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Opikināwāsowin (Cree)/ Eltth'i Nuheskéne Denushyé (Dene) Raising our Children Well

Indigenous Culture and the Child Welfare System in Saskatchewan

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Master thesis in Governance and Entrepreneurship in Northern and Indigenous
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Opikināwāsowin (Cree)/ Eltth'i Nuheskéne Denushyé (Dene) Raising our Children Well:
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Finally, I want to dedicate this work to the thousands of Indigenous children and families who have been impacted by residential schools and the child welfare system. I write the following work with your spirit close to my heart.

ABSTRACT

The research presented in this thesis addresses the question of whether a strong and healthy connection to cultural identity can help Indigenous Peoples mitigate the risk of becoming involved in the child welfare system. *Opikināwāsowin* will be explored in relation to healthy child-rearing in Saskatchewan. The concept of *Opikināwāsowin* is a Cree term that translates to *raising our children well*; a kinship value shared by many Indigenous Peoples and communities. For this research, and to pay respect and acknowledge the community that I have partnered with, the Dene translation *Elthh'i Nuheskéne Denushyé* is included in the title and can be used interchangeably with *Opikināwāsowin*. As a Cree research student, I chose to use the Cree spelling throughout this paper.

This thesis investigates how an understanding of healthy child rearing can benefit Indigenous families involved in the child welfare system, and how an understanding of Indigenous ontology can significantly change the child welfare system to be more culturally sensitive to Indigenous families. This cultural shift in the child welfare system is needed to reduce the high number of Indigenous children currently in care in Saskatchewan. To understand this idea and learn why it is important for a systemic shift in current child welfare systems, we must explore it's meaning and its relation to parenting styles within the Indigenous context. _

Through a literature review and a case study with the Birch Narrows Dene Nation in northern Saskatchewan, interviews with various community members that included Elders, knowledge keepers, and parents, were completed to explore the concept of Indigenous cultural identity

and its association with involvement in the child welfare system. This research is needed because evidence shows there is a direct relationship between Indigenous families

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Positionality

I am an Indigenous research student, a Swampy Cree/Nēhinaw Iskwēw from Treaty 5 territory in north-east Saskatchewan. My roots are placed in this territory in both Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Manitoba and the northern village of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan. I have lived in northern Saskatchewan in different communities for most of my life, apart from some time spent in urban cities to attend the First Nations University of Canada and the University of Saskatchewan. My employment background is in social work, and I have spent time working in child protection and mental health. My passion for my people is what drives my research and both my work experience and life in the north are what led me to this research topic. During the completion of this thesis, I have called Birch Narrows Dene Nation (BNDN)/Turnor Lake home, where I have lived and worked with my husband and our two daughters. This community is divided into two: the Birch Narrows Dene Nation (the First Nations reserve land) and the hamlet community of Turnor Lake. The people are Dënēsuliné, Cree, and/or Métis, and despite this physical division in the community, the people view themselves as one and refer to themselves simply as being from “Birch” or “Turnor”. Throughout this thesis, I will use the acronym BNDN to refer to Birch Narrows Dene Nation

1.1. Historical influences on Child Welfare: Culture Broken by Residential Schools

Indigenous families had been raising their children according to their own customs for millennia before any formal institutions like the child welfare system were established.

Families raised children based on foundations of love and immense respect. Children were the heart of the community, and they were treated with patience, love, understanding and an innate duty to preserve our people. Indigenous Peoples' connection to land played an integral role in parenting styles, for it was out on the land that children learned.

Families would teach children the languages, songs, ceremonies, customs, kinship and traditional values, and every other aspect of life openly and freely. Indigenous child rearing is revered as more than just a parental duty but as a collective duty to together sustain language, traditions and customs of the people. Indigenous ontology around family dynamics was viewed as whole, and each person had an integral role to play in the overall well-being of families and communities. The family unit was not reduced to just parents and their children as is common in the Eurocentric view of family. In the Indigenous context, everyone had a parenting role, including grandparents, aunts and uncles. In other words, everyone played a role in sustaining the children and, in so doing, sustaining the culture. This has been the way of Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial.

The intergenerational effects from residential schools have led to many issues for Indigenous parents and children, specifically, future involvement in the child welfare system. I assert that it is a loss of cultural connection that has led to this parental involvement in the system, and hence, to the high numbers of Indigenous children in care. The connection to culture is vital for Indigenous parents to thrive as caregivers to their children. First, this thesis will reflect on the historical influences on child welfare at the beginning with one of the most important influences on Indigenous parents, residential schools.

The federal government created a new system that would assume the parental roles of Indigenous parents in Canada. This system became known as the residential school system. The goals behind these institutions would be to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian society by means of cultural isolation and religious indoctrination of Indigenous children by members of the church (Rand, 2017 p. 58). The federal government delegated authority to churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church and other denominations (Rand, 2017 p.57). This process began when Canada's forefather, Sir John A. Macdonald developed the first residential school in 1883. In his address to the House of Commons, he stated:

When the school is on the reserve the child lives with his parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men- John A. Macdonald (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2013).

By sending Indigenous children to these schools, their connection to family, land, language, culture and community was severed. It was here where the children were now met with anger and no longer treated with love or respect. The entire residential school system was an assimilative process that was funded by the Canadian government, run by the Church and fueled by a mutual desire to colonize Indigenous peoples into white, Christian society

(Miller & Malloy, 2017; Fallon et al., 2019; Haight et al., 2018). The children were physically abused for speaking their languages, starved, and physically, emotionally and sexually abused by the people in charge. As Amrita Roy (2014) shares, Indigenous children who were placed in residential schools were “seized by force from their families and communities, mistreated, overworked, denied basic needs like food, water, and appropriate medical care, and both witnessed and personally experienced brutal physical, sexual and psychological abuse at the hands of school staff” (Roy as cited in Cowan, 2020, p.28). Although it is not confirmed that this abuse and cruelty occurred in every residential school or to every student who attended them, it was widespread (Robertson, 2006, p. 5). This was the reality for thousands of Indigenous children throughout the 113 year-long legacy while residential schools were operating, until the last one officially closed its doors in Saskatchewan in 1996 (University of Regina, 2017). It is estimated that throughout its time, over 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Canada, 2010) and those children, the ones who survived, later became parents with an institutionalized perception of child-rearing, one that they had learned through their experiences at residential school. This is very different from the traditional parenting skills passed down from generation to generation by their own parents, extended family and community. This created a multi-generational cycle involvement in the child welfare system. In fact, as Bombay et al., (2020), argue, “...[t]he overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the CWS (child welfare system) [is] linked to intergenerational cycles of risk initiated by the IRS (Indian Residential School) system” (Bombay et al., 2020, p.1). Fallon et al., (2021) similarly observed in their collected work, *Denouncing the Continued Overrepresentation of First Nations Children in Canadian Child Welfare*, that the “overrepresentation of First Nations children investigated by Canadian child welfare is a

consequence of centuries of policies of assimilation” (Fallon et al., 2021, p. 1). The residential school era is a very dark time in Canada’s history. But we must not forget that this history only dates back 50 years, and what’s more, the effects from this time are still very much evident today as we are seeing in many areas, but specifically in the child welfare system.

1.2. Research Objectives

This research examines the link between Indigenous parents’ connection to culture and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system. Indigenous culture is an all-encompassing definition_what makes a person them; it is the language, the ceremonies, the traditional knowledge, the belief systems, the history, the relationships to each other, to the land and well-being of the community. Indigenous culture is simply defined, as Leroy Little Bear states “Culture comprises a society’s philosophy about the nature of reality, the values that flow from this philosophy, and the social customs that embody these values” (2020, p.1). Through sharing narratives and lived experiences, the thesis will show the significance of healthy cultural connections and their association with fostering effective parenting approaches. By interviews and conversations, the research primarily focuses on advancing an understanding of the importance of Indigenous culture—including languages, ceremonies, kinship values, Indigenous values, and family systems—and demonstrating their potential to reducing the likelihood of Indigenous children and families’ involvement with child protective services.

1.3 Child Welfare in Northern Saskatchewan

Indigenous children are overrepresented in the child welfare system in Canada. In fact, as Barker, Taiaiake & Kerr share, “Aboriginal overrepresentation exists at every level of child welfare exposure (e.g., investigation, substantiated investigation, out-of-home placement) (2014, p.2). Although Indigenous Peoples comprise only 8% of the Canadian population, 50% of the children in care across Canada are Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2016). More specifically in Saskatchewan, Indigenous children account for 82% of children in care (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). The child welfare system was officially established in Saskatchewan in 1989-90 with the development of *The Child and Family Services Act* (Government of Saskatchewan, 2019). However, child welfare systems have been in effect since the 1950s all over Canada and were organized under different agencies. During this time, the federal government delegated authority to the provinces, and *Indian agents* were responsible for enforcing child welfare both on and off reserves (Bennet et al., 2005, p.19). At the time, this new system of child welfare assumed the roles of its predecessor, the residential school system; in other words, the goal behind the child welfare system was assimilative in nature (Bennet et al., 2005, p.56).

The child welfare systems in Northern Saskatchewan currently fall under the responsibility of both provincially and federally funded governments (Blackstock & Trocmé 2005). Prior to 2021, First Nations agencies would receive funding from what was then known as the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) under what was known as The Directive 20-1 Ch.5. Under this formula, First Nations received a certain

amount of funding based on the population of children between the ages of 0-18 years living on reserve and the FNCFS was expected to follow provincial and territorial legislation (Bennett 2001). However, because the amount of funding for First Nations Child and Family Service agencies was inequitable, in comparison to its counterpart (provincially funded programs), the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT) ordered Canada to provide funding to FNCFS which included 17 areas pertaining to funding and service delivery in child welfare (Government of Canada, 2021). Despite these two foundations for funding, the aforementioned *Child and Family Services Act* guides the framework for child welfare throughout the province and shapes the policies and modes of service delivery.

In Saskatchewan, those living off-reserve, despite identifying as Status First Nations individuals, fall under the Ministry of Social Services' Child and Family Programs. Ministry workers are expected to consult with children's respective bands once they become involved with the family, but they still assume authority over cases if the children/family reside off reserve (Ministry of Social Services, 2023). Both provincial and First Nations authorities provide services pertaining to child welfare delivery and these include investigations of maltreatment, family support through case-planning, referrals for support and apprehensions. Authority, justification of involvement and processes are all found in *The Child and Family Services Act 1989-1990* (Government of Saskatchewan, 1990).

In Saskatchewan, all policies and legislation pertaining to child welfare (on and off reserve) are written in the southern part of Saskatchewan. Agencies such as the Ministry of Social Services' Child and Family Services Department, which is a provincially funded entity, serves off reserve locations, and federally funded agencies, known as First Nations Child and Family Services *FNCFS*, services First Nations on reserve. These are the main

stakeholders implementing child welfare policies. Written by public servants, these policies do not reflect traditional parenting practiced by Indigenous Peoples in Saskatchewan and, therefore, display a fundamental disconnect with the very people they are intended to serve.

As mentioned above, there are certain guidelines that must be followed in the child protection arena. But who decides what these guidelines are? More importantly, who decided that one set of guidelines can be applicable to everyone involved in the child welfare system, regardless of background, culture, or where they live? Although there are separate bodies governing child welfare for Indigenous children on reserve, all the policies are derived from non-Indigenous perspectives and are almost always, as already stated, written in government agencies in southern areas where resources are plentiful, funding is accessible, and gaps in and lack of services are not so much an issue. However, for the Indigenous population in northern communities, the reality is that resources are low, barriers to services are greater, and access to services are limited. Finally, northern, Indigenous communities exist under vastly different conditions: with differences in socio-economic development, cultural expression, colonial impacts, and in different natural environments; Yet they are expected to have the same relationship with their child welfare agency as all the other communities. Interestingly, as well, Indigenous parents in the northern context are expected to have successful outcomes within the child welfare system as though the realities are the same as for those in the southern part of the province.

1.3.1. History of Child Welfare in Saskatchewan

Child welfare legislation was developed in Saskatchewan in 1908 with *The Child Protection Act*, which was created to provide protection for children in need under the age of 16 (Government of Saskatchewan, 1908). The legislation at the time “acknowledged poverty as a major factor in child neglect and abuse and addressed it with acts of charity, work for welfare and institutional care” (Dornstauder & Macknack, 2009, p.2). This legislation was revised only slightly over time and eventually become known as *The Child and Family Services Act* (1989-90). The period between 1908 and 1989 is crucial in child welfare, as Indigenous children were not protected during this time and instead fell victim to the child welfare system.

Assimilative and genocidal acts were carried out on Indigenous children, who were removed from their homes and placed in residential schools or adopted by white families, often out of province and country, in what is now known as the Sixties Scoop, a term first coined by Patrick Johnson in the mid-sixties (Paradis, 2015, p.1). The Sixties Scoop, as Paradis (2015), explains, “refers to an era in child welfare services where over 20,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were removed from their homes and communities to be fostered or adopted into pre-dominantly white, middleclass families or institutions (Paradis, 2015, p.1). These adoptions not only removed children from their families, it also removed their culture, their connection to place and land and their cultural identity (SOURCE NEEDED). As early as 2019, scholars like Peter Choate, have examined that because of the high numbers of Indigenous children in care in today’s child welfare system, it has informally been referred to as the “Millennial Scoop” (Choate, 2019, p. 1085). Although there is no exact number pertaining to Saskatchewan Indigenous children taken during this time, scholars like Sinclair it has been estimated that during the time of the Sixties Scoop, 20,000 Indigenous

children were removed from their homes and communities to be fostered or adopted into predominantly white, middleclass families or institutions (Sinclair, p. 10).

1.3.2 Current Child Welfare and Legislation

The *Child and Family Services Act* (1989-90) introduced child welfare policy in Saskatchewan and established the grounds upon which children could be apprehended from their families and removed to a “place of safety” at the judgment of a child protection worker. These workers are considered *officers* under the Act, and the legislation provides child protection workers with the legal authority to interview all children in the home where reports of abuse and neglect are suspected. As a framework, this legislation guides policies and models of services delivery to which every child and family service agency (but one, as we will discuss later) must follow.

In Saskatchewan, as of 2023, there were 5,967 children in care and this number includes two streams: 1) children who are wards (considered to be in the care of the ministry), on apprehended status, and those under a voluntary agreement, and; 2) children with Persons of Sufficient Interest (PSI) legal responsibility of the Ministry but placed in out of home care (Ministry of Social Services, 2023). This number includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, but Indigenous children accounted for 82% of the total children in care in the province. Although this number is lower than when it was recorded in 2018, the Ministry of Social Services identified 11% of children needed to be assessed, which the Ministry admits that there has not been a review to determine whether or not this 11% of

children is Indigenous or not (Government of Canada, 2023). However, based on the history and current research which states that “First Nations children (aged 0-15 years) in Canada were 3.6 times as likely to be the subject of a child maltreatment-related investigation compared to non-Indigenous children in 2019(Assembly of First Nations; First Nations Canadian Incidence Study, 2019, p.7). Although this speaks to the initial involvement in child welfare, and does not explicitly state that initial involvement equates children coming into care, the FNCIS report also states that, “[t]hey were up to 17.2 times more likely to be placed in formal out-of-home care during the investigation period (p.12). These numbers lead to an even more problematic statistic. As Blackstock and Trocmé assert, “there are more Indigenous children in care today, than there were at the height of the Residential School Era (RSE)” (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005).

In 2023, in Saskatchewan, Indigenous children account for 82% of children with legal status in care (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). These high numbers of Indigenous children in care are rooted in a “pervasive history of discrimination and colonization” (Blackstock 2003), but reasons for Indigenous child apprehensions are poorly understood by those enforcing the rules of child welfare. The problem with the current legislation is that it has not, and does not, include Indigenous worldviews on family relationships, child-rearing and culture and therefore repeats a discriminatory and very Euro-centric mode of service delivery. As Hawrys asserts, “The application of a system that fails to conceptualize family structures and child safety within Indigenous perspectives is bound to perpetuate cyclical colonialism and extend trauma” (Hawrys, 2022, pp.5-6).

Also lacking is the inclusion of Indigenous representation in the development and delivery of policies. These policies fail to consider barriers to funding and access to services

in the north as well. For instance, in the provincial model of child welfare, all policies and expectations for child welfare, as alluded to earlier, are developed in the south of the province, at the Ministry of Social Services by people living in the city. This is problematic because families in northern and rural Saskatchewan are expected to have the same access to, and outcomes as families in places like Saskatoon or Prince Albert where services are plentiful, within driving (or walking) distance and networks of formal supports are readily available. As such, families in northern Saskatchewan are expected to have the same outcomes as those in the south. Finally, because the policies created around child welfare have a typical 'top-down' approach, this has created a significant gap in service as it fails to start with the individual as the expert. As Wessells (2015) asserts, "Many efforts at mapping and strengthening child protection systems have been top-down and failed to listen deeply to families and communities or to recognize adequately their contributions to children's protection and well-being" (2015, p.8). This is not the reality for northern, Indigenous communities, suggesting structural change is needed.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to the Child Welfare System in Canada

Child welfare has been studied extensively since its development in the late 1800s in Canada. Governments and scholars alike have examined it to provide different statistics, i.e., the number of children in care, the number of children in care per region and the amount of money spent to keep child welfare systems operating. Research has been exhaustive in the examination of the history of child welfare, and on the policies and legislation in child welfare system (see, for example, Government of Canada, 2019; Vinha & Kozlowski, 2013; Brittain & Blackstock, 2015; Blackstock 2003; 2007; 2011; 2017; Kline, 1992; Miller & Milloy, 2017; Mosher & Hewitt, 2018). However, very little of the research captures the depth of emotions and lived experiences upon entering the child welfare system, or the complex, personal journeys that precede their involvement.

What's more, there are families in this country who are generational clients of the child welfare system. As mentioned earlier, and as the research on child welfare has mentioned extensively, historical and current processes of child welfare have left an impact on Indigenous families. Often, parents whose children are in care have experiences being in the system as children in care themselves. In fact, as Bombay et.al, 2020, p. 21, assert "those with a parent...or a grandparent who attended IRS (Indian Residential School) were at greater risk of exposure to the child welfare system" (2020, p. 61). This generational involvement in child welfare comes from a deeper understanding that the reasons why Indigenous Peoples are involved in child welfare today are *because* of the reasons from the past.

A common refrain among scholars who study child welfare systems in Canada is that the system can be considered a "process of assimilation" for the children involved in it (see, for example, Trocmé, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004; Davies, 1992; Sinha et al., 2001). Cindy Blackstock, an Indigenous author and activist, has written extensively on child welfare in

Canada and made the bold statement that current modes of child welfare in Canada are “the new residential schools” (Blackstock, 2010). As early as 2003, Blackstock made this observation, pointing out that “more Aboriginal children are placed in out of home care today than in residential schools at the height of the residential school movement” (2003, p. 57). More recently, Senator Murray Sinclair, the commissioner for Truth and Reconciliation, has compared present-day child welfare systems to residential schools, asserting that “the monster that was created in residential schools moved into a new house. And that monster now lives in the child-welfare system” (Sinclair, as cited in Krugal, 2018). This comparison between the current system and residential schools can be made because of the underlying discriminatory and inherently racist nature of the current legislation in Canada.

2.2. Indigenous Children in Care

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care is the outcome of many different factors that the literature has shared over many decades. Some common themes found in research are: discriminatory processes in history, ie., residential schools (see, Rand, 2011; Barker et al., continued assimilative processes found in child welfare ie., forced adoption and the Sixties Scoop (see, for example, Paradis, 2015; Choate et al., 2019); and socioeconomic issues that impede a parent’s ability to properly parent (see, for example, Mackenzie et al., 2016; Bell & Romano, 2014). These are reasons that provide a basis for understanding how the child welfare system and why Indigenous children and families’ numbers are as high as they are. However, there are other factors that must be considered as well. First, there are few services and programs on parenting skills offered to Indigenous families, that focus on Indigenous ways of knowing, ontology and culture. Instead, most programs and models of service delivery focus on evidence-based data to enhance or promote

healthy parenting. As Trocmé, Roy and Esposito (2016) argue in “building research capacity in child welfare”,

Second, implementation of new policies and programs is slow (Blackstock, 2003). If slow implementation and inadequate funding are placed side by side with a lack of cultural understanding in policy, high numbers of Indigenous children in care will result. As we have seen, neither the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples nor the distinct dynamics of the Indigenous family have made their way into child welfare policy. In their literature review *A literature Review and Annotated Bibliography on Aspects of Aboriginal Child Welfare in Canada*, Bennet, Blackstock and De le Ronde contend that “poverty was the only reason many children were apprehended from otherwise caring homes” (2005, p. 22). This is important to consider as it shows a presence to workers’ Eurocentric views and how this may impact service delivery. As

Blackstock, Bennet and De le Ronde argue that “young inexperienced non-First Nations social workers applied white values to the poverty-stricken situations of First Nations families (2005, p. 22). Finally, the importance of parents and their traditional roles as parents needs to be taken more seriously. There is a common belief in Indigenous culture that children are sacred and that everyone has a responsibility to help raise the community’s children. In *Denouncing the Continued Overrepresentation of First Nations children in Canadian Child Welfare*, Fallon et al, share “First Nations shared a community-based approach to child-rearing, with members of the extended family being collectively responsible for the protection and care of children” (Fallon et al., 2019, p. 14). This includes teaching them the history of our people, the languages, and practices. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for many people to be included in what is referred to as “family”

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Indigenous-based Case Study

The research is an Indigenous-based case study of- Birch Narrows Dene Nation. This Indigenous-based approach to collecting data, is known as “Keeoukaywin” which is a Cree term for visiting. The visiting methodology, adapted by Janice Gaudet, views data collection as a personal and intimate way of gathering knowledge in personal settings such as in homes, or in a land-based environment. Gaudet argues that this approach presents a decolonizing process of doing research, with a specific aim of drawing links between land-based pedagogy and *milo-pimatisiwin (the good life)* (Gaudet, 2019). Gaudet refers to this methodological approach as the *Visiting Way* method, and in the Indigenous worldview, visiting with others and listening to stories is a way to acquire knowledge. This methodology allows for a decolonized approach to working with Indigenous Peoples and communities, and it was imperative in building mutual trust and respect in the process of working with the people of Birch Narrows Dene Nation. This was also very important as the people of Birch Narrows knew all too well an all-familiar feeling a lot of Indigenous Peoples and communities feel when working with Westernized outsiders: that of being studied on and not studied with.

3.2 Community-based Engagement

Prior to conducting any research with anyone in this project, I was living in the area (since 2020) and considered it home with my immediate family. Birch Narrows Dene Nation is a shared community between a First Nations reserve and a hamlet known as Turnor Lake. I live and work in this territory with my husband and children. As a result, we have been fully immersed in the culture of the community. We have attended gatherings and community functions with community members. I did not do this with the intention of seeking to gain participants for my research; rather the genuine acceptance and welcome by the community that created an important and trusting relationship for me as a research student. This also made the decision to use the *Keeoukaywin Methodology* an easy one. As an Indigenous research student, I feel it is important for me to express that significance because relationships are an essential part of who we are as a people. This aspect was important as well as it made 'data collection' and the whole research process less intrusive, more personal and comfortable, which is the whole intention of *Keeoukaywin*, to be decolonial in nature.

3.3. Participant Selection

Consistent with the *Keeoukaywin* methodology, participants were selected through a collaborative process involving the community supervisor and myself, leading up to their

participation in face-to-face interviews. The selection was guided by the community supervisor's insights and complemented by my knowledge. Our focus was on individuals with extensive knowledge about the area, an understanding of the community's history, and some level of involvement in the child welfare system. A particular emphasis was placed on including Elders who are highly regarded within the community. These participants, of Dene, Cree, and Métis descent, were from the Birch Narrows Dene Nation/Treaty 10 Territory in Northern Saskatchewan. The interviewees comprised eight individuals: seven women and one man, with a diverse age range from the early 30s to the mid-to-late 70s, providing a broad spectrum of experiences and insights.

Once the community supervisor made the initial connection, I requested participation by the potential interviewee and explained the research process, purpose, intent, risks and benefits of the research. Prior to any interviews, I thoroughly explained the process in an exhaustive participant consent form. It was explained that their confidentiality would be respected, and the participants had an option to anonymize their identity. However, this option was not used and all participants reported being comfortable with their participation being known.

The individuals were asked ten questions in a semi-structured audio-recorded interview. These questions included (but were not limited to) providing a background about themselves; their knowledge of the child welfare system in Saskatchewan; their explanation of what culture is and what it means to them; their opinions on what needs to change in the child welfare system; and any connections they discern between culture and child welfare. They were also asked if they had any involvement in the child welfare system and if anybody in their family had attended residential schools. Finally, they were asked what they thought needs to

change in the child welfare system for it to consider the unique needs and culture of Indigenous Peoples. Regular progress reports were given to the community supervisor upon request, or when I required assistance making connections within the community.

3.4 Data Collection

A series of 10 questions were prepared before the selection process of the interviewees. Because the methodological approach, *keooukaywin*, resembles a visit between two friends, and not a formal interview where the researcher chooses the setting, the participant was able to choose where they wanted to meet. I started each interview by asking the first one or two questions, and the conversation would naturally flow to where all my questions would eventually be answered. Prior to the start of the interview, I found it helped the conversation to read the questions to the person before we started. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, depending on how much the interviewee share. As it is our custom to not abruptly cut a visit short for any reason, I did not stop the interview once my questions were answered.

As per protocol, tobacco and a medicine pouch consisting of the four traditional medicines (tobacco, sweetgrass, cedar, and sage) was given as a gift after each visit where knowledge was shared. However, not everyone in Birch Narrows Dene Nation practices traditional gift giving of medicines. If this was the case, I presented just a tobacco gift in this instance. I was told by a local Elder to give a package of cigarettes instead of a medicine pouch. Each interviewee selected their preferred setting, in which was most often a relaxed

environment such as their homes. As Gaudet shares as part of the *Keeoukaywin* Methodology, it is important to “slow down, take time, make the effort, knock on the door, sit down, listen, share, go to the land, meditate, empty [myself], and be present” (Gaudet, 2019, p. 48). This approach allowed for great conversation that flowed so easily and was quite comfortable, not like a typical awkward interview. I was met with warmth, sometimes food, a lot of laughter and real emotion, which made it feel not as if I was “collecting data” but sharing a part of the participant’s life and hearing their true and honest opinions about something I have been enveloped in for the past four years in a very different way.

I found this method the best approach for my work because it is how I have always learned from my own people. I am confident that this way of collecting data is a *wise practice* when working with Indigenous Peoples and communities. This transfer of knowledge is simply referred to as *storytelling*, a way many Indigenous Peoples share and retain knowledge amongst generations.

Coupled with *Keeoukaywin*, storytelling is used as an approach in this research. As Jude Iseke shares, “Storytelling is a practice in Indigenous cultures that sustains communities and validates the experiences and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples” (Iseke, 2013). While in my data collection phase, I was reminded of the lessons of my kokum (Cree term for grandma) Christie Crane, who would have us sit and watch her while she did something like beading some moccasins or making bannock. She would make herself some tea (and usually something for us to eat and drink as well), tell us a story. In that story was a lesson she wanted us to know. She would not tell us what it was she wanted us to learn, but there was a life lesson that would benefit us as we grew older. Much like in my younger days with kokum Christie, I found

myself sitting with different people in a comfortable way, listening to stories and gaining knowledge from people who were sharing an important part of who they are with me.

This is echoed in Shawn Wilson's work *Research is Ceremony, Indigenous Research Methods*, when he speaks of the importance of relationship building as an Indigenous researcher. Wilson shares, "It's a matter of forming a relationship that goes beyond the informant-researcher duality to becoming co-learners" (Wilson, 2008, p. 111). In this sense, as a research student I relied heavily on the knowledge of the person I was working with to help *me* create this thesis I have completed.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1. Approaches to build strong, healthy, and culturally oriented child welfare practices

In this section, different approaches were shared by the people who had participated in the study. Using a narrative analysis, five common approaches from these visits were identified by listening to all interviews and transcribing them. These were: familial attendance at residential schools; connections to land as a strong indicator of healthy culture; community programming as a preventative measure for families at risk (of child and family service involvement); kinship values and the role of extended family in parenting; and distrust of common child welfare systems despite the changes that have occurred in recent years. Coding was not needed

4.1.2 Approach One: Recognizing the legacy of familial attendance at residential schools

Of all the eight interviewees, all but one had a connection to residential schools. They either had attended residential schools themselves, or someone in their family had attended. This was true when speaking with BNDN community member Tiffany Moberly when reflecting on her upbringing as a child. As a child of a residential school survivor, Moberly remembered certain aspects of her own upbringing where she said she was aware that her mother couldn't raise her due to issues that stemmed from residential school attendance, but she was able to avoid falling victim to the child welfare system because other family was able to intervene. Today Tiffany and her husband Trevor (both are participants in this research) share a common goal to break integrational cycles as they both had parents who attended residential schools. Tiffany says that they are breaking that cycle with their own children by ensuring they are present parents, showing affection to their children and choosing to live a sober lifestyle for the sake of their daughters (Moberly [1] interview, 2023).

When speaking of his experiences growing up, Trevor shared that he learned many teachings from his grandmother, and mother that also had attended residential schools. Trevor shared that his mother (who is also a participant in this research) was able to get away from the residential schools because she ran away. He shared how he was able to learn from them about his culture, how he learned from the land and the significance of his culture. Trevor acknowledged this as being a mitigating factor to the sustainability of his cultural roots (Moberly [2] interview, 2023). He shares further that

the residential school system worked because it created that disconnection from Indigenous Peoples and their culture, that's why so many parents are broken today, they don't know how to parent. In order for our people to thrive, they have to fix that disconnect that was created, and they have to get back to the teachings of the old ways...everything has to be from the heart, it has to be done with love (2023).

4.1.3. Approach Two: Implementing land-based healing

It's essential to clarify that the concept of culture can vary significantly depending on the context, particularly when contrasting the perspectives of northern Indigenous groups with those in the south. Throughout my interviews, every participant from the northern communities emphasized the importance of land, language, and community, highlighting these elements as foundational to their cultural identity. As the interviewees revealed, culture for the people from Birch Narrows Dene Nation means living off the land; being connected to the land, being out in the bush hunting, setting snares, making dry meat (thin pieces of moose meat smoked over a fire), fixing fish and making dry fish (deboning fish, making fillets and smoking them over a fire); sharing what they've got (with family and community members

alike); the community helping itself and one another (at community events and gatherings); and family helping in parenting (relying on extended family to help teach and raise children). This was a common indicator of a healthy culture that I noticed immediately in the interviews. Each person spoke passionately about the land and the memories they have from childhood to the point where the land was almost personified (i.e., referring to the land as Mother Earth).

The significance of the land for these participants is more than just where they live; it is part of who they are, and it plays a critical role in their identity. As Elder Velma Sylvestre shared, “there’s a real strong connection to the land, living off the land. That’s a big part of Dene culture...Everything we need is here; it’s a strong way of living, and people can’t live without their culture” (Sylvestre [1] interview, 2023). This is a shared belief amongst Indigenous groups. When one is connected to the land, one can be viewed as being culturally whole, as a community prevention worker Tiffany Moberly has shared, “when we’re out on the land, hunting, fishing, trapping or camping, we are connected to who we are...and when you know who you are, you are balanced...mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally” (Moberly [1] interview, 2023).

The interviewees had a strong sense of belonging to the land. It was observed that the relationship the people have with the land is a beautiful and strong one. The land provides for them and in turn, the people care for it immensely. When speaking of the importance of land in their everyday lives, the interviewees identified a connection to land as being an indicator of a healthy cultural connection. Land was a major component in every person’s life and as a dual community, it was the one thing that connected members of both communities to one

another; it brought the people together. Finally, the land had provided a sense of belonging to the people and was a source of understanding their own identity.

As BNDN member Trevor Moberly shared when discussing the importance of understanding that sense of belonging from the land; he shared that

understanding who you are and where you come from has a lot to do with your culture; once you understand that, a lot of things in your life will change; the way you do things will change and that's what happened to me. I changed the way I was doing things (for the better) and that was based on the teachings from my grandmother and mother...I am Dënësuliine (2023).

This resonated in the words of his mother, Mariette Moberly, who had shared that she was taught to rely on the land which conveyed a strong connection to the land. In her words she shared,

I seen the hard parts of everything, I remember we had a house, we had to get wood, put wood in a bag and carry it....we went on the lake in the winter to make holes with the ax to haul water. I washed clothes by hand on a washboard, I hung them up on a clothesline with no mitts, nothing! I did all those things as a child, and me and my grandma used to cut wood and pile them all up with a little handsaw for winter. She taught me how to make a freezer from the muskeg. She used to dig a hole deep in a muskeg and she'll put sticks all around it, and she'll make little shelf, she'll put the moose meat and berries, stuff like that. And she'll cover it good, so no animal will get in there, the food was good. Yeah. There was no store food. just bush food and it was good (2023).

Mariette spoke eloquently of this interrelated connection to the land. The land was not just a source of physical survival, but the teachings that would benefit herself and her children as they got older would ensure a survival of their culture.

Apart from the many ways the land cares for the people, they shared a reciprocal duty to sustain this connection by teaching their young ones about it. As I had seen with Mariette and her son Trevor who both were so proud of their cultural identity and spoke so beautifully of the connections they had to the land, Trevor (and his wife Tiffany) expressed the importance of their daughters learning about their culture and the role the land played in their parenting styles.

This was also expressed with mother of six children Miranda Sylvestre who had shared that she, “I wanted to live out in the bush and that’s where I learned to do so many things, like making moose hide. One time, my uncle shot a moose and brought it to us and said, ‘I shot it, now you girls have to fix it’...that was my first moosehide” (2023). She shared that with her children, she makes sure they spend time outside and learn about the land. Miranda believes in the healing power of the land, not just in a symbolic sense, but its physical healing as well. Even now, Miranda relies on the medicines that she was taught to identify and harvest as a child, in her parenting styles today. Finally, Miranda shared her personal story of healing from addictions and how the land and knowing her culture played in her healing journey (Sylvestre[2] interview, 2023).

This view on culture and connection to the land is in a way a connection between the people as well. When sharing her own experiences of what the land means, Tara Moise explained that

Culture to me means the things I saw growing up. We didn't have things like powwows or ceremonies or things like that...I knew I was Indigenous, but it was things like hunting, fishing, trapping and those things that I saw as my culture. People did all those things, and you would take enough for your family and then share with the community. That's a big part of who we are here (2023).

When speaking with Elder Mary-Rose Montgrand, she explained the innate connection that the people of BNDN have with the land, or Mother Earth as she referred to it. She shared, "we must teach our kids these things (hunting, fishing, trapping, the language) because they have to have a solid foundation to stand on. Mother Earth is something you stand on, you connect with it and it is a part of our culture. When you are connected with these parts of your culture, you are connected to Mother Earth and your Medicine wheel is whole" (Montgrand, 2023).

This idea of being 'whole' is derived from what many Indigenous Peoples now as the Medicine Wheel teaching. In this teaching, we are all made up of four quadrants: our mental self, emotional self, physical self and spiritual self, all of which are interconnected to one another. Each part is dependent on the other and when one area (or part of ourselves) is lacking, the rest are as well. Connection to the land and all that it offers to our whole selves is imperative to the culture because we do not only rely on it only for physical sustenance like food or shelter, but it also nourishes our spirits, our mental and physical health as well. This cultural connection is a mitigating factor to child welfare involvement in that the connection to culture creates a sense of belonging.

4.1.4 Approach Three: Using community-led programming as a preventative measures:

The community of BNDN and Turnor Lake currently does not have its own child welfare program or unit within the community. As a result, child protection concerns are reported to Meadow Lake Tribal Council in Meadow Lake (four hours away) or a sub-office in Buffalo Narrows (one hour away). Unfortunately, this creates a barrier for the people of BNDN and Turnor Lake, as services often become more difficult to access and the community is forced to rely on its human capacity for different services. To rectify this issue, BNDN focuses on prevention and preventative programming. Members like Tiffany Moberly work collaboratively with other agencies (the school, the Elders program, the mothers' support group, the school, both community recreation departments to name a few), and people in the community to create and deliver preventative programs in the community geared toward parents and families. For instance, Moberly spearheads cultural camps and events throughout the year that focus on parenting, sobriety, culture, hunting, ceremonies, community gatherings, inclusion and education and awareness on different topics, all of which have the potential to impact parenting. She may facilitate parenting classes with cultural components incorporated into them. Other agencies in the community have cooking classes geared toward men, women and youth to help provide not only something to do, but also a chance for healthy socializing, food for families and, in a sense, capacity building.

The school, which caters to both members of the reserve and the hamlet, provides social activities open to everyone in the community that aim to enhance community and parental involvement. As the vice principal of Birch Narrows Dene Community School, Valendie McKay shared, “we provide all kinds of programming that focuses on Land, Language, Relationships and Community (or simply LLRC), and it's a way for the people of

the community to not only socialize, but to get involved” (2023). Having worked in the school setting at BNDCS, I can attest that the programming that occurs at the school around LLRC focuses on not only parental involvement in the school, but also community involvement as a collective measure to ensure the overall well-being of families. The community events focus on bringing children, youth, adults and elders together and range from community nights at the school, women’s and men’s support groups, elders programming, child and youth cooking classes, cultural weeks, recreational sports, community competitions in summer and winter breaks, among others (McKay, 2023). There is a focus group for every demographic and although the goal is not directly stated to help parents avoid becoming involved in the child welfare system, the outcome is that these programs work as preventative measures for families in the community reduces the risk of child welfare involvement (Moberly [1]; McKay, 2023)

These programs focus on building skills for parents and opportunity for the members to participate and learn. This may not look like preventative measures to outsiders, but to people in the north, this is a common practice. Having to create preventative measures to make up for the lack in services in this community; this is one of the strongest capacities of BNDN/Turnor Lake. (Moberly [1], 2023).

4.1.5 Approach Four: Incorporating kinship value and the extended family in parenting

All interviewees shared stories of their lives and the important relationships they had with extended family. As is a common custom for Indigenous kinship values, familial support networks include everyone in the extended family. This included great-grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and often, community members. Each interviewee discussed the

role that their grandparents played in helping teach and raise them. This is a common theme shared by all Indigenous people. The concept of family is viewed as an interrelated connection to grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

When sharing her own experience with me on this topic, Valendie Mckay reflected on taking responsibility for raising her nephew when he was unfortunately caught in the child welfare system. She explained that the decision to assume the responsibility of her nephew was something she immediately did without hesitation. However, she remembers the difficulty the process was for her and her husband. Valendie remembers waiting eight months before she was able to have her nephew in her care and he had already been caught in the system for a significant amount of time before this. What shocked her was how difficult it was for this to happen. As she reflected on this process, her emotions surfaced, leading her to share that she felt “like he didn’t even matter to them, I had to call people numerous times and it was as though they didn’t even know who he was or where he was” (2023). Valendie explained that this is the way of our people, to help where and when we can, without the expectation of receiving anything in return. For her, it was her duty as his auntie to assume the role of parent. She explained that “we all have a hand in raising our kids, we take advice and help from our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, this is who we are” (2023). This approach to parenting enhances the support network for the children, and it creates a strong foundation for Indigenous families if they can use that dependence on extended families as a positive rather than a negative.

4.1.6. Approach Five: Managing distrust in the child welfare system

Based on personal experiences at residential schools and a shared knowledge of the history of the treatment at those schools, interviewees expressed a still-present distrust of the child welfare system. Mother of six, Miranda Sylvestre expressed genuine worry for not only her children, but kids even just playing outside on the street. She stated, “even when we know they (protection workers) are in town, we’ll call or message other moms on the street to let them know that they’re here. We don’t trust them because of things we have seen them do in the past. we don’t want our children taken from us” (Sylvestre [2], 2023). For Miranda, and a lot of people like her, there is still a deep-seeded fear that modern day child welfare systems operate the same way it did in the past. For Tara Moise, a mother of two, she expressed that despite the current child welfare system to be the same for the whole province, she sees it is run differently in the north as opposed to the southern part of Saskatchewan. Tara shared that she feels that the people of the north are “being failed, and badly; they don’t have the same chances as people in the south....if kids are apprehended, they have a very slim chance at getting them back” (Moise, 2023). To add to this, other participants like Valendie, Mary-Rose, Trevor and Tiffany all expressed that they feel the current child welfare system does not have enough Indigenous influence in the system. When asked about this issue, Valendie stated she “feels that there needs to be more educated, Indigenous social workers in that field, people who know our history and have that understanding of who we are in order for it to work” (2023). Community members like Elder Mary-Rose shared that “parents are lost in the system, and that’s not their fault because it’s what they know...and they suffer, the children suffer. If we bring our people back home, we support them. That’s how it was back then, we cared for our people and that’s what needs to happen in the (child welfare) system” (2023). When asked about what she feels needs to happen in current child welfare systems for it to ‘work’ for Indigenous families, Tara Moise

shared that “the child welfare system today does not work for Indigenous Peoples. If First Nations people can build our own programs, suitable for who we are and where we are, then it would work...it should be used as a program, not a punishment” (2023).

This distrust comes from a deep-rooted broken relationship between Indigenous Peoples and any form of government and Westernized institutions. As history has witnessed, there have been numerous attacks on Indigenous Peoples and their culture, and the repercussions extend beyond the child welfare system.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

This research contributes to the ongoing work being done on child welfare in the Indigenous context. As I have just discussed, I have identified five different approaches to building strong and culturally oriented approaches to child welfare based on my case study with members of Birch Narrows Dene Nation. I will now explore how these approaches contribute to the extant literature on child welfare.

Firstly, there is a need to recognize the legacy of familial attendance at residential schools. This is imperative to the current research as it provides an understanding of why parents become involved in the child welfare system. As we have discussed, the residential school approach to child welfare has created a cultural loss for the children who had attended, and as a result, have created broken parents involved in the child welfare system today. As Hanson (2009) and Gamez & Manuel (updated in 2020) share, “Residential schools systematically undermined Indigenous cultures across Canada and disrupted families for generations, severing the ties through which Indigenous culture is taught and sustained, and contributing to a general loss of language and culture” (para. 2). This is important to consider because as stated earlier, children who had attended residential schools later became parents with an institutionalized perception of child-rearing. As Bombay, Matheson and Anisman share, “the lack of traditional parental role models among Indian Residential School Survivors impeded the transmission of positive child-rearing practices and actually instilled negative parenting practices (Evans-Campbell 2008., as cited in Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2014, p. 325). Finally, this is echoed by Bennet and Blackstock (2005), when they said, “Children in residential schools did not experience healthy parental role modelling and as a result, had a diminished capacity as adults to care for their children” (p.15).

A second identified approach is to implement land-based healing in child welfare. As I have reported on in the case study, the connection to land is a paramount component to Indigenous cultural identity. Indigenous Peoples’ connection to culture is a sacred part of who they are for it is from the land that they are sustained. The connection to land is important because it offers healing and a sense of belonging. As Liebenberg et al., (2019) state, “Indigenous culture is inextricably linked to land/ place; a collectivist sense of community and self emerges from this place-based understanding” (p.2). This is an important

factor to consider because the land is a source of learning and maintaining cultural heritage, it is where the children are taught and where the teachers and those in parental roles give those teachings. As Little Bear in *Jagged Worldviews Colliding* shares, “Teaching through actual experience is done by relatives: for example, aunts teaching girls and uncles teaching boys. One relative usually takes a young child under his or her wing, assuming responsibility for teaching the child all she or he knows about the culture and survival” (2020, p. 5). The *actual experience* by learning ‘hands-on’ is imperative to sustaining cultural connections to land, one another, place, as well, it enhances people’s sense of belonging. As discussed with the people of BNDN, this connection to land should be a foundation of programs in working with Indigenous Peoples. When child welfare programs place emphasis on the land-based component to learning and healing, Indigenous parents are then afforded the opportunity to learn and heal in a way that they are accustomed to.

Another approach that was identified was the need to use community-led programming as a preventative measure. Northern and Indigenous communities must make do with what resources are available to them. And since a lot of northern and Indigenous communities lack services, and as BNDN has proven, it is a normal practice for communities to rely on its members to create their own opportunities, services and resources. As it was discussed, the community of BNDN relies on its own programming to make up for the fact that it does not currently have its own child welfare department. To remedy this gap in service, the community works collaboratively with different agencies in the community to promote prevention and not apprehension. These other agencies include: the school, the health centre, the prevention team, the Elders program, the sport and recreation programs for example. As was evident in speaking with Tiffany and Valendie, different programs work together to create opportunities for the community’s members. All of the programming

happening in BNDN have a cultural component in them, whether it's language, crafting or cooking for example. This allows for more culturally appropriate ways of service delivery. As such, BNDN's preventative programming is a best practice in child welfare as it focuses on empowerment of the parents and looks at healing and involvement from a wholistic lens. The need for culturally based and community driven programming in child welfare is direly needed because as Blackstock and Trocmé (2005) state, "when culturally based structural supports are provided to Aboriginal children and families at risk, significant and sustained positive outcomes in child and family wellbeing can be expected" (p. 16). What needs to happen and what is a common theme in the literature, is a need for not only culturally infused policies but also approaches and practices in child welfare as well. The concept of culturally restorative practices insists that understanding the root of the problems will help us understand why people become involved with the child welfare system to begin with. There is a more complex reason as to why parents find themselves trapped in the unforgiving and judgemental world of child welfare. To understand this, researchers and those involved in child welfare must look at the history of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and organized institutions. An important part of these programs focusses on the whole family, which includes extended family as well, and leads us to our next approach.

The role of kinship values and extended family in parenting is not a new idea for Indigenous families. As stated earlier, Indigenous ontology around family dynamics is inclusive to extended family, including grandparents, aunties, uncles and cousins. It is very common for Indigenous families to rely on members of their extended family to provide teachings and guidance to their children, as we have heard from our participants above. This is important to consider because Indigenous children who are raised with their family, and in their community, "are routinely socialized to embody their culture, through processes such as

hearing and speaking their language, learning on the land, having multigenerational relationships of care, teaching and learning, and participating in significant livelihood activities” (Ball & Benoit-Jansson, 2019). The role that extended family plays in parenting is a strength, rather than a weakness i.e., relying on extended family to help with parental duties does not equate to a parent unable to parent effectively on their own. Rather, extended family serves as a broader support network for the child(ren) and the parents.

Finally, the last approach that was identified was how to manage distrust in the child welfare system. This distrust comes from a centuries-long relationship filled with discriminatory policies, and practices that have affected Indigenous Peoples, family and communities (Simmard, 2019, p.57). The relationship of these two groups has been riddled with discrimination, assimilation, maltreatment, genocide, racism, broken promises, and many other things. There is a deep-seeded distrust toward many institutions that represent the government, and this includes the child welfare system as we have explicitly heard in the words of the participants. This is why need for more culturally safe and appropriate measures in child welfare are needed. These approaches do not need to be overly complicated or expensive and certainly do not need to be lost in translation in a ‘top-down’ direction as is common for current child welfare policies and mandates, as we have discussed earlier. If anything can be derived from the approach that BNDN is currently taking to address its child welfare, is that programs in child welfare should be community-led and community driven, and when this happens, it places focus on the individual as the expert of their lives, allowing direction in healing to flow from them.

When Indigenous history, culture, and family structures are considered in how best to approach child welfare practice, a more inclusive and less intrusive framework of practice can

be achieved. Seeking this knowledge and its relation to current child welfare involvement will allow for more culturally safe approaches to child welfare practice (Simmard 2009). For more culturally safe practices and programs in child welfare to occur, those in service delivery and decision-making roles need to acknowledge their own ethnocentrism, their understanding of the history of Indigenous Peoples and the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and westernized government structures. What's more, these programs and models of service delivery need to reflect that of those they are intended to serve. As Chino and DeBruyn state, "An indigenous model must reflect indigenous reality. It must integrate the past, the present, and the people's vision for the future. It must acknowledge resources and challenges and allow communities to build a commitment to identifying and resolving health concerns and issues" (2006, p. 599). One major theme in the literature is that the historical treatment of Indigenous People in Canada is not sufficiently taken into consideration as a basis for understanding why Indigenous children represent higher numbers of children in care than those of any other ethnic background (see, example, Trocmé and Chamberland, 2003; Mosher and Hewitt, 2018).

As has been discussed, there is an urgency and an opportunity for change in child welfare in Saskatchewan. Canadian history and depicts a more accurate picture of the historical treatment toward Indigenous peoples across the country. This is also important as it (should) serve as a basis for understanding why Indigenous Peoples have so much distrust of any form of authority. This is also vital in understanding why parents become involved with CFS as well. Further to this, child welfare practices do not need to be strictly developed around formal education. Using the stories and histories of Indigenous Peoples *by* Indigenous

Peoples can be a mutually beneficial starting point. If more traditional Indigenous practices are used in policy development and program devolution, more opportunities for Indigenous communities to be an integral part of child welfare would be created. More First Nations bands in Saskatchewan can play a big role in how their child welfare programs work and create culturally safe and appropriate programming for children and families. These would look different than typical, intrusive child welfare practice that are limited to individualistic-specific approaches to child welfare as opposed to the holistic approach Indigenous Peoples are used to.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Opikināwāsowin is a mindset that goes back to before Contact where all members of the community shared responsibility in teaching children. This is a perspective that is foundational to Indigenous family structure, and, as such, it should be held at the forefront of practice in child welfare. So often is culture overlooked as a foundation for child welfare policy, frameworks and legislation development. This has been the practice of governments for decades, and, as history has shown, it has not been very successful and should no longer be the norm. To continue to practice child welfare in this way will only further systemic discrimination of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples should be included in the development of policies pertaining to parenting Indigenous children in-care. Also, understanding the importance of Indigenous culture and how this can be used to help heal families involved in child welfare systems is so vital for next steps. This is imperative in

improving child welfare and does not have to be a difficult feat. This could be as simple as understanding and acknowledging Indigenous perspective on family constructs. Moreover, this should be viewed as a source of support and strength and not a weakness or a flaw. Indigenous family systems are not limited to typical Eurocentric views such as the nuclear family and, as such, have bigger networks of support, which the child welfare system should account for. Allowing culture to be the foundation of child welfare practice would mean that decision-making in child welfare matters would reflect Indigenous customs, values, practices, principles and traditions, thereby allowing the child welfare system to improve for Indigenous families. Moreover, typical generic ways of child welfare practice only contribute to the problem at hand rather than help fix it. If the dominant practice is to determine who can parent a child, without consideration of certain factors such as Indigenous culture, history and ontology, then this will only perpetuate genocidal practices toward Indigenous peoples in Canada.

I would be remiss if I did not take the opportunity to identify the limitations of this research. Although the quality of content was rich and provided insight into this important area, one significant limitation is that it could have included more individuals. Further, because this community is divided into two, one being a reservation and the other a hamlet, I only worked with members of the First Nation, creating the potential for a barrier in the research. I also set to include all Indigenous peoples in the area (First Nations and Métis as there are no Inuit people living in the area), but all participants identified as status First Nations people, with one identifying as Métis but still having First Nations status. Also, I only focused on one community; if more communities in the area had been an option, I feel this would have provided more substance to the content. Other limitations to consider are: not all communities are the same, each community is unique in its capacity, each community may

be at different stages of healing from intergenerational trauma, from residential schools or the child welfare system, and, some communities may have weakened cultural connections, all of which could very well affect the outcome of research.

However, as is evident in the case study with members of BNDN, there are many ways in which child welfare can be improved, and thus mitigating Indigenous parents' involvement. If this is to happen, a significant increase in Indigenous involvement in research, community development and service delivery needs to occur. By utilizing *keeoukaywin*, I have been able to work with this Indigenous community in a good way. This methodology has allowed me, the researcher, to create a safe space in research where the people are seen and heard and a space where they are less likely to be retraumatized by sharing their stories

This approach has allowed for genuine thoughts and opinions by Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers and parents to be viewed as valid and helpful in academia. This approach to data collection breaks down typical colonial ways of research by making Indigenous Peoples at the community level experts. For instance, meeting people where they wanted, when they wanted, where they felt comfortable, with no formal structure or time constraints, allowed for a genuine sharing of knowledge. This methodology allows for a mutual respect in research to occur. As a community-based research methodology, *keeoukaywin* ensures respect is reciprocated, and visiting creates and fortifies connections that unify and build community from the ground up (Gaudet, 2019, p. 53). Albeit, *keeoukaywin* is the harder path to choose, as ethics approval was a hurdle because of the nature of the approach, the content shows that using community experts in research in academia is the best way to work with Indigenous Peoples and communities. More significantly, though, parents, Elders, local knowledge keepers, extended familial support, and even children should be included in

research as well. This is the idea behind Opikināwāsowin, the Cree term for “raising our children well.” The term can be translated in many ways, but it is the traditional view of child-rearing in Indigenous culture, that is an all-encompassing practice that is wholistic, inclusive, transparent, and holds culture at its centre. The idea of Opikināwāsowin can be utilized in child welfare research and practice because it holds culture as its foundation. In examining the case study, five different approaches were identified that would build strong, healthy, and culturally oriented child welfare practices. Each of these approaches were based on lived experiences and information that the interviewees viewed as essential to see real change moving forward. Each approach touched on culture in some aspect but never as something that they had lost. Fortunately, for the interviewees, culture was the constant, and it was the factor that had contributed to their community’s success in child welfare.

In conclusion, there are many reasons why Indigenous parents become involved in child welfare. As has been discussed in this thesis, some of these reasons include the historical and genocidal attacks (residential schools and the Sixties Scoop) on Indigenous children that led to their institutionalized perception of child rearing. Interlinked to this are the intergenerational effects which can lead to parental involvement in child welfare as well. However, at the core of these issues lies a common indication that may explain Indigenous parents’ involvement in child welfare: the cultural losses of these parents that has weakened their understanding traditional child rearing. When the connection to culture is lost or broken, Indigenous peoples’ sense of who they are and who they are meant to be is weakened. To contrast this, when an Indigenous persons’ connection to culture is sustained, enriched and supported, their ability to parent in a healthy way can mitigate the risk of them becoming involved in child welfare.

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