- Mate, G. (2009). *In the realm of hungry ghosts: Close encounters with addiction*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- Ministry of Children and Family Development & Caring for First Nations Children Society (2005). *Aboriginal operational and practice standards and indicators: Operational standards*. Retrieved from: <http://icwrn.uvic.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2013/10/practice-standards.pdf>
- Ministry of Children and Family Development (2017). *Aboriginal policy and practice framework*. Retrieved from: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/child-care/aboriginal/abframework.pdf>
- Ministry of Children and Family Development (2018). *CFCSA proposed amendments*. Retrieved from the BC Assembly of First Nations website: http://bcfn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2-CFCSA-Proposed-Amendments-_February-22-2018.pdf
- National Association of Friendship Centers: History (2017). Retrieved from: <https://nafc.ca/en/who-we-are/history/>
- Nehiyaw Masinahikan: Online Cree Dictionary. (2019). Retrieved from: <http://www.creedictionary.com>

- Peacock, C. (2009). Practising from the heart. In S. Strega & J. Carriere (Eds.), *Walking this path together: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice* (pp. 273-292). Black Point, N.S: Fernwood Pub.
- Potts, K., & Brown, L. (2005). Becoming an anti-oppressive researcher. In Brown, L., & Strega, S. (Eds.), *Research as Resistance* (pp. 255-286). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Province of British Columbia: Office of the Premier. (2019). *Caregivers for BC's most vulnerable get first pay increase in a decade* [Press release]. Retrieved from: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2019PREM0023-000294>
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2008). *Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect: Major findings*. Ottawa, 2010. Retrieved from: <http://cwrp.ca/sites/default/files/publications/en/CIS-2008-rprt-eng.pdf>
- Ratt, S. (2016). *Maci-nehiyawewin: Beginning cree*. Regina: University of Regina Press.
- Representative for Children and Youth (2018). Annual report 2017/18 and service plan 2018/19 to 2019/20. Retrieved from: https://rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/rcy-arsp-2017-18_web_final.pdf
- Representative for Children and Youth (2013). When talk trumped service: A decade of lost opportunity for aboriginal children and youth in BC. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/reports/monitoring-reports/when-talk-trumped-service-decade-lost>.
- Representative for Children and Youth (2015). The thin front line: MCFD staffing crunch leaves social workers over-burdened, B.C. children under-protected. Retrieved from: https://www.rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/rcy-thinfrontline-oct2015-final.pdf
- Representative for Children and Youth (2018). Relationships matter for youth “aging out” of care. Retrieved from: https://rcybc.ca/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/reports_publications/relationships_matter_research_report_fall_2018_final_0.pdf
- Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., Barlow, A. & Brown, E. (2005). Supporting young peoples’ transitions from care: reflections on doing participatory action research with youth from care. In Brown, L., & Strega, S. (Eds.), *Research as Resistance* (pp. 153-181). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Schwager, L. (2003). The drum keeps beating: Recovering a Mohawk identity. In K. Anderson and B. Lawrence (Eds.), *Strong women stories: Native vision and community survival* (pp. 37-54). Toronto: Sumach Press.

- Sinclair, R. (2009). Identity or racism? Aboriginal trans-racial adoption. In R. Sinclair, M.A. Hart & G. Bruyere (Eds.), *Wicihitowin: Aboriginal social work in Canada* (pp. 89-113). Black Point, N.S.; Winnipeg: Fernwood Pub.
- Sinclair, R. (2016). The Indigenous child removal system in Canada: An examination of legal decision-making and racial bias. *First Peoples' Child and Family Review* 11 (2), 8-18.
- Sinclair, R. & Carriere, J. (2015). Honouring adoptee rights: Towards anti-oppression in indigenous adoption. In J. Carriere and S. Strega (Eds.), *Walking this path together: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice*. (2nd ed., pp. 267-285). Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood.
- Smith, A. (2019, February 25). *Wahkohtowin: A cree way of living*. Cree Literacy Network. Retrieved from: <https://theyee.ca/News/2019/02/25/Cree-Way-of-Living/>
- Sotos, LLP. (2019, March 08). *Class action against the government of Canada brought on behalf of first nations youth*. Retrieved from: <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/class-action-against-the-government-of-canada-brought-on-behalf-of-first-nations-youth-816218905.html>
- St-Denis, N. & Walsh, C. (2016). Reclaiming my indigenous identity and the emerging warrior: An autoethnography. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* 5 (1), 1-17.
- Statistics Canada. (2017). *Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Key results from the 2016 census*. Retrieved August 15, 2019 from Statistics Canada: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025a-eng.htm>
- Strega, S. (2005). The view from the post-structural margins: Epistemology and methodology reconsidered. In Brown, L., & Strega, S. (Eds.), *Research as Resistance* (pp. 1-18). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Strega, S. (2009). Anti-oppressive approaches to assessment, risk assessment and file recording. In Strega, S., & Carriere, J. (Eds.), *Walking this Path Together: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice* (pp.142-154). Black Point N.S.: Fernwood Pub.
- Strega, S., & Carriere, J. (2009). *Walking this path together: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice*. Black Point N.S.: Fernwood Pub.
- Thomas, Q. R. A. (2000). *Storytelling in the spirit of wise woman: Experiences of kuper island residential school* (Order No. MQ52810). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ University of Victoria. (304633579). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/304633579?accountid=14846>

- Thomas, Q. R. A. (2005). Honouring the oral traditions of my ancestors through storytelling. In Brown, L., & Strega, S. (Eds.), *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches* (pp. 237-254). Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Thomas, R. & Green, J. (2015). Indigenous children in the centre: Indigenous perspectives on anti-oppressive child welfare practice. In J. Carriere and S. Strega (Eds.), *Walking this path together: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive child welfare practice*. (2nd ed., pp. 25-42). Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood.
- Thomas, R. (2018). *Protecting the sacred cycle: Indigenous women and leadership*. Vernon, BC: J. Charlton Pub.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and reconciliation commission of Canada: Calls to action*. Retrieved from: http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- Turnell, A. (2004). Relationship-grounded, safety-organised child protection practice: dreamtime or real-time option for child welfare? *Protecting Children*, 19(2). (pp. 14–25).
- United Nations (2008). UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Retrieved from: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf
- Walmsley, C. (2005). *Protecting aboriginal children*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood Pub.
- Zainab, A. (2003). The healing power of women's voices. In K. Anderson and B. Lawrence (Eds.), *Strong women stories: Native vision and community survival* (pp. 144-155). Toronto: Sumach Press.

Appendix A

Hay Hay: Social Worker Honour Song Lyrics (with phonetics):

Way-ah Hay-ah-oh Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya
Way-ah Hay-ah-oh Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya

Kiy-am Way-ah-oh Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, kiy-am Way-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya
Kiy-am Way-ah-oh Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, kiy-am Way-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya

Kispe-wew-Awaso-win, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya
Kispe-wew-Awaso-win, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya

Wah-koh-towin, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, wah-koh-towin, Way-ah, Hi-ya
Wah-koh-towin, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, wah-koh-towin, Way-ah, Hi-ya

Kisa-kihitin, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, kisa-kihitin, Way-ah, Hi-ya
Kisa-kihitin, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, kisa-kihitin, Way-ah, Hi-ya

Way-ah Hay-ah-oh Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya
Way-ah Hay-ah-oh Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah Hay-ah-oh, Way-ah, Hi-ya