Cultural Permanence for Indigenous Children and Youth in Care:
Advancing Knowledge and Current Practices for
Promoting Resiliency and Belonging

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with cultural connection and its role in creating cultural permanence when planning for Indigenous children and youth in care. Its goal is to mitigate the current path of disconnection and imbalance for Indigenous children and youth in care and to recommend an ecological, holistic approach to child welfare practice. It comprises a literature review that documents theories and practices to support belonging, cultural permanence, and cultural identity for Indigenous children while supporting meaningful connections with family, culture, and community. This information and analysis will be applied to the care of children and youth being served by Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCS) in British Columbia. The study's findings will highlight guidance to assist social workers in centering cultural traditions that promote cultural strengths, resiliency, and a sense of belonging for Indigenous children and youth. This thesis will provide suggestions for interacting with the Indigenous community, parents, relatives, workers, and other delegated agencies. Finally, this thesis will explore how one social worker's dream influences the direction of her practice to build on cultural strengths and spiritual resiliency.

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Acknowledgements

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the children and youth in care. My dream is that this thesis will contribute to their well-being and resiliency.

This logo, adapted from one created by NIFCS staff, foster parents, and a foster child at a community training discussion in Terrace cosponsored by the Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network (ICWRN) and NIFCS, represents the agency's vision of providing cultural connections for children in permanent care. The tree's trunk represents culture, community, family, and Elders' hands holding up the children and youth in care. Other cultural meanings can also be drawn from it.

Chapter 1: Dreaming a Better Future for Indigenous Children

Indigenous researchers have documented the tragedies and travesties of child welfare practice for Indigenous children and families (Blackstock, 2009; Carriere & Richardson, 2009; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Richardson, 2008, 2013; Thomas, 2011; Turpel-Lafond, 2013). Colonialism and its destructive social work practice, resulting in many destroyed relationships between Indigenous children and their birth families, have come under increased scrutiny and criticism in recent years by Indigenous scholars and practitioners. The processes and outcomes of government child welfare services have never been acceptable to Indigenous families, who have been left without recourse when their children have been taken into care. While stories of child-welfare-related suffering abound, they are not the topic of this thesis. Instead, it is the goal of this research to explore the literature and knowledge produced by Indigenous scholars, agencies, advocates, and policy makers who possess an anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, pro-Indigenous approach to child welfare and family work. I focus on exploring the literature written by Indigenous scholars in adoptions and child welfare, such as Cindy Blackstock (2009), Jeannine Carriere (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008, 2010), Sandrina de Finney (di Tomasso, de Finney, & Grzybowski, 2012), Cathy Richardson (2008a, 2008b, 2009; Richardson & Nelson, 2007; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009; Richardson & Wade, 2008, 2012), and Robina Thomas (2005, 2011). Indigenous researchers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Shawn Wilson (2008) talk about sacred processes that are embedded in Indigenous research, such as witnessing, testimonials, storytelling, and ceremony. Indigenous knowledge can be celebrated and acknowledged for the time, energy, and lifeblood of Indigenous researchers who have personally experienced many of the trials

related to colonialism that are documented in the literature. Highlighting excellence and innovation in Indigenous child welfare can be a form of celebration if it serves to improve the lives of Indigenous children and their communities.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to document and create understandings about the policies and practices that social workers and Aboriginal child welfare agencies can activate to promote ongoing connections for Indigenous children and youth in care. I aim to highlight practice that creates positive outcomes and lifelong well-being for these young people. More particularly, I am interested in documenting, organizing, and highlighting knowledge that can be applied in the agency where I serve as executive director, Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCS) on the northwest coast of British Columbia. Like many agencies that serve Indigenous children and families, NIFCS seeks to overcome the barriers to positive outcomes for children and youth in care. These challenges include insufficient government funding to support cultural connections and an absence of clearly articulated policy, guidelines, and training to support cultural plans. Like many agencies, we also strive to achieve excellence in the work of promoting well-being, connection, belonging, and overall successful outcomes for the Indigenous children and youth who come into care. The BC Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, emphasized in her March 2013 report that children and youth in care need "much more than paperwork"; they need "meaningful planning that will help them overcome the challenges they face and build the resilience and life skills they need to be successful, to finish school and to move on to productive and positive adult lives" (p. 96). NIFCS intends to address this

deficit in a systematic, strategic manner through regular monthly tracking with social workers to ensure that cultural plans of care (CPOCs) are individually tailored to each child's needs and completed collaboratively with school professionals, family, extended family members, and other significant professionals who are part of the child's life.

My intent with this thesis is to create a body of knowledge that can be helpful and promote advances in social work that reflect the highest values and ethics pertaining to the rights of Indigenous children that are so seriously overlooked in Canada (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2007). All children and youth in BC under the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (or a delegated Aboriginal agency or Community Living BC) have rights that are set out in section 70 of the provincial Child, Family, and Community Services Act (CFCSA; Government of British Columbia, 2007), which was developed from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, 1989). All planning for children and youth in care must be guided by the best interest statements outlined in the CFCSA. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that there are policies with adequate funding to support solid practice that honours cultural strengths and cultural resiliency to help strengthen the cultural roots of, and promote cultural pride in, Indigenous children in care in Canada.

Background

To support my goal of advancing knowledge and practices for promoting resiliency and belonging for Indigenous children and youth in care, I decided to analyze the existing Indigenous-centred literature related to this topic. It is apparent that many good hearts and minds have been considering this topic for quite some time (e.g.,

Bennett, 2004; Bruyere, Hart, & Sinclair, 2009; Green & Thomas, 2005; Hart, 2007; Sinclair, 2007; Indigenous Child Well-Being Research Network, 2011).

As an ally to Indigenous people, I have worked in social services for fourteen years, primarily with nine Indigenous communities on the Northwest Coast: Metlakatla Band, Lax Kw'alaams Band, Gitga'at Band (Hartley Bay), Kitamaat Village Council, Gitxaala Nation (Kitkatla Band), Kitsumkalum Band, Kitselas Band, Iskut Village Council Band, and Telegraph Creek Band. These communities are member bands of an Aboriginal delegated child welfare agency, Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society.

My background, although in a different context, contains some parallels to the circumstances of Indigenous children in Canada. I grew up with a single mother, six older siblings, and several nieces and nephews who were similar in age to me in the Caribbean island of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. As a black Caribbean/African woman, my ancestors were colonized slaves. I share similar sufferings with Indigenous groups all over the world, and have experienced racism, colonization, genocide of my people, and denial of basic human rights. I have personally experienced poverty-related neglect and physical beatings at home and at school that were considered discipline within that cultural context. I experienced extreme difficulties in my childhood and teen years and relied on spirituality, friends from church, and love and caring from older siblings as a creative means to respond to poverty and other difficult issues. I became resilient by drawing on my own family, cultural, and spiritual strengths, and I have been able to achieve a modicum of success as an adult. My own personal experience teaches me that

unfortunate life circumstances do not necessarily have to define and enslave, though they may impact my life at different times and places.

For these reasons, I can relate to the situation of Indigenous children who live in challenging situations, and I am passionate about nurturing positive social circumstances for them through my chosen field. I was drawn to child welfare work in the belief that human beings are created noble, with an inner, innate essence of dignity, and that they are capable both of achieving excellence in varying degrees in their lives and contributing to excellence in the lives of others.

My work as executive director within a delegated Aboriginal agency places me in the position of an insider to my research topic. At the same time, I am a cultural outsider. However, I have a deep relation to the issues explored in this thesis, which will inform my analysis even while I uphold the appropriate distance as researcher in order to have "fresh eyes" to see what has not yet become obvious.

Dreaming the Thesis into Being

Recently I had two dreams that have stayed with me, provoking me to think and wonder as I have engaged in researching and writing my master's thesis. In the first dream, I entered a large, open plain where many Indigenous people were gathered. A Chief, dressed in his full regalia, was speaking to the crowd. When he saw me enter, he welcomed me and asked me to join them. Three teepees were erected, and I went into the middle one. Inside, Indigenous people were sitting, singing, and drumming. I sat with them in the teepee lodge and participated in the ceremony.

I remember thinking in my dream that the Chief has invited me in wholeheartedly. I felt very welcomed, and there was a meeting of the spirit, a human connection that

words are inadequate to describe. I do believe that there is a sacred oneness between and among all humans, no matter what our material, physical, social, cultural, political, religious, economic, geographical, environmental, and other real and imagined differences are. Sometimes I wonder if the oneness I felt in the dream transcends difference and connects all people at a level of caring, respect, love, and dignity. I feel we are all created to embody these qualities.

Those were my feelings in the dream as I experienced being with a group of people who were different from me in many ways. I was profoundly moved by the experience. I am prompted to ask, might the Indigenous peoples of the world, of Canada, be the leaders in teaching, promoting, and living these profound spiritual values as role models for others to emulate? Unfortunately, we human beings use differences such as skin colour, religion, economics, politics, cultural practices, geography, nationalism (and other insidious, false, imagined ones such as racial superiority) as reasons and justifications to oppress, colonize, and denigrate each other. Instead we should practice openness, caring, respect, love, and dignity towards one another. However, it is a fact of reality that distinctness creates diverse cultures. In my daily life as a black Caribbean woman living in Canada in a biracial marriage, I creatively find ways to manage these complex diversities. By managing diversities, I mean learning to navigate differences by resisting being polarized within extremes of assimilation or excessive individualism. I feel the answer is in the middle—how to be true to who I am, to understand that my environment can influence me but also knowing that I can influence my environment as well. However, managing complexities in another culture different from one's own is not an easy task. For example, I don't remember experiencing racism growing up, even

though my country has a colonial past. The majority of the people are black and the health, education, and economic systems are run mainly by black people. My experience in Canada is different. Here I experience covert and overt racism and blatant racist comments. Some people think I have no personal merit for professional advancement and that I have been favoured because of affirmative action. A question I ask myself is, how can I use my personal experiences to assist Indigenous children and youth in care who have to interact with many exclusions, racisms, and diversities in their daily lives? By diversities I mean that children and youth in care live in a variety of foster homes; some are Aboriginal homes but most are not. They interact with cross-cultural differences in their schools, stratified neighbourhoods, mixed-race heritage within themselves, etc. I think it is essential for social workers to demonstrate to children and youth the qualities of resiliency, courage, and strength that it takes on a daily basis to live in a challenging environment and world. It takes a lot of moral courage to manage the challenges and hardships associated with some of the things Indigenous youth and children face, such as racism and classism, and to appreciate and respect healthy diversities.

The mention of moral courage prompts this question: What can be done to instil, foster, and develop a sense of moral courage? Two strategies come to mind that might address this question. First, Richardson and Wade's (2010) model of response-based practice can serve as an example of attending to the need for moral courage by acknowledging and honouring what children and youth already know, do, and value about themselves and how they cope with and respond to oppression and difficulties in their lives. For example, some children and youth hold tenaciously to the thought and hope that their parents are coming to get them out of care. To practice with respect and

dignity would be to acknowledge to the child or youth that the ability to hope is a strength in a terrible situation like being removed from one's family and community. Social workers can honour hope as a strength without putting themselves in an ethical dilemma (such as being brutally honest and dashing a child's hopes to pieces, or telling them that they are in permanent care and that their parents have lost their rights, or by lying and promising the child that the parents will return to take them out of care without knowing that with any certainty). People who experience hardships may have a tendency to see themselves merely as victims; however, they can change the perception of themselves if significant people in their lives, such as social workers, can hold a mirror out to them to reflect small actions of strength, courage, and resistance to oppression. This acknowledgement of their inner wisdom can aid youth in developing resiliency.

Richardson and Wade's (2010) Medicine Wheel of Responses elucidates what it means to practice with dignity. Richardson and Wade explain that the underlying assumption of practising with dignity is to acknowledge that families and individuals have preexisting abilities to respond to adversity and resist oppression. In their model, practising with dignity is based on cultural values, acknowledgment, ever-present resistance to oppression, responses to adversity, and attending to processes that reassert affronted dignity from past encounters. They point out that whenever people are treated badly they resist in some way, and that resistance preserves their dignity. Further, family and individual successes can be eroded by negative social responses, particularly after disclosures of violence and requests for help. Thus social workers must be careful not to replicate dominance and colonization in the ways we interact with Aboriginal children and youth and their families (Wade, 1997).

Second, in answering the question of what is needed to develop, instil, and foster moral courage, I want to acknowledge that children in care vary in age from birth to 19 years, so anything that might be done to develop, instil, and foster moral courage must be considered within the context of children's different ages and developmental capacities and needs. For example, young children tend to be spontaneous with their learning, less autonomous than teenagers, and they are natural imitators who seek and want approval. Through role modelling, it is easy to instil in children certain attitudes, ideas, and actions whose validity they can test as they grow towards adult autonomy. Since social workers and foster parents spend more time with children in care than do the children's natural and extended families, they can be role models of moral courage for these young children by centering cultural knowledge in their daily work and honouring cultural strengths. Young children in care need to have opportunities to have visits with families and siblings. They need to be reassured that despite living in foster care, their family loves them and wants to spend time with them, whether visits are supervised or unsupervised. They need to spend time in their cultural communities learning the dances, songs, and games and language of their culture.

At the pre-youth stage of ages 11–14, children have very unique needs as they are somewhat between childhood and youth and many changes are occurring within them. At this stage they can be encouraged to take ownership of their spiritual and intellectual development, to develop a strong sense of purpose and the volition needed to make good decisions and to engage in meaningful social action in their communities, schools, and neighbourhoods (Junior Youth Group, n.d.). Cultural activities, such as participating in storytelling with Elders and/or talented storytellers, could help to engage the interest of

children of this age, while sports, recreation, movie nights, and discussion groups on relevant topics that impact, inspire, and interest them could help to build positive social skills. Engagement in community services projects like visiting the elderly and cleaning up the environment are some ways to instil and foster positive outcomes.

Through processes such as these, children and youth in care could be assisted to recognize the moral issues underlying everyday decisions and identify the moral implications of their speech and actions. These activities could help to channel their energies towards both strengthening their own character and supporting community building.

Youth in care between the ages of 15 and 19 are more autonomous; however, youth and young adults may have little if any desire for adult approval. In some cases youth do not seek to imitate adults and (whom they may regard as hypocritical, for example). The autonomy and growing sense of independence of young people this age makes many youth naturally inclined to resist and rebel against whatever comes from adults (Hatcher, 1998), so they may not willingly choose to engage in cultural activities and events that the social workers and communities may plan. The challenge then is to engage and involve youth in decisions about them. Therefore, special caution must be taken by social workers to talk to and treat youth as equals, to recognize and validate their experience of the world, including the pain, hypocrisy, and evil it contains, and to facilitate their acquisition of the intrinsic motivation to make moral choices and generate spiritual responses that could avert negative consequences (e.g., cycling through the criminal justice system, addictions, substance misuse, early teen pregnancies, school dropout, or involvement in gangs and violence) and instead experience balance and

spiritual well-being. Social workers, foster parents, spiritual leaders, healers, Elders, and extended family members must help youth to discover the spiritual passion and excitement involved in this process of intrinsic motivation rather than a sporadic motivation generated by outside pressures or periodic life crises. The goal is to explore cultural traditions and activities that can be explored to help youth tap into nurturing the quality of moral courage.

Youth as autonomous young adults are genuinely happy only when their capacities have been properly developed, and they will only change their behaviour, ideas, and attitudes when they consciously decide, on the basis of an intrinsic motivation, to change them (Hatcher, 1998). Thus any successful program of activities intended to encourage youth buy-in and involvement must account for their unique needs, treat them as equals, and plan with them, not for them. In short, it must interact with them with dignity. If youth resist their own culture, a social worker can probe gently and respectfully into the reasons for their resistance and then validate and honour their resistance knowing that Aboriginal people's cultural practice were disrespected, denigrated, and forbidden during the colonial period with loss of their land, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and a colonial child welfare system. Social workers can model moral courage by viewing resistance within this context of social justice and resistance to oppression rather than attributing youth's behaviours to personal failings and individual weaknesses. Richardson and Wade (2008) stress that dignity is central to individual and collective well-being, that social interaction is organized largely around dignity, and that even small slights can be met with intense responses.

Moral courage increases incrementally as children and youth in care increase their knowledge of who they are and experience a sense of belonging to culture and place. This experience could release positive emotions which engender self-love and motivate service to others. Encouraging children and youth to take small courageous steps gives them more energy to deal with whatever unforeseen difficulties may lie ahead, thus building their resiliency to deal with life stresses.

Many children and youth in care experience anxiety and fear about the stability of their placements, of aging out of care with tenuous connections to family and extended family, the stigma of being in care and being referred to as a foster child, experiences of discrimination, racism, and prejudice, and of making wrong decisions by hanging around the wrong crowd. If they are not assisted to manage their anxieties, doubts, and fears before they become unmanageable, their fears could erupt in negative outcomes, such as hostile and aggressive behaviours towards self and others, (Daniel, C. Jordan, p.32).

Social workers, in collaboration with family, community, and other professionals, can assist youth through creative means to use the energy of anxiety and fear to work towards specific goals instead of taking the easy way out and passing these issues over to a psychologist or psychiatrist for medical treatment. Daniel (1993) in his book, "Becoming Your True Self", states that the ability to formulate a goal and take steps toward achieving that goal is moral courage, that modelling moral courage in reducing general anxiety and doubt to manageable proportions (p.35). Social workers can help youth make sense of their history of colonization, residential schools, Sixties Scoop, child welfare system, and the world's present stage of perpetual crises. This means we must not pretend that the crises do not exist or refuse to face them. Understanding something of the

problems one faces not only reduces anxiety but builds courage. Courage, in turn, generates intentionality, the willingness and desire to act, a process of developing our innate capacity to sustain authentic relationships. Spiritual and cultural teachings, values, and moral education are processes of apprehending and expressing the value of humans as noble creations with the capacity to feel and show love (Hatcher, 1998).

Children and youth need confirmation from their Elders and their families that their different ways of knowing are what makes them who they are—unique, with talents, skills, and abilities to positively affect their own and others' lives. These diverse ways of knowing may include verbal support, cultural guidance, formal education, dreams, spiritual teachings, service to Elders and communities, and cultural practices like vision quests or sweat lodges. The fact that children and youth in care are disconnected from their families, extended families, communities, and culture—which provide a more natural setting for instilling, fostering, learning, and developing moral courage, cultural values and teachings, and positive, relational human virtues—means that it is absolutely imperative that the government child welfare services, acting in the capacity of legal parents, provide training and resources for social workers and foster parents to foster and nurture this need. Doing so requires working in partnership with families, extended families, community Elders, and other caring adults to help children and youth increase their knowledge about themselves, where they come from, and who they are connected to. Children and youth need to know that they are loved, that they matter, and that they have capacities and potential to participate in decisions about themselves and to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others.

As a non-Indigenous ally who works with Indigenous people, it is part of my Indigenous practice, as encouraged by Indigenous literature, to pay attention to all ways of knowing, including dreams. As Simpson (2008) says, "the first step to making something happen is often a dream or a vision. The importance of visioning and dreaming a better future based on our Indigenous traditions cannot be understated" (p. 84).

With this thesis—and in my work at NIFCS—I dream of a better future for Indigenous children and families. My dream is that children in NIFCS care and NIFCS communities will experience family, community, and cultural connections and have healthy, positive, successful outcomes in all domains of their lives. Simpson (2008) states that "the importance of visioning and dreaming a better future based on our indigenous traditions . . . cannot be underestimated. But according to our traditions, those visions or messages from our ancestors and Spirit World will be lost if they are not acted upon" (p. 84).

For a long time, I did not understand what my dream about the teepee lodge meant, but I now understand the Chief's welcome as NIFCS accepting me as a Ministry of Children and Family Development seconded employee. The seven years I have worked at the agency have afforded me a welcomed opportunity to be part of many cultural events and ceremonies that are part of Indigenous daily life. More importantly, they have allowed me to increase my knowledge about the diverse worldviews and histories and the spiritual and cultural values that influence the people of the Nations NIFCS serves. This increase in knowledge has helped to build my cultural competence to ensure that the agency provides culturally relevant and appropriate polices and practices

to children, youth, families, and communities. Having the opportunity to be guided by a full First Nations board and nine communities, I am able to carry out their mission, which is to ensure that the voices and needs of children and youth in care, their families, and their communities are central in all of our planning and goals.

Michael Hart, in "Indigenous Knowledge and Research: The Mikiwahp as a Symbol for Reclaiming our Knowledge and Ways of Knowing" (2007), describes how he sought out the wisdom of the Elders to help him understand the symbolic meaning of the structure of the tepee lodge. Because of the way the top of the tepee lodge is made and covered, it is difficult from the outside to see any details other than the poles. Hart notes:

> One of the ways to develop a better view of the entire lodge is to enter it, thus the lower opening of the lodge acts to welcome people into the lodge to get this view. Similarly outsiders can develop a fuller understanding of the collective and individual understanding by entering and joining the people. (p. 86)

Hart's explanation speaks to me and to my working and personal relationships with NIFCS communities. As a welcomed outsider, I have joined the communities that NIFCS serves. As an insider in my role as executive director of the agency, I have an opportunity to reciprocate learning and knowledge, especially in the area of social work practice that honours cultural values, teachings, and ceremonies that, in turn, foster belonging and well-being.

In the second dream that came to me while I have been working on this thesis, I dreamt I was standing under a tree with brilliant green foliage and many red fruit blossoms. I reached up and held a tree limb in my hand to pick one of the fruits. To my

surprise and amazement, many children tumbled out of the tree and started running in all directions. I frantically tried to gather them all together, and with the exception of two adolescent boys, I succeeded. I had mixed feelings about the boys' departure. I felt disappointed that I was unable to hold onto them to keep them safe like the others, and I also felt a sense of relief with the knowledge that I am unable to save everyone and, in fact, some people do not need saving. This idea of saving others is challenged by Richardson and Wade in their Islands of Safety response-based practice model, which states: "Islands of Safety embodies the right to self-determination, through attention to dignity, including autonomy, agency, and micro aspects implicated therein with culturally appropriate processes (p. 143). I had to learn that lesson of self-determination from the two boys in my dream. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada strongly assert the right to self-determination and are working toward it as decolonizing action and resistance against colonial rule.

Fig. 1. A tree not unlike the one in my dream. Source: Mabey (1999).

Both the teepee lodge and the tree are well-known symbols with concrete and abstract meanings for many Indigenous peoples. Tepees were used by nomadic peoples of the Great Plains and are not part of Northwest Coast cultures. However, red cedar trees are plentiful on the Northwest Coast and totem poles and house posts carved from them can be observed in communities throughout this region. As well, cedar trees have been used to make clothing, boxes, and baskets, for cooking, for making canoes for transportation, and for ceremonial purposes. In this thesis I use the dream symbols of the tepee lodge and the tree to guide my understanding of practices that connect tangible and intangible realities, such as social work practice and dreams.

Research Questions

In alignment with the purpose of this thesis, which is to document, organize, and highlight knowledge that can be applied at NIFCS, where I serve as executive director, my research seeks to find new knowledge from the published literature, from other, unpublished Indigenous sources, and from other delegated Aboriginal and Métis agencies. My research question is as follows: What are some **indicators of dignity** that would tell us at NIFCS if we are making headway in providing meaningful connections for the children and youth in our care?

Richardson and Wade (2010), in "Islands of Safety: Restoring Dignity in Violence Prevention Work," provide the following practice suggestions for social workers to emulate in their daily practice with children, youth, and families: provide freedom and autonomy; refrain from advice giving; give space for pursuing highest hopes and most outstanding aspirations; encourage youth to care for self, Elders; and others; restore dignity when affronted. Social workers must be willing to make amends, respect

self-governance in the context of colonization, and practice in the spirit of freedom and equality. Social workers who use an anti-oppressive approach in dialogue with youth can help them to change negative messages about themselves, their families, and their culture that they have internalized from others around them (p. 138). Richardson (2008b), in her article on Métis experiences of social work practice, presents a list of skills for decolonizing social work practice and encourages social workers to incorporate intentional anti-oppressive strategies by practicing the following: working with transparency; acknowledging the power they hold to affect the lives of children, youth, and their families; creating space for people to make their own decisions; supporting rather than undermining; creating safety rather than instilling fear; connecting rather than isolating; attending with compassion rather than ignoring; reintegrating and reconnecting rather than separating; making whole, not breaking apart; listening, not talking; esteeming, not humiliating; acknowledging and witnessing; truth-telling rather than silencing and hiding; being transparent in record keeping rather than concealing and destroying records; and using courts in favour of families instead of to facilitate loss of custody of their children (p. 116).

According to Carriere and Richardson (2013, citing Richardson, 2006, Richardson & Wade, 2008, Wade, 1997), dignity is central to the well-being of children and youth in care (p. 13). Wade and Richardson (2010) define dignity in social work practice as respectful attitudes and actions demonstrated by social workers and other helping professionals when they show that they understand that human beings are sentient beings who respond to events and diverse forms of oppression on a number of levels. Respecting dignity in social work practice involves honouring what people already believe, feel,

think, and do to create safety and pursue safety for themselves and others (p. 138).

Dignity and respect are essential qualities of our nobility as human beings. For

Indigenous people in Canada, these noble essences and qualities were eroded by

colonization, racism, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop[1], overrepresentation in the

child welfare system, and poverty, among other forces. For children and youth in care,

these erosions were exacerbated by multiple foster placements and removals, and by

disconnection from family, extended family, culture, and community. Social workers can

assist with building dignity for children and youth by showing respect for who they are as

Indigenous people. They can show respect by giving children and youth choices and

options, involving them in decisions about them, supporting them to maintain bonds with

their biological families (when possible) and their extended family and communities,

explaining to them their rights and ensuring that their rights are upheld, and involving

them in cultural ceremonies and traditions that teach respect, such as providing small acts

of service to their elders and the disabled. Since dignity is central to well-being for

Indigenous children and youth in care, it is important for practitioners to understand the

importance of applying this ethical principle, with daily awareness in their practice, not

only with the children and youth they work with but also with the young people's

families, extended families, and communities (Carriere & Richardson, 2013). Carriere

and Richardson (2013) state that "dignity is linked to Indigenous teachings about respect"

(p. 13); they cite Mohawk psychologist Clare Brant (1990) who wrote about "native

ethics of non-interference" in his work with Indigenous communities. These ethics relate

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[1] A term coined by Patrick Johnson (1983) to describe the huge numbers of adoptions of
Indigenous children in Canada between 1960 and the mid-1980s, when entire communities lost
their children to the child welfare system and stranger adoption.

to human dignity, to giving people choice and sovereignty in the decisions they make in their lives, knowing that it is the community's role to ensure that young people receive good teachings throughout their development (Carriere & Richardson, 2013, p. 13).

Social workers can help to build dignity by showing respect for the whole person of each child. Respect is a value that is taught in very tangible way in First Nations culture. Children and youth are taught to show respect to their Elders by showing deference to them, helping to seat them, giving a helping hand, serving them at social functions, providing companionship, and speaking respectfully.

Whenever NIFCS social workers support community and collective decision making in their practice, this is another indicator of practicing with dignity. Carriere and Richardson (2013) report that a number of Indigenous metaphors and models have been used to represent holistic wellness, including the medicine wheel. As described by Green and Thomas (2009), the medicine wheel is used to understand the holistic aspects of each human being—spiritual, emotional, physical, mental—which collectively make us who we are. The concept promotes balance between and among the wheel's four quadrants. The medicine wheel also represents the four colours of the four races of Mother Earth (red, yellow, black, white), the four seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter), and the four stages of life (infant, youth, adult, Elder). Green and Thomas explain that each of the representations has particular meanings for both life and anti-oppressive practice with Indigenous children and families. Richardson and Wade (2008, 2010) base their Medicine Wheel of Responses on this concept. Other metaphors and models that have been used to represent holistic wellness include the cedar tree, the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002), the Sacred Tree (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, &

Lane, 1984), and the Tree of Life (Carriere, 2011). And, while not an Indigenous model, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1979) can be a helpful bridge for considering the individual in relation to the family, community, society, and the earth.

I listed several models above to show respect for the diversity within Indigenous teachings and traditions. It is for the communities, children, youth, and families that NIFCS serves, as well as NIFCS board members and staff, to decide which cultural models and metaphors relate best to their specific values, bearing in mind that NIFCS works with three different nations: the Tahltan, Haisla, and Tsh'imshian Nations. Therefore models and metaphors will be different.

According to Richardson and Carriere (2013), attending to dignity means responding to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and intellectual needs of children and youth in care, with culture being the central focus that supports those other domains. Attending to human dignity requires social workers to understand each child's cultural context. Building on family and cultural strengths demonstrates respect for a child's personhood (Carriere & Richardson, 2013, p. 9). It would be good practice for NIFCS social workers to consult among themselves on the question of what the indicators of human dignity are, how we recognize them, and how we respond to them. Richardson and Wade (2008) in their article "Taking Resistance Seriously," write about the colonial container and response-based practice. Their community workshops teach frontline workers to attend to human dignity in social work practice. And, as an Indigenous model, Richardson's "Islands of Safety" (2009) model uses the Medicine Wheel of Responses (see Figure 2 below) to attend to human dignity when working with Indigenous families and Indigenous children and youth in care.
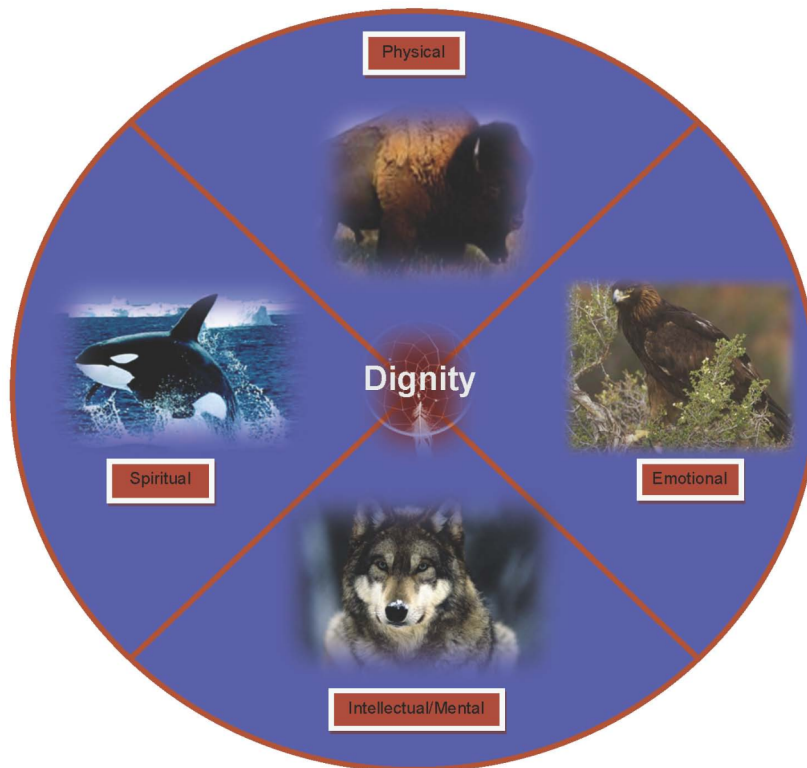
Source: Richardson (2010).

Fig. 2. Medicine wheel of responses.

Response-based practice (Richardson & Wade, 2008; Wade, 1997) has a lot to teach social workers about practice that pays attention to human dignity and to understanding what people already know and do to create safety. Asking strengths-based questions and focusing on the client's responses and resistance to oppression could be a superior approach to practice because it highlights preexisting knowledges, capacities, and preferences.

Richardson (2009) writes that the indicators of human dignity "can serve as a guide to a best practice with [Indigenous] families. Becoming knowledgeable about the signs of dignity and committing as a team or organization to place client dignity in the fore of all interactions" (p. 115) will help to build a strong foundation to the work.

Human dignity is mentioned repeatedly in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights(United Nations, 1984) in the context of safeguarding all human beings' dignity and rights. Article 1 of the declaration states: "All humans beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." This statement implies that dignity is essential to being human. Therefore, practicing with dignity is one of the principles that would guide practice at NIFCS. Building on this concept of practicing with dignity, what are some indicators of good, connective practice that attends to dignity? How can children grow strong roots—roots that connect underground to all the other roots?[2] How can children and youth blossom in ways that show their strength and beauty throughout their lives? What are some actual, achievable steps that NIFCS could take to achieve the vision of good outcomes for children and youth? Signs of dignity would be manifested in the following ways when children and youth experience dignity in the treatment they receive from their social workers and foster parents.

Children will express happiness through their smiles, brightness in their eyes, and relaxed muscles in their bodies whenever their need for connections is met through regular and ongoing visits and contact with their family, extended family, community, and culture. When children receive kindness, respect, encouragement, education, food, safety, and security, they feel balance, and they show this balance in such behaviours as helping others and being of service to their parents, Elders, and communities. They show less anxiety and fewer destructive behaviours. They are active in a purposeful manner.

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[2] As an example of connection to other roots, some children belong to more than one Nation.

When children are involved in their traditional ceremonies, they understand their identities and cultures. They carry themselves proudly, holding their heads and shoulders high, because they have a sense of cultural pride and belonging.

When families, extended family members, Elders, supportive family friends, and supportive professionals sit together with a child or youth and their social workers to plan for the present and future, including aging out of care, the child or youth would feel a sense of belonging in knowing they are not alone. Green and Thomas (2009) emphasize the skill of learning to listen and hear the stories of families we work with. By doing this we would be less inclined to feel we have to fix families, because we would hear the family's strengths and best hopes (p. 37).

When a child feels loved by someone and they love someone in return, they always want to be in that person's presence. When they feel cared about, children and youth want to be with their biological families, extended families, social workers, and care givers. Green and Thomas (2009) encourage social workers to practice in the traditions of the Elders and to practice from the heart as well as the head/mind. They state that when social workers practice from the heart, we feel all the pain and hurt the children and families we work with have felt. We then engage from a place of love and responsibility to protect these children and families (p. 40). Practicing from the heart enables social workers to practice with justice and compassion. These are two essential qualities that uphold human dignity.

Carriere and Richardson (2013), in their article "Relationship is Everything: Holistic Approaches to Aboriginal Child and Youth Mental Health," talk about dignity and its importance in the helping professions. Dignity practices form the foundation of

Richardson's response-based family practice with Indigenous communities (Richardson, 2006; Richardson &Wade, 2008, Wade, 1997). Richardson posits that dignity is central to well-being and that efforts to preserve dignity are often misinterpreted as symptoms or deficits. Carriere and Richardson emphasize that dignity is linked to Indigenous teachings about respect. Respect is demonstrated by giving Indigenous children, youth, and their families choices and sovereignty in decisions that affect their lives, knowing that it is the community's role to ensure that young people receive good teachings throughout their development (p. 13).

Social workers need not walk this path of practising with dignity alone or be overwhelmed by the task of giving families options. We are not expected to be holders of cultural knowledge and wisdom. Instead, the answers lie in seeking needed help from communities, Elders, families, and other caring adults. A model such as the Medicine Wheel of Responses, which is a holistic framework that supports the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of each child and youth, provides a conceptual and theoretical framework to guide practice with dignity.

Theoretical Framework

Being immersed in the Indigenous specialization of UVic's MSW program for the past four years has influenced my research paradigm, defined by Wilson (2008) as the beliefs that guide our actions as researchers. Since this research is about Indigenous children and youth in care, it is important to use an Indigenous lens to assess, understand, and describe cultural connection and its role in creating cultural permanence. As a researcher who is not Indigenous Canadian, I must remain self-reflective and open to being guided by Indigenous scholars to put my research and professional experience into

context. In relation to the topic, I am both an insider and an outsider. I am situated in the child welfare field, but I do not have membership in the Indigenous communities where I have worked, beyond being a "guest." Therefore, my theoretical framework is Indigenous scholarship and worldview as derived from Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Within this framework, I am guided by the ethics of Indigenous research and interaction (Battiste, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Brant, 1990; Castellano, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Thomas, 2005; Wilson, 2008). These ethics include practices outlined by Mohawk psychiatrist Clare Brant (1990), such as non-interference (e.g., refraining from advice giving and telling Indigenous people what they should be doing), protocols, sharing/collectivity, gratitude, respect, and expanded awareness of appropriate timing above and beyond the concept of Western time. Underlying these values are concepts of democracy and the equality of all individuals (Brant, 1990). In this context, the individual child and the "self" are seen as relational, as part of larger families, communities, clans and tribes. The child/individual must never be taken out of context. This accords with the child's rights as outlined by the United Nations (1989) in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, although there are few or no mechanisms in Canada to uphold these rights.

Methodology and Research Design

In undertaking this research, I followed the guidelines in the *Protocols & Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context* (University of Victoria, Faculty of Human and Social Development, 2003). The section that had the most applicability for me was #2, "Indigenous Peoples: Implications for Research," which states: "in order to determine whether Indigenous people have an interest in the research

question, consultation with the appropriate Indigenous individuals, communities, or organizations should occur."

As a means of consultation, in preparation for my research, I shared with the NIFCS board my intent to embark on and complete an Indigenous research study with potential to enhance practice at NIFCS. The NIFCS board is made up of nine First Nations members elected by their Chiefs to serve on the board for periods up to five years or more. I also discussed with the staff at staff meetings my research topic and intent. I received full support, enthusiasm, and encouragement from everyone. I explained to the staff that the method for my thesis is based on reviewing literature to gain new knowledge to enhance services that promote connections and belonging for children and youth in care. I told them that I would not be interviewing any human subjects for the thesis. In many ways this research is the first step in developing culturally rooted practice for the agency. After its completion and final approval, staff, board members, caregivers, Elders, and communities will be involved in planning ways to apply local ways of knowing, traditions, teachings, and ceremonies to NIFCS services to promote well-being, restore balance, and nurture strong roots for children and youth in care through connections to their families, culture, and communities.

The other Indigenous approach I used for this research was to utilize primarily Indigenous literature that embodies an Indigenous ecological, holistic worldview to approach a subject that has value and interest for Indigenous children and youth in care. Also, my supervisor and committee members are Indigenous scholars who wholeheartedly support the best interests of Indigenous peoples. This research is about accountability, ensuring that the work is done in a good way.

The study focuses primarily on previously published research articles and books on connectedness to family, extended family, community, and culture for Indigenous children and youth in care. In line with an Indigenous theoretical framework, I chose a qualitative research design, which fits well with an ecological holistic approach as well as an Indigenous approach. I searched the Internet and the University of Victoria library search engines using the following key words: connection/connectedness, cultural permanence, cultural adoptions, cultural resiliency, holistic approach, cultural planning, belonging, identity and cultural resiliency, spirituality. My thinking was that these themes would provide knowledge and information that could guide cultural practice for social workers who work with Indigenous children and youth within and outside of the child welfare system.

Carriere (2008) states that whenever one attempts to conduct Indigenous research, the question must be asked, "Whose knowledge do you privilege?" For this research, I privileged Indigenous cultural knowledge for my searches of articles. My searches yielded 15 journal articles that addressed the subject of cultural permanence in planning for Indigenous children and youth in care. I used Indigenous knowledge researched by Indigenous authors as a lens through which to understand cultural permanence. It is the right of every Indigenous child and youth to have permanent connections with their family, extended families, and culture. Children and youth in government care are often denied this right for a variety of factors.

Next, I analyzed these articles according to criteria described in Chapter 2. Additional themes that emerged from my analysis guided how I structured the thesis. Some of the symbols from my "Indigenous" dreams assisted me in interpreting how the

themes connect with each other and the greater context. In this way, I formed a thematic web of connection in my analysis.

The goal of reviewing themes that emerged from the literature on cultural permanence is to gain new insights and knowledge about the important elements of connectedness that promote holistic health and well-being in all domains of life: physical, spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional, as presented in the Medicine Wheel of Responses shown above in Figure 2. In addition to gaining new knowledge, the objective is to apply it to enhance cultural practice that meets the needs of Indigenous children and youth in care.

Thesis Organization

This chapter has introduced my research study and its purpose and situated both my research questions and my location as researcher within a context. It has also briefly outlined my theoretical framework and research design. In Chapter 2, I describe my methodology and research design in more detail. Chapter 3 consists of a literature review that identifies and illuminates themes related to cultural planning and permanency for Indigenous children and youth in care. In Chapter 4, I analyze my findings and discuss key insights relating to research and practice. In Chapter 5, I draw conclusions and relate my findings and analysis to the dream metaphors that are woven throughout this thesis. I also make recommendations for Indigenous child welfare practice, both within NICFS and beyond, in regards to policies and practices that could be seen as superior approaches to assist Indigenous children, families, and communities within the context of child welfare.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Design

This study focuses primarily on previously published research articles and books on connectedness to family, extended family, community, and culture for Indigenous children and youth in care. This means that I was not required to conduct an ethical application at the University of Victoria. I relied on the knowledge, voices, and citations already published by Indigenous and child welfare authors on the topic of promoting connection and cultural practice. The literature review (Chapter 3) explores published texts to consider what meaning and benefits could be gained from understanding and applying cultural knowledge with regard to the well-being and cultural connections of Indigenous children and youth in care. I chose to use a qualitative research design and to apply a qualitative approach to the data analysis. From my analysis of the literature (Chapter 4), I will draw out recommendations for implementation in practice (Chapter 5). The agency I work for will certainly draw on these ideas to enhance practice for the children we provide care for. A copy of the thesis will be shared with each board member, and staff, to consult about how to centre cultural practices to support connections and belonging for Indigenous children and how workers will engage in strengths-based practice that promotes dignity. Staff will collaboratively plan with families and communities ceremonies to support transitioning into adulthood and out of the care system. I will organize community gatherings around food and consult with Elders, the grandmothers' group, caregivers, child and family teams, and any other individuals who have an interest in caring, teaching, supporting, and encouraging children and youth to stay connected to family, extended family, and community. The agency will ensure that practice policies and funding are in place to support family and

cultural connections, such as visiting family and extended families in communities, participating in cultural ceremonies, arts, crafts, and cultural teachings, and listening to stories from knowledge holders and wise Elders. This thesis work will be a stepping stone to engage in ongoing dialogue about matters of importance to everyone connected to the children and youth in the agency's care.

Indigenous Research

Because this research focuses on Indigenous children and youth in care, it is important to use an Indigenous lens to assess, understand, and describe the topic of cultural connection and its role in creating cultural permanence to support cultural belonging and identity. However, in addition to a mere "lens," this research must embody the aspirations, approaches, values, and "spirit" of the field, bringing forth its energy and commitment to Indigenous children. As such, this is not a politically neutral project. It is designed and imbued with intent to inspire the profession and create positive change for Indigenous children, based on an integration of collective and extraordinary wisdom. By "extraordinary" I mean the wisdom that is inspired from the four directions and the various quadrants of the medicine wheel beyond the mere intellectual. This orientation to holistic knowledge can be said to transcend dominant boundaries, which helps characterize this research as Indigenous or "Indigenist," that is, Indigenous-centred research conducted by non-Indigenous allies.

Wilson (2008) explains that a major difference between dominant Western scientific and Indigenous paradigms is that dominant paradigms are based on a belief that knowledge is an individual entity, while an Indigenous paradigm "comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational: it is shared with all creation; it is not just

about interpersonal relationships; it is shared with the cosmos; it is [shared] with the animals, the plants, with the earth" (p. 56). This view upholds ideas expressed earlier by Brant (1990).

An element of Indigenous research is accountability, which encompasses the collective, meaning being in relation to people and all of creation (Bruyere, Hart, & Sinclair (2009). An Indigenous lens is "built upon the concept of relational accountability" (Wilson, 2008, p. 7). In particular, accountability involves a commitment to the people who are the subject of the research; Kovach (2005) writes that it requires researchers to hear the question "Are you helping us?" being whispered in our ears. Finally, accountability within an Indigenous methodology emphasizes practicality: "one seeks knowledge because one is prepared to use it" (Bruyere, Hart, & Sinclair, 2009, p.158). It is this kind of Indigenous methodology and paradigm that informs the purpose, aim, intent, and goal of my study, which is to document and create understandings about policies and practices for NIFCS, as an Indigenous organization, to advance knowledge and practices that promote resiliency and belonging for Indigenous children and youth in care.

In addition, the intent of this research is to address the research question, what are some indicators of dignity that would tell us at NIFCS if we are making headway in providing meaningful connections for children and youth in care? Practicing with dignity embodies the cultural and spiritual values of respect, courtesy, compassion, justice, balance, connections, and humility in knowing that each human being is endowed with their own sense of knowing, being, loving, and doing. NIFCS intends to live these

teachings and apply them in our daily interactions with children, youth, each other, caregivers, family members, and community partners.

Weber-Pillwax (2001) endorses trust as crucial to Indigenous research and stresses that the researcher "must have a deep sense of responsibility to uphold that trust in every way" (p. 170). Only research methods that correspond with and benefit the community are appropriate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 14). The preservation and relearning of culture and language and the promotion of self-determination are also central concepts to an Indigenous methodology. According to Thomas (2005) and Wilson (2008), storytelling, narrative, and performance are central to this methodology because they allow Indigenous voices to be heard and understood without the need for them to comply to external rules and abstractions. Thomas, an Indigenous scholar, shared lessons she learned from her grandmother through stories about the cultural and traditional rights she inherited through her family, as well as educational, spiritual, and political lessons and stories about Indigenous people's resistance to colonialism. Thomas used storytelling as Indigenous methodology to document the stories and voices of residential school survivors. In her article "Honouring the Oral Traditions of our Ancestors," Thomas (2005) used story telling as an Indigenous methodology that respects and honours people while simultaneously documenting their reality.

Carriere (2008) states that whenever one attempts to conduct Indigenous research, the question must be asked, "Whose knowledge do you privilege?" She suggests that Indigenous-based research must unite all the sources of Indigenous knowledge. By sources, Carriere refers not only to Indigenous authors, but to the different sources through which Indigenous people acquire knowledge in addition to Western knowledge.

Indigenous authors are united in documenting these distinct Indigenous holistic approaches to knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is an ecological concept based on respecting the function of every living thing, visible and invisible, and what each has to teach and learn through the Elders, ceremonies, dances, traditions, languages, ancestors, dreams, shamans, oral traditions of storytelling, the way of the circle, the four seasons, and many other sources that are not listed here. Uniting all of these sources of knowledge is a distinctly indigenous holistic approach to knowledge.

Interconnected relationships is the central concept that Indigenous holistic worldview is based upon. Relationship creates and restores balance (Reid, 2005, cited in Bruyere, Hart, & Sinclair, 2009, p. 211). Blackstock (2001, cited in Bruyere, Hart, & Sinclair, 2009) states that, according to a holistic worldview, "in order for a child, family or environment to achieve an optimal level of functioning, the physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive must be in balance" (p. 333). Traditionally, when issues arose within Indigenous families regarding the care and well-being of children, communities dealt with the issues within a community context rooted in relationships and systems of accountability. Blackstock explains that this statement does not imply that Indigenous communities did not have issues within the community, but rather that community processes and systems were in place to ensure children's safety and well-being.

Wilson's (2008) view is that Indigenous research cannot be incorporated into dominant research paradigms and methods in meaningful ways. Often when attempts are made, he says, Indigenous methodologies are inserted only marginally, or Indigenous ideas and peoples are co-opted to create the illusion of co-operation and collaboration. He argues that Indigenous peoples "will always face problems in trying to adapt dominant

system tools to our use" (Wilson, 2008, p. 13) because dominant research paradigms are inextricably linked to Eurocentric ways of knowing that are not always compatible with Indigenous worldviews.

Qualitative Research Design

Wilson (2008) suggests that every researcher needs to find the methods that best fit their research. I chose a qualitative research design, which fits well with an ecological holistic approach. An ecological approach, with the child in the centre, keeps the child in the broader context of the social world. Spring (2003) defines a holistic practice approach as a meaningful helping approach that attends to body, mind, emotions, and spirit (p. 58). This kind of holistic approach, which includes spirit and spirituality, is best suited to the work we do as social workers. In the communities I work with on the Northwest Coast, the Creator/God and the ancestors are always acknowledged through prayers. Prayers are always said by Elders and others at the beginning of every gathering, whether they are social, ceremonial, political, or academic gatherings. It is clear that individuals and communities gain strength and solidity through ceremony, ritual, and spiritual practice as orientation to well-being, both for individuals and groups. Therefore, it seems congruent that a research methodology would also take into account similar holistic approaches to knowledge creation and the synthesizing of preexisting information and wisdom.

Similar to Indigenous cultures, Cresswell (2007) explains that qualitative research embodies certain assumptions and a worldview. It also encompasses the use of a theoretical lens or lenses, a conceptual framework, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a particular social or human situation or problem. To study this phenomenon, qualitative researchers use an

emergent approach to inquiry, collect data, and then analyze the data inductively to establish patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the participants' voices, the researcher's reflexivity, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem. Further, it extends the literature and often signals a call for action (Cresswell, 2007).

In this thesis I have used an exploratory approach similar to that described above by Cresswell (2007). The medicine wheel is one approach that is explored as a holistic framework that embodies paths into knowledge (Green & Thomas, 2009, p. 31). This holistic framework is used by Richardson (2007) as a response-based approach to social work in cases of violence against Indigenous women. Richardson explained that this framework can exist as part of a larger social change initiative, such as decolonization or increasing cultural pride for Indigenous children and youth as a means of reducing suicide rates and increasing social well-being. My research design is founded on the assumption that textual analysis can guide social work researchers in their quest to document existing knowledge and create new knowledge to inform their practice. My textual analysis relies on extensive work that has already been done on the subjects of cultural permanence, resiliency, and belonging. However, I also want to acknowledge and honour the many Indigenous authors whose work has never been synthesized.

Methods

It is important to be explicit, not only regarding the theories that underlie and frame a research study, but also the particular methods of data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Patton (2002), the methodology and methods chosen depend on the goals and aims of the research study. My goal is to document and

create understandings about the policies and practices that Aboriginal child welfare agency and social workers can activate to promote ongoing connections for the Indigenous children and youth in their practice with a view to achieving positive outcomes and lifelong well-being for these young people.

I began by searching the Internet and the University of Victoria library search engines using the following key words / major themes: connection/connectedness, cultural permanence, cultural adoptions, cultural resiliency, holistic approach, cultural planning, belonging, identity, cultural resiliency, and spirituality. My thinking was that these themes would provide knowledge and information that could guide cultural practice for social workers who work with Indigenous children and youth within and outside of the child welfare system.

An observation I made while researching the topic is that when I typed Indigenous cultural themes into the search engines, the majority of the authors were Indigenous. From reading the literature, many of the issues this study investigates had personal meaning for the writers.

My searched yielded 15 journal articles that address the subject of cultural permanence in cultural planning for Indigenous children and youth in care. I chose the articles based on the following criteria:

- Addresses the subject of cultural connections

- Written by Indigenous authors[3]

- Widely circulated

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[3] One report was written by a non-Indigenous author who conducted an evaluation of services delivered by an agency. The data used to write up the report came from the voices of children and youth in care, foster parents, and community members. The researcher used methods such as surveys, telephone interviews, and face-to-face focus discussion groups. I included this report because it includes the direct experience, voices, and stories of children and youth in care.

- Published in Canada, with priority given to the BC Indigenous child welfare context

- Follows well-defined scientific methodologies, including interviews, surveys, and literature reviews, and the authors are university instructors with PhDs[4]. I used the PhD as a criterion because it indicates that the researcher has made a thorough review of the relevant literature, has developed a critique and analysis, and is familiar with the field from a research and literature point of view. The same cannot necessarily be said for authors who focus only on practice.

In addition to the 15 articles that met the above criteria, this study also explores research knowledge by other Indigenous scholars, agencies, advocates, and policy makers who take an anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, pro-Indigenous approach to child welfare and family work. I am aware of and acknowledge that many non-Indigenous and feminist authors take these same concerns seriously and have taken various forms of social action, including researching and writing about similar themes from non-Indigenous perspectives.

I considered two non-Indigenous authors' works for the following reasons. One document contained feedback, through surveys and focus groups, from children and youth in care, former children and youth in care, foster parents, agency staff and board, and communities about their agency's services, including cultural services. This report helped to inform some of my work in the area of documenting recommendations that directly relate to building cultural connections, identity, and resiliency through cultural

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[4] One of the authors has a legal background as a provincial judge and is now the British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth.

permanence and cultural planning. I used the other article, by Neufeld (2008) on

attachment theory, to compare and contrast a particular Western worldview on

attachment and belonging with Indigenous worldviews. Although Neufeld did not factor

culture into his theory, he shared some valuable insights on how to promote healthy

attachments. For example, Neufeld states that when children and youth feel and

experience opportunities of being invited into someone's presence, it evokes that essence

of dignity that is within all of us that tells us we matter. NIFCS translates this insight into

practical action to connect children as often as possible to their families, extended

families, and cultural communities. This concept of feeling invited into others' presence

is reiterated often in the Indigenous literature on connection, belonging, and identity.

Apart from these two articles, I focused on Indigenous authors because I am

writing about Indigenous issues that concern Indigenous children and youth in care. I

think it is important to use an Indigenous lens to do so rather than Eurocentric ideologies

and perspectives, many of which have created isolation and cultural disconnection for

Indigenous children in the system (Richardson & Wade, 2008, 2012). Furthermore, as a

researcher, I occupy an ideological and political stance in supporting the existence of

Indigenous knowledge in research and in wanting to improve the lives of Indigenous

children in colonized Canada.

My data collection included eight phases of thematic analysis:

1. I identified the thesis questions to be analyzed.

2. I searched for data using key words noted above.

3. I perused the reference lists of articles from my primary list of Indigenous authors who have published research on this topic to increase and widen my knowledge and understanding of the topic and the thesis questions.

4. I familiarized myself with the data I collected by analyzing the content of each article regarding the relationship between cultural connections and cultural permanence. I did this by thoroughly reading each article and by making notes and underlining relevant concepts specific to my research question (What are the indicators of dignity that tell us at NIFCS that we are achieving the goal of cultural permanence?) and to my research aims, goals, and objectives; then I organized the information and documented concepts and ideas within thesis chapters.

5. I defined all major themes and identified emergent themes. In this process, I looked for and noted agreement, convergence, and divergence among the themes.

6. I interpreted the findings as they related to my thesis questions.

7. I reflected on the implications of the findings.

8. I documented the findings.

The goal of reviewing theories from the literature about the importance of creating cultural permanence is to gain new insights and knowledge about these important elements of connectedness, which promotes holistic health and well-being in all domains of life: physical, spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional. In addition to gaining new knowledge, the objective is to apply the new knowledge to enhance child welfare practice that meets the cultural needs and attends to the dignity of Indigenous children and youth in care. The ultimate goal is that NIFCS would be able to see

identifiable markers of dignity expressed by the children and youth when their holistic needs are met. Literature that focuses on indicators of dignity would be highlighted as areas of practice for NIFCS social workers to apply in their daily work.

Limitations

Making the decision to focus this research study primarily on Indigenous literature does not mean it is free of limitations. In fact, some insights about limitations within Indigenous research have been expressed by Indigenous authors themselves. Wilson (2008) expresses this quandary when he describes how he struggles to write and exist in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. Wilson is referring here to Western paradigms that create this tension, not reinforcing the need for Western paradigms. He explains this quandary further by stating that at times he writes for both audiences and uses some dominant methodologies, such as Western literature reviews; however, he disdains using the intellect and reason to tear apart others' work and set oneself up as the expert on another person's knowledge and experiences (p. 44).

Indigenous researcher Lavelle (2009) shared challenges she experienced trying to integrate two different worldviews and methodologies in one research topic. Lavelle experienced some dissonance when she had to use the dominant systems of data analysis and thematic analysis, which she found disrupted the flow and made her work disjointed and were not suited to the natural flow of the circle and the way Indigenous stories are told.

While reading about the research experiences of several Indigenous authors and their struggles with dealing with research tensions, ambiguities, and the challenge of reconciling two different practices (i.e., Indigenous worldview and methodology and

Western worldview and methodology), I became aware of where my own tensions lie. I realized that I am naturally more drawn to the Indigenous paradigm because I have been influenced by my undergraduate and graduate training, which was focused on Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous realities, and my 14 years of work experience with Indigenous families and communities. As an ally, I choose to privilege Indigenous knowledges, methodologies, and worldviews to approach the subject of cultural permanence. I did not make this decision to privilege one set of knowledge over another from a place of extreme relativism, that is, accepting one worldview as true and ignoring the other even if the other has its own merits of validity and reliability. Rather, I decided on this approach because I feel that this method best fits the type of research I am doing and would better meet the standard of rigour for validity and reliability. For example, this research is approached from an anti-oppressive, anti-colonial theoretical framework. I am addressing a problem of disconnection that has its roots in a colonial past that forced Indigenous children into residential schools and forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and cultural communities during the Sixties Scoop. Currently, Aboriginal and Métis children are overrepresented in the child welfare system. This research is about rebuilding connections and restoring balance through attending to dignity, cultural strengths, spirituality, and resiliency.

Research can create bridges between Western practices and Indigenous knowledge; however, Wilson (2008) and Lavelle (2009) describe how bringing together these two worldviews can present challenges. I take this to mean that understandings from one practice could help could to shape the other in a manner that eliminates contradiction, where reciprocity is required, in that either practice can influence the

other—not by imposing outside standards, but by introducing influences or insights that provoke change from within. Wilson (2008) and Lavelle (2009) assert that ambiguity is inherent in any scientific or exploratory research.

From my searches in the literature, I see that non-Indigenous authors have addressed my research topic from a different worldview and with theoretical assumptions on identity and attachment that lean towards focusing on the nuclear family and blaming mothers for attachment problems with their children, while an Indigenous approach to attachment is collective and involves the extended family so that a child has many people to support his or her attachment. In terms of belonging and resilience, the Western tendency is to show that resilient qualities are the domain of a few gifted and lucky individuals, while Indigenous perspectives explain resiliency within the context of family, community, and cultural strengths. It was evident to me from the literature that most Western assumptions did not consider culture as a lens to assess, understand, and interpret what culture means to Indigenous people from their perspectives. An Indigenous paradigm stresses culture as embodying collectivity, community, interconnectedness, the sacred, and the spiritual, which the Western paradigm is more individualistic, linear, specialized, and hierarchal.

As an outsider working in an Aboriginal agency and researching and writing about an Indigenous issue, I am constantly reflecting on my location and reminding myself that I am a learner, not an expert. We can acknowledge postmodern thought for its disruption of the notion of the professional as "expert" to the client being the expert of their own life (Andersen, 2005). As a researcher, my own worldview influences how I read, interact with, and report on the data. My experience with this study is personally

constructed and filtered through my own worldview. As such, I believe it is impossible to be completely objective as a researcher, and this fact is an important element to acknowledge.

In more general terms, Indigenous researchers meet the criterion for objectivity in research by filtering their research through Indigenous communities, individuals, and colleagues. For example, this thesis went through several processes of approval and review by Indigenous supervisors and reviewers. Furthermore, the thesis uses an Indigenous perspective about how knowledge is acquired, gathered, and applied, which is very different from a Western perspective. Mayan scholar Carlos Cordero (1995, cited in Wilson, 2008) describes the difference by saying that within the Western knowledge system there is

> a separation of those areas called science from those called art and
> religion. The Indigenous knowledge base on the other hand integrates
> those areas of knowledge so that science is both religious and aesthetic.
> We find then, an emphasis in the western tradition of approaching
> knowledge through the use of the intellect. For Indigenous people,
> knowledge is also approached through the senses and the intuition. (p. 30)

It is the Western idea that knowledge is approached through the intellect which leads to the belief that research must be objective, Wilson (2008) says, and that personal emotions and motives must be removed if the research "results" are to be valid (p. 56). Therefore, Indigenous research does not view objectivity in the same way that Western research paradigms do. Furthermore, Indigenous knowledges are unique to given

cultures, localities, and societies, and are "acquired by local peoples through daily experiences" (Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2002, cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 19).

Finally, it is important to note that making recommendations for practice change does not equip researchers and practitioners to challenge the limitations and barriers of government funding practices and the deficit-based approach that allocates funds to investigation and child removal with little or no attention to prevention and family service. Even more broadly, how can research recommendations propagate social change and social justice in ways that create more equality, fairness, and well-being for Indigenous Nations within the dominant EuroCanadian political framework? Therefore, such research needs to be taken up in the context of greater social movements, such as Idle No More (n.d.) and other similarly intended initiatives (e.g., Cindy Blackstock's Federal Court challenge on inequality in funding for First Nations children in Canada; Clibbon, 2012; Federal Court of Canada, 2012).

In the next chapter, I present the findings of my literature review, which is not only based on scholars' perspectives of the themes that impact children and youth; the daily experiences and voices of children and youth are also an intrinsic component of this discourse.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In this chapter, I describe the literature that addresses the topic of cultural permanence for Indigenous children and youth in care, with the goal of advancing knowledge and current practices promoting resiliency and belonging. The ultimate goal is to obtain new ideas and to synthesize preexisting knowledge and Indigenous cultural wisdom to produce concrete, practical changes in child welfare policy and practice that would improve the lives of Indigenous children and youth in care in significant positive ways. The Island of Safety model and the Medicine Wheel of Responses, both developed by Richardson and Wade, are two practice examples that provide wisdom and insights for social workers to emulate in relation to practicing with dignity and respect to benefit Indigenous families, children, and youth.

This information and analysis will be applied to the care of children and youth being served by Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCS).

In the process of conducting the literature review, two significant themes emerged that appear to be foundational to the themes I selected at the outset and purposefully searched for. The first emergent theme is the impacts of, and responses to colonialism, in particular, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and today's child welfare system. This theme relates to the suffering caused by loss of culture, language, and land and disruptions in family bonding, identity, and positive self-concept for Indigenous children, families, and communities. The second emergent them relates to the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination. I begin the literature review with these emergent themes because they underlie the other themes and the cultural context in which they reside. The

other themes are as follows: connectedness and belonging; cultural identity; resiliency; and cultural planning.

Colonialism: Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the Child Welfare System

In "The Occasional Evil of Angels: Learning from the Experiences of Aboriginal Peoples and Social Work," Blackstock (2009) describes the harm done by the good intentions of some social workers, child welfare leaders, and academics. She highlights that all actions are done within a context. Within social work practice, the political, social, structural, and personal contexts must be considered, especially when dealing with vulnerable children and families. The context of Christian churches in Canada with the discourses of "helping" through missionization, de-paganizing, and saving Indigenous people from themselves through assimilation has influenced child welfare practice and what was seen as in the best interest of Indigenous peoples in Canada's settler society.

Blackstock (2009) makes particular reference to residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, about which many government officials, academics, and social workers stated that their ignorance of the enormity of the abuses, maltreatment, and decimation of First Nations culture and language. Counter-evidence suggests that at least some of this violence was public knowledge. For example, in 1905 Canada's chief medical officer, Peter Bryce, was quoted on the front page of the *Ottawa Tribune* saying that over 50% of Indigenous children in residential schools were dying and that the schools should be closed immediately. However, Duncan Campbell Scott, who later became the deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs, refused to close the schools, saying he wouldn't stop working to assimilate Indigenous children until the "Indian problem" was dealt with (Annett, 2001).

The Hippocratic code of doing no harm is the principle that social work ascribes to—to bring joy and happiness, to relieve pain, not to add grief to anyone. According to Blackstock (2009), good intentions in social work practice must be followed by actions that are mindful of the people we serve and of the consequences and impacts our actions have on them. Realistically, how can one conduct social work as an Indigenist ally in a country that has not publicly acknowledged or experienced regret for the incarceration of Indigenous children in Canada? In many cases, the government knew there were "active pedophiles" working in the residential schools and did not take action to make children safe (Indian Residential School Survivors' Society, 2011).

Blackstock (2009) addresses several broad themes that relate to the historical injustices done by Canada to Indigenous peoples through colonial rule. She states that the aim of this discussion is to assist social workers to reflect on what harm has been done. She recommends that social work practice move forward to mitigate and prevent harm— in other words, to learn from the past and use that learning to improve current practice. Blackstock states:

> The notion of improving other people is endemic to social work. It is both a source of moral nobility and trepidation. It implies an ability to define accurately another's deficit, to locate its importance in his/her life and assumes the efficacy of external motivations and sensibilities to change. As interventions with Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal helping professionals testify, it is a delicate balance between freedom and dignity of individuals and societies at one end and cultural arrogance and oppression on the other. (p. 31)

Blackstock explains that many injustices were done by people with good intentions, including social workers who were responsible for child apprehensions. She argues that some of the probable causes for these injustices continue as many "helping" professionals who believe they have good intentions justify and rationalize a colonial mindset that continues today.

The movie *The Education of Little Tree* (Friedenberg, 1997) provides an example of what Blackstock (2009) describes as the cultural, mental, emotional, and social harm that social workers' actions can have on families when they make decisions that disregard family and cultural strengths. The movie is about a 10-year-old boy called Little Tree who lived with his grandparents in an outlying village far from the city. Little Tree's grandparents taught him many lessons about the ecology of the environment, which they passed on to him in a natural way of teaching and learning as he followed them around. When social workers found out that Little Tree was not in government school, they went to his home and forcefully removed him from his grandparents. The social workers argued that they knew what was best for him, using the "best interest" section of the Child, Family, and Community Services Act (CFCSA). The CFCSA states that a child's education is one aspect of the child's best interest. There were no other protection concerns regarding Little Tree. Removing him from his grandparents severed the healthy connections he had with them. He lost the opportunity to learn about his culture, language, and traditional ways of life. Little Tree became depressed after he was separated from the two people he had the strongest bonds with. Eventually, Grandfather stealthily went to the school and took Little Tree back home with him where he belonged.

This is one example of a social worker doing emotional and spiritual harm to a child and his grandparents under the guise of good intentions, bolstered by the "best interest" statement that the CFCSA provides as a guideline for making decisions about children's well-being and safety. According to Carriere and Richardson (2013), social workers need to practice with insight and understanding about the impacts of the loss of meaningful connections in the lives of children and youth in care and make plans with the child's extended family and community to maintain and support healthy permanent relationships that support well-being and mental health.

Blackstock (2009) states that reconciliation is needed in social work as a way to practice with justice and compassion (p. 35). Although her article does not specifically address the topics of identity, belonging, connectedness, and cultural planning as they relate to the lived experiences of Indigenous children and youth in care, it does address the social work practice that has been so harmful to Indigenous children and families. At the same time, it reveals a worldview based on Indigenous conceptions of relationship and community in contrast to the individual social worker as an expert with solutions. Blackstock and other Indigenous theorists emphasize the right of Indigenous peoples to make the decisions on issues that affect them. In other words, they assert the right to self-determination (Churchill, 1982).

Self-Determination

Blackstock (2009), Brokenleg (2002), Carriere (2005, 2007a, 2007b), and Richardson (2008, 2012) all highlight that solutions to mitigating the harmful effects of a colonial child welfare system can be found in community-based decision making and community involvement and participation in the lives of children in care. Carriere (2010)

believes that the biggest issue in child welfare practice is connection, while Sinclair

(2007) asserts the importance of calling and addressing racism. In Carriere's view, the

problem is disrupted and broken connections; in Sinclair's, it is racist caregivers. The

truth lies in viewpoints, existing together and interacting with each other. Blackstock

(2009) writes:

> Research suggests that social workers should avoid drumming up
>
> solutions to "Aboriginal issues" by themselves and instead invest in a
>
> relationship where the right of Aboriginal peoples to make the best
>
> decisions affecting them is affirmed and supported. (p.30)

Social work practice is slowly shifting, and child welfare standards, including the

Aboriginal Operational Standards Indicators (Caring For First Nations Society, 2005),

state that Aboriginal families and communities must be involved in the planning and

decisions about their children. Blackstock (2009, p.31) quoted Chandler and Lalonde

(1998), who wrote about their findings from research conducted on suicide in BC.

Blackstock writes:

> Although First Nations children in British Columbia have one of the
>
> highest suicide rates in the world, more than 90% of the suicides occurred
>
> in 10% of the First Nations communities. In fact, some First Nations
>
> reported a zero percent suicide rate over the 13 years prior to the study.
>
> Chandler and Lalonde (1998) wanted to know what differences between
>
> communities that could account for such wide variation in suicide.
>
> Findings indicate that First Nations communities with a low suicide rate or
>
> no suicide rate had substantial community based decision making as

represented in community based service such as child welfare, health,

education, and fire and police services. (p. 31)

This finding has implications for involving whole communities, including

extended families, Elders, and community members to consult about defining the source

of the problems that their children and youth face and designing a model for solutions to

address issues of connectedness, belonging, and cultural permanence (Blackstock, 2009).

Indigenous scholar Robina Thomas (Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network,

2013) is actively supporting the Kw'umut Lelum Child & Family Services

(http://www.kwumut.org/) First Nations agency, bands, and communities to build their

capacity to manage their own child safety services and programs. However, she would

agree with Blackstock (2009), who asserts that Indigenous communities have always

made collective decisions at the family and community levels and have always been

engaged in community and capacity building.

Next I discuss the themes I purposefully searched for as part of my investigation

into the significant factors in cultural planning for permanence for Indigenous children

and youth in care: connectedness and belonging; cultural identity; resiliency; and cultural

planning.

Connectedness and Belonging: Western vs. Indigenous Perspectives

Individuals and cultures experience, perceive, and react to the world—and to

people, things, and ideas within our worlds—in distinctly different ways. For example,

Western perspectives on child development emphasize bonding and attachment to a

primary caregiver, usually the mother.[5]

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[5] Many of these views are decontextualized and do not acknowledge the socio-ecological or political context in which poverty exists, where mothers and children live with sometimes

In contrast, an Indigenous approach sees connectedness as it relates to extended family, cultural traditions, norms of collective care giving, and finding resources and supports within the extended family and community. With this approach, planning processes are (and should be) family led (Richardson & Wade, 2012). This fundamental clash in worldviews and approaches could put social workers in a quandary about whose and what approach they favour, in training and/or practice, when attending to issues of connectedness, bonding, and attachment. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors who have addressed connectedness in relation to Indigenous children and youth express similarities in terms of content and definition; however, they differ, in some cases drastically, in philosophical assumptions, context, and approach.

For example, non-Indigenous developmental psychologist and attachment theorist Gordon Neufeld (2008) and Lakota professor emeritus Martin Brokenleg (2002) agree that child and youth connectedness could be supported by a helping adult who offers warm, consistent, stable attachments and acts as a bridge to make connections possible. However, Neufeld posits a more interventionist use of individual clinical methods and strategies to deal with connection and connectedness, while Brokenleg and other Indigenous authors suggest a more collectivist, contextual, cultural approach that includes extended family and community (HeavyRunner & Sebastian Morris, 1997). All of the Indigenous authors reviewed view separation and its relationship to connection and connectedness from a cause and effect standpoint that has its roots in colonialism. Colonialism impacts every aspect of life in a settler society such as Canada, including

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minimal supports. We also live in a child protection culture of mother blaming (Richardson and Wade, 2012; Strega, 2009). In addition, there is a social stigma against those who have experienced violence (Goffman, 1963) and victim-blaming practices that result in mothers losing their children when the father has used violence in the home (Richardson & Wade, 2008; Strega et al., 2013).

culture, language, and land. In the past it included forced residential school and severe abuses of Indigenous children. Its ongoing effects include the current child welfare system with its overrepresentation of children in government care.

Neufeld (2008), in his work on attachment theory, defines separation as the experience of rejection and/or the lack or loss of love, emotional connection, belonging, significance, being understood, feeling taken care of, and being invited to exist in another's presence (p. 3). Neufeld believes that separation is "the epicentre of all human problems" (p. 83). He recommends treating every problem through a lens of separation and attachment. Importantly, however, he suggests no cultural context in which to apply this modality of treatment. Even the word *treatment* is Western medical terminology. This is an important distinction for social workers who see treatment as the domain of the expert psychologist or psychiatrist. Neufeld's theories on attachment and separation have important insights for understanding more about connectedness from a theoretical standpoint, including some understanding of how children in care may deal with their grief at being separated from their important people and places. However, a pitfall to this approach is that social workers who are influenced by these assumptions and beliefs of attachment theory may also learn language, definitions, and labels to identify various types of attachment problems in children based on Western ideas about attachment to mothers and nuclear families.

In contrast, Indigenous peoples see connectedness in a holistic way. According to HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997), the traditional Indigenous family unit is the extended family, where each child has an abundance of blood and clan relatives to share the responsibility of child rearing. Indigenous people's identities are connected to large

numbers of people, land, space, and time—the metaphysical states. As an example of how two different worldviews demonstrate connectedness differently, Westerners tend to introduce themselves in an individualistic way, outlining their achievements and accomplishments. In contrast, most Indigenous people introduce themselves in relationship to their clan, house, band, family lineage, and Nation(s) (see Absolon & Willett's 2005 work on relationality).

Carriere and Richardson (2009) assert that an Indigenous perspective of cultural connectedness and identity is more appropriate than attachment theory for Indigenous children and youth. They suggest replacing the notion of *attachment*, a unidirectional construct, with the more mutual and multidirectional term *connection* or even *connectedness*. According to these authors, the child's cultural connections and sense of belonging can also be nurtured through a relationship to land, Mother Earth, spirit, ceremony, and the ancestors. Being connected to a sense of place can bring positive feelings to a child's sense of purpose and belonging. Carriere (2010), in her book *Children of the Earth*, shares her story as an adoptee and her journey back to her parental home. She talks about the importance of returning to the land of the ancestors regularly so that the land will always recognize us. This concept is demonstrated strongly in the Maori film from New Zealand, *Whale Rider*. I remember seeing this film at the movie theatre and being very touched to see how the young girl was spiritually drawn to work with whales to save her people. Similarly, in *Smoke Signals*, the main character, Victor, experiences his childhood life and identity as connected to his Coeur d'Alene reserve in Idaho. As part of that exploration and repairing the relationship with his deceased father, Victor leaves and then returns to his reservation. While a vision quest like the one Victor

engaged in wouldn't be an appropriate activity for a young child in care, it might be empowering or transformative for an older teen or young man.

An Indigenous person who is adopted into a non-Indigenous home has experienced and continues to experience disconnectedness due to the modification of the environment through adoption (Carriere & Richardson, 2009, p. 52). Adoption creates a different environment than that intended by creation, as was demonstrated during the Sixties Scoop when whole communities of children and youth were adopted out into non-Indigenous homes. Most of these children were never returned to their biological families (Carriere, 2007a). In Carriere's (2007a) study on identity with First Nations adoptees, adoptees reported that disconnectedness from their families and culture had negative effects on their health, adding to their stress or putting them in high-risk situations. The adoptees expressed their need for connectedness and their desire to belong to a community of others like themselves. Carriere described how adoption affected all parts of the adoptees' lives.

The disconnectedness adoptees feel when they are separated from family, culture, and place through adoption equals spiritual dissonance, which has impacts on health (p. 53). Boss (1999, cited in Carriere & Richardson, 2009) refers to the "frozen grief" that occurs when the family that exists in an adoptee's mind is more important than the physical family they live with (p. 54). Adoptees feel connected to people they don't know (Rillera, 1989, cited in Carriere & Richardson, 2009), and are driven to find out where they came from so they can know they weren't "hatched" (Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990, p. 85, cited in Carriere & Richardson, 2009, p. 54). The concept of cellular memory and collective consciousness transcends the Western notion of the nuclear family (Anderson,

2000, cited in Carriere & Richardson, 2009, p. 55). In her study on identity with First Nations adoptees, Carriere (2007a) found that all of her participants "explained that their drive to seek out their birth family stemmed from questions about a longing to know who they are, where they come from, and where they belong in this world" (p. 41).

Many Indigenous children and youth in care experience separation on a daily basis because of a lack of meaningful connections in their lives. An exploration of the literature supports the importance of cultural connection to holistic health.

Carriere (2007a) asserts that connectedness should be used as a determinant of health, just as environment, genetics, and social conditions are determinants of health. She states that in First Nations cultures, children grow up in their community, receive cultural and spiritual guidance from their elders, and have opportunities to participate in ceremonial events. This becomes the foundation for identity and strength in their development (p. 114).

Cultural Identity

The cultural identity of Indigenous children and youth in care cannot be ignored; their well-being is connected to cultural healing (Carriere, 2010). Carriere (2007a) states that one of the benefits of connectedness is that knowledge of oneself and one's existence with others gives meaning to being part of a larger community and also of knowing oneself; connectedness enhances our sense of who we are.

This perspective of tribal identity was supported by several adoptees who participated in Carriere's (2007a) study. Her 18 study participants stated that identity and loss were the main issues they struggled with. Loss became the core category in the study; it was expressed to some degree by each of the adoptees and often was manifested

in their health, which for this study was organized into physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Two of the adopted participants in Carriere's study expressed a need for belonging and identity in their own words:

> For me, I grew up thinking that I was a nobody, like I didn't know my identity. So, when I was a teenager, I went through identity crises because that's when I started realizing I was different. There was something different about me. (Molly, cited in Carriere, (2007a, p. 50)

Another participant said that when she was 12,

> that's when I started questioning, I wanted to know more about native people. There was a Hudson Bay store, and I knew they did all their groceries. I was always going there to sit on a bench ad watch them. I wanted to know things. I wanted to be a native person so badly. (Mama Bear, cited in Carriere, 2007a, p. 50)

Figure 3 below shows Carriere's conception of the Tree of Life, or the extended family tree of adoption.
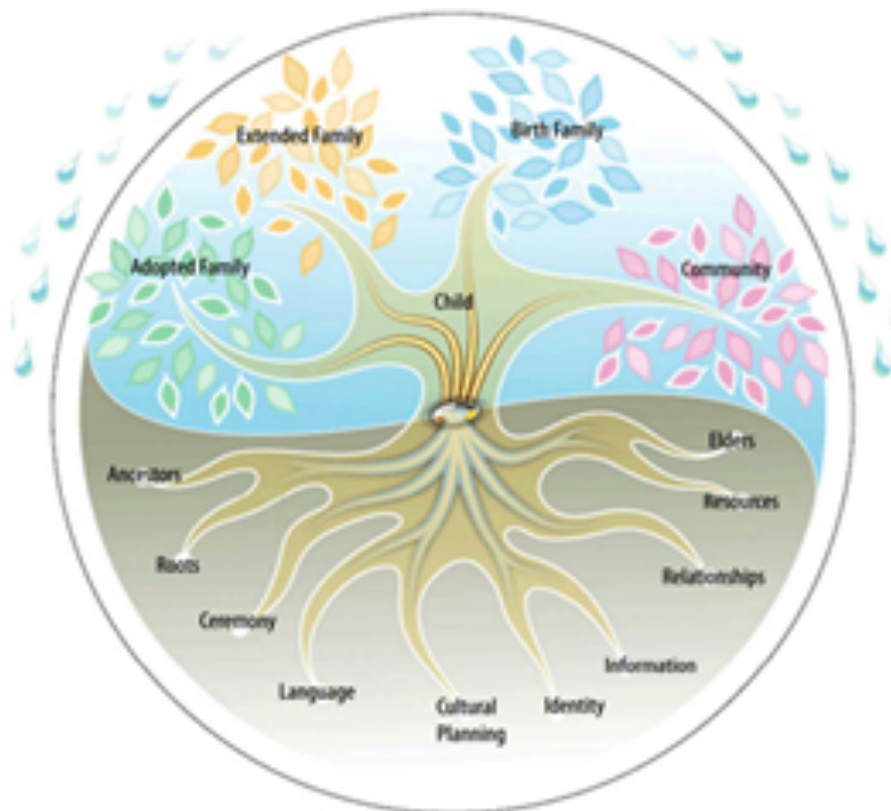
Source: Carriere 2007c.

Fig. 3. Tree of Life, or extended family tree of adoption.

Carriere cites Anderson (2000) as proposing a theory of identity formation for Indigenous peoples that includes resisting imposed definitions or rejecting negative stereotypes, reclaiming Indigenous traditions, constructing appositive identities by translating tradition into the contemporary context, and acting (e.g., using one's voice) to create a positive new identity (Carriere, 2007a, p. 220).

The loss of identity for children and youth who have been removed from their families and communities may contribute to impaired physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health. However, some Indigenous theories highlight the role of resiliency in restoring health and cultural pride in Indigenous children and youth. This idea is explored in the following section.

Resiliency

In *The Resilience Revolution*, Brendtro and Larson (2006) explain that initially some scientists hypothesized that resilience was a rare personality trait found only in a few "invulnerable" super kids, but research suggests otherwise. They believe resilience is the norm. These authors quote Emily Werner, who describes resilience as "the potential to achieve positive life outcomes in spite of risk" (Brendtro & Larson, 2006, p.33). Indigenous perspectives on resiliency imply that innate resolve is not the only element that constitutes resilient strength. Richardson and Wade (2008), in their work on risk and safety with children and adults who have been abused, do not work with the term *resilience* per se because it does not imply that the person did anything to resist the abuse, which is almost always the case (2008). However, they believe that children "resiliate," demonstrating their agency and spirit. They also see resilience as a group project, not something that an individual does on his or her own. They warn against trying to measure resiliency in children as if it were an inborn trait. Instead, they suggest looking to extended family and community networks to create the conditions where children may thrive. Brokenleg (personal communication, cited in Richardson, 2013) has said that "resilience" is the white man's way of talking about spirit. From an Indigenous perspective, belonging, spirituality, and cultural identity all play a role in fostering resiliency and supporting Indigenous people to overcome oppression and harsh realities, as explored below.

Resiliency and belonging.

Brokenleg (2002) quotes Lakota anthropologist Deloria (1943) who describes the core value of belonging in these simple words: "Be related, somehow, to everyone you

know" (p. 46). Brokenleg explains that kinship in tribal settings is not strictly a matter of biological relationships, but rather a learned way of viewing those who share a community of residence (p, 46). In the NIFCS self-evaluation report, one grandmother echoed this value of collective kinship in her statement, "every child in this community is my grandchild" (NIFCS Self Evaluation, March 2013. p. 54).

In this view, creating others as kin forges powerful social bonds that draw all into relationships of respect (p. 47). Thomas (2005) shares stories about the lives of resilient individuals who demonstrate qualities of courage, caring, and empathy and have a sense of place, purpose, and belonging. LaBoucane-Benson (2005) explains the intricate ecological framework of Indigenous family connectedness and resiliency. She argues for the saliency of Indigenous family resilience as a research paradigm. HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997), Brokenleg (2002), and Robertson (2006) all highlight certain elements as crucial to Indigenous family, cultural, and spiritual resilience; these elements have a direct tie to belonging.

Literature written by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors share the perspective that belonging and resiliency have a dialectic, intertwined relationship, and each one acts on the other with mutual influence. Meaningful connections with at least one significant person could assist with overcoming life's hardships and difficulties (Brendtro & Larsen, 2006; Szalavitz & Perry, 2010).

Resiliency and spirituality.

For Indigenous authors HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997), spirituality is the concept of interconnectedness. They believe spirituality is "at the core of [Indigenous peoples'] survival" (p. 61). Wane and Waterfall (2005) define spirituality as they

understand it as Indigenous women. For them, it encompasses culture, values, traditions, land, and relationships. In their writing, they employ the word *spirituality* to mean "certain qualities of mind, and appreciation of life, all of which bring meaning and purpose to existence. Spirituality is understood to be the determination that the mind produces, known as power of the will, to refine our behaviors through our own positive thoughts, words and actions. Spirituality creates positive productivity for self and others" (pp. 43–44).

Gray (2008) asserts that space is needed for spirituality in social work. According to Canda and Furman (2010), attending to spirituality can help child welfare workers put youth and children's challenges and goals within the context of their deepest meanings and highest aspirations. A "bio-psycho-social-spiritual view" (Canda & Furman, 2010, p. 5) views the whole person in the context of their environment. The symbol of the medicine wheel used in some Indigenous cultural/spiritual teachings can embody such a holistic view. Catherine Richardson, a Métis woman and academic researcher, author, university instructor, and counsellor/practitioner, uses the medicine wheel in her practice to attend to the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social-emotional needs of Indigenous clients.

Resiliency and cultural identity.

HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997), writing in part to address historical trauma from residential school and the Sixties Scoop, assert that cultural identity is a source of strength for Indigenous peoples. They explain that Indigenous worldview is the lens through which they understand where they came from, where they are today, and where they are going. Their cultural practices with their children, such as teaching

children they are gifts from the Creator, nurturing their spirit, and encouraging, supporting, and standing by them, foster resilience. From an Indigenous perspective, cultural roots connect to the past, present, and future.

Resiliency and balance.

Other Indigenous perspectives and approaches to resiliency in children involve balancing the four domains of life: spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual. The medicine wheel is one of many traditional ways used to teach and convey this concept as well as the idea that all races are equal and each brings their unique gifts to the world. Indigenous peoples believe that all of their children are born with a natural capacity or resilience in all of these areas. Therefore, a cultural strategy is to help children to recognize when they are out of balance and to understand what caused the imbalance and how to regain balance (HeavyRunner & Sebastian Morris, 1997, p. 62). HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997) suggest a variety of cultural ways to help children regain balance by teaching them the philosophy of the "good way of life" (p. 62). These include "traditional languages, ceremonies, dances, blood/clan systems, music/arts, medicine, foods, clothing, and more" (p. 62). These authors state that Indigenous children's cultural strength or resilience can also be fostered by the oral tradition of storytelling, where children learn to listen with patience and respect (p. 62). This holistic perspective is quite different from seeing the lack of resilience as stemming from problematic bonding with parents, particularly mothers, as Western psychological or therapeutic perspectives on children and resilience often do (Gone, 2004).

Supporting resiliency.

First Nations people have survived colonialism, have been deprived of their human rights, and have endured forced residential schooling and the forced removal of children from their homes, extended families, and cultural communities. Today Indigenous children are overrepresented in the foster care system; many children and youth are struggling to survive from the impact of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse at the hands of foster parents while in care. Nevertheless, because of their cultural and spiritual resiliency, they have survived as a people.

Robertson (2006) shared some examples of interventions used in cultural communities to support individual and cultural resiliency. These interventions include the development of informal support networks and healing circles; teaching respect for cultural values such as cooperation, wisdom, and the role of the extended family; psycho-educational group sessions to enhance participants' ability to overcome trauma and increase their understanding of colonialism; and community development. Robertson (2004, cited in Robertson, 2006) stated that a particular community in northern Saskatchewan which had been using these interventions, previously dubbed "the suicide capital of Canada," did not have a single completed suicide during the four year period from 1992 to 1995 (p. 14).

Richardson and Wade (2008) suggest that as networks of social workers and helpers, we can orchestrate positive social responses to people who have been harmed or mistreated; they advise that professionals hold an analysis of colonialism and violence as well as Indigenous responses that promote safety and preserve dignity. As well, it is important to consider conditions in the social world and understanding the need to

address racism and to create social equity so that Indigenous children may thrive alongside other Canadian children.

Cultural Planning

Despite the fact that all of the Indigenous authors reviewed in this study stress the importance of community involvement and participation in decisions affecting the children of their communities, the BC Representative for Children and Youth, Mary-Ellen Turpel-Lafond, observed in her March 2013 report to the BC legislative assembly that there has been little to no involvement of First Nations communities in creating cultural plans of care (CPOC) for their children and youth. This report specifically addresses the topic of CPOCs for children and youth in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and delegated agencies in BC. A CPOC is defined as

> an action-based planning tool for children in care, used to identify specific developmental objectives based on continuous assessments of the child's evolving needs and the outcomes of previous decisions and actions. Care plans are completed by the child's worker with involvement of the child, the family the extended family, the Aboriginal community if the child is aboriginal, the caregiver, service providers and significant people in the child's life. (p. 8)

Permanency is the overall goal and context for plans of care. For Indigenous children in care, cultural permanency occurs with stable, lifelong relationships that offer a sense of belonging, which multiple foster placements do not.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1984) states that everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community and the right to freely contribute to it. For Indigenous children and youth in care, cultural permanency is defined as the right to experience stability and continuity of meaningful relationships with their family, extended family, community, and culture.

Turpel-Lafond points out that permanency planning are not just about placement; it is about strengthening the child's relationships, identity, and sense of belonging. According to Turpel-Lafond, research shows that placement instability for children in care is associated with emotional difficulties and that multiple placement changes and unplanned placements can lead to negative outcomes, including a loss of belonging (p. 27). Previous sections and paragraphs of this thesis explained the impact of the loss of belonging that Indigenous people have experienced and the need for looking to extended families, Elders, and Indigenous communities and cultural practices for opportunities to create well-being and strong cultural identity.

Turpel-Lafond reported that of the 100 children whose files were audited for her report, 60 were identified as Aboriginal. Only three of those children had a CPOC. The CPOC is both a critical element in ensuring that children remain connected to their traditions and cultural heritage and a requirement of BC's Child, Family, and Community Service Act (Government of British Columbia, 2007). The number of children in the audit with an out-of-date CPOC was also much higher among Aboriginal children (270 compared to 13 non-Aboriginal children). Turpel-Lafond describes this finding as unacceptable (p. 3), not only from a practice standard point of view but also because completed plans of care can support providing meaningful connections for the children

and youth in care. For example, when a social worker involves children, youth, their families, and cultural community representatives in planning and documenting plans of care and all signees have signed off, this action, which calls for accountability and credibility, ensures that meaningful connections and other holistic plans for children and youth take place. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and the province of British Columbia have committed to funding plans documented in the CPOC signed off by everyone.

Summary

The literature review conducted for this thesis revealed that colonial policies and practices, including residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and today's child welfare system, have contributed to poor health outcomes and a loss of culture, connectedness, language, belonging, and identity for Indigenous children, families, and communities. Blackstock (2009) highlighted the negative impacts that social workers' actions/practices have had on the lives of many Indigenous children and families under the guise of good intentions. The common social worker's belief that "we know what good is, we are good, and we can instil good into others" is so ingrained in the social work fabric that there is little meaningful conversation about our potential to do harm. Blackstock challenges social workers to practice with a certain level of mindfulness and self-awareness. She emphasizes that they must assess their actions within the context of how they might be perceived by the children, youth, and families they serve, and not only see their actions through the lens of their good intentions. Blackstock sees reconciliation within the context of cooperation, partnership, and collaboration as a necessary step to heal from the past and a first step toward developing social work services that better support

Indigenous children, youth, and families. She and other Indigenous theorists (Cajete, 2000; di Tomasso, de Finney, & Grzybowski, 2012; Gone, 2004) assert the right to Indigenous self-determination in matters pertaining to Indigenous children.

The literature review confirmed the importance of connectedness and belonging, cultural identity, and spirituality in supporting resiliency and well-being among Indigenous children and youth in care. The readings highlighted that Indigenous perspectives on identity do not focus on otherness and difference, but on connectedness and relationship. Similarly, Indigenous conceptions of spirituality are about connection, relationship, belonging, and being as one within a universal system of kinship ties, (Wane & Waterfall, 2005, p.43). Some of the readings emphasize that cultural strengths support the resiliency necessary for a balanced life. Others indicate that spirituality is central to all life, that it contributes to resiliency and the ability to overcome hardships. Richardson and Wade (2008) see "resiliating" as a group project and planning for children as a process that must be family led. HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997), among others, assert that the best response to injustice and oppression is to simultaneously build community and apply decolonizing strategies such as anti-oppressive and ant-racist approaches to practice.

This review of the literature provokes the question that forms the focus of my analysis for this study: How can NIFCS work towards the goal of achieving successful outcomes for our children and youth in care, as stated in the purpose of this thesis, to promote resiliency and belonging? The literature shows that in order for Indigenous children to have successful outcomes, we as social workers must attend to their cultural needs and help them build strong cultural identities. NIFCS social workers will utilize

family and community strengths to promote belonging and resiliency in the children and youth in our care. The agency will involve community participation to give us guidance about introducing cultural teachings, values, ceremonies, protocols, language, and storytelling to their children and youth.

As social workers, we are encouraged by Blackstock (2009) and others to practice in such a way that we do not behave as solution givers in isolation from Elders and community knowledge holders. How do we ensure that we do not replicate dominance or oppression? How do we encourage and support children and youth to strive for excellence within their own capacities and capabilities? How can we support each child and youth to find their place of connectedness in relation to themselves, their families and extended families, their communities, and their culture? Exploring answers to these questions forms the substance of Chapter 4, Analysis.

Chapter 4: Analysis

This chapter discusses key themes of the study that relate directly to the research topic of cultural permanence for Indigenous children and youth in care as well as giving some context to the study purpose and locating the researcher in relation to the thesis process and direction.

This study provides the background for the agency at which I work as executive director, Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services (NIFCS), to increase cultural knowledge in order to enhance practice that highlights indicators of dignity and that meets the holistic needs of Indigenous children and youth in care. I have been working for this agency for the past seven years. I am committed to carrying out the vision of its First Nations board and nine member communities on BC's Northwest Coast (Metlakatla Band, Lax Kw'alaams Band, Gitga'at Band of Hartley Bay, Kitamaat Village Council, Gitxaala Nation [Kitkatla Band], Kitsumkalum Band, Kitselas Band, Iskut Village Council Band, and Telegraph Creek Band) to ensure that their children and youth in our care maintain connections with their families, extended families, and communities and are given opportunities to know about and learn their languages, spiritual teachings, and cultural traditions from their Elders, families, and communities. These practices would be indicators of practicing with dignity to NIFCS staff, communities, and families. Ultimately, the goal is for children and youth to benefit by being strongly connected to their roots and experiencing a sense of belonging.

NIFCS works collaboratively with the communities it serves to bring children home from outside their geographic locations through homecoming ceremonies. These homecomings usually involve collaboration with other agencies and the Ministry of

Children and Family Development (MCFD). It also collaborates with Nagantsi'istk, a group of about 16 grandmothers from Lax Kw'alaams, who are leaders and strong advocates in supporting cultural connections for children from the member bands. Nagantsi'istk invites children and their social workers and caregivers to visit their communities, sends personal cards and gifts to each child and youth in care who lives away from their home territories, speaks to these children and youth as a group by Skype. It is important to note that although today's youth are very technologically savvy and communicate extensively through social media, technology should not and cannot replace face-to-face communication. At the same time, it is desirable to meet and connect with youth where they are. Using social media to connect with children and youth is one way of practicing with dignity, by respecting the comfort level of children and youth and using technologies which they find comfortable for communicating. From my work experience at NIFCS, the teens and older youth very rarely get involved in cultural activities that are planned for them, which, in hind sight, should be planned with them. We feel that families and culture have a lot of benefits to offer, but if we are inadequate in our approaches and strategies to attract, engage, and work with the youth, then we are failing them to a certain extent. I researched other practical ways of working with youth since this age group is very autonomous and requires specialized ways that align with their interests, intrinsic motivations, worldviews, and development. A study conducted by The United Way of Toronto identifies the following strategies which NIFCS can use:

- Offer a variety of activities, such as sports, homework help, the arts, or community service, to attract a diverse group of participants, to reduce boredom, and to encourage regular attendance.

- Offer activities that tend to be missing from the school day, such as First Nations arts activities that been eliminated from the traditional school curriculum.

- Employ well-trained, dedicated staff or volunteers with whom youth can identify, who may have lived in a similar environment as the participants and have had similar experiences. Use the "3C" approach to volunteer/staff recruitment: competence, character and commitment.

- Use positive approaches, encouraging youth to build on their strengths and improve their skills in wide range of areas, as opposed to characterizing programs as targeting negative behaviours, such as crime or drugs use.

- Conduct direct outreach to youth, as well as their families and extended families, through phone calls, home visits, office visits, coffee/pop visits; street outreach has proven to be particularly effective for recruiting teens; youth participants are often a program's most effective recruiters or ambassadors; hire dedicated youth outreach staff if possible.

- Involve youth, for multiple benefits: youth can best identify what interests and attracts them. Youth can serve as outreach staff, and involvement in the planning and implementation of these programs offers opportunities to develop leadership skills, as well as earn some income, all of which serve to attract youths as well as provide them with tangible benefits.

- Offer youth the chance to be of service, rather than just to be served (e.g., social activism and community service initiatives, service to Elders).

- Incorporate physicality through athletics, dance, drama, camping, hiking,

and even building trades projects, where responsible self-care and health-promoting behaviours are a natural part of the skills to be mastered.

- Address barriers with low or no fee; have an accessible location that is welcoming and youth friendly and a convenient schedule.

- Include literacy programs, strengthening young people's motivation to read and write by linking reading and writing with explorations of identity and self, integrating literacy activities with other activities, such as cooking, cultural field trips to museums, canneries, old village sites, hieroglyphics sites, performances, theatre, and by fostering a sense of playfulness about reading and writing.

- Engage in outdoor activities that are of cultural interest and have youth draw, journal, or carve out scenes and items that interest them. Make cameras available for taking pictures and movies. Create healthy competitive group art/collage projects for display. (Bonnell & Zizys, 2005)

At NIFCS the grandmothers visit with children and youth at MCFD offices and agencies along the coast to have face-to-face meeting with children in care. The grandmothers know that their children and youth in care are disconnected from their roots. They know the importance of having a strong cultural identity. They know that communities have a lot to offer about Indigenous knowledge and cultural ways of being, and they know that it is caring and love that build resiliency, and that honouring these children and youth in these very practical ways shows respect for who they are, thus builds their sense of dignity and increases their cultural pride. The grandmothers

demonstrate the importance and value of working together with people of good hearts and minds to promote well-being in children and youth, especially those in care.

The Context of Delegated Aboriginal Agencies

Since the early 1980s, many Indigenous communities in Canada, including BC, have embarked on taking back responsibility from the government to care for their own children. The province gives legislated authority to child- and youth-serving agencies through a graduated three-tier step process that comprises basic voluntary services, guardianship services, and full child protection services. First Nations people assert that this delegated process is an interim measure toward self-governance. There are 27 of these agencies in BC at different levels of delegation. Some agencies provide services only on reserve while others provide services to Indigenous children and families both on and off reserve.

NIFCS received delegation in 1999. It currently provides guardianship services to its member Nations, which include Tsimshian, Haisla, and Tahltan people whose Elders and leaders guide NIFCS with traditional teachings. NIFCS is well placed (and wholeheartedly wants) to benefit from new knowledge gained through an ecological, holistic Indigenous approach and perspective. NIFCS's mission is "to provide community based and community driven child and family care services that protect and preserve the unique cultural identity of every child and family in the bands we serve" (Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Board, 2008). NIFCS has some experience in participating in community-based and -driven services. The agency participated in community participatory research through "Touchstones of Hope" (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2013) which was founded by Cindy Blackstock as

a reconciliation movement to redevelop Indigenous child welfare on the basis of community-developed visions of healthy children and families informed by the Touchstones of Hope principles. NIFCS also conducted collaborative partnership research with the Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network (ICWRN), University of Victoria, on custom adoptions (Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network & Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society, 2014).

Self-Location in Indigenous Research

A major theme of this thesis is cultural identity; it takes the position that one road that leads to strong cultural identity, knowing who you are and where you come. Sinclair (2003, cited in Absalon & Willett, 2005) defines self-location as "revealing our identity to others; who we are, where we come from, our experiences that have shaped those things, and our intentions for the work we plan to do" (p. 122). Hence, self-location, in Indigenous research as in life, is a critical starting point.

My starting point for this research begins with my experience of working as a guardianship supervisor for one year and as the executive director of NICFS, a delegated First Nations agency, for six years. I embarked on this study because I wanted to increase my knowledge about the cultural contexts of the Indigenous peoples I work with and deepen my understanding of the things that matter most to them. I enrolled in the Indigenous master of social work program at the University of Victoria so that I could learn through an Indigenous lens, utilizing Indigenous knowledges and approaches to understand the worlds of the communities NIFCS serves. I decided to use Indigenous methodologies and knowledges to research issues of concern that pertain to Indigenous children and youth in care, who deeply need cultural permanence because of their

disconnection from their biological families and extended families, their communities, and their cultural traditions and teachings. The ultimate goal of this research is to restore balance and well-being in the lives of Indigenous children and youth in care by promoting cultural connections.

I approach my work as an ally to Indigenous peoples who believe in social justice and in practicing social work with the spiritual qualities of justice and compassion. My cross-cultural experiences are those of a black Caribbean woman who grew up on a small island in the Caribbean and immigrated to Canada as a young adult. On the island of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we learned to live with many diverse groups of people born out of our country's colonial past. The Caribbean islands were colonized by the British, French, and Dutch at different times in our history. The slave trade brought many racial groups that added to the mix. My classrooms consisted of Black, White, and East Indian children and mixes of all three. My teachers were all different shades of black and white, but primarily black. Despite our diversity, there was classism based on wealth and skin colour. Lighter skin was seen and treated as better and even superior. If you were poor and very dark, your social and economic experiences were likely to be more difficult than those of your neighbour or friend with lighter skin. This skin colour superiority is a leftover legacy of slavery and colonization.

Despite these challenges, my experiences with diverse cultures prepared me somewhat for the multicultural mix in Canada. There were differences in dress, food, mannerisms, music, dance, and cultural norms, which I have learnt to deal with. It can be less stressful to fit in sometimes than to be different, especially if you look different. It is not always easy to fit into another culture different from your own, because your own

culture is imbedded within you, and you can experience inner dissonance. Although I

know where I came from and was never disconnected from my family while I was

growing up, I can relate to the inner sense of dissonance expressed by the adoptees

Carriere (2007a) interviewed. I live within another culture from the one I grew up in, and

I am the only member of my family living in Canada. I often yearn for that family and

cultural connection. The inner dissonance expressed by the adoptees in the Carriere study

arose from not knowing where they came from, who they were connected to biologically

and culturally. The adoptees longed to be connected to their birth families. My lived

experience shares some similarity with the people I work with, so I am able to empathize

with them on an experiential level. I feel that my own experience is partly what prompts

me to try and make a difference for others.

In my culture, we do not have a child welfare system that removes children from

their parents; it would be unthinkable. We never had a history of doing so, although there

was a lot of poverty. The community attended to these needs through community

education; community health centres gave out basic nutritional packages for the babies

and young children; daycare is free (or parents pay a small fee) and funded by the

government and private organizations; schools give the children glasses of milk in the

morning and at break times. Poverty and its related neglect was and still is a big problem

for many families in my home country, but social workers and government never

intervened and removed children from their families and homes. If our government had to

remove children because of corporal punishment and poverty, as the BC Ministry of

Child and Family Development (MCFD) does, a great percentage of the island children

would be in institutionalized care. Instead, resources are used for community development in the areas I described above.

Having this cross-cultural perspective and experience has broadened my understanding of the human complexities of dealing with poor and marginalized families. Where I come from, children get beaten and verbally chastised, but at a level that is considered culturally acceptable discipline. The sexual abuse of a child, however, is a criminal act and perpetrators are prosecuted. Children and parents will receive counselling, and children in many cases will live with safe relatives. There is no government child and family legislation that addresses children and family needs, as there is in Canada. Criminal law deals with sexual abuse, molestation and rape, and severe physical harm. During my fourth-year social work practicum in my country's child welfare department, I accompanied the social worker to court on some child welfare matters, including child molestation and child rape. I saw incidents where family members refused to believe a child and accused her lying, so in instances like those the child could be subjected to ongoing sexual abuse. I feel the right approach to government intervention lies somewhere in the middle of these two polar opposites in the two different countries. I struggle with this question: Why am I in a profession that separates children from their families, communities, and culture? A secondary question is, how do we balance this with the fact that, occasionally, Indigenous children need to be protected? My struggle allows me to see the need for children in care to be supported in cultural resiliency through cultural connections and cultural identity. It is important to always keep in mind that practicing daily with dignity and respect will help to restore balance that was disrupted because of separation.

Theoretical Framework For Practice

This chapter addresses insights related to understanding the importance of culture and how strategies related to this study's key themes of connectedness and belonging, resiliency, and spirituality, when applied using Indigenous methods and methodology, could potentially provide supports and strengths for successful life outcomes for Indigenous children and youth. The aim of NIFCS is to incorporate knowledge gained from this study's literature review into practice with Indigenous children and youth in care to ensure that culturally appropriate elements are applied that would effectively promote resilience and belonging.

My dream about the tree, which I described in Chapter 1, prompts this question: How can we at NIFCS support each child's best dreams? Although it is not explicitly stated in the thesis purpose statement, it is nonetheless an important question to ask because it can inform a project or activity NIFCS could develop that would give each child and youth in our care an opportunity to reflect on what they want or dream of or envision for themselves, apart from what adults might think they need and want. This question could be an avenue for reflective discourse between children and youth, their caregivers, and their social workers that could be useful for discovering talents and supporting the development of children's gifts and talents.

To address the purpose, aim, and goals of the study, I used an Indigenous qualitative methodological approach that incorporates Indigenous knowledge and worldview. I have divided my analysis into two parts. In the first, I return to my dream about the tree and borrow the tree symbol to as a metaphor for culture and the greater web of life, as well as for cultural permanency planning for Indigenous children and

youth in care. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze the study findings and relate them to child welfare practice at NIFCS.

The Tree as a Metaphor for Culture and this Thesis

>*I dreamed I was standing under a tree with brilliant green foliage and many red fruit blossoms. I reached up and held a tree limb in my hand to pick one of the fruits. To my surprise and amazement, many children tumbled out of the tree and started running in all directions. I frantically tried to gather them all together, and with the exception of two adolescent boys, I succeeded. I had mixed feelings about the boys' departure. I felt disappointed that I was unable to hold onto them to keep them safe like the others, and I also felt a sense of relief with the knowledge that I am unable to save everyone and, in fact, some people do not need saving. I had to learn that lesson of self-determination from the two boys in my dream.*

For me, the tree in my dream is a metaphor for culture. It is a very connecting symbol, with the different parts contributing to the whole. NIFCS's goal for every child and youth in care is to ensure they have meaningful, permanent connections: the web of life. I borrow the tree metaphor as an organizing feature for this analysis, using different parts of the tree—the roots, stem, leaves, and fruits—as metaphors to explain some of the concepts in this study.

Roots.

Indigenous peoples were traditionally part of land-based societies in which families exercised economic rights to territories and resources. Indigenous children's rights and responsibilities were rooted and grounded in this thriving collective system

LaBoucane-Benson, (2005, p. 180). Unfortunately, this traditional way of life was disrupted by colonization and the disconnection of five generations of Indigenous children from their families and communities (LaBoucane-Benson,2005 p. 181). Connecting children back to their roots, to their families and communities, is not only a decolonizing methodology, but a healing strategy to restore holistic health and well-being. Every child in care needs to know their roots. They need to know they are connected somewhere to extended families, to a community of place. They need to know they came from somewhere. Those who live in stranger care in foster homes or have been adopted into non-Indigenous homes, lack awareness of how they are connected. This lack of awareness weakens children's roots and disconnects them from community strengths and resilience.

In nature, we observe that trees with strong roots don't succumb easily to natural disasters. Metaphorically speaking, children with strong roots will also be resilient. This study's findings show that the keys to resiliency are cultural identity, connectedness, and belonging. These qualities are directly related to dignity through meeting the whole needs of children, as explained in Richardson and Wade's (2010) Medicine Wheel of Responses. Dignity is at the centre of the wheel anchoring as strong roots, connecting to the whole person, the spiritual, emotional, physical, and social needs of each Indigenous child and youth. When we speak of connectedness for children in care, we refer to their family of origin, which includes their extended family and cultural community, as well as their teachings, values, traditions, language, and ceremonies. When children reside in their communities, they are connected across all generations, unlike when they are in foster care. Whenever I attend community feasts and other community gatherings, I

observe the coming together of all generations. It is a very profound experience for an outsider. On one occasion I attended a community dance and the hall was filled with families from across all generations dancing together to country music. Children in care need more opportunities to attend these community functions and participate in them, even if they are not from that that particular community.

Stem.

In my tree metaphor, the stem of the tree is knowledge. Thomas (2011) describes how her grandmother passed down traditional and other knowledge to her through stories, including mythical stories about how to stay safe, how to learn about values, how to understand metaphysical and spiritual concepts. Simpson (p. 74) affirms that Nishnaabeg (Anishinaabe) cultural existence demands that Nishnaabeg knowledge is passed down to the younger generations; she states:

> Our children must have a strong connection to land in order to be able to
> maintain the necessary connections with the plant and animal nations and
> the spirit world to nurture, balance, and our children must have the skills
> embodied in listening so that they can fully appreciate and synthesize
> knowledge from the oral traditions of their peoples. (p. 75)

Leaves.

Leaves are a connecting feature of the tree; the function of a leaf is to bear the blossoms and the fruits. If the roots of a tree are weak and not firmly connected, the leaves do not blossom and bear sweet-tasting fruit. At NIFCS, as legal guardians of the children and youth we are delegated to care for, we have the legal and moral responsibility to attend to their needs as Indigenous children and youth. The literature,

and other Indigenous communities provide Indigenous models of care that we can emulate and borrow from in this regard. One such model is Richardson and Wade's (2010) "Islands of Safety" model. As guardians and caregivers, we need to connect the youth and children back to their extended families and communities, where they can learn about their cultural teachings, values, cultural spirituality, family, and community strengths. In this way we would be fulfilling our parental duties in a just and compassionate manner.

In addition, the leaves' connection to the branches could also symbolize that many children and youth belong to more than one cultural heritage. Others belong to different bands, clans, and houses. Some cultures follow patrilineal ancestry and others follow the matrilineal line. Whatever the differences and similarities are, children need to be guided to honour and welcome their uniqueness as well as their diversity. In my view, the lack of awareness of the unity of the human condition is a cause of hostility and apathy. I believe colonialism is partially based on ignorance of the oneness of humankind. We are all the leaves of one branch and the fruits of one tree. Indigenous children and youth in care need to be aware that they are connected to every other human being as part of the human tree.

Fruits.

Finally, the fruits of the tree represent positive, successful outcomes from the dreams of every family member, community member, cultural group, caring citizen, caring social worker, and, ultimately, the children and youth themselves. The fruits we at NIFCS are aiming for are that children and youth in care would have strong cultural identities, would experience holistic health that integrates the physical, spiritual,

emotional, and intellectual through balance and well-being. That they will live with dignity and practice respect because their self-worth was respected. Connections would be not only a concept, but a reality in their lives. They would know at least one or two family members or caring adults with whom they could form bonds of trust. They would have real knowledge about their family tree. They would have role models that embody family and cultural resiliency.

In the rest of this chapter, I elaborate on how this study's themes and the knowledge gained will be used to improve practice within NIFCS and, I hope, in Ministry offices and other agencies as well.

Connectedness and Cultural Planning for Cultural Permanence

This study's findings reveal that colonial policies and practices, including residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the child welfare system, contribute to the loss of culture, language, family bonding, and identity for Indigenous children, families, and communities. One of the main goals of this thesis is to mitigate the current path of disconnection that children and youth in care face by recommending an ecological, holistic approach to practice with Indigenous children and youth.

The objective of the literature review was to advance knowledge and current practices promoting resiliency and belonging for Indigenous children and youth in care. The ultimate goal was to obtain new ideas and to synthesize preexisting knowledge and Indigenous cultural wisdom to produce concrete, practical changes in child welfare policy and practice to improve the lives of Indigenous children and youth in significant positive ways. My findings demonstrate that connectedness is central to well-being. When I refer to connectedness, I mean ongoing strong relationships between the child and their birth

parents (whenever possible), with their extended family and community, and with Indigenous culture, teachings, and spirituality. To support this kind of connectedness, Richardson (2009) suggests that social workers practice having strengths-based dialogues that dignify Indigenous children and families. Her "Islands of Safety" model draws on Turnell's (Turnell & Essex, 2006) signs of safety.

A theme that appears crucial to practice with Indigenous children and youth in care is that interactions between social workers and children or youth and parents, family, extended family, and community members need to promote belonging, self-esteem, a sense of connection, and a sense of self-worth. They must also uphold the rights of the Indigenous child as identified by the Secretary General of the United Nations Rights of the Indigenous Child (United Nations General Assembly, 2012), including the right to know one's people, one's land, and one's language and to live in one's culture.

Children in permanent care have adoption as one of their permanency plans. The other options are return to parents, which very rarely happens, or transfer of custody to a family or community member. Provincial standards and Aboriginal Operational and Practice Standards Indictors (AOSPI) state that when placing Indigenous children for adoption or in foster placement, preference should be given to Indigenous families or members of an Indigenous community. Given the overwhelming agreement and convergence on the definition and meaning of Indigenous cultural identity and its connection to culture, family, and community, an important question to ask is, How might NIFCS factor culture into its plans when addressing issues of loss, belonging, and identity for children and youth in care? In addressing issues of loss, identity, and belonging, which for most of the children in care are acted out through oppositional

behaviours, anxiety, depression, attempted suicide, and substance misuse, the typical approach is to refer them to a mental health clinician who specializes in Western approaches, such as cognitive or talk therapy. Most Indigenous youth resist this kind of help. Some of them have said to me, when asked why they won't go to therapy sessions, "I don't know what to say." We expect youth to have the vocabulary to articulate their internal and external complexities, but most do not. Further, every child who has been assessed by a psychologist or psychiatrist has diagnostic labels listed in their files. Recommendations never include identity and culture as protective factors in promoting well-being. Being in care is usually listed as a reason for misbehaviour and dysfunction, but I have yet to see culture and cultural strengths as a recommended avenue to well-being. This discrepancy is one of the motivating factors for this thesis and its goals.

To determine how well NIFCS has been accomplishing its goals, the agency conducted a self-evaluation in March 2013. Children and youth in care filled out surveys and participated in a sharing circle about their experiences of connection to culture, family, and social workers. Some of their responses are included below.

One young woman who left care at age 19 was interviewed by the evaluators. She expressed her experience in these words: "When I had my first baby [my social worker] was in the birthing room with me. She cared so much about me. She helped set me up with everything I need when I left care." The young woman was 15 when she gave birth and was living with her foster parent. Her statement illustrates the importance of showing care and being there for children and youth when they are most vulnerable.

Another part of the evaluation was a focus group discussion conducted by the evaluators with the children and youth to gather data about their experiences in care. This

was not a teaching opportunity; it was intended strictly to hear directly from the children without any adults present so they could speak without hesitation about their daily experiences of being in foster care. Many youth and children reported trust when their social worker engaged them in experiential visits to cultural communities or participating in cultural activities (e.g., making regalia) with other children in care. They also gained trust when social workers socialized and ate with them at events or attended appointments with them (especially so for children with special needs).

According to Richardson and Wade (2008), the whole family that surrounds a child in care must be able to take part in planning for cultural permanence. Cultural planning is about belonging, about saying to a child, "You belong to us." It is about the wholeness of the child and taking children where they belong.

Illustrating the web of connectedness, one grandmother said in the NIFCS survey, "Every child in this community is my grandchild."

Children and youth who participated in the sharing circles about culture named the following things as important aspects to strengthening their cultural identity: [cultural identity] "means having more time with biological families"; "celebrating birthdays"; attending naming feasts, funerals, and other cultural events; maintaining consistent relationships to the traditional families; and learning to hunt, fish, and dance the traditional dances (Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Self-Evaluation Report, 2013, p. 54).

For Indigenous peoples, culture is the essence of who they are (Carriere, 2007; Hart, 2007; Smith, 2012; Thomas, 2005). Their lived experiences constitute a symbiotic relationship between culture and mind (Gone, 2004). HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris

(1997) explain that an Indigenous worldview is grounded in fundamental beliefs which guide and shape young people's life experiences. For Indigenous peoples, these fundamental beliefs include the traditional meaning of family as the extended family, whereby each child has an abundance of blood and clan relatives to share the responsibility of child rearing. Elders are highly respected within the extended family system because of their crucial role in passing on history and culture. This is important knowledge in working with Indigenous children and youth.

For NIFCS, this thesis is meant to critically analyze how Indigenous knowledge and principles can guide practice that promotes balance, belonging, connectedness, and resiliency. It is important to the agency that these knowledges and principles are articulated in the agency's values, mission, mandate, and policies, and that resources are allocated toward implementing cultural practices and activities that matter for the children in care. More and more agencies like Kw'umut Lelum Child and Family Services (http://www.kwumut.org/) are taking over full child protection services from MCFD so that they can ensure the well-being of their children and youth in care. Kw'umut Lelum is very fortunate to have Indigenous scholar and storyteller Dr. Robina Thomas on its board. Dr. Thomas brings Indigenous knowledge and experience to the agency's planning to help it provide for the needs of the children and youth it serves. NIFCS is in consultation with Kw'umut Lelum's executive director to learn about their journey and path towards attaining full child protection delegation because it is NIFCS's goal and intent to pursue full child protection within the next two years.

Cultural Diversity and Cultural Planning for Cultural Permanence

The report to the BC legislature of the Representative for Children and Youth (Turpel-Lafond, 2013) revealed that of 60 First Nations cultural plans of care reviewed; only three were completed, with minimal involvement of the parents and cultural communities. The social workers' response to this deficit was that they find it almost impossible to be aware and knowledgeable of diverse languages, customs, teachings, religions, and cultural traditions. In meeting the needs of diverse children and youth from diverse Indigenous backgrounds, applying cultural relevance in a Western context while ensuring the centrality of culture is a real challenge; however, it is not impossible, and as guardians of these vulnerable youth we are asked to meet the challenge. Thomas and Green (2009, p.40) encourage us as social workers to collaborate with Indigenous helpers to include and centre Indigenous traditional ways that uphold the cultural teachings that have valuable teachings to offer everyone. For example, the medicine wheel teaches balance and interconnectedness; all my relations teaches that everyone and everything in the visible and invisible world is interconnected, with diverse functions and roles, and we have a responsibility to maintain and restore balance and harmony. Like the human body with its diversity of organs and functions, we have the responsibility to honour and ensure wholeness, balance, and harmony or else we experience sickness. Metaphorically, when we lose sight of this fundamental Indigenous teaching and practice separation instead of rebuilding, when we work as individuals in isolation of cultural protocols with Indigenous families instead of in partnership and collaboration, the social body politic suffers, especially the vulnerable ones like children and youth in care who are disconnected from their sources of strength, such as their families, extended families,

communities, and culture. For example, the nine communities NIFCS serves have diverse languages, customs, traditions, teachings, and beliefs. Our social workers are not expected to know everything, but they are expected to partner, collaborate, and build relationships with each community and family to plan for each child to experience cultural permanence by experiencing connections, belonging, and a strong sense of identity.

Despite this diversity, Indigenous literature from around the world is united in the principle of holistic connections, balance, and well-being for promoting resiliency and positive outcomes for children and youth (Gray & Coates, 2008). HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997) posit that, in spite of tribal differences, there are shared core values, beliefs, and behaviours among different Indigenous groups. These include spirituality, childrearing as the responsibility of an extended family, veneration of age/wisdom/tradition (respect for Elders), respect for nature, generosity, respect for others, composure/patience, the relativity of time, and nonverbal communication (p. 61). The authors highlight the challenge of applying a single cultural context to every Indigenous child and youth because of the diversity among Indigenous cultural groups, languages, and practices.

What does this mean for social workers who encounter cultural diversity in their work? Children and youth in care need to understand their cultural spiritual teachings of the interconnectedness and interdependent relationships of all things, where uniqueness and differences both are honoured and celebrated. I see the metaphor of the tree having some significance in reinforcing this concept. We need to see all of the different Nations as branches of one human tree.

In practical terms, NIFCS can practice a number of things to support Indigenous children and youth in their specific and particular cultural heritage.

Recognizing Dignity in Children and Youth

First, at NIFCS we will apply the Medicine Wheel of Responses model that respects others' dignity by honouring their inner capacities and preexisting knowledge about their own sense of knowing about themselves and the world around them. This includes honouring families' knowledge of how to keep themselves and their children safe, honouring families' capacity to love, feel love, and give love to their children despite their personal circumstances, their capacity to make their own decisions about and for themselves and their families. We are all born with free will to make choices. That means that children and youth in care will have opportunities with their families to connect, to interact with the land through cultural visits, to experience a sense of place, to participate in ceremonies, and to connect with cultural ways of knowing, being, and living. When children's holistic (i.e., spiritual, social, physical, and emotional) needs are met through dignified practice, their minds and bodies will show signs of dignity through their radiant and happy faces and spontaneous smiles.

Second, for younger children who learn by mirroring, our best hope is that all of NIFCS staff will practice with dignity on a daily basis with each other so that we are emotionally and physically relaxed, calm, and happy when we interact with children. In turn, the children would be able to mirror positive things about how we behave and act towards them and their families. As humans we are all aware of the mirroring process and effects.

Another way we can gauge whether we are doing a good job is to listen to the voices of children and youth, whether that is through processes of self-evaluation, picnics around the fire, watching cultural movies together, working on cultural collages together, or visiting communities together. These activities can give us cues about the willingness and enthusiasm of youth to attend and participate in events and activities and to be of service to others.

The more time that NIFCS staff and caregivers spend with children, youth, families, extended families, and community members in each other's presence and on the land, the greater the visibility we would all experience, and the stronger the attachment and resiliency children and youth will experience. "Being invited to exist in another's presence," Neufeld (2008) writes, where there is love, emotional connection, belonging, significance, being understood, and feeling taken care off, is the epitome of dignity and the magnet that helps to create attachment and support resiliency for our children and youth in care. These concepts are elaborated in Chapter 5.

Summary

Critical reflection about social work practice is required around key themes of connectedness, identity, and cultural and spiritual resiliency because of their implications for promoting well-being in Indigenous children and youth in care. It is recommended that Indigenous children and youth in care receive culturally appropriate services. The best practice is that which occurs within the local context of the needs of children and youth. Social workers need to be cognizant of whose knowledge and worldviews they are intentionally and unintentionally using in their daily practise. For Indigenous children and youth, the essence of their identity is deeply rooted in culture. Whatever a child's specific

cultural values, teachings, norms, traditions, protocols, stories, dances, arts, principles, and spiritual teachings are, social workers can act as a bridge to help them find their place within their culture. Indigenous authors, through their research and lived experiences, are giving us tools and knowledge to do so.

In the next and final chapter, I summarize the Indigenous knowledge and approaches to practice that this thesis has explored with the goal of promoting resiliency and belonging for Indigenous children and youth in care.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This chapter summarizes the thesis by tying some of the concepts discussed in the preceding analysis into the broader purpose and goals of the thesis and its guiding methodology. The metaphor of the dream tree with its significance to practice is highlighted, and I describe how my dream helped inform this thesis. In particular, I discuss cultural diversity in practice as it relates to the specific communities served by Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCS). I recommend a number of principles and cultural activities to enhance practice with Indigenous children and youth in the care of NIFCS. Finally, the thesis closes with some concluding remarks about dreaming the future with children and youth in care.

Thesis Overview

The purpose of this thesis was to document and create understandings about the policies and practices that First Nations child welfare agency and social workers can activate to promote ongoing connections for the Indigenous children and youth in their care with a view to achieving positive outcomes and lifelong well-being for these young people. In particular, I aimed to document, organize, and highlight knowledge that can be applied at NIFCS, where I serve as executive director.

A specific practice question was explored in this research: What are signs of dignity that social workers can recognize in their practice with children, youth, and families? What are indictors of dignity? Practising with dignity involves building rapport without the expectation to trust, offering choices when possible, asking for permission to raise sensitive topics even when required to do so, acknowledging ways that individuals preserve their dignity through their responses and resistance to oppression and suffering,

being honest about the power we have through legislation, using empowering dignity-based language in our assessment reports, court documents, and CPOCs, and asking strengths-based questions in interviews when we are investigating issues of violence and safety, with mothers in particular. These are some ways that we know we are practicing with dignity (Richardson, p. 212).

In addition to the main research question, I was able to explore many other questions. Some were broad research questions, such as "how can research recommendations propagate social change and social justice in ways that create more equality, fairness, and well-being for Indigenous Nations within the dominant EuroCanadian political framework?" Understanding and teaching others about colonialism, how colonial violence supported by the Indian Act and played out through residential schools, child welfare, policing, and health and social services has served to devastate many Indigenous communities and resulted in great suffering. Richardson (2004, 2006) asserts that the Medicine Wheel of Responses is an Indigenous framework for understanding Indigenous resistance to colonialism, racism, and oppression.

A reflective question on "relational accountability" is, how is my research benefiting the people I am working with, as alluded to by some Indigenous authors, such as Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson. A question that relates to my personal location is, how can I use my location of race, gender, status as an executive director, and historical experience of poverty to support, align with, and advocate for equal and dignified practice for Indigenous children and families?

Other questions relate to enhanced, wise practices. For example, how can NIFCS work towards the goal of achieving successful outcomes for our children and youth in

care that promote resiliency and belonging? How can plans of care support meaningful connections for the children and youth in care?

Many answers to these questions were supported by research from this thesis. However, knowledge from a medicine wheel framework and from an Indigenous worldview is not static; it is cyclical, never ending, and relative; therefore, my position is to always be open to learning, reflecting, applying what I have learned, and reflecting again on previous applications of learning. The cycle of learning and knowledge enhancement goes on and on.

NIFCS intends to apply this systematic approach to learning with the work we do by engaging in ongoing dialogue with communities, staff, board, children, youth, Elders, care givers, and other professionals and stakeholders through a variety of communication modalities. Christopher Walmsley (2004) reported that "credibility to practice child protection needs to be constructed with community members to counter the historical legacy of colonialism; the focus is to build reciprocal helping relationships with members of the community to ensure children's safety. One way to optimize learning is to choose a "cultural guide"—someone who is respected by all, knowledgeable about the community, and with whom a non-Indigenous social worker can develop an open, trusting relationship (p. 104).

I used an ecological, holistic, qualitative methodology for this thesis. I drew on some personal parallels with the people in the study as well as drawing meaning from two dreams. According to Wilson (2008), knowledge can be acquired through both empirical methods/observations and spiritual sources, such as communion with ancestor spirits and through visions and dreams.

The Indigenous literature reviewed in this study converges on the point that connection to one's roots is crucial to forming and maintaining healthy identities. Using Indigenous theoretical frameworks and methodologies in research helps to make Indigenous cultural knowledge relevant to the needs of Indigenous peoples. Much research has been done, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people "of good heart and mind," as evidenced by the multitude of literature in existence. However, the research carried for this thesis has importance for NIFCS as a delegated First Nations agency to apply new knowledge and cultural recommendations to practice.

A description of the methodological approach that guided and shaped the process of inquiry in this thesis would not have been complete without making clear some of the elements of my personal worldview and location within the context of the study. In terms of conducting ethical research in First Nations communities, as a non-Indigenous person, I must remain constantly aware of my personal beliefs and biases that are present in how I discuss an Indigenous research paradigm. As a racialized woman of colour who has experienced racism in many ways, I use my experiences in a male-dominated Western-hegemonic society as a source of empathy and understanding. At the same time, my "sameness" is never assumed. With this being said, it is important to examine how non-Indigenous people can participate within Indigenous research. Getty (2009) believes that as an outsider "it is possible to be authentic and still develop a relationship and learn about another's point of view and experiences" (p. 8). I questioned myself a lot while doing this research regarding where I am located conceptually, personally, and professionally. What I have learned from this research has heightened my awareness of

the need for decolonizing practices in work with Indigenous children, youth, and families.

Reviewing Goals and Objectives

The goal of this thesis is to mitigate the current path of disconnection for Indigenous children and youth in care and restore balance by recommending an ecological, holistic approach to practice.

The specific research objectives of the thesis were as follows:

1.   To conduct a literature review of primarily Indigenous authors on the topic of creating cultural permanence when planning for Indigenous children and youth in care.

2.   To identify the themes revealed through the literature review that support cultural permanence, connectedness, belonging, and the cultural and spiritual resilience that restores dignity, balance and well-being.

3.   To provide suggestions for enhancing practice that applies superior approaches that respond to the culturally appropriate needs of children in care.

In accordance with the first objective, to conduct a literature review of primarily Indigenous authors on the topic of creating cultural permanence when planning for Indigenous children and youth in care, I read literature written by at least 15 Indigenous authors. The purpose of choosing of Indigenous authors was to garner Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and experiences as they relate to centering cultural knowledges and experiences to address the topic of cultural permanence for Indigenous children and youth in care. Several non-Indigenous articles were also utilized, primarily for content value about the main themes in the literature review and for the purpose of identifying

similarities and differences between Western and Indigenous perspectives on the thesis topic's main themes.

In accordance with the second thesis objective, I analyzed the articles for content information on three main themes: connectedness and belonging; cultural identity; and resiliency as it relates to belonging, spirituality, cultural identity, and balance. Two important themes that emerged from the literature review and appear to be foundational to the other themes were colonialism (in particular the impacts of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the child welfare system on Indigenous children, families, and communities) and the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination.

In accordance with the third thesis objective, to provide suggestions for enhancing practice that applies superior approaches that respond to the culturally appropriate needs of children in care, I have prepared some recommendations for practice at NIFCS. These are included below in the section headed Recommendations.

Cultural Diversity in Practice

Meeting the challenge of cultural diversity in social work practice is a topic that should be elaborated and expanded beyond the scope of this study. However, I want to include some thoughts here. One of the insights and "Aha!" moments that I had while exploring and interacting with the literature and my tree metaphor was about the concept of diversity. Gray and Coates (2008) and Turpel-Lafond (2013) posit that one of social work's deficits in conducting culturally appropriate planning is in the area of diversity. Social work entails dealing with diverse peoples, cultures, and backgrounds. Many, if not most, social workers find planning around diversity challenging, especially meeting the specific local needs of the children, families, and communities they are working with.

In discussing my tree metaphor, I stated that many analogies could be used to inform practice at NIFCS. For example, the concept of diversity represented by the tree could be used as a guiding principle that NIFCS could put into policy to inform NIFCS how to honour and respect differences in language, traditions, ceremonies, teachings, values, and protocols. What strategies and cultural activities might we apply to meet the holistic needs of children and youth that are grounded within their cultural knowledge and teachings? As a delegated agency we are the children's guardians. It is up to us, not the children, to figure out diversity; it is our problem and should never fall on the shoulders of the children, nor should it be overlooked or dismissed, as in the case where the CPOCs were not completed because of workers who "did not know what to do" (Turpel-Lafond, 2013). NIFCS social workers will endeavour to find family members and cultural advisors to assist them with meeting each child's specific individual needs. We will not take the easy way out and say it is too challenging to know about every difference.

The concept of the tree with its interconnected parts could also be used to convey the principle of unity in diversity. That we are all the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch signifies a principle of oneness, a common thread that connects us to each other. First Nations peoples in Canada and Indigenous peoples around the world who have experienced colonization know what it is to be rejected because of their differences. The residential school was used as a tool for assimilation—sameness. Indigenous people's diversity was not honoured, respected, or seen as strengths, not only for their own culture, but for other cultures and humanity as a whole. The tree is connected by all of its interconnected parts: the roots, stems, branches, leaves, and fruits. The statement,

"We are all the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch, we must behave towards one another with utmost kindness, love, and harmony" (Abdul Bahá, 1982) has implications for learning about unity in diversity.

NIFCS's three Nations have different words in their languages that express the concept of oneness and diversity. The Tsimshian word, sayt k'uulm goot (Sai-KOOLUM-gaawt) means "with one heart"; in Haisla, haisla'go (Hai-zla-GOH) means "we should get together as a community to do something"; the Tahltan word is dahdze'lige (Dah-ze-THLIGAH) "we are like one or like one heart." This teaching is a common Indigenous teaching; it does not mean we are all the same, it means we are all interrelated. As such, it is our ethical responsibility as social workers to figure out how to work across differences to meet the specific cultural needs of every child we work with.

Children and youth in care experience many kinds of rejection, from their peers and from some adults, because they are different. In addition to the cultural and racial prejudice that many First Nations youth experience, a child or youth may have a disability, be in foster care, be overweight, be gay or two-spirited. There is a need for social workers and caregivers to figure out how to work across these differences and empower youth to understand that difference is not wrong, less than, or a deficit, but simply a difference and to show them how they can hold onto their identity and become resilient through family and community strengths. Knowledge about response-based practices (Richardson & Wade, 2008) is helpful knowledge for NIFCS to document within its practice standards and policies because of its values of restoring dignity and creating mutual respect between the social worker and the child and family members. Taking this action would help to fulfill the purpose of this research to document,

organize, and highlight knowledge that can be applied in the agency where I serve as the executive director. Other actions and suggestions are outlined in the section below.

Recommendations for Practice

For Indigenous children and youth, connectedness and belonging goes beyond maternal bonding and the nuclear family. Each child is connected to myriad extended family members, with specific ties to cultural clans and houses. It is important for children in care to know their clan and house name, the names of their symbols, the name of their specific language even if they don't speak the language. It is important for them to know the dances, participate in the ceremonies, and understand their community's teachings and values that guide thoughts, attitudes, and interactions with everyone and all of nature. Children in care need to know who they are in relation to their relatives and ancestors.

Biological parents, extended family, Elders, and trustworthy community members need to be involved in guiding social workers and foster parents about what culture has to offer and how to engage Indigenous children and youth in activities and programs that have demonstrated success over time. Elders are a valuable source of strength through sharing cultural knowledge and assisting with centering culture at the heart of practice. Many agencies already incorporate Elders' participation into their offices to assist in conflict resolution by applying traditional ways of restoring harmony and balance. Some use story telling as a cultural methodology to pass on traditional values and teachings. NIFCS could encourage and request the involvement of Elders in many ways. For example, NIFCS could invite Elders to meet with children in care to tell them stories about their cultural history, spiritual teachings, values, and traditions.

NIFCS can promote connections with culture and community in many other ways. For example, we can involve children in games that help build identity. We can provide opportunities for them to learn about roles models of courage and resiliency. We can invite Indigenous artists to teach children and youth cultural art. We can take them on community visits several times a year, and take them to cultural museums to teach them how to make regalia and learn about their crests, dances, clans, and houses and build confidence and cultural pride. NIFCS could establish a library of Indigenous literature, artifacts, games, videos, life books, journals, Indigenous coloring books, music, books, and toys. We could have cultural camps for children and youth, bring youth from different Nations and communities together to learn from each other and to build appreciation and tolerance for diversity and differences. At these cultural camps, the communities could be invited to collaborate on designing, planning, and implementing the activities for the camp. The children and youth would learn traditional lessons and values about hunting, food gathering, local medicines, and their local environment and its history.

NIFCS can facilitate supervised and unsupervised visits with biological families to strengthen bonds of connection. As a superior approach to practice, NIFCS would like each child and youth to have a life book with updated yearly pictures. Each child receives a birthday gift from NIFCS social workers, and we would use that opportunity to take their picture every birthday, put them in their files, and give the child and foster parents a copy. Each child would be given a sketch book or journal for them to draw or write down their hopes and dreams for the future. Their hopes and dreams could be included in their

plans of care, to be supported through practice and through funded and non-funded services.

Another superior approach to practice would be ensuring that when a youth ages out of care they would have a cultural ceremony with the youth, their biological, adopted, and extended families and community Elders. Each youth would be given a copy of their cultural plan.

Creating genograms is another valuable activity. The Roots worker would have a genogram in each child's file and discuss their family tree with them. It is mandatory to read children their rights and children's and youth's comprehensive plans of care (CPOC) should reflect their rights to maintain connections to family, extended family, and culture, to be treated with dignity and respect, and to participate in decisions about themselves. In addition, it should be mandatory that each Indigenous child has a family tree in their file that is discussed with the child and to some degree with the foster parent. This is not a current policy, but I believe it should be since most Indigenous literature talks about the importance of identity and its relationship to mental and emotional health and holistic balance.

Children and youth in care need to have cultural plans that clearly document how their individual needs will be met for connectedness, identity, and belonging, what activities, programs, and services will promote their well-being and restore balance to their fragmented lives. Research has shown that when children and youth in care have plans of care that meets their holistic needs, it is a mitigating factor in preventing suicides. The ultimate goal is for Indigenous children and youth to thrive, to have cultural pride, to have positive self-esteem, to be resilient to cope with the stress of being in

government care, to learn about cultural resiliency from role models in their lives and

from stories about individuals who have demonstrated resiliency in their lives.

There is, of course, a great need to fund specific policies and programs that

promote cultural identity, strengths, and resiliency and extended family and community

connections. Present funding levels are inadequate to plan for these needs; however,

according to Simpson (2008), Elders and communities, without funds, have always

passed on their knowledge and teachings to the younger generations because of their own

sense of cultural responsibility, commitment, and care to what has sustained past

generations and will sustain future generations. This commitment on the part of Elders

and communities does not absolve governments who act in the capacity of legal

guardians of the responsibility to adequately fund cultural programs and activities that

promote the well-being of Indigenous children and youth. My role as the executive

director of NIFCS means that I am in a position to be a strong advocate for funding to

apply cultural practices and to work with a full First Nations board to ensure that cultural

programs are funded.

Topics for Further Research

As noted above, a topic that requires further research is that of meeting the

challenge of cultural diversity in social work practice. Another is the challenge for social

workers to work across differences in ways that promote cultural safety and respect

dignity.

Many Indigenous children reside in non-Indigenous foster homes, and not much

research has been done about these important relationships with children in care. Also,

children spend more time in school than they do with their social workers. What are the

implications of not factoring these two important areas of relationship into the context of promoting resiliency and belonging for Indigenous children and youth in care? I see this as a recommendation for NIFCS to explore as the legal guardian who is entrusted with the legislative and cultural responsibility for the well-being and holistic health of children and youth in care.

Concluding Remarks

My dream about children falling out of a tree left an indelible picture in my memory. I feel a deep sense of responsibility and care for children and youth who are disconnected from their families and cultures, whose lives are fragmented in so many ways, and who have experienced so many losses in their lives. I am aware that the children and youth I work with do not receive the care they deserve. The tree metaphor affirms the inherent right of Indigenous children and youth to receive holistic care guided by Indigenous values and teachings and grounded in cultural ways of knowing and being.

I would not have had the courage to share a dream within academic writing if I had not found a place and space within Indigenous perspectives. As Simpson (2008) says, "the first step to making something happen is often a dream or a vision. The importance of visioning and dreaming a better future based on our Indigenous traditions cannot be understated" (p. 84).

It is my hope that this thesis will bear some good fruits for children and youth in care and for NIFCS in enriching its practice and cultural policies. This research has engendered a renewed sense of hope for me that through applying practices that support connectedness, belonging, and cultural and spiritual resilience, practices that respond to the culturally specific needs of Indigenous children and youth in care, the children and

youth we serve will be able to develop a sense of cultural pride and safety knowing they can rely on a web of interconnected family, community, and cultural strengths. It is every child's dream to have a forever family. It is every social worker's dream to see children and youth in care have good outcomes in life.

It is my dream as a researcher that this thesis bears fruit, that all of the interconnected parts that make up a tree are symbolic of the whole and balanced child. That they are able to grow strong roots by knowing their place of birth, who they are related to, and where they fit within their family and community. The stem of the tree could be social workers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, other professionals, funders, governments, and policy makers to act as the bridge to make connections possible to the roots and to maintain those healthy, trusting connections to the roots. The branches are the many and diverse Nations and languages. The leaves represent all of humanity, and the fruits are the successful outcomes of connectedness and belonging, identity, trust, and cultural pride, spiritual and cultural resiliency to help Indigenous children and youth in care face life's challenges. I chose this research topic because I dream of changes for better future practice. History is replete with people who dream, such as Martin Luther King; many of the things he dreamed about came about long after his speech and his death, and many are yet dreams.

It is my best hope and deepest dream that each Indigenous child and youth in care can create their own dream tree and realize their own dreams.

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