

Experiential Learning within the Resource Department of Family and Children's Services
of Renfrew County

Advanced Practicum Thesis Project
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work
at the School of Social Work, Laurentian University

by
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April 30, 2015

Thesis/Advanced Practicum Review Committee
Comité de soutenance de thèse / Stage spécialisé
Laurentian University/Université Laurentienne
School of Graduate Studies/École des études supérieures

Title of Thesis/Advanced Practicum
Titre de la thèse / stage spécialisé Experiential Learning within the Resource Department of Family and
Children's Services of Renfrew County

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Degree
Diplôme Master of Social Work

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Abstract

The child welfare system is one that operates under considerable strain. Although my experience has been primarily child protection, my MSW placement within the resource department has provided me with many valuable insights into this line of work. I fully anticipated that the resource role would not be as fast-paced or stressful as front line protection work, and may have underestimated the challenges facing resource workers. My initial review of the literature provided me with the necessary background for my work with resource families during my placement experience. This enabled me to bridge the gap between my protection and the resource role, and to see child welfare from another perspective. Overall, my thesis will examine how we can promote resilience and capacity building under the strain of the existing system, not only for the people with whom we work, but for us as practitioners. This report reflects on my learning experience and what knowledge I have gained, and on how this knowledge has enhanced my practice. A large part of this learning experience for me has been to identify what theories and knowledge guide my practice within the child welfare system. In determining what my learning experience has been, my aim has been to be as self-critical in my approach as possible in the construction of this understanding.

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge my family for the sacrifices they have made in support of this accomplishment. Thank you to my husband, Bernie Tremblay, who picked up the slack and ran our very busy household when I was away or working on various assignments. You're my partner in everything, and I can't wait to start our next adventure together. I want to say a very special thank you to my children, Jack Tremblay and Tyler Tremblay, for being so understanding, and giving up much of our time as a family over the past two years. I hope that one day when you are following your dreams, you will know the value of perseverance and you will not give up when things are hard, but instead, learn and grow from every challenge. I will be there to support and encourage you to be successful in reaching your goals, just as you were to me. I also want to thank my brother, Jordan Palmer, for lending his technical skills and for sharing his passion for the work of child welfare in developing the concepts for the recruitment posters, which we hope will inspire others to become involved and to make a meaningful difference in the lives of children.

I wish to thank my readers, Diana Coholic and Leigh MacEwan for their guidance and patience throughout. I had no idea what I was getting into when I first started out. You ladies have taught me so much and really pushed me to do my best. Thank you Brenda Robinson, my practicum supervisor, for your valuable insights and for your guidance throughout my learning experience, and for showing me first-hand the value of clinical supervision and support in this line of work. I want to say thank you to my friend and colleague, Stephanie Murdoch, for giving me a gentle shove into the MSW application process. Without your encouragement and support, I am not sure that I would have found the time and energy for this. I also want to acknowledge how grateful I am for my friend and colleague, Nicole Dennison, who has inspired me

throughout my learning journey in child welfare, and who reminds me (when I need it most) why we do this work. Thank you, to my friend and colleague, Michael Dalton for being a truly great teacher, and for helping me to make my learning experience so meaningful. Thank you to all of the resource workers and families who helped me to understand what this work entails, and for sharing your stories with me. I also want to acknowledge my protection team. I am so fortunate to work with a group of such committed and caring people. My educational leave meant that the families on my caseload would be dispersed amongst my team. Despite being overloaded and short staffed, each worker accepted this challenge unquestioningly, and responded to the needs of my families with great skill and compassion. They are a true testament to the kind of individuals that can be found working within the child welfare system, making such personal sacrifices in order to do the work, and against all odds, making a difference in the lives of the children and families we serve. And last, but certainly not least, I want to say a special thank you to all of those children and families who have influenced me over the past 8 years, and who have taught me so much...

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Introduction

My interest in pursuing a placement in child welfare grew from my own experience working within the field of child protection. I was presented with a unique opportunity to learn about another area of child welfare that I have had only limited exposure to in my role as a child protection worker; a practicum placement within the resource department at Family and Children's Services (FCS). Child protection workers navigate an understaffed, under-funded and sometimes misunderstood system in order to do the best job possible for the most vulnerable children and parents whom they serve day in and day out. Sometimes there is no real hope that the challenging aspects of the job such as understaffing and underfunding will change. This can be the reality of child protection. Recruiting and maintaining competent staff can be a challenge for child welfare agencies. The turnover rate is reported as being between 20 and 40 percent annually, with the majority of these workers leaving before their second anniversary (Kim, 2010). Workload is the most significant organizational determinant of employee turnover and retention. Workers can feel pressure from the weight of their caseloads, court appearances, a staggering amount of documentation, and low salary. In addition, social workers within the child protection field face a unique challenge in that they are mandated to engage with families who did not ask for service and may not have a choice as to whether or not they become involved. Because workers experience this on an ongoing basis, the work itself can be challenging as it can be difficult to remain engaged with clients who do not wish to be involved with a child welfare organization.

Child protection workers often work in volatile situations, face aggressive clients, and have to navigate these challenges while upholding their responsibility of protecting children who are our most vulnerable population. Workers carefully balance the expectations of their clients,

organizations, and governmental standards. Workload, and an agency's response to it, is a significant factor in determining the climate of an organization (McFadden et al., 2014). High caseloads and low wages can be a sign to individual workers that their contributions are not valued, which can deflate their sense of self-esteem and satisfaction with their jobs. This in turn can contribute to attrition, which is very costly to child welfare agencies, but, most importantly, to the children and families they serve.

When child protection work is discussed, what immediately springs to my mind are the frontline workers who intervene in situations where children are at serious risk of harm. While this certainly describes the broad function of child welfare, it does not capture the experiences of all social workers within the child welfare setting. Resource work is often overlooked and, possibly underappreciated by protection workers by virtue of the fact that protection workers are completely inundated with other tasks and the overwhelming nature of the job itself. We do not often recognize the protection work that happens behind the scenes in resource departments, which involves cultivating and assessing prospective foster and adoptive families. Resource work pertains to the foster and adoption segment of the child welfare system. Resource workers are trained "protection workers". Typically they do not perform front-line protection work. Resource workers are dedicated to the work of assessing and supporting resource families for children in care; which is another aspect of protecting children.

The impact of workload stressors can also be felt by resource workers whose job is to form a trusting relationship with prospective foster and adoptive parents in order to find permanent homes for children in care (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004). The challenge for workers extends beyond merely finding and recruiting prospective foster and adoptive parents. It depends largely on retaining them. This is difficult to do when there are insufficient resources to support

foster and adoptive families throughout this process. The net effect of having insufficient resources to support prospective adoptive families is that children do not get adopted.

I use the term “resources” to refer to the department within Family and Children’s Services that oversees the assessment and licensing of foster and adoptive homes. Resources is a term that is used loosely within the placement agency to refer to both the department itself, as well as available homes for children who have been apprehended and placed in the care of the Children’s Aid Society. “Resource families” is a broad term used somewhat interchangeably with “foster families” and “adoptive families,” as well as those providing care to relatives, who are known as “kinship” caregivers.

The functions of the resource department include initial screening and recruitment of prospective resource families to attend Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) pre-service training. The training of these recruited families is also a function of the resource department. The goal of this training is to ensure that prospective resource parents have the ability to meet the six core competencies in caring for children, which are: protecting and nurturing children; meeting children’s developmental needs and addressing developmental delays; supporting relationships between children and their families; connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime; working as a member of a professional team; and reinforcing a child’s heritage and cultural identity.

Orienting myself to this work, and to a more critical approach to child welfare, I began to break these terms down in terms of the use of language and the intent this language conveys. For example, what do we mean by protection, and what does this imply? What or who are we protecting children from? How do we nurture children? How does the idea of addressing children’s needs fit with the broader notion that each child should have equal opportunity when

the standard of care that is applied to children in care does not apply to children in the general community? What do we mean when we say that resource families are expected to work as a member of a professional team? To me, working as a member of a ‘professional team’ implies that there can be a gap between the professionals and the clients we serve in terms of our knowledge and power; our authority distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’. This gap can also exist between the agency and resource families. While we expect our resource families to operate as though they are our equals, we do not necessarily accord them the same respect, or trust their expertise even though they work with our children day in and day out, and probably know them better than any of us could. When we have polarized opinions, do we truly assign resource families the same legitimacy and professional status as other child welfare practitioners? As another example, the gap centred around a parent’s inability to care for his/her own child places foster parents in a position of power and authority, and may reinforce stigma towards biological parents who are determined to be unable to care for their children. For resource families, it can be a careful balancing act, as resource families may find themselves in a similar position if their views are not aligned with those of the agency. They may in turn feel the stigma of being “client-like” when there is a gap between them and the “professionals” who wield much of the power and decision-making capabilities.

Following the completion of PRIDE training, participants who are interested in becoming resource families will participate in a rigorous assessment process known as the Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) home study. The goal of the assessment is to reasonably determine the potential abilities of prospective resource families based on their experiences with parenting and other character defining experiences that would indicate how they are likely to respond to the challenges of caring for children within the child welfare system. Through this

process, it is mutually determined what ages of children a family is best suited for caring. This is determined on a variety of factors, taking into consideration the family's ability to respond to challenges that present differently depending on the developmental stage of the child. As an example, some caregivers are better suited to respond to the needs of an infant than those of a teenager. Other factors that influence this determination are the ages and characteristics of other children in the home. The assessment ultimately recommends or precludes a home for the placement of a child (or children). Once approved, resource families are assigned a caseworker who will meet quarterly with the family in a supportive capacity. The resource home undergoes an annual assessment which provides a snapshot of the family's experience over the past year. This assessment captures all of the placements during that time period. Through discussion, the family's ability to meet the six competencies is assessed.

Prior to meeting with the family, the resource worker would typically obtain information from the child's worker (or workers, where the protection worker remains involved). Any child who is placed in the care of the Children's Aid Society has his/her own worker. This worker is responsible for establishing a plan of care for the child, which is developed in conjunction with the child and the resource parent, and carried out in partnership. This plan sets out expectations of everyone involved and will determine what the child's needs are by establishing goals to meet these needs. The resource parent's participation and follow through with case planning is basically assessed, not only as a function of the plan of care meetings, which occur regularly, but also at the time of the annual assessment. This can be determined by reviewing the family's response to access visits, medical and other appointments, and activities for the child. This can be a helpful way to create a narrative about the family's experience in caring for the child.

I thought that an experiential learning placement in the resource department would provide me with the opportunity to bridge the gap between my role as a protection worker and that of resources, as well as to develop a better understanding of the role of foster and adoptive parents, and how we as partners can work together to support children. I believed that there was much to be learned from foster parents' experiences that can inform workers' practice and vice versa. In order to begin to bridge this gap, I needed to understand more about the resource families we work with, and what service we provide to them specifically.

In my advanced placement, my first objective was to expand my knowledge of fostering and adoption services. This is a big part of the work that I do in child protection. It is important for me to see the other end of the spectrum in terms of the work that we conduct in child welfare. It was my expectation that having a deeper understanding of the role of fostering and adoptive services would enhance my clinical skills in working with families during times when children are placed in care. I believed that working in resources would offer a different perspective on the work that I do, and would also enhance how I work with foster families when I return to my protection position. As an M.S.W. Advanced Practicum student within the resource department, I was able to receive PRIDE trainer training, and delivered this training to prospective resource applicants. A large part of my role as a student consisted of completing annual resource family home assessments. My second objective within my placement was to develop a stronger more effective practice by identifying and understanding the theoretical knowledge bases of my work. My third objective was to incorporate the work that I do in my protection role, specific to engaging fathers, into my work within the resource community.

My thesis report will discuss the learning that took place within the practicum, through the completion of my learning objectives. With respect to my first learning objective, my aim

was to expand my knowledge of fostering and adoption services within the organization. I undertook multiple approaches to achieve this goal. My aim was to expand my knowledge through a literature review, which explored the recruitment and retention of resource family homes, motivations to adopt, kinship care, and customary care arrangements. I applied and tested this knowledge within the practice setting. I expanded this knowledge through training opportunities, job shadowing, delivering training, and through my engagement with resource families in my role as a student providing case coverage and completing annual assessments. My second learning objective was to identify and understand the theoretical and knowledge base of child welfare work. Through this process I examined what we know about neglect, attachment, and how we can apply social constructionism, strengths-based, structural and post structural approaches in child welfare. I also looked at what it means to be a more reflexive practitioner, and how clinical supervision can support this process, both in the placement setting, in the field, and on and off-site. In order to achieve this goal, I conducted a subsequent literature review, the aim of which was to orient me to critical theories and perspectives that influence day-to-day decision making in child welfare. My third objective was to test and expand my knowledge of father involvement within the resource realm. In order to achieve this, I compiled sources of information that aimed to provide a background for the application of this knowledge to the resource setting. I discussed my experience offering training on father involvement to resource parents, which produced some interesting feedback. And lastly, I examined the implications of this for the field of child welfare.

In this report, I will begin with a literature review which explores the recruitment and retention of resource family homes, motivations to adopt, kinship care, and customary care arrangements.

Chapter One - Literature Review

Prior to beginning my placement within the resource department, I conducted a literature review, which set the stage for me in terms of developing some insights into the work of the department and the people it serves. Because I would only be spending three months in the department, I wanted to get as much of an introduction to the work as I could before I arrived so that the time it takes to become oriented to the people and the processes would not hinder the possibility of more advanced learning in my placement. In hindsight, I am glad I did as it allowed me to be more critical and mindful of my learning experiences. Without having some knowledge of the unique circumstances relating to resource families, I would not have been able to develop the depth of understanding through discussion and further exploration. During my placement, and throughout the learning process, I continued to expand this review.

My review consisted primarily of several multidisciplinary databases including social services abstracts, social work abstracts, nursing and psycARTICLES. The key words used to retrieve literature were “recruitment” “retention” “motivation” “adoption” “fostering” “foster care” “home study” “assessment” and “experience”. The results of my searches were predominantly American sources of information, along with some British sources. Although there are Canadian statistics and sources of information as well, in my experience, they were not as plentiful. In this chapter, I will begin by discussing recruitment and retention, followed by motivation to adopt, the importance of kinship caregivers, and customary care options for Aboriginal children in care.

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Homes

I initially planned to look at recruitment strategies within resource departments. In order to develop insight into the recruitment capacity of the particular agency where I did my advanced

practicum, and in order to become acquainted to the role of the resource worker, it was important for me to develop an understanding of prospective parents' motivation and willingness to foster and/or adopt children taken into care. I also felt that it was important for me to develop a fuller understanding of the characteristics and factors that influence the likelihood of a successful adoption. I located an American study (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004) which utilized data from child welfare research sources such as The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, which collects data annually on all children in foster care, including those who have been adopted. Geen, Malm, and Katz (2004) also used data from the Child Welfare League of America, the National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Survey of Family Growth (a nationally representative survey of women 15-44 years of age on topics related to fertility, family planning, and reproductive health). The purpose of this study was to inform the recruitment and retention of adoptive parents, in order to address the underlying problem, which is the overabundance of children waiting in foster care for 'forever homes.' The study (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004) was conducted by researchers at the Urban Institute and Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University with a grant provided by David Lucile Packard Foundation. The data collection for this study involved (1) a national survey of state adoption directors, (2) three case studies (San Jose, Miami and Boston) which involved in-depth qualitative interviews with state and local adoption directors, private agency adoption directors, and focus groups with adoption workers and adoption applicants (15 groups with a total of 92 participants) on the adoption process, and (3) case record abstraction. The authors aimed to estimate the number of applicants who sought to adopt, and to understand the factors that influenced the success of these adoptions. The findings indicated the need for greater support for prospective adoptive parents as the majority of

prospective parents dropped out early on in the process. Most significantly, the authors acknowledged ‘word of mouth’ as a powerful recruitment tool, and given that the majority of our referrals come from other resource parents, it is important that we assist these resource families to develop a positive experience. This article offered a great deal of information in this area and assisted me in developing a general understanding of the characteristics of the families who adopt as well as children who are adopted, their experiences through this process, and the factors that lead to their success (these characteristics are described in the following paragraphs.) Also, their research helped me to gain insights into the rationale behind our department’s desire to utilize more than one strategy to achieve adoptions for children whose legal status has been finalized and who remain in foster care indefinitely. These strategies include the need for child specific recruitment and the need to explore kinship options as well, particularly for children who have behavioural difficulties or are otherwise difficult to place.

According to the Princeton Survey Research Associates (1997), at least one third of all American families have considered adopting a child. Out of this potential resource demographic, some will choose international adoption or private adoption, and some will “accept” a child from foster care, recognizing that this often means older children (six years old and up), children with mental or physical disabilities, and sibling groups. Most people who are interested in adopting are seeking to adopt a single child who is young and has no mental or physical disability (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004). In the United States of America, 59 percent of children adopted from foster care are adopted by their foster parents, and 23 percent are adopted by relatives. Only 17 percent of children adopted through the foster care system are adopted by people who were not previously known to the children (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004).

National adoptions statistics in Canada are not readily available. Information concerning children in the care of child welfare agencies is maintained provincially, although the focus is on service delivery rather than research and as such, a complete and accurate picture is difficult to create. The Dave Thomas Foundation, an organization that promotes awareness of the need for adoptive homes for children in care in Canada, compiles these statistics and estimates that in 2013 approximately 30,000 children in Canada were available for adoption. In Ontario in 2007, there were 18,668 children in the care of the Children's Aid Society. Approximately half of those children were Crown Wards, and only nine percent of that population were adopted (822 children) (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007). According to the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies for the 2012-2013 fiscal year, there were 24, 851 children in care. During that time, 8,483 children were discharged from care. Of the remaining 16,358 children, 69 percent were already in care in the previous year(s), 23 percent were admitted to care, and eight percent were readmissions. On a monthly average, 44.8 percent of children in care were Crown Wards (with and without access) (OACAS, 2013).

According to Geen et al. (2004) the number of children adopted by families coincides with a shift in child welfare practice, which makes finding kinship placements for children a priority. Although Geen et al. is an American study, child welfare legislation in Ontario requires that protection workers seek family placements for children coming into care, and these placements are favoured over foster care placements. The increased utilization of kinship caregivers in Ontario is part of the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda. These changes were brought about as a result of extensive consultation with the Ministry of Child and Youth Services and child welfare professionals, and were intended to improve outcomes for children who become involved with the system (OACAS, 2010). Multiple strategies were developed to

improve outcomes for children. In particular, the use of kinship *care* (for children in the care of the CAS, where kinship caregivers go through the process of becoming approved foster parents and are paid accordingly) and kinship *service* placements (for children not in the care of CAS, where children may be placed under Supervision Order with the kinship caregivers, for which there is no financial support) stems from the identification of the need for a broader range of care options for children and youth that support long term and permanent homes. Kinship placements are recognized (in some cases) as being better options for children than traditional foster care in that they allow for continuity for the child by maintaining connections with family members (OACAS, 2010). In cases where an apprehension is imminent, the child protection worker will search for prospective kinship caregivers, who will be assessed as to their potential to provide a safe and nurturing home for the child. Kin options for children help ease the transition thereby lessening the pain of separation from biological family members (OACAS, 2010).

In order to develop successful recruitment strategies, it is also important to distinguish the types of children who are more likely to be adopted by general applicants, from those who are more likely to be adopted by relatives. For example, in the United States, generally, children who are adopted through foster care tend to be younger and are more likely to be female, Caucasian, or Hispanic, while relatives are more likely to adopt older children, children who are male, minorities, and who have special needs (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004).

According to survey research on Canadian attitudes toward foster care and adoption, conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation (2013), Canadians are most likely to consider adopting a child less than two years of age (41 percent). Canadians do not tend to express a gender preference. Men are far more likely than women to demonstrate a racial preference. Nearly three out of five women state they have no preference as to the race of the child. Geen et

al. (2004) also pointed out that the adoption process itself can be difficult. They found that adoptive families had common complaints about workers and the process in general. Often, families did not feel adequately supported by the worker. They felt that there was poor communication; that workers were keeping information from them; or that it was insufficient or inaccurate information (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004). These sentiments were echoed in the work of Brown (2008) and Jones and Morrissette (1999) who wrote that foster parents require the support of their workers and good communication in order to be successful.

In a Dutch study, Nooredegraaf, Nijnatten, and Elbers (2008) explored the dual function of resource workers as helpers and gatekeepers through conversational interviews with social workers and prospective adoptive parents. The purpose of the study was to show through analysis of these interviews how social workers, without explicitly identifying themselves in this dual role, can test the prospective parents' abilities and simultaneously help to strengthen them as parents. As Nooredegraaf et al. (2008) explained, resource workers integrate seemingly contradictory functions into their role. This dual role is one with which prospective adoptive parents can struggle. On one hand, the homestudy worker is the prospective parents' strongest advocate in terms of having a child placed with them. It is in their best interest to share important details about who they are with the worker. On the other hand, families are unsure how honest they should be because there is a lot that is unknown about the approval process.

Research shows that applicants with more resources are more likely to succeed in completing adoptions (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004; Crum, 2010; Selwyn & Quinton, 2004; Octoman & McLean, 2014; Brown & Bednar, 2006; MacGregor et al., 2006; Brown, 2008; Jones & Morrissette, 1999). Support from the worker in the form of good communication, validation, and offering the resource family opportunities to be heard and be respected are

helpful strategies the resource worker can employ in order to promote this success. For the prospective resource family, having extended family and other support networks in place, such as the support from a resource family community, can also be helpful. Adoptive families need someone to answer their questions about the adoption process, and having someone to empathize with them about their experiences can offer additional support. Jones and Morrissette (1999) and Brown (2008) also identified the importance of this support from workers in navigating placements (and adoptions) with success. MacGregor et al. (2006) determined that their Canadian sample was very similar to other samples of foster parents from the USA and Britain in terms of the support foster parents need to do their job. They found that what foster parents really need is for fostering agencies to dedicate enough resources to ensure that staff have the time to respond to their needs. It is therefore important for workers to assist in cultivating these for prospective parents, and to prepare them for the realities of becoming parents. Some researchers have noted that some states have dedicated recruitment or retention counsellors who are committed to assisting adoptive parents through the adoption process (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004). It is essential for adoptive families to have an experienced adoption worker to assist them in navigating this foreign process, because it is a process that can be completely overwhelming, but one that if done well, can have a profound impact on the child, the family of origin, and the adoptive family. This strategy can address the feelings of inadequate support expressed by some foster parents throughout the adoption process.

In order to increase the number of adoptive homes for children waiting in foster care, the agency must determine why there are not enough homes in the first place. In their study on improving recruitment and retention of adoptive homes, Geen et al. (2004) inquired as to why there is such a need for adoptive homes for children in care. Can this lack of resources be

attributed to the interest level in the general population? Are recruiting methods unsatisfactory? Or are there too many barriers within the system and not enough supports for applicants to successfully adopt? There are indications that people are interested in adoption through foster care (an estimated 240,000 calls per year in the U.S.A.), but no indication as to how many of those callers would be approved and able to adopt (Princeton Survey Research Associates 1997).

As indicated in the Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC) publication *Rescuing a Critical Resource: A Review of the Foster Care Retention and Recruitment Literature*, there are three approaches to recruitment: general, specific, and targeted (CWLC, 2014). General recruitment is that which occurs through the media. Child-specific recruitment relates to kinship or other caregivers who have a relationship with or know the child in care. Targeted recruitment focuses on specific demographics that pertain to children in need. This is interesting to note because, as indicated in the CWLC publication, advertisement has very little effect on the decision to become a foster parent. Many calls to child welfare agencies may be the result of advertising, and are often weeded out at that stage, recognizing that they would not be good candidates for Parenting Resources Information Development Education (PRIDE) training. The CWLC reported that the media is responsible for only eight percent of recruits through newspaper advertisements; three percent of recruits from radio advertisement; three percent from television advertisements; and three percent from marketing on the internet. By contrast, the most influential reason for becoming a foster parent, as reported by the CWLC, is a personal connection to fostering such as knowing a foster parent, or growing up in a family who fosters. This influence accounts for 80 percent of resource family recruitment (CWLC, 2014).

According to Geen et al. (2004) many adoption experts indicate that successful adoptions have more to do with retention than they do recruitment. This is supported by Leshied, Rodger,

Brown, den Dunnen and Pickle (CWLC, 2014), who have indicated that the most important factor in successful recruitment is the successful retention of existing resource families. Because 80 percent of new recruits have some connection to the existing foster care system, it is of utmost importance that the existing families who foster feel supported in doing so. These families are instrumental in drawing new recruits through the stories they tell about the children they foster. They provide an inside look about both the challenges and the rewards. If these resources are disgruntled about the foster care system and do not feel adequately supported or valued as an important member of the child's professional care team, chances are they are going to be vocal about it and this may in turn influence how others feel about fostering. Alarming, two thirds of resource families have considered stopping caring for foster children (CWLC, 2014).

There is an abundance of American research and statistical information readily accessible, but Canadian sources of information are much harder to come by. As Ferris-Manning and Zandstra (2003) wrote in their publication on Children in Care in Canada for the Child Welfare League of Canada, there is no body of research that looks at children in care statistics nationally. This may be why Canadian statistics on adoption are elusive. For example, "The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) (2002), by Nico Trocme et al., is the first national study that tackles a specific child welfare issue in Canada with national scope" (Ferris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003, p. 3). MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, (2006) conducted a Canadian study involving 54 participants from nine different counties across Canada, on the motivation, support and retention needs of foster parents in Canada. The study shows that, most often, adoptive parents do so because they are motivated intrinsically to do something positive, making a difference in the life of a child, and that they want to have children in their home. The most important factor identified by the participants in the success of the

adoption process was the measure of support from the agency. The participants indicated that they needed to be able to have a voice and for their opinions to be valued. They also needed to feel a part of the team, planning and working together for the benefit of the child. This entailed establishing respectful and trusting relationships with their workers, characterized by good communication. In fact, the biggest criticism resource families have is that they do not feel a part of the professional team (Baring, Gould et al., 1983; Blakey et al, 2012; Crum, 2010; Lutz, 2003; Marcenko et al., 2009; Rodger, Cummings & Leschied, 2006).

When prospective foster parents' calls to child welfare agencies go unanswered, they are frustrated and discouraged. Geen et al. (2004) were interested in exploring why so many potential adoptive parents drop out early on in the process. Based on feedback from focus groups with foster parents and workers, they were able to ascertain that workers felt that applicants who could not navigate these small problems would never be able to manage adoption through child welfare. From the prospective parents' point of view, they felt an urgency to respond to the agency's overwhelming demand for adoptive homes for children, and felt unwelcome and unneeded after their calls to the agency went unanswered (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004).

This is only the beginning of the challenges resource families will face throughout the adoption process. Recognizing this, agencies need to focus their efforts on the retention of possible parents. Many foster parents withdraw from fostering before their first year of service because of a lack of agency support, lack of responsiveness and poor communication (MacGregor, et al., 2006). Foster parents need to feel supported as a member of a professional team, and their abilities affirmed in order for them to be successful in caring for children (MacGregor et al., 2006; Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003; Brown, 2008; Jones & Morrissette, 1999). The current shortage of foster homes in Canada does not allow for the gradual

introduction of foster parents to their new role, which may jeopardize the success of placements for new foster parents, and lead to burn out for new and inexperienced foster parents (MacGregor et al., 2006).

The relationship between the home study worker and the foster/adoptive family is extremely important (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004; Nooredegraaf et al., 2008). This relationship can have an impact on the success of future placements. If the family does not have confidence in the relationship with the home study worker, they may not feel comfortable enough to express fears or shortcomings, which is necessary in order to develop the families' skills and abilities to cope with the challenges of parenting an adopted child. Families must be able to develop a relationship with the home study worker in order to overcome their fears and anxieties about being judged and scrutinized, and to minimize the power imbalance between them and the agency representatives. Accordingly, it is important to note that increasing the number of resource homes is not the only or explicit goal of the resource department; the main goal is responding appropriately to the needs of the families and children we serve. For some children in care, this means finding an appropriate placement. This may also mean a more concerted effort toward recruiting family placements, and working more proactively and intensely to prevent admissions to care.

The Dave Thomas Foundation noted the discrepancy between the number of available permanent placements and the number of Crown Wards within Canada. The Dave Thomas Foundation focuses on raising awareness of the needs of children in care, dispelling myths about adopting from the child welfare system, and interestingly, on changing the public perception that child welfare adoptions are charitable. "As long as people are primarily interested in foster care adoption because of altruistic reasons, there will be a finite number of people willing to upend

the stability of their families for a child adopted from foster care” (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2013, p. 36).

In order to nurture positive outcomes for children in their adoptive placements, there needs to be an understanding as to how to best meet the needs of these children, which really begins with the knowledge of effective recruitment processes. Recruitment for foster care or adoption in child welfare can be general or child specific. The idea behind general recruiting strategies is to cultivate a pool of resources from which to draw from and create an appropriate match between a child in need of a permanent placement and a ‘forever home.’ Child specific recruitment targets relatives or friends of the family who may already have a relationship with the child (Crea, Griffin & Barth, 2010). As suggested by Crea et al. (2010), agencies need to commit to recruitment efforts in order for them to be successful.

In addition, it is important for home study workers to examine their own practices in writing home study narratives as research shows that workers tend to minimize identified risks by excluding these from the documentation process (Noordegraaf et al., 2008). In my experience, this tends not to happen during the assessment process as it is the time during which the agency is figuring out whether or not to approve someone. However, this does happen once a foster family has been approved, and there is almost an inclination to try to protect them on some level. Where concerns have been raised, how and where are these documented and addressed? Do they necessitate new child protection referrals to be assessed by the intake department? While it is understood that no foster parent has immunity from allegations, this is another apparent contradiction of child welfare in that there is also the sentiment that they should be protected or shielded to some extent, and the issues addressed internally. There is a notion within the resource department that in working with resource families, we do not look at the issues in the same way

as we would child welfare clients, with “protection eyes.” Crea, Griffin and Barth (2010) highlighted the importance of exploring those sensitive issues, because although there is recognition that the issues exist, there is not enough work devoted to addressing these issues in the process.

In summary, the literature shows that there is an important partnership between the resource worker and the prospective resource family in the recruitment, development and retention of these resources.

Motivations to Adopt

Although there are different pathways to adoption (international, private, and foster care), motivations to adopt are similar. Although families may choose the same means of adoption for subsequent adoptions, some do not. Understanding the reasons people adopt informs recruitment efforts as well as outcomes for child well-being (Malm & Welti, 2010). Malm and Welti (2010) explored these motivations which included infertility, altruism, and religiosity. According to Malm and Welti (2010), over 80 percent of adoptive parents did so because they wanted to provide a permanent home for a child. MacGregor et al. (2006) cited ‘empty nest’, increasing family size, and providing a companion for an only child as motivations for parents to foster and adopt. Prior exposure to adoption increases the likelihood that individuals will adopt. Knowing a child is in need of a permanent home can also influence the decision to adopt. The majority of prospective adoptive parents have some connection to adoption or the foster care system. Many cite relatives, friends and co-workers who adopted children from foster care, were adopted themselves or grew up with foster children in their homes (Geen, Malm & Katz, 2004).

It should be recognized that parents who are unable to conceive did not likely choose adoption as the preferred means by which they would have a family (Malm & Welti, 2010). The

degree to which infertility impacts on family well-being is a phenomenon that occurs often among adoptive families, but must be assessed on an individual basis (Malm & Welti, 2010; Cohen & Westhues, 1990). It is important for the workers to explore with the couple how they have dealt with infertility and how they reached the decision to foster or adopt (Cohen & Westhues, 1990). Cousineau and Domar (2006) and Valentine (1986) suggested that infertility can have a significant psychological impact on individuals and couples. Cohen and Westhues (1990) included feelings of distress, personal suffering, loss of control, stigmatization and disruption of the developmental trajectory of adulthood as it is quite natural for the couple to mourn the loss of being able to have a child of their own. The worker can gain a great deal of insight from the couples' ability to deal with their disappointment and loss, but also how they are able to support each other through this process. This is suggestive of how the couple may potentially bond and attach to a child placed with them. In order for them to be able to mourn and give up the idea of being able to have a child of their own, they most likely had a strong attachment to the idea of having a child of their own (Cohen & Westhues, 1990).

Cousineau and Domar (2006) indicated that stress management and coping skills training can greatly assist couples in overcoming their suffering around infertility. There are conflicting opinions about the impact of infertility on family well-being. Burns (1990) concluded that there are potential harmful effects of unresolved infertility issues, and that these needs do not diminish after a child is introduced to the infertile couple, "a baby, whether by birth or adoption is not synonymous with fertility, because it does not ameliorate the infertility experience" (Burns, 1990, p. 187). On the other hand, Flykt et al. (2009) suggested that previous infertility may make parents more resilient. They argued that the more positive and prepared a parent feels to care for the child(ren) in his or her care, the less parenting stress they will experience.

In addition to training and assessing resource families for children in care, resource workers also put these skills to use in developing family placements. Relatives and family friends (who are included in the notion of “kinship”) can make ideal caregivers for children in need of an alternative placement, given their already existing relationship with the child. While there are clear benefits to kinship placements for children, they can present certain challenges as well.

Kinship Care

Farmer (2010), pondering the problem of placement shortages in England as well as the concerns around the quality of state regulated placements, recognized the increasing importance of family placements. Farmer (2010) conducted a mixed methods study in which she utilized both qualitative and quantitative data to determine which factors related to good outcomes for children in kinship placements. Based on statistical significance, Farmer (2010) was also able to predict the likelihood of placement disruption (or breakdown) in both kin and unrelated placements. Farmer’s study took place in England, where data was collected from four local child welfare authorities. A sample of 270 children living in placements was drawn from a total of 2,240 children’s cases which were made available for the purpose of this study. From this sample, 53 percent of children were placed with kinship caregivers, and 47 percent were placed with foster or unrelated caregivers. The 270 files were reviewed, and from that number, a smaller sub-sample of 32 family caregivers, 16 workers, six parents, and 16 children were chosen to participate in an interview process. From the interviews and case related data collected, Farmer (2010) drew out factors relating to outcomes for children in kinship placements and compared those to outcome factors for children in unrelated foster care placements. Farmer (2010) utilized two measures; (1) the placement quality (which was characterized as either good or as

problematic/poor), and (2) placement disruption (where the placement ended without a plan, resulting in a move for the child). Farmer (2010) found that outcomes varied significantly, and her examination of the factors contributed to positive (and negative) outcomes for children in family placements. Due to changes in legislation that encourage, even favour kinship placements of children in care, there is good reason to explore what factors relate to good placement outcomes in kinships care (Farmer, 2010), as is the case for children in Ontario described earlier in this chapter.

What is significant about Farmer's research (2010) is that while she noted that family options, particularly placements with grandparents have lower levels of disruption, they also endure longer periods of strain than their counterparts in foster placements. Kin caregivers more often than non-kin caregivers, struggle to cope with the children placed in their care (Farmer, 2010). This seems to be because family members, through their connection to the child(ren) in their care, tend to have higher levels of commitment than carers who were strangers prior to placement. Farmer (2010) found that 71 percent of kinship caregivers continued to provide care when they were under strain, as compared to 48 percent of unrelated caregivers who were experiencing strain. When foster parents are not coping well and want to relinquish the child(ren) in their care, workers responded much more quickly than they did in kinship situations. Additionally, relatives caring for children have the added pressure of potential conflict or resentment of the parent whose children the relatives are caring for. To add to that, kinship caregivers received less formal support than did foster parents. In summary, kinship caregivers often persevered beyond the point where unrelated foster parents admitted defeat, and they experienced considerable strain in doing so (Farmer, 2010).

Gordon et al. (2003) wrote about the importance of enhanced support services for kinship caregivers, recognizing that these caregivers demonstrate a high level of commitment to providing the children in their care with safety and stability. This constitutes a significant adjustment for the caregivers (and the children), which requires a great deal of support. Strozier et al. (2012) elaborated on the nature of these adjustments and supports and argued for the efficacy of support groups in increasing the level of social support for kinship caregivers. Kinship caregivers face a unique challenge in that they are caring for children who belong to their family members, which brings another level of difficult circumstances for them to navigate in terms of family dynamics. The parents of the children in their care aren't distant strangers to them but rather are cousins, children, or close friends. Additionally, kinship caregivers face a lot of the challenges that other resource families face, such as legal proceedings, conflicts with their own children, loss of personal time, isolation from family and friends, and generally feeling unsupported at a time when there is an increased need for support.

It is also interesting to note that according to Farmer (2010), in both kin and unrelated care, placements were more problematic for children whose parents used drugs. No other adversities relating to parents influenced the placement outcomes of children in either group (Farmer, 2010). Children who were hyperactive experienced more placement disruption, particularly in unrelated foster placements. Farmer (2010) also pointed out that children with a high number of adversities were more likely to experience disruption in placement when they were in unrelated foster care. This suggests that children with complex needs would be better served in kinship placements. When kin-caregivers are approved as foster parents, they receive financial and practical support making them ideal resources. Children placed with kin *service* caregivers do not receive financial support from the CAS. Kinship *care* families have gone

through the process of becoming approved as foster parents, and are paid as foster parents.

Children placed in kinship care arrangements also have the added benefit of having a ‘Child in Care’ worker assigned, which offers an additional source of support for the family placement.

Finally, Farmer (2010) suggested the importance of carefully considering referrals from grandparents and not dismissing them too early on the basis of age or health, because there is a lot they can offer their grandchildren, and these are the most stable of all the kinship placements because they tend to persevere despite difficulties they may be having. Thus, there needs to be greater support for kinship caregivers. Farmer (2010) concluded that children in kinship placements do as well as children in unrelated foster care but with the added benefit of having placements that tend to last longer. But because these children benefit often at the expense of their relatives, we need to ensure that they have adequate supports in place in order to sustain the caregivers in these caring arrangements.

Customary Care

Given the overwhelming number of Aboriginal children in the care of child welfare organizations across Canada, there is a need to acknowledge the importance of Customary Care options for these children. Customary Care for Aboriginal children is a necessary endeavour of the child welfare system in beginning to address the historical and current injustices perpetuated by this system.

“Customary Care is a model of Aboriginal child welfare service that is seen as culturally relevant to Aboriginal children and youth. Incorporating the unique customs of each First Nation, Customary Care is a traditional method of caring for children, premised on the belief that a child is the collective responsibility of the community” (MCYS, 2010, p. 9).

The implementation of Customary Care practices is a means of disrupting the trauma that continues to be perpetuated against Aboriginal people by the child welfare system. Aboriginal people in Canada have a unique history of abuse which has profoundly impacted an entire culture for generations as a result of physical and sexual abuse perpetrated against children within the residential school system, and stemming from language and cultural death experienced by children who were taught that they were inferior to white people, and their language and culture represented them as dirty savages who must be educated and assimilated into white culture. When these children finally returned to their families, they remained disconnected as they did not speak their language and did not know their culture. Essentially, an entire generation of Aboriginal people were lost and alienated as they did not have a sense of belonging in either place. As a consequence of the abuse they endured, the separation and losses, and the trauma that resulted, this generation of children, who was raised without a nurturing positive reference for parenting, was plagued by mental health, violence and substance abuse issues, and the subsequent '60's scoop', which again, saw Aboriginal children removed from their families and placed in white foster homes, severing any ties they had with their culture. These injustices can be replicated within the current system, in which Aboriginal children are overrepresented in care, and are most often placed in white foster homes.

When compared with the rest of the population in Canada, statistics show that Aboriginal children are overrepresented within the child welfare system (Statistics Canada, 2008; Sinha, Ellenbogen & Trocme, 2013). According to Sinha, Ellenbogen and Trocme (2013), Aboriginal people are recognized in Canada as being First Nations, Inuit, and Metis. The current population of Aboriginal children in care is three times higher than at the height of the residential school system in the 1940's (OACAS, 2010). This is a significant number given that Aboriginal

children in Canada only represent five percent of the Canadian population of children, but they account for 40 percent of children in care.

Lavergne, Dufour, Trocme and Larrivee (2008) indicated that, according to their analysis of the 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, neglect findings are more prevalent with respect to the Aboriginal population than any other population. In fact, neglect investigations occur among the First Nations population at a rate of six times higher than that of non-Aboriginal children (Sinha et al., 2013). Sinha, Ellenbogen & Trocme (2013) and Lavergne et al. (2008) attributed these findings to the intergenerational impact of trauma inflicted upon Aboriginal people within Canada, and the pattern of ‘state-sponsored’ removal of First Nations children from their homes beginning with the residential school system and continuing under the current child welfare mandate. Sinha et al., (2013) explained that neglect is the most prevalent form of maltreatment, occurring in 34 percent of substantiated maltreatment investigations (according to the 2003 and 2008 CIS). According to Sinha et al., the overrepresentation of First Nations children is linked to factors relating to the physical condition of housing environment, as well as caregiver risk factors such as substance use. Furthermore, these

“current conditions have been shaped by colonial, Canadian, and provincial/territorial policies and practices that dispossessed people from traditional lands, disrupted functioning economic systems, suppressed First Nations cultures and languages, and separated generations of children from their parents (Frideres, 1998; Milloy, 1999; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996)” (Sinha, Ellenbogen & Trocme, 2013, p. 2083).

There is some recognition of this oppression within the child welfare system, as the 2006 amendment to the Child and Family Services Act (sec. 226) dictated that every review of the Act (which occurs every five years) must now include a review of those provisions which impose obligations on CAS organizations in providing service to a person who is defined as an 'Indian or Native person' under the act, and with respect to children who are defined as 'Indian or Native' persons, in order to assess compliance of CAS organizations with these practices. The CFSA acknowledges the importance of culture, heritage and traditions concerning Native children and families who become involved under the CFSA, and requires the CAS to involve the Band in culturally relevant planning for the child under those circumstances. In accordance with the Child and Family Services Act and the Ontario Permanency Funding Guidelines (2006), the Ministry of Children and Youth Services has outlined a best practice guide to formal customary care arrangements (MCYS, 2013). However, this has not ameliorated the problem of overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care. The persistence of this problem requires a complex solution including the adoption of an anti-oppressive framework for child welfare practice, and addressing child poverty.

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to inform my placement experience by providing the necessary background knowledge for me to work effectively in this capacity as a student, and to develop insights into work with resource families as a child welfare practitioner. From my review, I was able to become acquainted with the overall processes of the resource department, as well as the range of placements that can be provided to children in various circumstances. In the next chapter I will discuss the theories and knowledge that can inform child welfare practices.

Chapter Two - Theory and Knowledge that Informs Practice within Child Welfare

When I began my quest for a fuller understanding of what I actually know about child welfare practice, I started by asking, 'How do we know what we know'? It is helpful, in deconstructing the discourse relating to child protection, to begin the process of figuring out what this practice is, and what it is not. On the surface, the Children's Aid Society (CAS) may seem like, and can be, an institution that is oppressive. Although some would argue that it is one of the most contradictory places for social workers to position themselves, most child protection professionals who have enjoyed a career in this field will say that it is important and worthwhile work.

In order to believe in this work and to be effective as practitioners, we must ground our practice in theory so as to inform and guide our practice. When we say that bodies of knowledge guide our practice, I wondered what are these, and how do we know which ones will help us to understand our practice, and which ones will guide us? These are questions that I intend to explore in this chapter, and will attempt to answer through my own exploration of what I believe to be pertinent discourses in child welfare work: issues of neglect; social constructionism; anti-oppressive practice; attachment theory; strengths-based approaches; structural and post structural approaches to social work practice; reflexive practice; and the importance of supervision.

What Do We Know About Child Neglect?

In this section, I intend to examine what is known about child neglect in order to develop a better understanding and inform my own responses as a worker. Although there is a great deal of literature today on the subject of neglect, it is acknowledged that there is a lack of research on the response of the child welfare system to the issue of neglect, as well as any evaluation of the effectiveness of different approaches to dealing with neglect (DePanfilis & Dubowitz, 2005;

Schumaker et al., 2011). Much of the research on child maltreatment refers to abuse and neglect as though there is no distinction. Both are forms of maltreatment. Abuse cases are more readily identifiable and, therefore, more thoroughly studied. Cases of neglect tend to be minimized (Burke et al., 1998). Neglect is a much more difficult concept to grasp than a physical injury. Because there is no one definite harmful event, it is not immediately apparent what the impact is on the child. It is not necessarily clear what the Children's Aid Society's response should be in each case. "Paradoxically, although neglect is the most common form of maltreatment and continues to increase in Canada (Trocme et al., 2005), it is one of the least studied (Behl, Conyngham & May, 2003) and one for which the effectiveness of intervention is the least firmly established (Dufour & Chamberland, 2004)" (Dufour, Lavergne, Larrivee & Trocme, 2007, p. 142).

When compared with the United States, there is relatively little emphasis on the documentation of Canadian child welfare statistics (Trocme, 1995). Trocme (1995) presented the findings of the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS), the first Canadian study of its kind which detailed incidents of child maltreatment, and provided child and family characteristics. In terms of its prevalence within Ontario, 41 percent of investigations are related to physical harm, while 30 percent are neglect (Trocme, 1995). In the most recent publication on findings from the 2008 Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, neglect is reported to be the second largest single category of child maltreatment at 28 percent (with exposure to intimate partner violence at 31 percent) (CWLC, 2014). Physical abuse cases involve visible injuries, which are observable and quantifiable, whereas, the impact of neglect is primarily psychological or emotional and the extent of which is not immediately or concretely known to the worker. The alleged perpetrator in most cases is a parent, with mothers

identified as the perpetrators in 48 percent of investigations, and fathers or stepfathers in 43 percent of investigations (Trocme, 1995). What's interesting, as Trocme (1995) pointed out, is that mothers were held accountable for 82 percent of neglect cases, and even when fathers were present, they were less likely to be held accountable for their children's well-being. The OIS also highlighted the importance of continuing to develop Canadian statistics and information, given the discrepancies between the Ontario and American child welfare systems. Trocme (1995) explained that while the two child welfare systems are similar, our social welfare systems are different. For example, Canada has a more extensive safety net. Trocme (1995) also considered socioeconomic and cultural determinants more prevalent in the United States that may contribute to child maltreatment. As such, Canadians should not rely on American statistics to inform policies and practices (Trocme, 1995).

There is a growing body of social work theory on neglect. This body of literature also draws on theory from psychology, nursing, psychiatry, and child development. Neglect is basically defined as a persistent failure to meet a child's needs resulting in impairment to health or development (Department of Health, 1999). Neglect can take many forms including emotional neglect, abandonment, failure to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter, and failure to protect children from harm (Tanner & Turney, 2002; Department of Health, 1999). Neglect is identified by the Ontario Child Welfare Eligibility Spectrum as harm by omission. Specifically, "The child has been harmed or there is a risk that the child is likely to be harmed as a result of the caregiver's failure to adequately care for, provide for, supervise, or protect the child" (Eligibility Spectrum, 2006, p. 31). Neglect is further classified within the Eligibility Spectrum into categories with varying degrees of severity. Neglect can be characterized generally as being the result of inadequate supervision, neglect of a child's basic physical needs, caregiver response

to a child's physical health, caregiver response to a child's mental, emotional or developmental condition, or caregiver response to a child under 12 who has committed a serious act (such as killing or seriously injuring another child). Situations which are determined to be 'not severe' or 'minimally severe' are deemed to be below the intervention line, and often result in a community referral for support. In those instances where the issues are 'moderately' or 'extremely severe', this constitutes a need for protection and the involvement of the child welfare agency. The section of the Child and Family Services Act (1990) that is applied in situations where there is neglect, are primarily sections 37(2) (a and b) which indicate that a child is in need of protection where:

(a) The child has suffered physical harm, inflicted by the person having charge of the child or caused by or resulting from that person's (i) failure to adequately care for, provide for, supervise or protect the child, or (ii) pattern of neglect in caring for, providing for, supervising or protecting the child (b) there is a risk that the child is likely to suffer physical harm inflicted by the person having charge of the child or caused by or resulting from the person's, (i) failure to adequately care for, provide for, supervise or protect the child, or, (ii) pattern of neglect in caring for, providing for, supervising or protecting the child.

Although the Act described above and the Eligibility Spectrum provide child protection workers with a concrete set of guidelines by which to operationalize a definition of neglect, the problem for protection workers remains when and how to intervene. Trocme et al. (2001) explained why this is. For instance, the Eligibility Spectrum indicates that poor dental hygiene can be an indicator of neglect. A child who is scrounging for food, or food that is nutritionally inadequate or in short supply, may also be indicators of neglect. Additionally, when children's

immunizations are not up to date, or when there are developmental concerns such as delays in speech, this may also indicate neglect. But while one or more conditions may exist, the existence of these conditions alone does not necessarily constitute a removal of a child from his or her caregiver(s). The determination of risk is often arrived at by weighing these risks against protective factors. But here again, the identification of risks and protective factors is highly subjective, as is the significance attached to each factor in arriving at a final decision.

In the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, Trocme et al., (2001) wrote that neglect is a difficult problem to address because it is unlike abuse cases which are “incident specific” (p. 35). Neglect, is different in that it is chronic in nature (Trocme et al., 2001). It is difficult to identify because while there are certainly indicators [Trocme et al., (2001) classify eight subtypes of neglect], there is not necessarily agreement among child welfare practitioners on what specifically defines neglect or what the thresholds are for intervention. Moreover, child welfare is very much incident based, and with chronic neglect that persists over time, there is not necessarily a trigger event (Tanner & Turney, 2002). Neglect is not a single event, or even a series of single events, but is a way of life characterized by hopelessness (Tanner & Turney, 2002). Consequently, a worker may adjust to what they are seeing over time, whereas in a new situation, they would be concerned (Tanner & Turney, 2002). As such, it is imperative that child welfare practitioners are critical in their approaches to working with children and families, and that they draw on relevant research and knowledge bases in order to inform their practice decisions. A critical approach is one that helps us to identify the underlying causes of problems that present, helps us as practitioners to understand our own reactions to what we are seeing, and allows us to respond most effectively. A critical practitioner employs skills of

reflection and scrutiny in order to contextualize the issues with which he or she is presented (Millar, 2008).

Developing the ability to integrate knowledge and practice is a key function of child welfare work. For instance, there are researchers who developed indicators for neglect including structural approaches that account for social and economic factors in families' circumstances (Tanner & Turney, 2002; Trocme et al., 2001). There is research on the effect of neglect on child development (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Allen & Oliver, 1982; Erickson & Egeland, 2002; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Perry, 2000). There is research outlining strategies for intervention including individual work, family work, and broader socio-environmental circumstances of isolation and poverty (Tanner & Turney, 2002). As Tanner and Turney (2002) have written, no one strategy is perhaps going to be effective, but to be sure, the strategies that social workers employ ought to be well-informed. Also, there is emphasis on forming a therapeutic relationship rather than on performing a brokerage role as a means of achieving change. This means that the worker must be invested in establishing a trusting relationship with the client, and that the worker helps and works with the client through the change process. The kinds of change that child welfare professionals ask people to make can be very difficult for them to achieve.

I believe this is because one's parenting ability depends largely on an individual's own experiences of being parented, and his or her exposure to parenting role models. There is an intergenerational impact of parenting. Therefore, we cannot expect parents to rise to a standard for which they have no basis for comparison. Because there is so much learning involved in the process of challenging existing inadequate parenting practices, the development of an understanding as to why a particular practice is inadequate, and the discovery and

implementation of new and improved practices, this process can be a difficult one, and one that requires time. Parenting can be a highly contentious topic under the best of circumstances but especially within the field of child welfare, where there is the added pressure of the power imbalance that exists in the relationship between parent and worker. The reality for parents who are involved with the CAS is that ultimately, the consequence of not being ‘good enough’ as a parent, is having your children removed from your care by the same person who is ‘helping’ you through this process. This leaves little doubt that there is an inherent challenge within this system for workers to develop the trusting relationships that are necessary to assist parents and children in meaningful ways. That being said, the families who are affected by neglect are not solely afflicted due to deficits in parenting. There are structural factors that contribute to this as well. Because of this reality, Schumaker, Fallon and Trocme (2011) indicated that child protection workers alone cannot resolve issues of neglect, and called for a multi-sector, long-term approach to service in these cases.

Neglect has profoundly negative consequences on the lives of children, which can impact their potential as adults. Caregivers’ insensitive care and unavailability results in long term negative neurobiological consequences for development for children (Perry, 2000). For example, it can impact the way they feel about other adults and form relationships with their peers. How caregivers respond to their children has everything to do with how children form attachments (described later in this paper). Neglect is a concern in and of itself, and not secondary to abuse, as it is often seen. Long term effects of neglect are “corrosive” (Davies & Duckett, 2008). In fact, some researchers argued that neglect has a more profound impact on children than instances of abuse (Erickson & Egeland, 1996; Gauthier, Stollak, Messe & Arnoff, 1996; Kaplan, Pelcovitz & Labruna, 1999; Gabrino & Collins, 1999). For example, Schumaker et al. (2011)

indicated that neglected children experience more severe cognitive and academic deficits, social problems, and internalization of problems than children who are abused. Most concerning to Schumaker et al. (2011) is that despite the devastating impact of neglect on children, there is no clear understanding among child welfare professionals as to how to address these issues. What we do know is that interventions where there is neglect have to be rigorous (Howe, 2005).

Long-term intervention in cases of neglect usually has to be purposeful and focused (Tanner & Turney, 2002; Davies & Duckett, 2008). Such an intervention must be supported by strong assessment of family's needs, clear objectives for change, and strategies as to how to get there. According to Tanner and Turney (2002), child protection workers need to have a clear idea in mind as to what success will look like for the family, and be prepared to remove a child if parents are not able to achieve this. Tanner and Turney (2002) suggest re-thinking our negative beliefs about dependency of child welfare clients on the child welfare system, as long term interventions can be helpful so long as they are purposeful. In my experience, it is generally accepted that as helping professionals, we don't want to create a dependency upon us as helpers. We aim, in our work, to empower our clients to help themselves. In order for us to do this in child welfare, we must develop a parallel process of assisting child and parent, and alleviate some of the pressure for workers and clients to accomplish all of the work that they set out to do together under such strict timelines.

Furthering the notion of critical practice described earlier, Trocme et al., (1995) also explored the relevance of the role of fathers and the incidence of neglect. Little is known about fathers and child neglect. This may be attributed to, at least in part, the fact that mothers have been regarded traditionally as primary caregivers (Dufour et al., 2008). Looking specifically at neglect, Dufour et al. (2008) called for more insight into the problems experienced by fathers as

well as mothers in order to have an impact on children's safety and well-being. "Child neglect is generally associated with single-parent families headed by mothers who are grappling with major psychological and social problems of their own" (Dufour et al., 2008, p. 154). The men in these families tend to face fewer problems.

In order to develop a better understanding of the problem of neglect, and to improve the safety and well-being of the children who are at risk of harm in these situations, Dufour et al. (2008) indicated that more information about both mothers and fathers is needed. Dufour et al. (2008) proposed new research in the area of father involvement and what impact fathers have when they reside with their children. There is also interest in expanding knowledge of father's involvement in neglectful situations, acknowledging that it is not merely the presence of a father that creates or reduces risk. This is dependent on the nature of his involvement and is based on both quality and quantity of involvement. Dufour et al. (2008) outlined four dimensions of father involvement for consideration: coercive involvement, when the father is very present, but his conduct is abusive, violent, intrusive, dismissive, or hostile; obstructive involvement, when both the quality and the quantity of the involvement is low; intermittent involvement, when the father's behavior is positive, but his presence is infrequent; and positive involvement, where, even if the father's behavior is appropriate and sufficient, its beneficial effects are compromised by the family's many serious problems.

Applying a Social Constructionist Perspective in Child Welfare Practice

According to Payne (2014), who wrote about the social construction of social work theory, "Social work theory in general, and practice theory in particular is socially constructed in interactions between clients and practitioners in their agencies and in wider political, social, and cultural arenas" (p. 2). Payne (2014) explained that, as social workers, we build our practice

knowledge and theory through our experiences in the world. Payne (2014) identified that practice and theory are not separate entities; rather, they influence each other and evolve over time. Because of this, change is possible through engagement with this process of evolution of ideas and practice (Payne, 2014).

The daily work of social workers has major influences and consequences on the lives of the children and families in which they are involved. The functions of child welfare are rooted in various theories, legislation, and the socio-political and economic contexts. Above all else, Canadians value freedom and equality. These are values with which neoliberalism has also strongly identified. Neoliberalism projects a distorted view of how governments uphold these beliefs. In actual practice, neoliberal conceptions of freedom and equality severely limit people through marginalization and by perpetuating inequalities. Canadians value protection, particularly of those who are vulnerable and cannot protect themselves. Canadians also value family and privacy. But these virtues become complicated by competing stances that the state has obligation to protect vulnerable populations such as children, but has no business in the private affairs of individuals and families.

At times, the CAS is called upon to respond more or less intrusively. The field of child protection has become a profession, grounded in theory and research (such as attachment theory). The work of protection workers is also guided by the CFSA, which determines the grounds for involvement. Ultimately, how it is decided that the CAS will police families depends very much on the politics of the day. Presently, the socio-political climate assigns individuals the responsibility for the problems they face. Accordingly, all forms of social support are residual including that of the CAS. Under a market-based model of service delivery imposed by

neoliberalism, one of the primary functions of the CAS has become that of reporting and accountability.

Because these influences are varied and complex, it is crucial that social workers be able to deconstruct and examine these influences in order to develop meaningful and effective practice that is relevant to the individual circumstances of every family. In order to do this, we must first identify the knowledge that informs our practice. Then, we must critique this knowledge in terms of its application. Social constructionist theory focuses on the actual lived experiences of people to form their realities. Solomon (2008) identified how a social constructionist approach would be useful to child welfare: It would draw attention to the socio-political, economic, and historical conditions producing policy and practice; it would view child welfare not as static, but as changing and reshaping over time; it would make visible the link between the lived experience, power and knowledge in the changes to the system regarding views on family life, modes of assessment and intervention; it would focus on the local and with special attention to the complexities of the work; and, it would provide an analysis of the terms used to define aspects of peoples' lives such as "risk", "safety", "family", "abuse and neglect". Through the use of these critiques, more meanings are available to workers to make sense of the lives of the children and families they work with (Solomon, 2008).

Anti-Oppressive Practice in Child Welfare

Yee, Hackenbusch, and Wong (2013) highlighted the importance of an anti-oppressive (AO) stance for child welfare practitioners, particularly at an individual level of practice. Ironically, these authors pointed out the importance of adopting an AO stance on an individual basis, since it has not been possible, to date, to implement on a structural basis. Millar (2008) also pointed to the difficulty in implementing AO practices on a systems level because of the

“unconducive political climate” (Millar, 2008, p. 363) that is neoliberalism. Millar (2008) acknowledged that institutions (such as the CAS) have power, and that “the use of this power, particularly the factors that sustain it, should be subjected to a form of critical analysis” (Millar, 2008, p. 365), and the utility of AO frameworks to construct this analysis. Using an AO framework for analysis, Yee et al. (2013) indicated that until the problem of child poverty is addressed, the child welfare system will continue to perpetuate inequalities, particularly with respect to Aboriginal families. As they stated,

“Given the colonial history of Canada, and the myriad ways in which government policies and state structures have harmed and continue to harm Indigenous peoples and communities, we acknowledge that the applications of an AO framework is limited in its scope to address entrenched oppression. Ultimately, an AO framework can only be used as a practical tool to understand, critique and improve current practices (Yee et al., 2013, p. 3).”

Yee et al. (2013) characterized the CAS’s stated endeavours of respecting differences and overcoming inequalities as ‘rhetoric’, indicating that these efforts, as evidenced by the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children within the system, remain a ‘work in progress’. These authors also attributed this lack of progress, in part, to the highly regulated system in which workers are too busy meeting administrative goals to focus their efforts on working with families in ways that go beyond prescribed risk analysis to meaningful intervention. They further stated that while creative practices are assumed to be more costly, they may cost the system less in the long run.

The Significance of Attachment Theory to the Field of Child Welfare

According to Bowlby (1988), attachment theory developed as a result of observations that were occurring in the field at the time (beginning in the 1930's) of children's acute distress following separation. The significance of attachment theory lies in the identification of adverse effects of childhood experiences on personality development, and on formulating recommendations on "how to avoid or at least mitigate" these negative effects (Bowlby, 1988, p. 22). Attachment theory, at the time of its inception, was described by Bowlby (1988) as highly controversial as many trained psychiatrists saw deficiencies in evidence and lack of adequate explanation as to how distress and anxiety in children could produce negative effects on personality development. It gained legitimacy through Ainsworth's work (1962), which addressed this controversy through extensive evidence and identified areas for further research. For example, in its infancy, attachment theory could not fully explain maternal deprivation, and it was first thought to be tied to the fact that the mother fed the child, rather than the relationship itself that the child was reacting to, inferring that a bond would inevitably develop between the child and whoever fed the child.

The theory of attachment, of course, has evolved considerably since its initial development. As Bowlby (1988) explained, "Attachment behaviour is any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world. It is most obvious when the person is frightened, fatigued, or sick..." (p. 26). It is generally understood within the field of child welfare that a bond forms between an infant (or a child) and a provider who consistently meets the child's needs, whatever they may be (such as food and comfort). This establishes a trusting relationship and also develops the child's sense of who they are based on how the world around them responds to them. This is reiterated by Bowlby (1988) who explained that when a person

knows that “an attachment figure is available and responsive... [this gives the person] a strong and pervasive feeling of security... and encourages him to value and continue the relationship” (p.27). Bowlby (1988) further characterized this bond as an indicator of resilience against adverse childhood experiences. He also indicated that adverse experiences have an impact on a child that cause personality disturbances which increase a child’s vulnerability to experiences later in life, and increase the likelihood that he will continue to experience adversity in life as an adult, limiting possibilities later in life. Bowlby (1988) believed that the greatest value of this theory was the possibility of prevention. He further explained that attachment theory shed light on the development of a healthy personality and how to achieve these conditions so that parents can provide these opportunities to their children, thereby maximizing children’s potential. Attachment theory remains a way of examining the impact of family functioning on child development, and one that social workers critically rely on when making decisions about children’s safety and well-being in the context of child welfare.

Mennen and O’Keefe (2005) highlighted the importance of the use of attachment theory in child protection work as a means to protect children from negative outcomes resulting from poor decision making within the system. They indicated that having this critical knowledge can improve outcomes for maltreated children. For example, because attachment can be used to predict functioning ability of children in social, psychological, behavioural and cognitive domains, it is extremely relevant for those working within the child welfare system and can limit potential harmful effects of decision making concerning children. In particular, those decisions that revolve around removals and placements.

A child’s relationship with his caregiver, particularly during those early childhood experiences, can tell us a lot about the child’s perception of his self and the world around him. A

healthy or secure attachment results where the caregiver has responded consistently to the child's expressed need, nurturing the child's development. When these children encounter adversity, they are easily comforted and are ready to explore new situations (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). Conversely, anxious/ambivalent, anxious/avoidant, and disoriented/disorganized attachments are formed in response to a caregiver's inconsistency, emotional neglect or abuse by the caregiver. These children learn that they cannot rely on a caregiver to respond to their needs and as such, do not trust easily and can present as though avoidant of their caregivers. Attachment challenges can be seen as survival techniques (Crittenden, 1992; Nadon, 2015; Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). The child invests in himself rather than external relationships as a mechanism of self-preservation (Nadon, 2015). There is evidence to suggest that children can develop healthy attachment with therapeutic intervention and when they achieve emotional stability and a sense of security (Clarke & Clarke, 1999; Messer, 1999). The child welfare system aims to establish this for all children through gaining permanency in their living arrangements, which recognizes the need for children to develop healthy attachments.

As Mennen and O'Keefe (2005) stated, it is important for child welfare professionals to recognize that attachment exists between maltreated children and their parents. Equally important, is the need for parents to be able to understand and respond to their children's needs. "Where maltreatment is severe and there is an insecure attachment between child and parent, then placement may be the most appropriate decision. An appropriate foster placement can help the child develop a secure attachment and use this new attachment to form internal working models to guide future relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2001; Shirk, 1998) including a healthier attachment to birth parents" (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005, p. 584).

While placements can assist the child in developing healthy attachment and a positive internal reference, the impact of separation and loss on the child is often overlooked, or it is assumed that the child will adapt accordingly. The loss of a primary attachment figure is significant for anyone, but especially for a child who has limited ability to reason and understand these changes (depending on age and developmental stage). Mennen and O'Keefe (2005) also wrote about the limitations of the current system to implement the changes necessary to respond appropriately to children's needs around attachment, indicating that social service budgets have been squeezed in an effort to save money, but this is rather short sighted as these children (as poor functioning adults) end up in treatment facilities or incarcerated, which is much more costly.

Strengths-Based Approaches in Child Welfare

Saleebey (2013) wrote that, as social work professionals,

“everything you do... will be predicated, in some way, on helping to unearth and embellish, explore and exploit clients' strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings about society's domination (p. 1).”

Strengths-based practices assume that all people have skills, abilities and resources to draw on (Sabalaukas et al., 2014). Strengths-based approaches also recognize the 'critical knowledge' that individuals possess about themselves which provides insight into their experiences navigating challenging circumstances and contributing to their resilience (Sabalaukas et al., 2014). Walsh and Canavan (2014) identified that strength-based approaches are generally understood as being synonymous with concepts such as resilience, hope, and positivity.

Within the field of child welfare in particular, theories used to explain and understand child abuse and neglect have more often than not, described the deficits of parents, essentially blaming

them for their circumstances. The success of the strengths-based approach in working with children and families relies on the worker's ability to broaden his or her view of social problems and utilize their clients' competencies (Saint Jacques, Turcotte, & Pouliot, 2009). According to Sabalaukas, Ortolani and McCall (2014), strengths-based practice is increasingly becoming a focus for child welfare practitioners. Strengths-based practices are regarded by many as the solution to deficit-based models of practice (Douglas, McCarthy & Serino, 2014), and are helpful in reducing the stigma of accessing services, and in identifying solutions to the presenting problems (Douglas et al., 2014).

Working with children and families who are experiencing difficulty requires practitioners to look for strengths in order to overcome these difficulties. A well-balanced approach to working with children and families is to acknowledge the problems they encounter and to build capacity (Saint-Jacques et al., 2009). According to Saint-Jacques et al. (2009), the strengths-based approach is an ecological perspective that takes into consideration the environment in which the individual (or family) is positioned. It holds that interventions should be dependent on the client's capacity and the resources available. Clients are the experts on their situations (Sabalaukas et al., 2014). Practitioners are partners who collaborate with them in order to bring skills and knowledge to that partnership in order to help (Saint-Jacques et al, 2009). St. Jaques et al. (2009) identified six principles that constitute strengths-based approaches: the focus is on the individual strengths rather than pathology; the community is viewed as a source of resources; interventions are based on client self-determination; the practitioner-client relationship is central; aggressive outreach is employed as the preferred method of intervention; and, people are seen as being able to learn, grow and change. Using this approach, one can still evaluate risk (as in child protection work). This approach must focus on collaboration, place emphasis on understanding

how the client or family solves problems, and rely on the strengths and resources of the individuals, the family, and the community in order to work successfully.

Ferguson (2003) pointed out that women and children may utilize child protection services to assist them in life planning to find safety from abuse, to discontinue unhealthy relationships, and to overcome trauma. There are those who are critical of this view, citing that structural forces limit the choices that people can make. When a mother is presented with the choice of leaving an abusive partner or losing her children, what choice does she really have? However, Ferguson (2003) maintained that the way to engage is through a strengths perspective, from which anyone can be viewed to have strengths, even in challenging circumstances, and that approaches that consistently marginalize people, treating them as powerless, are oppressive.

Furthermore, St. Jacques et al. (2009) indicated that there is strength-based methodology, which is outlined as follows. The first step is to examine a client's situation from his or her perspective. Through the client's narration about his/her problems and suffering, they tell their story in a way that explains the significance to them, giving them meaning and the practitioner considerable insight. Practitioners are better able to understand the client's hopes and dreams, but also what skills and capacity for resilience they possess. The second step is to identify the factors contributing to their circumstance, exposing obstacles as well as strengths to overcoming them. The intervention should be tailored in a way that is meaningful to the client, and addresses their motivations in coming for help, rather than how the practitioner views their situation. The third stage is outlining the activities to take place which include education, action, defense of rights and creation of support networks. The action pieces to any plan are important as they provide an opportunity for the client to demonstrate abilities, develop new skills and reaffirm their positive virtues. It is important to help the client develop an understanding of the skills and

abilities they possess within the greater context of their lived realities. The ultimate goal is to activate this recognition, clients' skills and abilities, and, once personal abilities and community resources are put into action, there is no longer a need for the practitioner (St. Jacques et al., 2009).

Although a strengths-based approach is ubiquitous within social work, Gray (2011) cautions us that in order to use strengths-based approaches most effectively, practitioners must be mindful of their alignment with neoliberal ideals. As in the field of child welfare, strengths-based approaches can be problem-centric and interventions call for a response to a deficiency of one sort or another. Child welfare practitioners also have to be wary of the downloading of responsibility onto the individual (Leidenberg et al., 2013). Rather than acknowledging the structural forces that perpetuate inequalities, neoliberalism tasks social workers with education and activation in helping poor and marginalized people to learn to aspire toward autonomy and innovation, and toward the development of resilience, self-esteem, healing, wholeness, wellness, happiness, and spirituality (Gray, 2011). Social workers within the field of child welfare generally want the same goals for the children and families they work with, and reject notions of inequality, and seek to disrupt the status quo through various social justice mechanisms.

Furthermore, Gray (2011) stated that strengths-based approaches are rooted philosophically in Aristotle's theory of human flourishing that posits that people have innate potential and reach their capabilities through exercising reason and intellect. Both the strengths-based perspective and its Greek philosophical underpinnings support notions of individual freedom, self-determination, and responsibility. This belief is tied to the notion that if people work hard, they will have success. Conversely, for those who do not enjoy a measure of success, it is assumed that they did not work hard or are somehow undeserving as they are seen as being

fully responsible for their lack of success. Because neoliberalism has embraced the philosophical foundations of this approach, the critical practitioner must go back to basics and rethink ways of distinguishing him/herself from applications that maintain the status quo rather than achieve social justice (Gray, 2011). On a more basic level, strengths-based approaches are grounded in the appreciation that every person has innately positive traits, and on human growth and potential. In this sense, social workers can promote resilience and maximize capacity.

While best-practice recommendations for child welfare would advocate for workers who are “strengths based, solution focused, capacity building, asset creating, motivation enhancing, [and] empowerment specialists” (McMillen et al. 2004, p. 7), there are significant barriers for workers to achieve this within the current system. As individual child welfare practitioners, I think we strive to meet this ideal. However, we must be mindful of our practice within the broader context. We are a part of a larger system which is not inherently focused on the strengths and positive attributes of individuals, but on upholding the safety and well-being of children, which often results in severe consequences for parents. Additionally, the system is drastically underfunded; and, although it may subscribe to a strengths-based model of practice, time constraints and workload pressures due to this lack of funding can prevent this from happening more effectively.

Walsh and Canavan (2014) pointed out that while working in a ‘non-blaming’ way within the child welfare system is something that child welfare practitioners have long aspired towards, it continues to represent a challenge for us today.

“Recent comparative studies (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011) track how a confluence of various factors including the rise of the risk paradigm (Beck, 1992), the promotion of a specific child *protection* ideology, the application of forensic, audit-based assessment

frameworks and the reification of discreet problems as direct causal factors for child abuse has helped create our current poorly functioning yet expensive child protection systems” (Walsh & Canavan, 2014, p. 2).

As Walsh and Canavan (2014) suggested, strengths-based perspectives are more relevant than ever when we consider that the majority of child welfare referrals stem from the chronic problem of neglect, and that what most parents need in order to overcome these challenges, is an understanding and compassionate intervention. Walsh and Canavan (2014) further indicated that strengths-based approaches can have a significant impact in the field of child welfare particularly because of the tendency of neglect cases to be re-referred. This suggests that if child protection work is enhanced by strengths-based approaches to working with families, that the success of these approaches will yield greater change for families, therefore, decreasing the need for families to become re-involved with the CAS.

Structural and Post-Structural Approaches

According to Lundy (2011), structural approaches are central to social work as a helping profession, because rooted primarily in our approach to working with individuals, are the solutions to the problems they face. Structural social work recognizes that too often, the focus within the helping professions is on individual deficiencies. This represents a failure to recognize and understand how larger structures, social, political and economic, can influence and shape the lives of individuals. “Such an analysis can help social workers illuminate obstacles to, as well as strategies for, achieving advocacy, providing education, and promoting social change” (Lundy, 2011, p. 18). Similarly, Mullaly (1993) identified that the focus of the social work profession should be on understanding the impact of social structures and the maintenance of social order, rather than on the individuals who have been victimized by these social problems. Mullaly

(1993) believed in the responsibility of structural social workers to recognize and eradicate all forms of oppression. Mullaly (1993) advocated that structural social work, as a critical practice, was not constrained by one approach or another (such as working at an individual level or a systems level of practice), but rather, recognized that both were necessary simultaneously. Mullaly (1993) also indicated that by virtue of its critical nature, critical social work has a political and practical intent. Structural social work, having been developed in Canada, is uniquely relevant for Canadian social workers.

According to Todd and Burns (2007), structural approaches provide us with the ability to relate an individual's problems within the broader context of structural inequalities by attending to the political, social, and economic factors that influence peoples' lives. Structural analyses, particularly in the child welfare context, are helpful in that they bring into focus the oppressive potential of the work, given that child welfare agencies are one of the most powerful agencies of the state (Todd & Burns, 2007), especially considering the impact CAS can have on one of the most fundamental values of our Canadian society - the importance of family. For this reason, it is important for child protection workers to have an appreciation of structural social work approaches, which enable social workers to shift the blame away from clients for their problems, and, instead, focus on the social relations that maintain these problems (Todd & Burns, 2007). For instance, when workers have developed an awareness of the ways in which they and the systems within which we live can be oppressive, they are able to respond more appropriately and effectively to parents' needs, alleviating pressure, rather than contributing to parents' problems or by chastising parents for circumstances which they may have no control over (Todd & Burns, 2007).

Post-structuralism is a broad theory that examines how people interact with the world around them, making and reproducing meaning (Belsey, 2002). Todd and Burns (2007) explained that the viewpoint of post-structural social work theorists, such as Fook, acknowledge that “[t]he world is complex and uncertain and there are no universal rules that govern it” (Todd & Burns, 2007, p. 26). Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida (1990) and Michel Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980), Todd and Burns (2007) indicated that there are differing opinions and experiences that compete with what is accepted as natural or normal by mainstream society, and that the assumption of this normalcy points to the existence of power inequalities. Post-structural approaches ‘enhance’ our understanding by drawing attention to the ways in which racism, ableism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism also shape and influence the lives of individuals who come into contact with the child welfare system (Todd & Burns, 2007). The work of post-structuralism is to examine how power relations such as racism, heterosexism, sexism, and classism are maintained through our interactions (Todd & Burns, 2007). Accordingly, Todd and Burns (2007) explained that even our language, which is seemingly neutral, can establish differences between mainstream and marginal social locations and serve to maintain inequalities.

The most common reasons for involvement of the CAS relate to domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse (Trocme et al, 2005). Because many of these families are also living in poverty, are led by single mothers, and are victims of racialization/colonization (Todd & Burns, 2007), it is critical that social workers in the field of child welfare have a strong understanding of the impact of these factors on the likelihood of parent and child success. Post-structural approaches to child protection work, as well as reflexive practice, can be helpful for social workers in child welfare settings to develop an understanding of the complexity and uncertainty of each situation. Todd and Burns (2007) stated it was “arrogant and unhelpful” to

think that social workers can approach any situation knowingly through theory alone (p.26). They also indicated that reality is far too complex to be understood out of context in this way, which is why it is important to perceive the subtleties, nuances and contradictions of the work. Recognizing complexities in our work requires reflective practice on the part of the practitioner.

Rossiter (2001) as a critical social work theorist, would also agree that social workers must embrace uncertainty, but most new social workers fear it. Although Rossiter (2001) poses a challenge for proponents of post-structural theory, by questioning the ability of social workers to assist 'victims' from within systems such as the CAS which often perpetuates victimization, she does recognize the dynamic and multiple ways in which power differences are maintained, and significantly enhances the discussion on how knowledge is created, assisting critical social workers to develop a more critical practice.

Rossiter (2001) takes a brutally honest look at social work practice, exposing the dilemma of critical social work by asking if there can be any innocence in the 'helping' profession. Her analysis of this issue is complex, and takes into consideration the fact that, as professional helpers, our own satisfaction depends on the helplessness of others. We do characterize our work as rewarding when we are able to help people. The problem, as Rossiter (2001) outlined, is that these are not acts of charity. We must re-think our approaches in the context of human rights, and not as we typically define them, as needs. When we recognize, for instance, the human right of each individual to have food, the act of giving a homeless Aboriginal person a bowl of soup takes on an entirely different meaning. Especially for the white middle-class 'helper', in the context of colonialism, where had this history not transpired, perhaps the person would not be in 'need' of soup. Rossiter (2001) illustrated how the act of giving the soup in that moment created and reinforced the existence of inequalities and classes.

Only when there is no marginalization, no inequality, do positions of helper and helped disappear, when there is emphasis on community and mutuality. In this sense, it seems that the overall goal of social work is to work ourselves out of a job. Only then, when we have a truly just and equitable society, when the rights of all humans are recognized, will there no longer be a 'need' for our services.

Reflexivity

The terms reflexivity, critical reflection, and reflectivity are often used interchangeably (Marlowe et al., 2015; D'Cruz et al., 2007). The key difference between critical reflection and reflexivity, according to D'Cruz et al. (2007), is the timing, in that reflection is a process that occurs after action, while reflexivity occurs in the moment. According to Fook (2002), reflectivity is more of a process of reflection, while reflexivity is the ability to locate oneself in any circumstance to appreciate one's influence. Fook (2002) uses the terms interchangeably with the understanding that "reflective processes will still be underpinned by a reflexive stance" (Fook, 2002, p. 43).

D'Cruz et al. (2007) identified three variations on reflexivity. The first concept refers to an individual's response to an immediate context, concerning the individual's ability to process information and create knowledge to promote self-development; a 'project of the self'. The second notion of reflexivity refers to the individual's self-critical approach that questions how knowledge is produced and how power influences this process. How is knowledge generated? How do we subject our own knowledge claims to analysis? "The reflexive practitioner is aware of the assumptions that underlie how they make sense of practice situations and the cognitive processes by which knowledge is created" (D'Cruz et al., 2007, p. 77). The third approach regarding reflexivity is concerned with the idea that emotions are relevant to social work

practice. Generally speaking, emotional responses in practice situations can be seen by other professionals as a sign of weakness; that a person lacks necessary control or ability to manage anxiety or perhaps is 'not cut out for the work', implying the individual is deficient in some sense (D'Cruz et al., 2007). Emotions, particularly anxiety, play a part of social work practice (Todd & Burns, 2007). Child welfare professionals are confronted on a daily basis with the painful realities of the children and families with whom they work, and the devastating consequences of these realities. Workers have to make difficult decisions in impossible situations. They hear and see stories of child maltreatment every day, and it is their job to empathize with parents in what may seem like hopeless circumstances. If child welfare practitioners did not have emotional responses to the work they do, that would be concerning. Therefore, social workers must develop awareness of their feelings rather than repress them, which is particularly important when listening to cues about stress and burnout (D'Cruz et al., 2007).

As White (2001) explained, a reflexive practitioner is one who is able to look outward to understand the social and cultural influences on her practice, and inward to challenge the ways in which she makes sense of the world. Reflexivity can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in a formal institutional setting, and practice wisdom gained from experience in the field. As D'Cruz et al. (2007) outlined, rather than trying to achieve objectivity, the reflexive practitioner examines her personal narrative in order to understand how meaning is created, including the self in the construction of this knowledge.

Marlowe et al., (2015) also wrote about the importance of integrating personal and professional selves in the development of critical awareness in social work practice. They pointed to the vital role of field placements in developing these skills. Because the field

placement is situated closely with classroom learning (which provides the foundation of knowledge), the field placement is ideal for the development of practice skills. The supervision component is also central to skill development in the practice environment as it offers students a way to process their learning as they are applying their theoretical knowledge base in complex practice situations (Marlowe et al., 2015). These practice situations can be challenging for students as they struggle to resolve tensions they encounter in the practice setting, and are often faced with contradictions. Marlowe et al. (2015) described the developmental process of critical awareness that allows students to make these vital connections between their experiences and the knowledge they gained from them, and also to reflect on their ‘use of self’ as a means of informing their practice. Learning to be a reflexive practitioner requires transitional awareness across mind, emotion, and body, that is, the student develops critical awareness in stages.

Marlowe et al. (2015) identified these stages as follows: pre-reflection; reflection; reflexivity; and praxis. According to these authors, pre-reflection constitutes an unquestioning response in the student or practitioner, which results in the acceptance of beliefs as truth. Reflection occurs when the individual has developed the ability to process and evaluate his or her practice, the point of which is to identify how we make sense of our social work practice. Reflexivity occurs when students or practitioners are able to draw on the use of language, power dynamics and their use of self in order to develop situational contexts in their work with people (Fook, 2013; Marlowe et al., 2015; Payne, 2005). It also involves being able to use knowledge from one situation, and respond creatively in new circumstances (Beddoe et al., 2010). Praxis occurs in social work when the practitioner evolves his or her practice based on the changes reflected upon, which is a precursor to social change. Marlowe et al. (2015) pointed out that, most often, students are able to identify their thoughts and feelings, and reflect on their practice,

but rarely were they able to identify insights related to body awareness. As Todd and Burns (2007) wrote, this is a valid way of knowing that if not tapped into may result in disembodied professionals. Marlowe et al. (2015) further suggested that it is the realization of all three dimensions (mind, emotion, body) that ultimately leads to the development of critical awareness.

There is a strong need for social work professionals to develop these skills in order to be effective practitioners. In a field such as child welfare, where professionals are constantly faced with contradictions, and must consider how their own personal histories influence their work, this critical consciousness is especially important. Reflexivity is especially important within the field of child welfare where the issue of neglect presents such a challenge to workers in terms of clearly articulating a threshold for intervention, as well as determining a response to it. In doing so, social workers must interpret many factors that take into consideration the socially constructed nature of neglect, which requires reflexive practice (White & Hoskins, 2011). With so much emphasis on the use of assessment tools to assist child welfare practitioners in making practice decisions, reflexivity is a skill that may be undervalued in the field of child welfare.

Within the child welfare setting, bureaucracy and accountability within social services have resulted in mechanisms that seek to validate our practice (D'Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007; Todd & Burns, 2007; Aronson & Smith, 2009). For instance, following the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda, workers were mandated to use risk assessment tools in order to assist them in determining outcomes for a family. There is a danger in conforming to these practices and, blindly, unquestioningly, utilizing such tools. Not only from a professional development standpoint, where a worker may become complacent in adopting this approach and the worker may not be engaging (or enhancing) his clinical skills; but from a client perspective as well. Workers can do great injustice within this system by failing to recognize how broader influences

can have a trickle-down effect on the families we work with. Child welfare practitioners make important decisions that can have a significant impact on families, which cannot be taken lightly. Without being able to form our own assessments of various situations as practitioners, we may overlook valuable pieces of information that help shape the family's reality, which may ultimately have an impact on whether or not a child is returned to the care of his or her parents. Therefore, particularly in the field of child welfare, professionals must be critical, reflective, and reflexive in their practice, despite the mandated use of assessment tools.

On the other hand, some authors have criticized the concept of reflexivity in that it could cause uncertainty on the part of the practitioner that could lead to endless questioning and paralysis (Fuchs, 1992). In some ways, I can identify with this feeling of paralysis. The more I learn about child welfare practice, the more I realize I have more to learn. I question my practice within this system. I think there will always be a degree of uncertainty in this work because we are faced with so many contradictions and dilemmas. For instance, weighing competing priorities such as children's need for permanency, and parents' need for time to overcome struggles that prevent them from being able to safely and adequately parent and protect their child(ren).

Although I would like to be able to argue that the reflexive practitioner can navigate seemingly endless questions and uncertainties to arrive at a conclusion in any circumstance that he or she can feel reasonably confident about, being a critical social worker in the field of child protection poses an overwhelming degree of uncertainty. I used to think that any doubts I had could be overcome by truly *knowing* my practice, which, to me, meant having a sense of purpose, and being able to identify which theories and bodies of knowledge inform decision-making processes in our work with families. And that by pairing our knowledge as practitioners, with that of the client, we can fill in the gaps and to do the best job possible using all of our

available resources. In the field of child welfare, where there is so much focus on competencies and evidenced-based practice, and rigorous, scientific ways of knowing, it is difficult to avoid buying into this thought process.

As Rossiter (2001) explained, all of this certainty is used to further legitimize our own practice, which is inherently problematic, as it overlooks the primary source of the problem: the dichotomy that exists between people and professionals in the first place. How can we ignore the history that “troubles the act of helping and our identity as helpers” (Rossiter, 2001)? Rossiter (2001) examined the painful reality of social work in capitalist, imperialist countries, as this work would not be necessary had we not created social problems in the first place. Rossiter (2001) found that, as a critical social worker, it was exceedingly difficult for her to see any social work action as neutral and as purely ‘helpful’. Rossiter (2001) advocated for social workers to embrace this endless scrutiny. Even it can seem futile, social workers ought to value doubt over certainty in their practice, as it is a necessary part of a truly critical practice. She further suggested that as critical practitioners, we need to challenge ourselves to think in ways that, rather than solidifying our positions of authority by creating status as ‘professionals with expert knowledge’, use our knowledge to evaluate the ethical problem that is inherent in the ‘governmentality’ of helping.

In the next section, I discuss the importance of clinical supervision in social work settings, and in particular, for social work students. Within the field of child welfare, clinical supervision can encourage reflexivity on the part of the child welfare practitioner, enhancing worker development and also influencing the worker’s intention to remain in the field. Given the complexities of child welfare work, there is a necessity for the profession to retain highly qualified individuals to perform this work.

The Importance of Clinical Supervision in Child Welfare

There is a vast body of literature on the subject of clinical supervision in social work practice (Kadushin, 1976,1992; Harkness 1995; Kadushin & Harkness 2002; Hamilton, 1954; Munson, 1993; Shulman, 1982; Falender & Shafranske). Clinical supervision has been identified as a “distinct professional activity” (Falender & Shafranske, 2004, p. 3), which facilitates integration of practice and research. Falender and Shafranske (2004) described clinical supervision as a collaborative interpersonal process that involves observation, evaluation, feedback, facilitation of supervisee self-assessment, and development of knowledge and skill through instruction, modeling and mutual problem solving. This interaction recognizes and builds on the strengths and talents of the supervisee, and encourages self-efficacy (Falender & Shafranske, 2004). Clinical supervision improves outcomes for clients (Bambling, King, Raue, Schweitzer & Lambert, 2006). Knudsen, Ducharme and Roman (2008) identified clinical supervision as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion and turnover. The process of supervision enhances competence and promotes life-long learning (Falender & Shafranske, 2004).

According to Baglow (2009) and Beddoe (2012), there are four basic functions of supervision in social work: managerial, developmental, supportive, and mediative. All functions are required for supervision to be effective and holistic. There is a tendency to distinguish clinical or professional supervision from that of “line” supervision in social services (Beddoe, 2012), where supervision generally serves as both a function of risk management as well as worker and client support. Supervision is a way for supervisors to ensure that workers are responding appropriately to the needs of their clients, making clinically sound decisions, and are

not only engaging with the worker in a supportive capacity (Giddings et al., 2008), but also to promote the development of individual workers.

Given the complexities and vulnerabilities of the populations served, it is important to continue to develop knowledge and skills relevant to social work practice. And because of the overwhelming challenges that social workers face, particularly in the field of child welfare, it is essential that workers receive the support they require as professionals (Giddings et al., 2008). It comes as no surprise to child protection workers that they are at high risk of experiencing negative consequences of their work such as burnout and compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995). Good clinical supervision can influence the employee's intention to stay, stabilizing the workforce within the organization, but also, it can promote best practices and professional growth and development.

The continuing trend towards neoliberalism and the politics of efficiency has created an environment in which supervision has shifted its focus to that of compliance, in part due to reliance on assessment tools, but also, the time constraints resulting from excessive caseloads. The organizational climate has a trickle-down effect on the clients we serve. Workload is an organizational factor that has a big impact on the employees as well as the service users. Looking at child welfare practice as an example, when we are too busy 'putting out fires', less serious issues are put off until they begin to smolder (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). If an agency is preoccupied with becoming aligned with a market-based model of service, it embodies characteristics of efficiency, accountability, and competition, and the outcome will likely be a high caseload and low service quality (Steen, 2010; Aronson & Smith, 2009). Market-based models of social welfare breed high turnover rates, which can be conceptualized as an additional stressor and can further impact quality of service. Furthermore, Steen (2010) emphasized the

importance for administrators of attending to organizational stressors by identifying macro solutions in order to increase the ability to withstand stressors, rather than address the problem on an individual case by case basis. The focus needs to be on the organizational context and other systemic factors that influence the overall climate of the organization. Human service organizations are becoming increasingly corporate entities, and within this context, workers conform to an increasingly narrow conceptualization of service and self (Aronson & Smith, 2009).

Policy matters are seen as being out of the realm of being contested, and resistance to neo-liberal policies is dismissed because “of course the social workers are having a problem with this” (Aronson & Smith, 2011, p. 441). Political factors are extremely relevant, particularly when assessing government funded organizations such as child welfare agencies. Child welfare has undergone a complete transformation in recent years, and many of the changes that were implemented were brought about in order to enhance efficiency and reduce costs. Consequently, the primary function of the CAS has been undermined by competing needs for accountability and reporting. “Reforms aimed at protecting abused children have left child-welfare workers inundated with paper work, stressed out, and generally ‘overwhelmed’ by their jobs” (Blackwell, 2001). Furthermore, “restructuring has resulted in the de-skilling and work intensification of front line workers, as well as low morale among workers” (Aronson & Smith 2009, p 531). Through the process of ‘transformation’, workers have entered a new era of social work, in which they have become “compliance technicians” (Aronson & Smith, 2009, p. 535).

With respect to child welfare agencies, the culture of efficiency has created scarcity. When scarcity already exists, it is difficult to plan for scarcity because there is no slack in the system. Within the context of efficiency, slack is significantly undervalued. Child protection

workers especially, but most people in general, tend to fill their days with a multitude of tasks. It is a standard impulse for us to try to squeeze everything in when we are busy (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). But the danger in having a full schedule is that when something comes up and we are already at full capacity, we begin to juggle and fall behind. Tasks we were suddenly unable to handle today, get put over until tomorrow, which is also “efficiently packed” (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). When we are not tightly packed we often feel as though we are not doing enough (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). And, of course, efficiency experts will find ways for employees with too much time on their hands to work more efficiently (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

Clinical supervision is an important aspect of child protection work because it can help us to integrate the social policy agenda into our work, which has been dominated by market based models of service provision. Examining the bigger picture provides us with more insight as practitioners as to how structural forces impact individuals. It also lends greater understanding about how our clients perceive and process information based on the taxing effect of poverty on these abilities. It makes clear the importance for us working under a neo-liberal regime to be conscious of our own limitations, and raises our awareness of our tendency to fall into ruts by resorting to habits that will only further tax our own capability to perceive and process information, and decrease our productivity. Not only do we have to be able to recognize the problem of scarcity within our organizations, we must actively work to address this for our clients and for ourselves. All of which, reinforces the importance of carving out time for clinical supervision.

While graduate educated social workers are the preferred candidates for child protection work, social workers may find themselves frustrated and undervalued in this realm because of the reliance on assessment tools rather than practitioner knowledge and skills. Often, the

distinction of having a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree accords the assignment of more difficult cases. Although this can be a sign of the supervisor's confidence in the graduate trained social worker's abilities, without adequate clinical support, she can feel exploited, rather than encouraged, by this practice. Underutilization of skills by graduate trained social workers in child welfare, and, simultaneously, the prevalence of external supervision is increasing (Beddoe, 2012). Social workers as professionals with a high degree of knowledge and skills, benefit from a less hierarchical, more consultative approach, which is often found outside of the confines of their agencies of employment, particularly if that organization is plagued with an unhealthy work culture (Beddoe, 2012).

In my experience, clinical supervision can be inconsistent among supervisors, and may focus more on the compliance aspects rather than the clinical aspects of the child protection role. Thus, efforts should be made to expand internal supervisors' knowledge of delivering clinical supervision, as well as committing to training supervisors on a particular model (such as an integrated model of supervision) that will create some consistency in approach throughout the organization, and enhance the knowledge and skills of the workers, which in turn supports a highly skilled and competent workforce that benefits clients, creates employee satisfaction and longevity, as well as employee retention (Giddings et al., 2008).

Placement Education and the Importance of Supervision

According to Zuchowski (2014), placement education is the single most important factor in social work education. Field placements provide students the opportunity to obtain hands on learning with the support and guidance of social work supervisors to develop their clinical skills as social workers. But because of neoliberal influences and the increased pressures on supervisors that result, these opportunities are becoming fewer for social work supervisors and

prospective students. In addition to the culture of efficiency that neoliberalism breeds, which results in high caseloads, worker stress, low staff retention and increased pressure on workers, neoliberal contexts also impact *what* students are learning through their exposure to these practices (Zuchowski, 2014).

“The consequences of neoliberalism include the devaluing of social work skills and knowledge, a reduction in practitioner autonomy, the positioning of workers as experts [and undervaluing students], a focus on procedural solutions rather than structural analysis, and an overall loss of meaningful social work identity that is linked to emancipatory social change (Zuchowski, 2014 p. 3).”

In this sense, if the role of the student is viewed by the supervisor as a “passive recipient of knowledge” (Morley & Dunstan, 2013, p. 147), their learning and growth in the social work profession will be devalued and undermined. If the student is able to recognize this is occurring, there may be opportunity to challenge this within the placement. However, if the student is unfamiliar with the context of the work, or does not have practical or clinical experience going into the placement, she may not be able to recognize the negative consequences on the outcome of her learning experience. The other thing to consider is whether or not the student feels comfortable enough to challenge these practices based on his or her inferior position in relation to that of a supervisor. Doing so may result in backlash from the supervisor that can have a significant impact on the overall quality of the student’s placement, the feedback from the supervisor with respect to the student’s learning experience, and the potential for this experience to have a negative impact on the student’s future employment aspirations at the agency or elsewhere based on the potential and the quality of a reference. If the student feels that his or her placement is in jeopardy, or feels otherwise threatened by the supervisor, they may not be able to

negotiate a learning contract that is more valuable to the student and the organization as a whole. Marlowe et al. (2015) also wrote that within the placement environment itself, there is a power struggle for students. Students often perceive tension in the workplace arising from workplace dynamics and potentially oppressive practices, and sense that as students, they have relatively little power in these circumstances.

With so much emphasis in higher education on developing competency, along with the transformation of social service organizations into marketplace models of service provision, students are conditioned to fall in line as efficient employees rather than apply their critical knowledge as social work students educated for the profession (Zuchowski, 2014; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Bellinger, 2010). “Quality practice learning environments involve a generative process, where practice is not prescribed, but constructed, and students are engaged as active contributors and learners, facilitating a dynamic connection between academic and practice learning” (Zuchowski, 2014, p.3). Students’ satisfaction with their practice learning rests on the establishment of an effective supervisory relationship (Zuchowski, 2014; Bellinger, 2010). “Supervision needs to build a pedagogical culture that actively engages students in their learning” (Zuchowski, 2014, p. 4). This entails the development of a social work identity, having learning opportunities during field placement, and feeling competent (Cleak & Smith, 2012), whether the student is accessing on or off-site supervision. MSW students who cannot achieve these outcomes through on-site supervision, due to lack of supervisory qualifications or because of agency constraints, may seek what is often referred to as external supervision. Giddings, Cleveland, Smith, Collins-Camargo and Russell (2008) analyzed students’ experiences in their MSW placements, reiterating the importance of supervision for placement students. Giddings et al., (2008) looked at the effectiveness of an integrative supervision model with MSW students in

child welfare field placements. This model was used effectively to assist students to develop an increase in knowledge and skills relevant to child welfare practice, recognizing that, too often, supervision in child welfare is compliance focused and tends to support a young and inexperienced workforce (Cornerstones for Kids, 2006).

Lietz and Rounds (2009) also drew attention to the educational role of the supervisor, and the supervisor's responsibility to advance the supervisee's knowledge and skills as part of this practice. Fortune, McCarthy and Abramson (2001) acknowledged the importance of integrating classroom learning with practice realities. Students demonstrated an increase in skill and confidence when learning is gradual, building on their skill set (Fortune et al., 2001). Repetition and variety, observation and participation in activities, engagement with a project, and guidance and feedback are all ways the field instructor or supervisor can assist the student (Fortune et al., 2001). The field instructor or supervisor provides the student with valuable insight when the student is able to take theoretical knowledge and apply it in practice settings (Fortune et al., 2001). Field placements provide students with contextual references for what they are learning (Fortune et al., 2001), and clinical supervision assists the student in developing this awareness.

Because supervision is such an integral part of student learning, in that it can help form the basis of a professional competence and identity (Hensley, 2003), particularly at the MSW level, and because clinical supervision is not always ideal or available within the context of the placement organization, some students seek out alternative measures of supervision.

External Supervision

External supervision presents some challenges for placement students and supervisors, but it also has unique benefits. It is difficult for the supervisor in this relationship to know concretely, based on observation, what the student is capable of. It is also difficult to know the

context in which the student is learning. There is also the possibility that the student does not have a role model to observe directly in practice (Zuchowski, 2014). This can be mitigated by the student's previous work experience in the field, if this is available to draw from, as well as the external supervisor's experience in a similar field. For example, a supervisor who has extensive knowledge of child welfare, having worked in that setting for all or part of his/her career, would have a strong understanding of the context in which the student is placed.

"Supervisors' insight into the conflict or harmony of a placement setting thus would be important in guiding and assisting the students' learning" (Zuchowski, 2014, p. 9). Knowing the agency context enhances the supervisor's ability to facilitate this learning process through supervision. Developing an understanding of the broader issues within the placement such as conflicting values, can help provide this context. For example, if the values of the organization and its practices are incongruent with what motivated the student to pursue social work as a career, this will provide some insight into the context of the placement. Whether or not the external supervisor has prior knowledge of the human service organization, by employing this strategy, the supervisor can quickly establish the context and create meaning of the students' experiences. Although it may be difficult for students to establish a rapport with an external supervisor with whom they have no previous relationship, it is a worthwhile engagement. For some, this relationship includes the internal supervisor. For others, it may not. The development of this professional relationship requires that the student invests some level of responsibility and initiative. This process is made easier by connecting with a supervisor who has had professional experience in the field the student is practicing. For example, someone who has had a career in child welfare, understands the limitations of the organization, as well as the extent to which a student can achieve what he or she sets out to do within this role, and what supports could be

made available. The benefits of external supervision is that there is a focus on the promotion of students' professional growth, the development of a practice framework, and the provision of social work input into the field experience (Zuchowski, 2014).

Selecting an individual based on their knowledge and experiences in the field, to guide and assist learning may be ideal as this person would be well positioned to facilitate critical reflection in the student to develop a deeper understanding of his or her social work practice. An external supervisor is also uniquely positioned to explore some of the power dynamics, and the pressure on students in their learning environments to be assimilated into the work culture as ready employees (Bellinger, 2010; Zuchowski, 2014). What may be lacking, particularly in places of work that have adopted neoliberal practices, is the commitment to social work practice of enabling students to be responsive to the complexities of social work practice, to navigate changes and challenges within various systems, and to uphold their professional values (Zuchowski, 2014; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Through establishing the context and engagement with the student in describing and reflecting on their learning experience, a more generative learning experience can occur (Zuchowski, 2014). External supervision allows for the student to more fully explore these issues in placement, particularly those arising from the internal supervision arrangement.

Also, professional social work practice can more readily be discussed through external supervision, whereas internal supervision tends to socialize the student into the surrounding milieu. A student who does not have sufficient experience or knowledge of the placement environment may accept this practice unquestioningly, stifling his or her social work learning experience. External supervision is a safe way to explore learning, where students can be active participants in this learning, and can help students to overcome potentially oppressive learning

environments (Zuchowski, 2014; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Domakin, 2014). “This process could facilitate the development of social work practice that is focused on emancipatory change that identifies and names oppressive practices and facilitates students’ critical reflection and practice learning about the skills and competencies necessary for practice in the field” (Zuchowski, 2014, p. 14). As Zuchowski indicated, the term “external” supervision needs to be revisited as it implies a disconnect from the supervisor and the practice. The term “mobile” supervision has been also been used to characterize this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Through the process of exploring what theories and knowledge can inform practice within the child welfare setting, I have become more knowledgeable of my own practice. In the next chapter, I will discuss the insights that I have developed through the application of these theories, and how the integration of this fuller understanding of my practice will enhance my work as a child protection worker.

Chapter Three - Analysis of the Practicum

Primarily, I was drawn to the idea of a placement within the resource department of Family and Children's Services because of my belief that learning about the child protection work from this perspective would enhance my practice, particularly in how I engage in work with resource families and children in care. In this chapter, I will describe the process of my practicum, and the application of my learning in the placement setting.

Process of the Practicum

Description of the Agency

Family and Children's Services of Renfrew County belongs to the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, whose mandate is to protect children under the age of 16 years in the province of Ontario. The Child and Family Services Act is what gives child welfare agencies in the province of Ontario its authority. Because protection concerns are so diverse, child protection workers utilize the Eligibility Spectrum to determine the need for service, which also helps link the protection issue to the relevant legislation. It also helps guide intervention response time in relation to the severity of the issue. Child protection issues generally fall into one of five categories: physical harm by commission, physical harm by omission, emotional harm, abandonment/separation or caregiver capacity.

Family and Children's Services of Renfrew County (FCS) has established itself as a multi-service agency that offers a number of supports. Its mission is to help families and communities in Renfrew County protect and support the development and well-being of children, youth and adults through integrated services, prevention, and social inclusion. In addition to child welfare services, FCS also provides Ontario Early Years Centre programming, Developmental Services, Kumon, and Family Visitation and Exchange Services. The provision

of resource services falls under child welfare, although the resource department is located in a separate building.

Strategic Planning

Family and Children's Services has identified its strategic planning priorities as of June, 2012, with an aim to achieve these goals by June, 2017. There are three main directives which are derived from our mission to provide assistance to families and communities within Renfrew County to aid in the development of children and adults through service integration and promoting social inclusion. First, our organization has committed to providing preventative, protective, and socially inclusive services that empower and strengthen individuals, children and families. In order to develop a strategy that will promote service delivery that both empowers and strengthens the people we work with, the agency has implemented a strengths-based service model. Second, the organization aims to maintain, strengthen and develop community partnerships that will increase availability and quality of services. A piece of this work involves networking within our community and sharing our vision in order to promote a positive image of the agency. In order to achieve this goal, we have set out to identify current partnerships as well as seek out new partnerships that will fill gaps in service. This will involve a needs assessment and ongoing evaluation of our progress. And, finally, our agency has committed to becoming an employer of choice by creating an environment where employees can grow and develop. This will be accomplished through employee recognition and training opportunities, as well as an ongoing commitment to hire highly qualified staff. Key strategies include the promotion of employee wellness and the development of a supervision model.

Objectives

It was my aim to ensure that my learning approach was a good fit for the agency, the broader community, and the people we serve, and that this practicum was aligned with the strategic vision put forth by FCS. My main motivation in pursuing a placement through resources was to gain new experiences as a worker in child welfare that would contribute to a fuller understanding of the work that we do. To me, this was an important endeavour as it is an integral part of the work that we do in child protection. It was my expectation that having a deeper understanding of the role of fostering and adoptive services would enhance my clinical skills in working with families during times when children are placed in care. I believed that working in resources would offer a different perspective on the work that I do, and would also enhance how I work with foster families when I return to my protection position.

With respect to my first learning objective, my aim was to expand my knowledge of fostering and adoption services within the organization. I used multiple strategies to achieve this goal. For instance, I aimed to expand my knowledge through a literature review, which explored the recruitment and retention of resource family homes, motivations to adopt, kinship care, and customary care arrangements. I applied and tested this knowledge within the practice setting. I expanded upon this knowledge through training opportunities, job shadowing, and generally through my engagement with resource families in my role as a student providing case coverage and completing annual assessments with respect to resource family homes. As an MSW Advanced Practicum student within the resource department, I was able to receive PRIDE trainer training, and delivered this training to prospective resource applicants. In order to do this, I had to familiarize myself with the scope of this training. This learning will greatly assist me when I return to my protection role, as it helped me to understand what knowledge and skills foster parents develop throughout this process. Because of the overlap between the two roles, I was

able to identify many areas in which my practice could enhance the delivery of the content of PRIDE through my protection work experience.

My second learning objective within my placement was to develop a stronger more effective practice by identifying and understanding the theoretical knowledge bases of my work. Through this process I examined what we know about neglect, attachment, and how we can apply social constructionism, strengths-based, structural, and post-structural approaches in child welfare. I also examined what it means to be a more reflexive practitioner, and how clinical supervision can support this process. In order to achieve this goal, I conducted a literature review, the aim of which was to orient me to critical theories and perspectives that can influence day to day decision making in child welfare.

My third learning objective was to incorporate the work that I do in my protection role specific to engaging fathers, into my work within the resource community. In order to achieve this goal, I compiled sources of information and prepared a presentation that would provide a basis for the importance of father involvement for resource families. Later in this chapter, I will discuss my experience offering training on father involvement to resource parents, which produced unexpected results.

Understanding and utilizing supervision also became a focus for me during the course of my placement; particularly the importance of having clinical supervision in field placement education to be able to expand my knowledge and challenge myself in the learning environment. Because supervision lends itself to the process of becoming a more critical and reflexive practitioner, and toward an integration of theory and practice knowledge, it was a critical part of my learning. In general, the field placement can be such an important part of student learning at

the graduate level. As such, if the student is not receiving adequate support, they have an obligation to seek external supervision in order to meet his or her learning objectives.

Agreements with the Organization

I negotiated with my executive director to take a leave of absence from my protection position in order to do an experiential learning practicum in the resource department. This was an unpaid placement. I completed 450 hours of work in order to fulfill the requirements of my practicum over a 13-week period.

Supervision

I had direct supervision in the workplace environment, where I met with the supervisor of the resource department on a biweekly basis. However, I also utilized off-site clinical supervision, with a focus on the clinical aspects of my practicum learning, in order to assist me in achieving my learning goals.

Training Plan

I began my introduction to resource work by shadowing practitioners working in the department and through discussion with colleagues in the department. I read policies and other documentation that oriented me to my new role. I completed PRIDE training through the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), which enabled me to develop a thorough understanding of the core competencies that guide foster parent training, and gave me an introduction to teaching this training. With this opportunity, I developed the confidence to become involved in PRIDE training, to deliver and actively participate in this training. It also provided me with important knowledge and insights that would aid me in conducting annual assessments of approved foster homes. It had been previously identified that there is a need for further exploration with foster parents of their needs and interests in training. As such, I

developed a survey that would provide the agency with this information in order to determine what training could be offered. During my experiential learning placement, I was able to pursue other learning opportunities such as the development of a training needs survey and resource materials for foster parents to address identified gaps in foster parent training.

Initially, during the negotiation of my placement, there was discussion of utilizing my student placement to explore the feasibility of other strategies for recruitment of resource families in addition to the traditional ‘foster-to-adopt’ model of recruitment that the agency currently employs. There is a staggering number of older children who remain in the care of this agency (and across the province) without permanence. Finding other avenues to achieve adoptions for older children in care, such as adoption specific recruitment, was one strategy that was discussed. This was not supported, which is unfortunate, as two thirds of children in the care of this agency are Crown Wards over the age of 10. In light of this fact, I developed a series of posters, with technical help, aimed specifically at recruiting adoptive parents for older children in care. One of the posters depicted an older child with a male guardian, and purposefully avoided presenting the traditional family image of two parents (male and female), with one or two children. The other was a hand of a parent, which could be male or female, with a smaller hand inside. The image of the adoptive parent in each poster was comprised of words that represented what it takes to be an adoptive parent. Included in this word art were the Seven Grandfather teachings (Love, Honesty, Respect, Truth, Courage, Wisdom, and Humility). Recognizing a significant need for Customary Care homes due to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care, I had hoped to collaborate with the local Band in order to develop posters that were specific to the recruitment of Native resource homes. Although this did not transpire during my placement, it is something that I can continue to explore and work on. In the next section I

discuss the importance of structural and post-structural theories of social work and their implications, particularly within the field of child welfare.

Structural and Post-Structural Theories and their Applications for Child Welfare

I have identified with a structural approach to social work since I was introduced to the idea in my undergraduate learning. But the more I thought about this approach, the more I wondered about my employment within the child welfare system and whether it was an effective means of combatting the social injustices I was confronted with on a daily basis. I began to think that if I wanted to contribute to social work and social justice, I could not be a part of a system that did so little to support these efforts, although I could not reconcile this with my belief that we do make a positive difference in the lives of the children and families with whom we work. Upon further examination using a post-structural lens, I was able to make meaning of my experiences in child welfare, and was no longer discouraged about my work within this system. Todd and Burns (2007) presented post-structural theory in child welfare as a means of achieving ethical and just outcomes through micro-practices. Structural social work theory takes into consideration the broader structures in place that impact on an individual level; while post-structural theories attend to these as well as the power dynamics at play within communities, families, and in client-social worker relationships (Todd & Burns, 2007).

Structural Theory

Based on my experience as a protection worker for the Children's Aid Society, parents who become involved with this system do not often present with just one issue. And parents who face multiple challenges, particularly any combination of domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse (or all three) are often not successful in overcoming these issues to the end that they regain custody of the children who were removed from their care. In my opinion, the

reasons for this include the structural context in which these problems were created, the persistence of these problems and their severity, and the timelines imposed by the Child and Family Services Act. These timelines are meant to uphold the best interest of the child, and are concerned with the notion of achieving permanence in a reasonable amount of time. This allows for the parent(s) to demonstrate their capacity, or in the alternative, for a plan to be developed that meets the child's needs when this cannot be achieved by the parent(s). Parents are not always able to make the necessary changes within the required amount of time. Ultimately, the parents need for more time gives way to the competing need for permanence for the child.

During my placement, I was asked to deliver a presentation at Parent Resource Information for Development and Education (PRIDE) about the role of protection workers and to describe the realities faced by our biological parents. In order to give a true snapshot, I quickly looked through recent cases of mine and identified 10 families with whom I have had extensive involvement with and/or children that have been removed from their parents' care. Out of those 10 families, only one family had successfully navigated the challenges they faced. In this instance, the mother had transportation of her own and was employed. She utilized the system in a way that supported her and the children in her care. She was able to overcome an extremely unhealthy relationship and in so doing, demonstrated her insight and ability to be protective of her children.

For all 10 of these families, poverty was an additional struggle that they faced. We know that domestic violence, mental health problems, and drug and alcohol addictions are the most common underlying issues concerning parents involved with child welfare services today (Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, Daciuk, Felstiner, Black, et al. 2005). But child welfare practitioners tend to rely on specialists in these fields to help their clients address these problems.

Without integrating extensive knowledge into our practice of how domestic violence, mental health issues, and addictions can affect a caregiver's ability to be available, to respond appropriately, and to nurture and protect their children, our practice may not be adequately informed and our interventions may be less successful. We know that severe and chronic ill health of a parent, or substance abuse, or a child's exposure to domestic violence can have a lasting impact on the child's development, and can impair the healthy development of relationships that help nurture and sustain the child. Because the consequences can be so devastating, child welfare agencies must act swiftly to help remedy these problems, or in the alternative where this is not possible, to provide healthy attachments for children. In order for us to truly understand the experience of the parent, the impact on the child, and to generate best practices in child welfare for the successful outcomes of children and families with whom we work, we need to have a strong knowledge base about each of these issues that presents in our practice.

“In this context, a structural analysis provides a theoretical lens for examining the work of child protection and for understanding the links between oppressive social relations and involvement with child protection services, one of the most powerful agencies of the state” (Todd & Burns, 2007 p. 24). Without this understanding, child welfare doctrines would inevitably blame mothers and poor people for their plight, as they would be held to an unachievable standard of the middle class (Todd & Burns, 2007). Structural social work recognizes that the blame rests with individuals who are not solely responsible for their own circumstances. Structural social work acknowledges social and other mechanisms that shape these realities. When we have greater understanding of the forces that are at play in an individual's life, we are able respond to individual needs with greater understanding and

efficacy, and we avoid re-victimizing individuals with unwarranted judgment. For instance, most people do not aspire to be addicts. An addiction can happen to anyone, and often people do not realize until it is too late. Addictions are not easy to overcome, contrary to the common belief that people have choices about their use and can just stop if they want to. People often think that if they were faced with a choice of having to stop using or losing their children, that they would be able to stop. In reality, it is not that simple. On a very basic level, the addicted brain can become hardwired to secure substances because using the substance triggers the reward system within the brain, reinforcing this pathway (Rideauwood, 2013). Eventually, the addicted brain will attach enough significance to a substance that it overrides all other functions, making the substance as vital to survival as air and water, and often, even more so than food (Rideauwood, 2013). It is as important to understand why the person cannot stop, as it is to understand why they started in the first place. Sometimes people just succumb to peer pressure. Sometimes people develop unhealthy ways of coping with past traumas and abuse.

Ideally, for those of us working in the child welfare system, it is crucial that we not only respond to instances of maltreatment by building capacity (in the parent) or altering the situation (for the child) to prevent maltreatment from occurring in the future, but also, that we address the trauma that children have experienced, thereby decreasing the likelihood that they will face the same struggles as adults. “Approaching child protection work with a structural analysis brings into focus opportunities for advocacy and education, for client-worker alliances, and for collaborative problem solving” (Todd, Burns, 2007, p. 25). The lives of people are always more complex than the structures that shape them (Todd & Burns, 2007). Taking into consideration people’s dreams, hopes, and fears may not coincide with the way their lives are shaped by structures, as Todd and Burns (2007) indicated, reducing them to their resistance or submission

to oppression, which is why it is also important to attend to the subtleties of practice using post-structural theory.

Post-Structural Theory

Todd and Burns (2007) suggested that post-structural theory can be used most effectively as a means to augment structural theory (as opposed to favouring one over the other), making the subtleties of practice more clear. Post-structural analyses provide more accurate descriptions of the work that we do, and provide a framework for how we apply theory to practice in a way that is more suitable, perhaps, than structural analyses in that it validates our attempts to help people from within a system that a structural analysis would conclude is not possible to do effectively. I view post-structural theory as having practical applications within a system such as the CAS, which allows us to do meaningful work with people without having to dismantle an entire system for all the challenges it presents, in order for the work to be valid. A post-structural approach is a “dynamic and deliberate consideration of how we, as social workers, and the clients we serve, make meaning of ourselves, our interactions, and the world around us” (Todd & Burns, 2007, p. 27).

Ungar (2004) argued a similar viewpoint, which also embraced the challenge that is inherent in recognizing individually and socially constructed realities while, at the same time, fulfilling organizational mandates. Ungar (2004) explained that by positioning a worker (whether child welfare or corrections or mental health or other) as part of the community, the notion of ‘other’ is deconstructed, and so too is the relevance of expert ‘outsider’ (or privileged) knowledge. Ungar (2004) argued that workers’ positioning in their communities as people and as practitioners is highly relevant to postmodern social work. He stated further that an ethical practice should not be focused on maintaining rigid boundaries between client and practitioner,

but, instead, acknowledges the proximity of workers to their clients within the community and recognizes the strengths and complexities of this association.

As an example of this in practice, I have often been asked by clients whether or not I have children. Different workers have different responses to this question. Some feel that they do not want their clients to have personal information about them. Others feel that it isn't appropriate to share this kind of information with clients. Some do not want to engage in the debate about whether or not one can effectively engage in the work of child protection without having children of your own. I do not feel conflicted about sharing that I am a parent. I am often asked the ages of my children, which I respond to as well. I do this because, generally speaking, the parents I work with want to have some sense that I can relate to their experience. I live in a small community. Sometimes I go to the grocery store, the mall, or to a park, and I will run into clients. My children have shared classrooms with children on my caseload. I have participated in school events, where I have encountered parents and children with whom I work. I have often thought about how this makes it easier for us to relate to one another. When my clients see me out in the community, whether alone or with my children, they have a sense of who I am, and this creates mutuality in our experience. I think this also helps break down the perception of child protection workers as experts who have privileged knowledge, and the hierarchy between clients and practitioners.

Ungar (2004) stated that the strength of postmodernism is in the acceptance of multiple realities. When we, as practitioners, accept individuals' construction of their realities as true and just interpretations, rather than defining their realities for them in language that is not meaningful to them or does not capture their experiences, we are effectively working within the 'system'. Not only do we have to be conscious of this as practitioners, we have to actively draw on these

perspectives in our work. Unger (2004) suggested that in doing so, we give our clients a voice. We involve them more meaningfully in the work we do together.

In order to truly reflect the perspective of our clients, Unger (2004) indicated that we should give consideration, or rather, *innovation*, as to how we do this even in the most mundane of tasks such as documentation of case notes. As workers, we need to be attuned to whose perspective we are documenting, and how our language is defining or limiting our clients' experiences, essentially, constructing their realities. "It is the social worker's role to concretely demonstrate an openness to hear, and then to account for, the multiple realities of others" (Unger, 2004, p. 492). Unger (2004) suggested that his conception of postmodern social work was only one approach, and that, just as postmodern theories promote the existence of multiple realities, so too may there be other interpretations of postmodern social work practice.

Next, I further the discussion begun at the beginning of this section by describing Todd and Burns' (2007) interpretation of post-structural social work, which consists of four different approaches: uncertainty, deconstruction, re-thinking power, and bodily knowledge.

Using 'Uncertainty'. Approaching a situation with uncertainty has benefits. It checks our assumptions and causes us to really listen and learn from our clients about how their experiences are truly unique, not necessarily how they fit with our preconceived notions of who they are based on theories. Our notions of who people are should not define their experiences. It is important to take the time to understand how each individual's experience is unique, although it may seem counterintuitive to the crisis driven nature of child protection work. It challenges workers to be more open and to engage with multiple possibilities in terms of planning with a family (Todd & Burns, 2007). Post-structural approaches can provide a framework for us to become more attuned to the needs of our clients. We can potentially recognize justice situated in

complex realities when we remain open to these possibilities. Asking a client about his or her situation, rather than making assumptions demonstrates that the practitioner has a genuine desire to understand the situation from the client's perspective rather than approaching the situation as an all-knowing professional.

Although there are many 'gray' areas of child welfare, the system tends to characterize people in a fairly black and white sense, either 'good' or 'bad', victim or perpetrator. By keeping our preconceived notions about people in check, we can create opportunities. For instance, if we equate a drug abusing dad as a risk, we may ultimately dismiss this person. In doing so, we do everyone a disservice and end up making more work for ourselves in the long run. But, instead, if we develop an understanding of why this dad uses, and we work with him to overcome these issues, we help him to recognize his potential, which in turn benefits everyone.

Using 'Deconstruction'. Using deconstruction, a method of post-structural analysis, we can systematically identify contradictions in our language by inverting concepts so that what is "unthinkingly and repeatedly marginalized" is re-centred. An example is the notion of finding family for a child as opposed to finding a child for a family, and applying this to the practice of photo-listings for adoption. If the process was consistent with the intention, adoptive families' biographies would be on display, minimizing the risk to children (of online profiling) and sharing in the vulnerability of being put out there on social media. This would also prevent or reduce the instances in which children could be exploited through this process.

Another example pertains to attachment theory. Examination of attachment theory within the context in which it was developed, calls into question what may often be taken for granted. Developing a more critical approach can be difficult to do when 'knowledge' is aligned with our own experience, is derived from a place of privilege, and is widely accepted as the norm. "[A]s

theories inform practice, and practice reinforces theory, they produce an appearance of objective truth, sublimating the socio-political and economic features at play in their formation” (Solomon 2008, p. 143). It is interesting to see how theories evolve over time along with socio-political and economic changes, and in line with the experiences of the dominant group.

The strict application of attachment and other theories may result in reproducing privilege and may greatly limit the possibility for understanding the lived experience of the people we are trying to help. Rather than focusing on theories that may create difference and oppression, social workers should explore, from the client’s perspective, relationships that guide, provide and protect (Solomon, 2008). These may not be recognized by theory or by traditional concepts of family and attachment figures, but are inherent to the family’s functioning. “Simply, by making visible the socio-political economic features of taken-for-granted processes of theory and practice, we create greater possibilities for what to think and do within child welfare and as social workers” (Solomon, 2008, p. 143).

‘Re-thinking Power’. Within an organization as powerful (and contradictory) as the CAS, it is important for workers within the system to develop a more critical understanding of where this power originates from, and how we can re-think the use of this power. Todd and Burns (2007) examined the, at times, contradictory standpoints of the CAS, suggesting that the focus over time has swung back and forth between ‘family preservation’ and ‘child safety’ like a pendulum, rather than striving to meet both simultaneously. Because social work practice is always evolving, it is important for us as child welfare practitioners to understand where we’ve been in order to make sense of the changes within the system, and to determine what our future aspirations should be. In order to develop my own insight into these changes and what impact

they can have on workers in the field, and ultimately on the children and families we serve, I will examine some of the most significant developments within child welfare over the past 25 years. Beginning in the 1990's, and resulting from a series of inquests into child deaths, which concluded that had protection workers responded intrusively enough, child deaths could have been prevented, child safety became the priority of child welfare organizations (CECW, 2002). Changes to the legislation were introduced and mandatory risk assessment tools implemented. The wording in the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) changed from 'least disruptive' to 'least intrusive'. The threshold for findings of maltreatment was lowered with the introduction of 'risk of harm' and 'emotional harm'. Previously, child welfare agencies would have to prove that a child was harmed in order to warrant the need for protection under the Children's Aid Society (CAS). As a result, child welfare agencies saw a sharp increase in the number of children in need of protection and entering the care of the Society. The new risk assessment model, which was intended to standardize responses from child welfare organizations, recognized emotional harm caused by exposure to domestic violence, and classified this as a form of maltreatment. Domestic violence is now one of the most common factors in terms of family involvement with CAS, present in over 30 percent of open files in Ontario; "Over one third of substantiated child maltreatment investigations in Canada, excluding Quebec, in 2003 involved some form of exposure to domestic violence (34%)" (Black, Trocme, Fallon & MacLaurin, 2008, p. 397).

As a result of these changes, child protection work in Ontario became much more intrusive. The assessment was cumbersome, and the strain on individual workers and on the system as a whole became apparent. In 2001, a comprehensive assessment of the child welfare system in Ontario was underway and pointed out the unintended consequences of these reforms such as the overreliance of workers on assessment tools in their practice and corresponding

decrease in clinical engagement with families (Todd & Burns, 2007). These tools, which were intended to minimize risk and adequately ensure that workers were meeting basic minimum standards, could not replace a worker's intuition and skill in engaging with families. Essentially, the use of these tools did not enhance the actual work with the families, but created additional strains on workers, in terms of their accountability through record keeping responsibilities. The evaluation also highlighted the significant increase in the number of children coming into care, which the system could not afford to maintain. These conclusions resulted in the development of the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda and the Differential Response (DR) model of service that would replace the Ontario Risk Assessment Model. Transformation intended to return to greater focus on client engagement, and DR allowed workers to customize their approaches to assessments with families. An amendment to the CFSA in 2006 gave direction to child welfare organizations to seek out other less adversarial means of dispute resolution in an effort to decrease families' involvement in the court system. This illustrates how societal shifts in values can ultimately result in changes to legislation, and what impact this can have on the people with whom we work. Bala and Trocme (2008) wrote about the difficulty for child protection workers to achieve the perfect balance between not making unfounded accusations, and protecting children from parents with a history of abuse or neglect. Within the field of child protection, workers are under constant scrutiny and are criticized for being both overly intrusive and not intrusive enough.

Child protection work is also influenced by investigative bodies such as the Chief Coroner of the Province of Ontario, and the Child Death Review Committee, who look into child deaths in order to understand why and how the deaths occurred, so as to inform prevention efforts. As an example of this in practice, I do recall as a new worker, learning about high risk

infants, and what our responses should be as workers in those situations on the front line. The messaging at that time was that there is good reason to be intrusive, and to insist on undressing a baby and witnessing a diaper change in order to assess the baby's overall health and well-being. This practice evolved from the tragic story of Jordan Heikamp, the 5-week old baby who died of starvation while living with his mother at a shelter for abused Native women, and being under the supervision of the Catholic Children's Aid Society in 1997. The coroner's office testified during the trial that signs of starvation would have been visible. Part of the problem was that the baby was usually wrapped in a blanket. As a consequence, even though he was being 'observed' by many professionals, he died of starvation and no one noticed, because no one really ever saw him. One of the recommendations from the coroner at that time was to confirm the accuracy of the caregiver's statements. In the case of Jordan Heikamp, his mother did not report any concerns, but no one verified his overall health and well-being (Chief Coroner, 2001).

I think that knowing what to look for comes with experience. Most obviously, a child who is 'skin and bones' is gravely concerning. Medical evidence presented at the time of the Heikamp trial suggested that signs of starvation would have been present 10-14 days prior to Jordan's death, although this was disputed by his mother (CBC, 2001). But even in the absence of something as concrete as his skeletal appearance, there are other ways to detect dehydration and starvation. Jordan's mother, Renee Heikamp, testified that Jordan Heikamp was sleeping upwards of 8 hours at a time. Excessive sleep or 'listlessness' can indicate significant dehydration or chronic starvation. There may have been other indications that he was dehydrated, such as a sunken fontanelle, dry diapers (or fewer wet ones), or dry eyes when crying (CHEO, n.d.). He may not have cried as much if he was fatigued. Also, his skin may have lost its tone and elasticity, and one may have noticed the wasting of muscles as it is typical

for babies to be plump (WHO, 2005). Dehydration in a baby is a very serious thing as it can have devastating consequences within a short amount of time, which is why infants are at much greater risk given their vulnerability (CHEO, n.d.). Having your own children as a worker can provide an added level of confidence and understanding because a worker can not only empathize with a parent, but also has some reference for what would be concerning in an infant's appearance, having to make those judgment calls as a parent. But without having a concrete way of knowing that every worker is able to assess each situation carefully and consistently, I see the rationale for developing a more intrusive process, which brings me to my point. For new or inexperienced workers who implement this practice of insisting that parents undress the baby for the worker's visit, this may feel very intrusive. It may inhibit the development of trust between worker and parents, and may result in parents having to wake a sleeping baby.

When we weigh the risk of offending parents and that of an infant's well-being, the decision may seem obvious to child protection workers. I have recently been to a home with another worker who insisted on one of these diaper changes, and I felt in that situation that it was not necessary, and in fact, only hindered the ability for us to build a working relationship with the family who was anxious about our involvement to begin with. It was immediately obvious to me that the child was well nourished and cared for. I gauged this by his healthy weight, and the level of interaction between the baby and his parents, but also his ability to engage with workers. This baby was bright and alert and presented no cause for concern. Although the risks to infants of dehydration and starvation are grave, there were no indications with this baby that he was dehydrated given his healthy weight and his energy level. He did not appear to be neglected in any way. I explained to the family that while I completely understood why the previous worker asked them to change their baby's diaper in front of her, I did not require them to undress the

baby during my home visit and provided them the reasoning behind this based on my observations. This interaction presented an opportunity for the parents to hear what positive things they were doing in terms of their care of their baby.

Using ‘Bodily Knowledge’. Post-structural approaches to social work practice can assist workers within the child welfare system to develop a more critical practice. For instance, by turning attention to their internal presence, workers become more aware of their use of self and how this can influence practice. Todd and Burns (2007) indicated that bodily knowledge is a significant and legitimate way of ‘knowing’, and that there needs to be further exploration of our physical and emotional responses to child welfare as a post-structural practice approach. We are conditioned to ignore these responses. Many times in my own practice I have felt tense because what I have been instructed to do seems counterintuitive. These feelings are important to acknowledge and give us reason to pause and take notice so that we may be able to respond more meaningfully. We should consider our gut reactions in situations, or the incongruence we feel between our emotional selves and our external presentation.

We often look at how parents respond to their children, physically and emotionally, but do not spend time to understand our emotions other than to control them, dismiss them, or ignore them. Todd and Burns (2007) indicated that, in this way, we can be disembodied professionals. I have learned through this process that I have a very difficult time watching children’s reactions when their parents do not show up on time or at all for scheduled visitation. Either it bothers me more now than it ever did before, or I have become more aware of my physical reaction to it. My frustration perhaps comes from my personal belief that children should come first and parents have an obligation to ensure that they are meeting their children’s needs before their own ‘wants’. I become especially frustrated when a parent seems to lack the necessary insight into

how their behaviour can have a devastating impact on their children. The more I learn about the importance of attachment for children, the more desperately I want this to happen for children.

I cringe and I find it pains me to watch as children slowly realize that a parent is not going to show up for them, and I truly cannot imagine a more difficult thing for a child. I almost cannot stand the aftermath, when a 7-year old wants to jump out of the driver's car and kill himself because things didn't go according to plan, and he is helpless and doesn't know how else to respond to what is happening around him. At the same time, I know I am on the hook for ensuring opportunities for meaningful and beneficial access to occur. I want to eliminate obstacles for parents knowing how important these visits are for the children. Sometimes, even then, it does not happen. I have a difficult time with poor excuses as to why parents could not be on time or come at all.

I often catch myself thinking that if I were in their shoes and this was the one thing I had to do today, I would go to the end of the Earth to be there for my children. Then I remember that some of the parents I work with did not have the benefit of having a strong positive attachment figure, and I picture them as children, and I know they may be just as vulnerable. I realize that there are things holding them back from being included in some of the most basic ways we thrive in our society such as education and employment. I do understand the feelings of rejection and failure and guilt that many of our parents carry. It does occur to me that it is easier to blame someone else than to admit that you are hurting the people you love most, who you should be protecting, but cannot. All of these things are further complicated by poverty, unhealthy relationships, poor problem solving and coping skills, mental health issues and substance abuse.

Through critical self-awareness and reflection, we can become more attuned to our bodily responses, and what they are signalling for us. Todd and Burns (2007) asserted that these are

ways of knowing, and that we have to re-orient ourselves in our practices to include an analysis of the ways in which we relate to others. Using post-structural methods of analysis to understand my practice has also helped me to become a more reflexive practitioner. For example, through paying attention to my own physical responses to this work, I have become much more aware of those instances where my heart races, or I feel a weight or a tightness in my chest, or I feel that I cannot breathe. When this happens now, I am able to acknowledge the causes of this anxiety, and I am able to identify what I need to do in order to manage this. This may entail giving myself permission to let go of something; figuring out where my responsibility ends and the client's begins; thinking through what the pressures are and why I am feeling pressured in response; identifying the beginning of an unhealthy work habit, because we can easily fall into ruts when we start to get busy; acknowledging that it is unrealistic to continue a pattern of working that involves giving up lunches and breaks and coming in early and staying late in order to meet the demands of the job (and still not being able to meet everyone's demands); or it may alert me to the fact that I need to have a conversation with my supervisor about managing workload stress, and talking about bigger problems within the agency.

Becoming a More Reflexive Practitioner

One of my main goals in terms of measuring the success of this placement was to become a more reflexive practitioner. To begin this process, I oriented myself to think deliberately about my placement interactions. I kept track of these experiences in a journal, allowing me to examine my experiences more carefully, and to draw on theory and knowledge to make sense of this. Why is reflection critical? Particularly in social work, a profession dedicated to social justice and change, it is imperative to consider how we engage in this process. Helping is emotive and

subjective, requiring further examination with respect to our motives and our means of carrying out this practice.

In my placement, I was assigned a caseload. Given my tenure at the agency as a protection worker, and the tendency for protection workers to migrate into the resource worker role, it seemed to be a good fit and something that was manageable. I did want to have the 'resource experience' during my placement. This was an opportunity I would not have otherwise had unless I was prepared to make that leap in terms of a change of position. What was most appealing to me about this opportunity was the new skills and insights that I would bring to my practice as a protection worker, having been oriented to resource work as a student.

Pursuing further education in the field of social work has given me an opportunity to explore and more critically understand my social work views and how these inform my practice. My first exposure to the idea that practice is grounded in theory came during my undergraduate studies. Still fresh in my mind when I entered the field of child protection as a recent graduate, I struggled to incorporate this into my practice for the longest time. Becoming oriented to child welfare is no easy task. I easily spent a couple of years becoming familiar with my role and the responsibilities it carried. It took even longer for me to make this practice my own, developing an individual style, something that I was comfortable with. When I really hit my stride, I began to enjoy the challenges that the child welfare system presented. But I found that I was equally troubled and perplexed in terms of being able to overcome these challenges within a broader social and political system that perpetuates these difficulties. I believe that as social workers, as our understanding of the complex problems facing vulnerable people advances, so too must our efforts to change and overcome them.

I was ready for a new challenge. I say that, and, at the same time, getting there required a lot of coaxing from a good friend and colleague of mine who also undertook her Master's degree in Social Work. At times, the burden of work can be heavy, and with the added challenge of raising a family and other commitments, it may seem that there is no good time to go back to school. "One of the most practical challenges for practitioners is finding the time to engage in the practice while being overburdened within their professional roles and responsibilities" (Devreau-Brock, 2013; Findlay, 2008).

In order for practitioners to be successful in terms of developing their skills and evolving their practice, they must be adequately supported, which means removing barriers such as limitations on time and resources, which make opportunities for reflection and growth more difficult to seize. In the context of child welfare, I believe that this is virtually unheard of. In such a system that is drastically underfunded and underemployed, the workload is incredibly taxing on workers and their supervisors, and due to the nature of the work itself, promotes task-oriented rather than clinical supervision.

However challenging this learning process has been, it has also been very rewarding. I have been able to focus my energy on developing a more reflective practice, and, in the process, have had the privilege of learning about new ideas and perspectives that will enhance my work and benefit the people with whom I work. I have come to appreciate how imperative it is that, as social workers, our various practices are grounded in theory, and that we understand the lens through which we view the work that we do. This is something that I have come to know through my education in the field of social work. I have come to understand this in a much more meaningful way now that I have developed practice skills and can interpret and contextualize my own experiences.

The process of reflective writing through the use of a journal can promote mindfulness and can assist workers to critically evaluate their practice. The use of a journal allowed me to process my own learning experiences in an uninhibited and honest way. It allowed me to access my thoughts and questions at later points should they become relevant again to my learning. My journal also enabled me to assess my own learning over time. It was a useful tool for discussion during clinical supervision in terms of assisting me to further develop my ability to think and act critically as a practitioner. Journaling provided me with a practice setting in which to link individual experiences to those found in the literature, to the broader social and political context. Journaling may be particularly important for child welfare practitioners to begin to make these critical links, when clinical supervision or continued education is not accessible. It may also be helpful in terms of maintaining boundaries between work and home life. The amount of attention given in our thoughts to our work could be maximized by offering critical reflection through journaling, rather than disorganized, unguided, often ruminating thoughts that occupy our headspace outside of work hours. This is neither productive nor healthy for the practitioner and doesn't benefit the client.

Supervision

Supervision is an integral part of the learning process at all levels of social work. It is through this process that students learn to develop a critical awareness of their practice (Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery & Van Stratum, 2015). Marlowe et al. (2015) wrote about the third year placement of bachelor of social work students as being an opportunity for students to integrate their personal and professional selves, and for the process of becoming a reflexive practitioner. While they assume that the students have no prior experience in the social work

field, their findings, which indicate the importance of the integration of theory and knowledge into practice, are still relevant to the process of my learning.

As a practitioner in the field of child welfare, I am continually integrating research and practice. This is necessary to continue to develop and sharpen practice skills, but also to remain current and up to date in the field. Each encounter with a new client is different. The factors that shape and influence their circumstances have a unique impact on each individual. Our responses to clients should be equally unique and individual. Even experienced practitioners face difficult dilemmas and seemingly impossible situations. In my opinion, experienced practitioners often encounter difficult situations in which they feel tension or contradictions in their role. This is the importance of critical supervision; to be able to resolve these tensions and use such experience to continually improve social work practice (Marlowe et al. 2015).

Support is a core aspect of supervision (Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Marlowe et al., 2015). This aids the social worker in becoming a more reflexive practitioner through the exploration of their thoughts, feelings and bodily reactions to the work, and by facilitating the student's (or practitioner's) knowledge of his or her practice. Marlowe et al. indicated that there is a risk to the student in terms of his or her professional development that is implied when the agency culture is not conducive to reflective practice. Marlowe et al. promoted the use of mindfulness-based tools in order to assist students (particularly third year bachelor of social work students) in overcoming this barrier, as it would not be common for them to seek off-site supervision. Mindfulness practices can help the student in his or her placement to develop a critical sense of their use of self in their work with people.

A lot of my learning during my placement is directly applicable in my other work in child welfare. Knowing now what I know about the importance of supervision, I question why this

time is not protected within child welfare. Particularly with respect to front line workers, where given the unpredictable and busy nature of the work, supervision can be characterized by interruptions, or may not occur at all due to various demands on workers. The nature of the work environment itself presents a challenge as to how we move toward a consistent model of supervision, and how we realize the value of this activity within such a chaotic environment. When crises arise, or workers are just plainly overloaded, things like supervision and team meetings, in my experience, are the first to go. Assigning priority status to supervision may improve consistency, however, there will always be a level of unpredictability that results from emergency situations such as apprehensions. These are circumstances which require employees to seek supervisory consultations, and are understandable interruptions to the scheduled supervision time of another employee.

When clinical supervision is not possible or accessible, to what extent do social workers have a responsibility to seek this out privately? Would this be supported philosophically by such an organization as the CAS? What responsibility do individual organizations accept in ensuring professional competence through supervision? As clinical social workers, we may find value in doing so, both on a personal and professional level, although it is not likely to be encouraged or supported by child welfare agencies due to liability issues and issues of payment for this service. Because my supervision within my placement was solely task-oriented, I sought external supervision. My readers suggested and supported this endeavour, providing me with contact information for Ms. Brenda Robinson, a 30-year veteran of the field of child welfare. As an experienced front line worker and resource worker, Brenda was very knowledgeable of the work itself, and was able to help me to focus my learning goals on areas of practice that were meaningful to me. For instance, I came to Brenda with many insights and interests that resulted

from my experiences with the many challenges that child welfare presents. Brenda was able to sift through these and reinforce those that she felt could be developed as an important part of my student learning. Brenda helped me to see the value of clinical supervision, and she validated my interest in exploring a passion of mine (father involvement) in the realm of resource work. Brenda also provided me with important insights around the children who care for foster children, which led me to explore this more critically and integrate this knowledge into my practice. I feel that these were two significant contributions to my learning journey that also significantly enhanced my practice as a child protection worker.

Bridging the Gap Between Resource and Protection Work

Throughout this placement, I was able to pause and reflect, whereas this was not possible to the same extent in my protection role. The difference in the environment, particularly with respect to the workload, was immediately apparent to me upon my arrival at the resource department. What I have come to realize is that the resource role requires just as much dedication as protection in order to cultivate resources for children in care. Resource work involves a great deal of thought and careful practice in order to ensure positive outcomes for children placed in prospective homes. Although the pace is certainly different, there is quality of work that happens in the resource department. In my experience, it is quantitatively much less than what occurs in the protection departments. What is significant about this is not as relevant to the resource department as it should be to the protection departments.

For instance, the amount of work that is expected of intake and ongoing (both are front line protection) workers is often an unrealistic and overly demanding amount of work. The amount of work that is produced by the protection standard is the kind that may lead to situations where things get overlooked or forgotten, or workers are not able to accomplish tasks because

there is simply too much to do. This should not be condoned or supported by a system that exists primarily for the protection and well-being of children. Workers may feel conflicted about their roles within it because of the lack of support for workers, and ultimately, the children and families we serve. Child protection workers strive for the safety and well-being of children and their families. I have often heard workers express their discomfort of working in a system that is so flawed, primarily because these flaws (such as underfunding resulting in workers being overloaded) can place children at risk and can result in inadequate service to families.

Child welfare as a profession can be a struggle for many people, continually striving to meet the impossible standards of child protection work. Combined with strong social work backgrounds and beliefs about advocating for change, protection workers can find themselves hopelessly invested in the work that they do, despite the challenges of an unmanageable workload that is focused on working with some of the most vulnerable populations, children who have experienced maltreatment.

Part of my learning journey has been to deconstruct the placement of social workers within the field of child welfare in order to find a meaningful way to perform this role within such a powerful and contradictory system. Through this exercise, I have found that I am able to do this by considering post-structural theory, and I find value in the idea of micro-practice within the field of child welfare, in that each of my encounters with children and families is an opportunity to challenge social injustices and to create meaningful change. I have learned also that post-structural practice is strengthened by active involvement with larger social goals. This action includes developing and continuing to support committees that promote awareness and engage the larger community, such as my involvement with Dad Central Renfrew County. This committee exists to spread knowledge of the importance of positive father involvement in the

lives of children. Part of the work of this committee is to engage other service providers and community members, and to facilitate critical reflection on organizational and individual practices that hinder or promote father engagement, and where the latter occurs, to challenge this practice. The other central component of this committee is to contribute to the knowledge base within the community at an organizational and individual level of the importance of fatherhood in the lives of children, which occurs through workshops and other programming.

Through my experience working within the child welfare system, I have come to understand that the challenges of this system require practitioners to be critical, non-judgmental, and responsive in every situation. Reflexive practice allows us to engage with a family in a way that does not ignore the history, but leaves room for acceptance that certain truths are more important for us to uphold, and others not so much. Certain truths are more valued than others; which ones, why and how do we decide? In order to decipher the best approach in each situation, workers must determine what structural forces are at play concerning the family's experience, and what is the worker's own understanding of his/her family dynamic, personal desires, fears, and hopes. Structural approaches reveal the impact of broader systems at play in an individual's life, while post-structural approaches examine the relations of power and the limitations and possibilities that this brings (Todd & Burns, 2007).

Permanency

Through the process of my student placement, I have come to understand that there are points of intersection in terms of the work that we do between protection and resources, and because of the difference of roles and number of people involved in decision-making processes it is imperative for protection and resources to have a mutual understanding of common goals. Using "permanence" as an example, and taking into account that there are different perspectives

on the work that is to be done between front line and resources staff, there is often disagreement on how to achieve the best outcome for a child and/or family. The following is an illustration of how differing perspectives may lead to disagreement as to what constitutes the child's best interest regarding permanency. In my experience, these disagreements come about most often as a result of the decision-making process regarding placements for children in care. For instance, should a newborn be placed immediately in a foster-to-adopt home if the Application before the court is not one of Crown Wardship? On one hand, placing an infant where there is the potential for adoption, reduces the risk to the child. The risk implied is that a child who is initially placed in a foster home would have to bear the impact of loss and separation from that home should it be determined that the child is unable to return to his or her parent(s), and must then transition to an adoptive home.

On the other hand, a resource family who is seeking to adopt, may have a difficult time returning a child who, despite 'being prepared' for this very real possibility, developed a bond with the child who was placed temporarily in their care. For many prospective adoptive parents, the prospect of having to return a child after loving that child for a significant period of time is heartbreaking, and the emotional risk is not one they are willing to take. In my opinion, the source of tension between departments and the heart of these disagreements comes from the misalignment of who the 'client' is, and what our duty is to that client. At FCS, protection positions are held by social workers with a minimum educational requirement of a bachelor's degree in social work. Generally speaking, social workers bring a wealth of theoretical knowledge on practice with various groups, which can be applied in many settings. Once on the job, social workers in child welfare learn a great deal of practical knowledge about child development, neglect, poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, substance abuse, and how all

of these factors interact and impact on children both in terms of their immediate safety and over the long term.

Protection workers learn very quickly how to balance risks and protective factors in every situation. Protection workers integrate what they know about harm to children based on research, into their practice with families. Protection workers form relationships with their clients and gauge progress. They determine how much change is enough, weighing many variables simultaneously. When it is determined that a child cannot remain with his or her family, the protection imperative is to establish permanency with another family. It often takes a while to reach this conclusion. A child may be placed in a foster home in order to mitigate the immediate risk while a parent undertakes to address the concerns identified so that the child may return. Sometimes, children are unable to return. Up until that point, a child may have been placed in a foster home on a temporary basis. When a final decision is made, the focus becomes that of permanency. But what exactly does that mean?

For some, this concept is clear cut, and can be equated with adoption. It is generally understood within the field of child welfare that adoption, because it is intended to last a lifetime, results in fewer placement breakdowns and moves for a child, which is obviously desirable and beneficial. I encountered a permanency planning dilemma during my placement where the child had, for the first time in her life, experienced consistency, unconditional love, trust, and had formed a strong, secure bond with her foster parent. But this foster parent was unable to adopt. Does this mean necessarily, that all of this will be disrupted because the value placed on adoption as a means of achieving permanence is higher than long-term foster care? And how do we support this if it means that the child may emotionally and psychologically be harmed as a result given what we know about attachment and separation, and there are no guarantees that a

potential adoptive placement will offer what the current placement offers? Sometimes, it seems that there is no good solution to the problems that present in child welfare.

In my view, each child and each situation should be viewed on a singular basis, taking into consideration the unique factors that are relevant. As a system, there is danger in blindly implementing a practice simply because it is the latest protocol. Instead, we should use all of the tools and knowledge available to us to make each decision, knowing that each decision will have profound and long lasting implications for a child. In the case of this young girl, there is an added complication in that there is no identified adoptive placement, so it would be unfair to speculate that she would not be better served in an adoptive home. If there was a suitable adoptive placement, much consideration should be given as to how to transition her to her 'forever home', and how to recognize the importance of her previous foster placement in the process of this transition, and in the maintenance of this relationship afterward for as long as she needs.

If anyone can bridge this gap between resource work and front line child protection, it is Daniel Nadon. Nadon is a 30-plus year veteran of the child welfare system, working in different capacities including child protection and resources. To add to his experience in the field of child welfare, Nadon is also a foster parent. In a presentation given by Daniel Nadon (2015) on "The Children Who Foster," Nadon identified a number of significant issues for resource families, resource workers, and front line protection workers alike, which highlighted the need for a more integrated and knowledgeable approach in working within the child welfare system. Nadon (2015) examined fostering as a family proposition having an impact on the children who foster, recognizing that the biological children are often overlooked within this dynamic. He described foster children as being different from other children, and emphasized the importance of an

understanding of this among child welfare workers. The majority of children in care suffer various long term consequences of abuse and neglect, and through the process of them coming into care, we can also add to that the impact of separation and loss on an already vulnerable population. Nadon (2015) argued that it is our responsibility as child welfare professionals to care for children, but also to ensure that our approach does not harm those who are doing the caring. Just as first responders are susceptible to compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995), so too are foster families in their daily caring for others with trauma.

Nadon (2015) advocated for workers within the child welfare system to acknowledge the impact of caring for foster children on those families and children who care for them. Workers often lose sight of the importance of considering resource families in planning and decision-making concerning children in care, and often view their families as an extension of the child welfare institution, rather than as families first. This may be due to the protection worker's detachment from the resource family by virtue of the involvement of a Child in Care worker. It may also be the result of lack of communication, experience, or insight on the part of individual workers. But considering that this experience is common among resource families, it is more likely to be the former; a systems problem.

In my opinion, many child welfare professionals adjust to what they see over time, and lose sight of the significance of moves for children and for the families who care for these children. I think we expect a lot from resource families. We acknowledge that caring for children in care is a very difficult job but, at the same time, we accept this as normal and expect that families will as well. Children who foster are particularly vulnerable because they are the least trained, least heard, least supported, least understood, and they live the experience of fostering and connecting with other children every day (Nadon, 2015). Children who foster can experience

anger, frustration, resentment and guilt. They may experience sadness because their family dynamic has changed. They have less time with their parents. Their parents may be depleted. The children may experience a loss of things they appreciated such as mom's baking or dad playing with them outside. Fostering can be confusing for children because their feelings may be discounted. The child welfare system does not do a good job of acknowledging the impact on children who foster when foster children leave their families. Although the importance of this realization is something that has occurred to child welfare professionals quite some time ago (Cohen & Westhues, 1990), it is something that continues to elude us as a general systemic practice.

Nadon (2015) indicated that child welfare professionals should acknowledge children's role in caring and the challenges that this brings. Workers can contemplate how adults process grief associated with separation and loss, putting into perspective what a challenge this can be for children. Parents who foster need to ensure that they also acknowledge the sacrifices and contributions that their children make to fostering. As an example, from very early on, children are taught that it is important to share. The underlying principal of this is equality. Children who foster are taught that they have to "share" their parents' attention, time, resources, and toys. Children can grow to resent this over time because the reality is that it does not feel fair anymore when sharing isn't 50/50 (Nadon, 2015). Children who foster can experience confusion and stress and can be impacted deeply by the foster children who come into their lives. This should not be dismissed nor taken for granted.

Sometimes, when resource families become burnt out, the child welfare system characterizes the family's various coping responses as 'resistance' or 'selfishness'. We are not always able to recognize this need, do not provide the necessary supports or do not have the

necessary resources to support the family. This often results in the home being closed. Our responses to resource families must recognize that they are families first, and not an institution, and our commitment to these families as an organization who supports children and families should reflect that. After all, these children and families are supporting and caring for some of our most vulnerable children. They require our support in order for their efforts to be successful, recognizing that the biggest impact we can have on a child who has experienced maltreatment, is to promote a positive attachment so that he or she may overcome this adversity in life.

In the next section I examine how permanence can contribute to children's resilience, through the process of providing the opportunity for a child to develop healthy, lasting attachment to his caregiver(s).

The Ultimate Goal of Permanence: Resilience

Ann Masten (1994) described resilience simply as good adaptation in the context of risk. In determining resilience, Masten (1994) considered the overall functioning and development of the individual, and exposure to some sort of threat to this functioning or development, in order to determine how well the individual responds to this challenge. Without the challenge aspect, an individual cannot be said to be resilient. Although Masten's (1994) contributions to the knowledge about resilience are still relevant, work continues in this area, and the definition of resilience has evolved since then. Ungar (2011) indicated that there has been a shift in focus on resilience being an individual trait, to one of ecological relevance, suggesting that "children's positive outcomes are mostly the result of facilitative environments that provide children with the potential to do well" (Ungar, 2011, p. 4). Resilience is, therefore, an especially important consideration for the field of child welfare where children are exposed to various significant

adverse conditions to a much greater degree than their peers who are not involved with the child welfare system (Gallwey, 2013).

Children who are brought into care can be said to have experienced traumas resulting from serious physical or mental injuries. These are often compounded by their removal, which constitutes a significant loss and separation for the child. Children who enter care have been exposed to at least one episode of maltreatment, but, in reality, the likelihood is that they have experienced several (Gallwey, 2013). I have often wondered about the traumatic effects of instability and uncertainty on children. For instance, children who come into care have already experienced maltreatment and separation and loss.

I work with one family whose children have been in our system for over one year on a 'temporary' basis. When children are brought into care, typically, the Society aims to establish a permanent plan from the very beginning of the process. Part of this planning may include a term of Society Wardship, granting the Society temporary care and legal guardianship over the child for a definite period of time. This can be helpful in establishing a time frame within which the Society can reasonably work with the parent toward a return of the child(ren) to their care. When the Society does not believe the child(ren) can return to a parent, the Society will make an Application for Crown Wardship. Because of the finality of such an order, Crown Wardship can take some time to achieve. There are instances where the court does not grant either status, and the child(ren) remain in the care of the Society under Temporary Care and Custody. This precarious status can be extremely anxiety provoking in children. I see it in this family: visits, particularly transitions at the end of the visit, are difficult for the children. Substance abuse and ill mental health have prevented their mother from being reliable, consistent and emotionally available to her children. When she is late or does not attend, this sends the children into a tail

spin because essentially, they feel she has abandoned them. They do not know how to respond because they are angry and upset with her that she is not there for them, while at the same time, they yearn for her. They have great difficulty problem solving and managing emotions because inside, they are falling apart. They are latency age children who still suck their thumbs, and who have extreme reactions (yelling, name calling, running, sobbing uncontrollably) to the smallest situation. Their sensitivity is so heightened that any little thing can become the most devastatingly significant thing. When children do not have a concrete sense of why they are in care, and when or *if* they may return home, it can be very difficult for them to manage all of these changes. And the reality is that even if we had all of the answers to give to children, this may not offer much consolation, because after all, they just want to be home.

So, how do we as child protection workers, foster resilience in these children and help sustain them through such a tumultuous time? We can start with a recognition of what it means for children to have been separated from their families and to remain in care. We can acknowledge the importance of swift planning for the family, and focus on achieving permanence so as to minimize the risk that the child's situation will become unstable again at some point in the future.

A key function of child welfare agencies is to promote resilience through the development of plans of service that attempt to mitigate risks through the establishment of protective factors. The concept of permanence is one that Cohen and Westnes (1990) argued was not entirely clear as for some the focus is on terminating parental rights as quickly as possible in order to provide children with stability and certainty about their belonging. Although it is generally agreed upon that the aim of permanency is to impose a timeframe in which to establish

children in stable, nurturing families where they can develop relationships intended to last a life time (Cohen & Westhues, 1990).

Gilligan (2006), in his work on promoting resilience and permanence in child welfare, reflected on the meanings of permanence. Gilligan (2006) stated the importance of considering permanence from the child's perspective, and indicated that there are two elements involved in this construct: stability and continuity. While the intention of permanence is undisputed, important questions about what it entails are raised with respect to the applicability and durability of this construct (Gilligan, 2006). For example, what is permanence and how do we assign its value to all children in care? And how do we ensure that the relationships that are intended to last a life time, continue to last beyond the child's placement into adulthood? Gilligan (2006) suggested the use of second-tier supports or additional relationships that would promote continuity for the child should primary relationships fail (which is undesirable but placement breakdown does occur even in adoptive situations). I found this interesting because often, in my experience, workers try to protect children from their families. Workers, although perhaps unintentionally, or unwittingly, sever many of the child's important connections through his placement in care and the management of this placement. Due to a lack of resource homes, children are often removed from their communities, transferred to different schools, and are completely uprooted through this process. Workers' responses to extended family are often that we have an obligation to limit the child's exposure to potential risks, and, as such, do not promote meaningful access between children and their extended families. We also tend to limit the number of individuals who attend visits, our justification for which is that the access visits (however frequent they may be – sometimes only once or twice per week) are really the parents'

time to strengthen and maintain their bond with the child, and as such, we do not want to infringe upon this time.

In reality, children need strong connections in foster care, and therefore, child welfare professionals have to develop a deeper awareness of the importance of this for children in care, and must be more thoughtful as to how we go about doing this in some meaningful way. Gilligan (2006) also spoke about the need for child welfare practitioners to be able to recognize and appreciate a child's ambivalence in care. The profoundness of this statement can be understood through Gilligan's concept of "double exile" (2006, p. 29). A child in care may face a future in which he feels no connection to either world, because of the severed connections with his family of origin, and a corresponding lack of new supportive systems for the child in care. All workers within child welfare, no matter what their function (resource, protection, child in care worker) have to be diligent about creating and maintaining relationships for children in care. In order to support and sustain children for life, child welfare practitioners must foster connections that will endure and could provide the child with options later in life. These connections are not prescribed but are unique to each individual child. A child may be anchored in education or in a relationship with a sibling or a talent that he or she has developed. They may find connections to people who have acted as a mentor, a support, or someone who is concerned about their well-being and validates them as a person. The more multi-faceted and integrated these connections, the stronger the impact on the child (Gilligan, 2006).

Brown, Leveille, and Gough (2006), in response to a child welfare symposium sponsored by the Centre for Excellence in Child Welfare (CECW) in Ottawa in 2004, considered whether permanence is necessary for resilience. There is an assumption within Canadian child welfare practices, that children are more resilient when they can be established quickly in a stable,

permanent home (Brown, Leveille & Gough, 2006). Some researchers do not necessarily support this and, as such, further consideration is required. For instance, resilience may be more a product of positive attachment than achieving permanence. Brown, Leveille, and Gough (2006) urged policy makers not to rush to permanence, to adoption, to extinguishing parental rights because it is important to be able to ‘test the waters’ in determining the best course of action for each child. However, there is evidence to suggest that positive attachment can promote resilience in children (Gallwey, 2013). Where there are opportunities to promote this, child welfare professionals ought to be able to recognize them and pursue them vigorously.

So what is permanence, and how can we achieve this in order to promote children’s attachment and resilience? Jones’ (2004) model of permanence is a three dimensional construct that encompasses emotional, physical and legal aspects. Not all of these are equally relevant to each child. In order to achieve permanence for a child, a determination of what each of these elements means to them, and how they can be applied, must be undertaken. Emotional permanence is described as that which promotes a child’s sense of belonging. Building connections for children in care is of utmost importance. These connections have been established when a child knows that they are in place, can trust that they will remain, and can visualize a future with the family (Brown, Leveille & Gough, 2006). The other defining feature of emotional permanence is for the child to develop a strong personal identity which is stable over time. The goal in achieving this sense of personal identity is that children are able to know who they are and how they fit into the world around them (Brown, Leveille & Gough, 2006). Physical permanence is essentially achieving stability in a living environment. As Brown et al.,(2006) have suggested, child welfare agencies place a great deal of importance on this aspect of permanency. Children may experience multiple moves until the agency finds a forever home,

one that is determined to be a good fit for the child. Brown et al. believed that moving children multiple times to find the right home may be less harmful than attempting to work out a placement that is less than ideal.

Legal permanence is that which is recognized by law. Of the three aspects of permanence, Brown et al. wrote that the emotional seems to be the most significant. Without emotional well-being, foster children may experience loneliness and isolation as adults. This is not the case for all children. The concept of permanency for children is as individual as each child is, and may be linked to a pet or an activity rather than an adult, and may change for children over time. The key is to create significant attachments that will be sustained throughout the child's life, promoting resilience. This is one application of a resilience framework in the field of child welfare.

Cohen and Westhues (1990) wrote about the dilemma facing workers when considering foster care for children as a permanent plan. As they indicated, the difficulty is that foster parents act as guardians on behalf of the child welfare agency, and in that capacity, feel no particular obligation to the child. Although I would not necessarily agree with this statement because, in my experience, foster parents can and do become attached to the children in their care. They also indicated that the agency creates barriers that hinder the extent to which they are able to form relationships with the children in their care. This can be a source of frustration for them. Perhaps most significantly, the statement above (pertaining to the foster parents' obligations to the child) best explains the logic behind the agency's support of 'adoption' as the preferred path to permanency for children in care. Because of the uncertainty created by lack of permanence, the family has not fully made a commitment to the child, and the child has not been completely integrated into the family. The child also sensing this uncertainty about his or her future, may not

be able to work through loss or form attachments (Cohen & Westhues, 1990). One of my main learning activities during my placement was conducting annual assessments of foster homes, which provided me with many insights as to the experiences of foster parents, particularly as it relates to the forming of these meaningful relationships with children, which in turn promote resilience.

Annual Assessments of Resource Family Homes

It has been my experience in conducting these assessments, that at least for long-term foster parents, the agency has an agenda during these meetings, which is usually to bring the resource parents on board with their agenda. If the resource parents are not aligned with the agency in its interpretation on the philosophy of care, they may be perceived as lacking competency, particularly in the area of working as a professional team member. It stands to reason that resource families must continue to demonstrate their ability to meet standards of care. Although these broad principles exist, how they are applied in real life situations is subjective. One worker may have a very different interpretation of these skills and abilities than another worker, but because the process of assessment involves a review of the previous assessment to determine areas of growth, and whether or not goals that were set have been met, previous assessments may influence subsequent assessments. Once an opinion of a resource family has been formed, it may continue to live on as workers' assessments tend to be supportive of one another. And despite frequent changes in workers, supervision tends to be more consistent. Therefore, some continuity of negative themes may occur as a result. Similar to a judge's ruling, there are basic principles that inform decision making. Unless it is determined that a judge has erred, a decision will not be overturned. It is for this reason we must be conscious in our decision-making practices in terms of what knowledge informs these outcomes.

Attachment and Culture

One of the annual assessments I conducted during my field placement involved a foster family who seemed to present many challenges for the resource department. The main difficulty I think was in the application of attachment theory which did not account for cultural differences. The solution is to avoid evaluating resource families' competencies against the standard of how families demonstrate attachment relationships within one cultural context (Mireki & Chou, 2012). Without an awareness of the family's cultural context, the family may be inappropriately identified as insensitive, as was the situation in this case.

The multicultural application of attachment, according to Mireki and Chou (2012), is informed by Ainsworth's (1967) cross-cultural study in Uganda which established the multicultural universality of the tenants of attachment theory. Ainsworth's (1978) work expanded on attachment theory by defining sensitivity, which is a caregiver's ability to determine when protection and comfort are needed, and to respond to these needs (Mireki & Chou, 2012; Ainsworth, 1978). This concept is applicable to all cultures. An application of attachment theory is that physical closeness becomes less important as the child grows and develops, but psychological availability of the caregiver is crucial in order for the child to develop and mature successfully (Mireki & Chou, 2012). As for this resource family, there were multiple indicators that the caregivers were attentive and responsive to the needs of youth in their care.

It was conveyed that this resource family was not necessarily working well as a member of a professional team (one of the core competencies of PRIDE training). They were lacking in the area of meeting children's developmental needs and addressing developmental delays (another core competency of PRIDE). I believe that this was a poor assessment of this family's capabilities, given that the cultural aspect was overlooked. This is supported by other areas of

their annual home assessment which shows a high level of competency (based on attachment theory) in determining when a child needs protection and comfort, and in responding appropriately to those needs. For example, the foster parents were warm and understanding when it came to placing children in their care. They even advocated for a child to be their only placement at a time when that youth was beginning to settle into the home and other aspects of his life such as school. The response from the resource department was that this family has been deemed appropriate for two or more placements and, as such, should have another placement. These resource parents demonstrated a genuine interest in children placed in their home and were respectful in terms of allowing the child the time he/she needs in order to feel more comfortable in their new surroundings. They encouraged communication and demonstrated acceptance. They were effective at forming trusting relationships with children in their care. These foster parents were very supportive of sustaining relationships with family, which is helpful for the youth in their home. It also provides the foster parents with a level of insight into what the youth is coping with. These foster parents also involved the children in their home in most aspects of their livelihood, which is farming. The foster father engaged the youth in this way and was able to have discussions with the youth. Hard work and learning new skills, participating meaningfully in doing jobs that are both challenging and rewarding, and having the support of a positive role model go a long way to helping the youth develop a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. These foster parents made their home a safe place where youth feel like they are part of the family. The foster mother prepared good home cooked meals, and they ate together as a family and would talk about their day. The foster parents encouraged the youth to discuss feelings and emotions about what was happening in their lives, and would share advice and comfort the youth when

there was a need. This way of protecting and nurturing children can have a lasting impact on child into adulthood.

As indicated previously, these foster parents were criticized for their ability to meet children's developmental needs. This criticism stemmed from their perceived lack of commitment to the youth placed in their care, specifically, for affording the youth too much responsibility in gaining independent life skills. These foster parents were judged unfairly from a Canadian cultural perspective, different from their cultural ideals, which promoted independence for children. The result of this is that they have been perceived to be insensitive, which in my experience working with them, is not the case. Their philosophy of care is one of supporting the youth to learn new skills and assisting the youth through this process, rather than doing things for the youth that they can do with encouragement on their own. These foster parents wanted the children in their care to navigate their transition to adulthood and independence with success, which is why they reinforced this practice and provided optimal support. Looking at this issue from a culturally appropriate perspective would enable the Society to work with this resource family differently and would yield a more favourable outcome, as at the time of my student placement, they were being identified as being 'uncooperative.'

The focus of the annual assessments has been, continually, to try to gain compliance from the foster parents. The message to the foster parents is that if things are not done as the Society dictates, then they do not have the capacity to meet Ministry requirements, and they are only "provisionally capable" of meeting children's needs. For all that this family does for teenaged children coming into their care, I imagine that this would be very difficult to hear. What these resource parents do for our agency is truly a gift, and the impact on the many children who have come to know them as family is significant. I have known some of the children who came to be

in the care of this foster family. One child, in particular, leading up to his placement, had great difficulty with family relationships and struggled to finish school. I believe that the care and support he received truly made a difference as he was able to complete his high school education and is employed. He maintains in contact with the foster parents and has also told them what a difference they made in his life. In terms of reinforcing a child's heritage and cultural identity (another of the PRIDE competencies), I question how we as an agency make a fair determination of foster parents' ability to recognize this need in children if we are not able to apply this ourselves in our assessments of foster families' parenting perspectives based on their cultural differences.

Stigma and Financial Issues

There can be a stigma (Blythe et al., 2011) attached to long-term foster parents. This is evident in the assumption that exists about long-term families, that there is an unwillingness to commit to caring for children permanently. While this may be true for some, resource parents who are willing to foster children are a valuable commodity. Not every resource parent is willing to take the emotional risk of taking a child in, getting to know that child, and then having to transition the child out of their home. When examining why a resource parent would be unwilling to adopt, what often occurs to people is that there will no longer be financial support, thus, the assumption that foster parents are motivated, at least in part, by money. While some foster parents would agree that fostering is a means of supplementing family income, the payment is not the determining factor for entering or remaining in the foster care system. Even though foster parents may feel they require more money in order to maintain their foster home, the monetary aspect is not a significant motivator (MacGregor et al., 2006). As MacGregor et al.

(2006) have noted, if foster parents perceived their compensation as adequate, this may validate the work that they do in caring for children, and may increase foster parent retention.

In my experience speaking with resource families, they reject the notion that people are financially motivated to become foster parents. While perhaps not every resource family is in it for the right reasons, resource families are not getting rich with the money they receive for children in their care. For the challenges that resource caregivers face, this arrangement would certainly not be seen as advantageous to the resource caregiver. There are significant rewards, but they are not monetary. The reward is helping a child in need or teaching life skills to youth to prepare them for independence and success. It is in forming a meaningful and trusting relationship, and having this connection for life. When this happens, the rewards continue, as the independent young adults remain in contact and celebrate their successes with their foster families.

The money, in terms of how it is broken down and allotted, is an interesting issue, particularly when looking at it from a structural perspective. While it may be a lot more than what a child may receive in his or her family of origin, it is the standard of care that has been assessed by the political and economic forces within the province, and mandated for the CAS to provide to children. What is interesting about this is the harsh discrepancy in the standard of support for children who are *not* in care within the province of Ontario. To my mind, foster pay is an institutional acknowledgement of the acceptable standard of care for a child, which is approximately \$1500.00/month at the present time. If this is the reasonable standard of care for a child, why do governments not recognize this need in all children, including those who remain with their families of origin? There is much discussion among anti-poverty coalitions in Ontario about the need for an increase in the minimum wage, access to affordable child care, and even

talk about a guaranteed minimum income. But rather than supporting families and children through these, or other like measures, the social safety net and even our economy has been eroded by neoliberalism. Access to full time and good paying jobs is now severely limited, with part time work characterized by minimum wage being the new norm. Additionally, cuts to social programs have been significant over the past three decades, resulting in deepening poverty (Aronson & Smith, 2011).

It has been my experience working in my protection role that biological parents can feel resentment toward foster parents. They may feel that with the financial support that foster parents receive, they, too, may be successful in caring and providing for their children. Biological parents may feel that foster parents want to keep their children as a means of collecting financial support from the child welfare agency. Biological parents, especially those who receive support from Ontario Works (social assistance), will especially notice the financial implications of losing a child, because they will no longer be eligible to receive benefits such as the Canadian Child Tax Credit and the Universal Child Benefit. This, for some, may represent a loss of approximately 1/3 of an already limited income. These losses for families make it very difficult to maintain what they do have in order to work toward a return of the child(ren), and may in turn create more barriers. For example, if a parent was living in a three bedroom housing unit at the time his or her children were apprehended, the housing authority may decide that the parent is no longer eligible for such a unit, and may require the parent to move to a one bedroom unit, which will not be suitable for the parent and the children should they return.

It has also been my experience in working within my protection role that fathers are marginalized by the child welfare system. While mothers may bear the at times unfair scrutiny for their circumstances, fathers, whether absent or not, are often discounted as being unimportant

contributors and as such, are not actively involved in the protection work. Engaging fathers has been an interest of mine for the past three years in my role as a child protection worker, and something that I continued to explore in my role working with resource families.

Fathering Initiative

My final learning objective in my student placement was to bring knowledge of the importance of father engagement to the resource community. Prior to beginning my placement as a student, I was involved in a fatherhood initiative within the agency, in my role as a protection worker. A few of my colleagues and I attended training in 2011 on the importance of father involvement in the lives of children. From that training, those of us who went decided that we should strike a committee within our organization in order to promote awareness within our own agency (to front line staff in particular) and continue to spread a positive fathering message as an organization. Engaging fathers is an important part of the work that we do within the field of child welfare, given the ways in which child welfare agencies can sometimes systematically dismiss fathers. The naming convention with respect to file openings is an example of this. When a family becomes involved with a child welfare agency in Ontario, the file opens automatically (for the most part) under the mother's name. Workers often select mothers as their targets for communication as typically they are more readily available, styles of communication are more receptive, and meetings with mothers are typically conducive to working cooperatively. Generally speaking, fathers tend to be more avoidant, hostile, absent, and disengaged. In an environment of work overload, workers tend to engage with the family members who are more inclined to call back, be present at meetings, who can respond to questions about caregiving, and who are responsible for other aspects of the child's life.

It is mothers who tend to be most actively involved in the day to day parenting and managing of the child's school and other activities. Mothers are typically the point of contact for the school and other social agencies as well. In instances where domestic violence has occurred, it is the imperative of child welfare organizations to work to engage fathers in order to address these concerns. While father engagement can be especially difficult where there is domestic violence, even where there is not, fathers often feel unheard or unwelcome, especially if their ideas are different from mothers. It can be difficult for fathers to step into what has been strongly reinforced as a mother's realm. Mothers, foster parents, and the child welfare system as a whole are regarded as the epitome of authority and knowledge on parenting. When parents become involved with this system, it's usually because some aspect of their parenting has been called into question, and our involvement is perceived as punitive. From this perspective, it is difficult to engage and to want to be involved when you've been told that what you've been doing is wrong and you're under constant scrutiny.

My placement within the resource department provided a unique opportunity to share this message about the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children with the resource community. Initially, my thought was that working with foster parents may promote more involvement between foster fathers and foster children, as well as enhance foster parents' understanding of the barriers to father involvement with respect to children's biological fathers. After presenting material on father engagement, the foster parents had some important insights in terms of the barriers imposed on them by the child welfare system, which I had not previously considered. Their insights raised some fundamental questions about the kinds of interactions we promote as an organization, especially around what knowledge and beliefs guide these practices.

Specifically, the foster parents highlighted the discrepancy between the messages being promoted by Dad Central Ontario, and those they receive from the agency.

Dad Central Ontario has lauded dads' rough and tumble play, identifying how these interactions benefit children (and fathers, mothers, and the broader community). Active play promotes attachment that might otherwise not happen, on the basis that this is how fathers tend to interact with their children, through play. The message from the CAS is that foster parents, especially foster fathers, should not "wrestle" or "play fight" or have this sort of physical contact with foster children. I think the underlying presumption is that avoiding this contact will protect foster families from allegations – and that "wrestling" can be misconstrued as something inappropriate, which the organization does not want to promote, particularly given children's past history or trauma which we may not fully understand.

Given the overwhelming evidence in support of these kinds of interactions between parental figures and their children, I think we need to be critical of our stance and figure out what research or knowledge informs the position of the CAS, and perhaps re-evaluate it. I found it so interesting that they would point this out because it is just one more contradiction that foster parents experience within the child welfare system. They are supposed to love the foster children like their own, but in foster parents' own words, "They'll [CAS] remind us all the time how they're not ours. Foster parents are supposed to treat biological and foster children the same, but can't wrestle and play the way they would their own."

While bonds between male caregivers and children are not formed exclusively through wrestling, they are formed through activation and play. There are other ways to promote this. For example, male caregivers can show safe affection, and can get involved in active play such as tag or sports, or outdoor play that is not confined to small spaces. The child welfare stance on

physical interactions between male caregivers and their children is an area of child welfare practice that warrants further exploration. We need to challenge our perceptions of the dangers of these kinds of interactions. Our bias that makes women more trustworthy in these circumstances on the basis that they are women. The current practice may be limiting the ways in which children in foster care develop attachment and regulate emotion and cognition.

Foster fathers may have an important therapeutic role to play in helping a child adjust to a foster family. Cohen and Westhues (1990) found that within the context of resource families, foster or adoptive mothers tend to suffer more stress in establishing a connection with the foster child. This particularly happens with those children who have special needs and have suffered rejection, abuse or neglect by the biological mother. These children may have difficulty forming a new relationship with a mother figure (Cohen & Westhues, 1990). Cohen and Westhues (1990) showed that there is an important role for fathers to play within resource families. Fathers have the ability to step into what would typically be described as the mothering role, in order to begin to build trust and establish a relationship with the child. Cohen and Westhues (1990) described that the father would remain in this role until the bond between the resource mother and child begins to develop. The father in this instance would have an additional supportive role to play with the mother, reassuring her that she has not failed as a mother (Cohen & Westhues, 1990), as this may be what she is feeling after her expectations of being a primary caregiver to this child have not been met.

What I have learned from my involvement in this fathering initiative is that involved fathers make an important differences in the lives of their children. Beginning in the 1980's, researchers began to explore the impact of father's increased involvement on children. The results of this were "remarkably consistent" (Lamb, 2002, p. 7). Children with highly involved

fathers possessed greater cognitive competence, increased empathy, held fewer sex-stereotyped beliefs, and had a stronger internal locus of control (Lamb, 2002). Greater involvement of fathers in multiple aspects of their children's lives is related to better social, emotional, and physical health for children (Carr & Springer, 2010). Positive father involvement has a huge impact on men in general in terms of their own adult development, but also on their partners in the co-parenting relationship, and on all aspects of child development (Allen & Daly, 2007). Outcomes for children can be so profoundly improved by positive father involvement, and because child protection workers are uniquely positioned to engage with fathers and create opportunities for father involvement, this work is extremely relevant for child welfare practitioners.

Increasingly, fathers are becoming more involved in the task of caring for children. Fathers generally want to be involved in more ways than ever before, but often do not know how (Russell, 2011). They struggle to find ways to become engaged, may not know how to become engaged, or perhaps are not even allowed to engage (Russell, 2011). Mothers can act as gatekeepers, as they are assumed to possess some natural instincts guiding and solidifying the bond between mother and child. Mothers may not have confidence in fathers' parenting ability or fear the loss of control over their domain (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; DeLuccie, 1995; Seery & Crowley, 2000).

Among investigators in Canada who have taken up this issue, Bouchard and Lee (2000) and Doucet (2006) have addressed the maternal influence on the father role (sometimes construed as maternal gatekeeping) and elucidated the tensions for fathers' involvement created by the interplay between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. Expanding this critique to a deconstruction and unlearning of "the good mother" script may also be an important step toward

getting beyond the constraining binary of mothering and fathering, and realizing new possibilities for positive parental involvement with children” (Ball & Daly, 2012, p. 15).

Despite many masculine stereotypes aimed at fathers, fatherhood is unexpectedly fragile (Russell, 2011). While there are a number of factors that can influence a father’s relationship with his child, one of the strongest influences is the father’s relationship with the mother. Fathers often withdraw from children when they are not getting along with the mother (Russell, 2011). Also, separation and conflict tends to affect fathers’ relationships with children more so than mothers’ (Russell, 2011). Fathering esteem is also a factor. The more confident fathers feel, the more likely they are to be involved. Fathers also bring their own experiences of fathering to that role. With that comes the trans-generational impact of family relationships (Russell, 2011). What do they know about fatherhood from their own experiences as a child? How did they navigate the transition to fatherhood? Were they ready to become fathers? What did that entail? These are questions that can help workers in the process of engaging fathers in the work of child protection, to understand what their experience of fatherhood has been. Allen and Daly (2007) indicated that there are several studies on the impact of father involvement on the lives of their children cognitively, emotionally, socially, and physically.

For instance, cognitively, children who have involved fathers are better problem solvers, have stronger communication skills (Rowe, Cocker, & Pan, 2004), demonstrate higher academic achievement, greater career success and psychological well-being (Nord & West, 2001; Amato, 1994; Barnett, Marshall & Pleck, 1992; Flouri, 2005; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Harris, Furstenberg & Marmer, 1998; Snarey, 1993). Emotionally, children develop stronger attachment with their fathers, are more resilient in stressful situations, more curious and ready to explore, relate more maturely with strangers, have fewer instances of depression and emotional distress

and have a greater ability to take initiative and be self-directing (Cox, Owen, Henderson & Margand, 1992; Biller, 1993; Pruett, 1997). Socially, children have a greater ability to interact and relate to others, have more confidence, have positive peer relationships characterized by less conflict and more generosity, and less negativity and more reciprocity, stronger relationships with siblings and more tolerance and understanding (Hooven, Gottman & Katz, 1995; Lieberman, Doyle & Markiewicz, 1999; Lindsey, Moffett, Clawson & Mize, 1994; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). These influences also help build character and empathy. Allen and Daly (2007) stated that “[t]he strongest predictor of empathic concern in children and adults is high levels of paternal involvement while a child” (p. 6). Allen and Daly (2007) also pointed to the research of Beradette-Shapiro, Ehrensaft and Shapiro (1996), Koetsner, Franz and Weinberber (1990), Lamb (1987), Radin (1994), and Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957), crediting them with this notion of there being a link between the development of empathic concern and father involvement. Lamb (2002) wrote about the issue of father involvement concerning the absence of fathers. Specifically, he was looking at children of parents who were separated or divorced. Lamb (2002) acknowledged that, “Fathers cannot be assumed to be psychologically and emotionally absent just because the parents are separated/divorced and the men no longer live with their partners” (p. 6). Growing up without a father does not mean that every child will encounter developmental issues (Lamb, 2002).

So how do we account for these differences? As Lamb (2002) explained these differences may be the result of emotional harm resulting from periods of conflict, strain and hostility leading up to a divorce or separation. The absence of a co-parent can also contribute to this phenomenon. Having someone to depend on, to make decisions, give breaks and offer support in raising a child can only strengthen and enhance intra-familial relationships. The absence of a

father may also imply financial stress. Economic stress is often accompanied by emotional stress. Developmental issues in children may emerge due to the fact that fathers perform multiple roles (economic, social and emotional), which, without them, may be inadequately fulfilled. Lamb (2002) also indicated that children benefit from having two highly involved parents rather than just one, as this offers diversity of stimulation through interaction between the child and each parent's individual style of parenting. Paternal involvement may also increase parental fulfillment, contributing to warmer and richer relationships (Lamb, 2002).

Emotional regulation is an important skill for children to develop as it is essentially the building block for emotional and cognitive development. The absence of this has significant consequences for children that can last a life time. Fathers help teach their children about emotional regulation through rough play. This kind of play can assist the child in dealing with aggression, and can teach boundaries and resilience (Russell, 2011). The child can learn impulse control, self-soothing and can further develop motor skills. For fathers, attachment is created through play and might otherwise not occur as this is how fathers tend to express themselves and engage with their children (Russell, 2011). Activation and play is stimulating for children and encourages growth and development. Children who learn to engage in this way are less likely to bully and to be bullied. They learn what is acceptable and what isn't through rough and tumble play (Russell, 2011). Letting a child win also teaches that resilience pays off (Russell, 2011). Self-regulation is key for children to develop the ability to get along with others and for learning success. Everything comes easier when children can regulate their own attention and focus on learning.

The implications of father involvement for the child welfare system are huge, as many of our children and families struggle daily living in poverty. We know, based on the significant

contributions of health sciences research, that our environment and access to resources (social determinants of health) greatly impact our ability to achieve our overall potential. When we pair this with neurobiological research on the effects of grinding poverty on brain development, it is evident that the daily insult of stress impairs brain functioning and development in the same way as we understand conventional injuries such as direct physical trauma to the head, or emotional trauma from exposure to domestic violence. Chronic stressors such as living in poverty, living with a mentally ill or chemically dependent parent, and/or exposure to domestic violence, can impair children's ability to develop cognitively and emotionally (Boyce, 2013; Greenberg, 2013). If children are not able to develop impulse control and regulate their emotions, they will have a difficult time functioning in life. As child welfare professionals, we can be promoting children's cognitive and emotional development through the use of programs (such as Triple P) that combat the effects of poverty and other stressors by teaching resilience and emotional regulation.

We can be promoting positive father involvement, and providing education to families, service providers and community members about the importance of fathers' participation in the lives of their children. Not only does this benefit children and mothers, it significantly reduces the likelihood that children will be brought into care just by increasing the number of adults who can be a support to a family unit, and children in particular. If we do not engage with fathers, the potential of this relationship and the positive impacts on children will not be realized, but also, half of the child's extended family (paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other important family members) may not be actively engaged and supporting of this family.

As Scourfield, Cheung and Macdonald (2013) wrote, interventions for fathers involved in child welfare services is a recent development in the literature concerning father involvement.

Scourfield, Cheung and Macdonald (2013) also acknowledged that fathers make an important difference in the lives of their children. Scourfield, Cheung and Macdonald (2013) indicated that there has been a recent shift to include fathers in various family services. Scourfield, Cheung and Macdonald (2013) identified the 'polarizing' effect of gender politics on the topic of father involvement, with woman abuse on one end of the debate, and father's rights on the other. They also pointed out that there is a lack of literature on interventions with fathers. Scourfield, Cheung and Macdonald (2013) found that incorporating teaching methods appropriate for fathers, and using targeted approaches rather than universal approaches are strategies that assist in effective recruitment of fathers to services. Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey and McMaugh (2014) identified that there is very little research on fathers' involvement with child welfare services. They further indicated that there is a perception of fathers within child protection families, that they are uncommitted, uninvolved, and unable to change (Zanoni et al., 2014). They found that contrary to this view, fathers involved with child welfare services were committed, involved, and (often) no longer using substances. Zanoni et al. (2014) examined the need to inform practices of father engagement within the field of child welfare, and for workers to develop an further their understanding of these men and the challenges they face.

Similarly, Dominelli, Strega, Walmsley, Callahan and Brown (2011) examined fathers' experiences within the Canadian child welfare system, acknowledging that they tend to be excluded and are 'invisible participants' within the system. Dominelli et al. (2011) indicated that fathers, whether biological or not, generally want to be involved, and spend much of their time trying to convince workers that they're 'good enough' and could be trusted to care for their children. The importance of this study by Dominelli et al. (2011) is in the finding that there continues to be a lack of recognition of the importance of fatherhood, and a lack of confidence in

men's skills as 'good fathers'. This standard of requiring proof exists with respect to fathers, but is not applied against mothers, who are assumed to be capable (unless proven otherwise).

Thompson (2013) wrote that "the [child welfare] system treats fathers more severely and with greater suspicion (2013, p. 11), and that "child welfare agencies favour the mother as the caregiver and focus of the services, [while] [f]athers are viewed as unnecessary or dangerous despite evidence of the benefits of their involvement" (2013, p. 1). This represents a significant problem within the field of child welfare, in that the children may be unnecessarily coming into care on the basis of workers' assumptions that fathers are not equally capable as mothers to care for their children, and must prove this to workers before they will be permitted to do so. This applies to fathers who are single parents, but also in cases where the father has a partner. It can also occur when men (who may or may not be fathers already) are seeking to become involved with mothers and their children; the Society can be very sceptical about their involvement with mothers and their children due to their vulnerability. As Thompson (2013) wrote,

"Malm et al (2006) found in cases with non-resident fathers that over 70 percent of caseworkers viewed father involvement as positive for the child's development, but barely half felt that the father wanted to be involved in planning for his child. Only a quarter of the original sample [in Thompson's research] of non-resident fathers was identified as a placement resource for children. Issues preventing placement were similar to engagement barriers [in working with fathers]: criminal history, substance abuse, substandard housing, domestic violence, and prior abuse of a child. These issues are similar to reasons for removal of children from mothers, who receive and participate in services at higher rates than fathers" (Thompson, 2013, p. 13).

Finally, Canadian researcher, Jessica Ball (2009) examined how Indigenous fathers in particular were some of the most marginalized individuals in society, considering Indigenous father involvement against the backdrop of colonialism, which significantly diminished the role of the Indigenous father in the lives of his children. Ball attended to the fact that literature on fathering is largely representative of the experiences of the dominant culture of European descendants. Additionally, Indigenous fathers are excluded by mother-centrism in parenting programs and within the field of child welfare (Ball, 2009). Most significantly, “it is generally acknowledged that most Indigenous men and women in Canada are either survivors of residential schools or have suffered ‘secondary trauma’ as a result of being born to parents who lacked parenting role models” (Ball, 2009, p. 7). One hundred years of residential schooling has resulted in a significant disruption of the attachment process between children and parents, and of children’s exposure to father role models, leaving many Indigenous men, upon becoming fathers “to venture into a role and a set-up of relationships that have little personal resonance” (Ball, 2009, p. 8). Ball (2009) undertook this study of Indigenous fathers’ experiences in order to contribute to a better understanding of the diversity of fatherhood, to promote increased father involvement, and to contribute to a revitalization of Indigenous fatherhood. In doing so, Ball identified the significance of colonial past on Indigenous fatherhood today.

Ball (2009) described that through the process of residential schooling, many Indigenous people have no positive experiences of being fathered. The intergenerational transmission of fathering has been severely disrupted within this population. Indigenous children, who were raised in institutions, were not loved, hugged or kissed as children typically are. These children experienced many forms of abuse. Ball (2009) wrote that “Indigenous men have the highest rates of mental illness, addictions, and suicide among ethnic groups in Canada” (p. 16). The low self-

worth that was generated by these experiences represents yet another obstacle for Indigenous fathers in feeling confident enough to explore their abilities as fathers, where they have no frame of reference to begin with. Ball (2009) discovered, in the sharing of their experiences, that some Indigenous fathers were left to search for 'clues' as to how to effectively parent and interact with their children. These clues came from sit-coms on television, and also through women's coaching and encouragement. Interestingly, Ball (2009) wrote that despite their limitations, very few Indigenous fathers blame women for the barriers they experience in being involved fathers, unlike their non-Indigenous counterparts. Ball (2009) noted some Indigenous men found that children were a part of their healing journey. Playing with their children helped them to process the loss of their own childhood. Because of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care, and the frequency with which Aboriginal men are underrepresented within their families (and other social institutions such as education and employment, which has led to poverty and increased disenfranchisement), Ball (2009) argued that there is a strong need for specialized programming for Indigenous fathers.

Conclusion

Using a critical and social constructionist point of view, I have examined attachment (and separation) as one of the main theoretical underpinnings that informs decision making within child welfare. Through this process I have come to think that if we, as practitioners, learn to deconstruct other theories and bodies of knowledge in this way, rather than accepting them unquestioningly, we will be more able to understand the lived experience of each individual we connect with in order to help in a meaningful way. This learning would not have taken place for me without direction and support to explore what theories and knowledge inform my practice, and to become more reflexive and critical in my approach. This I see as the value of clinical

supervision. Without this critical exploration of our practice, we risk becoming routinized in our responses, and may unknowingly stray from our core social work beliefs, or stagnate, as critical reflection promotes growth and personal development.

Chapter Four - Conclusion

Critical Practice, Critical Practitioners

I utilized my placement within resources as an opportunity to develop a more conscientious approach to my practice, both within the placement setting but also as a protection worker. Although the resource role was completely new to me, I saw it as another facet of the work that I am very familiar with. It is my belief that having a rich understanding of the child welfare system prior to my introduction to the resource role, has allowed me to be more critical in my understanding of the overall functions of this department within the broader child welfare system.

To begin the process of becoming a more reflexive and informed practitioner within the field of child welfare, a great deal of consideration has been given to identifying who our clients are in child welfare, and what are some of the characteristics of this population. Most obviously, children are our clients. They come to our attention because they have been abused and neglected. But taking care of children implies taking care of their families as well, because children are vulnerable and are dependent on their families. When children are placed with families who foster, we have to be sensitive to their needs as well. It is for this reason that as an organization, we have to make a commitment to attend to the needs of parents and families in all of the instances they present to us in this line of work. In my experiences, most parents don't deliberately harm their children. Many of the families we serve struggle every day because they are living in poverty. Poverty is a significant factor in determining risk to children, which is not surprising when we consider the social determinants of health, and how virtually every aspect of a person's life is affected when the person lives in poverty. Working effectively within such a difficult system, and under very challenging circumstances, requires a great deal of knowledge

and experience; and integrating theory and practice, especially in the field of child welfare, is easier said than done.

Tanner and Turney (2002) indicated that social workers must achieve research literacy, which is not easy to do as workers in the field, especially in child welfare, where we tend not to have the “luxury” of time to reflect on our practices and engage with research and other knowledges that inform practice. Research literacy is really about developing an understanding of the importance of relevant research on practice. It is the ability to locate and draw on relevant research to inform practice, an awareness of the different approaches, and an understanding of the strength and limitations of these approaches. Most importantly, it demands the ability to distinguish between strong and weaker research papers to be able to use the available data with confidence to inform practice with children and families in a meaningful way. This is probably accomplished best by graduate students who are developing or furthering their practice in the field of social work, and are focused on the integration of research and practice. For child protection workers, particularly those who enter the field as young and inexperienced workers, this can be a real challenge.

For new workers entering the field of child protection, this may be the first time they have grappled with some of the fundamental issues that the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) represents. What do individual workers believe about rights of parents and intrusiveness of the agency? What do new workers know about court processes, permanency or concurrent planning, which are outlined by the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), and must be integrated into the daily work of child welfare professionals? How do workers answer questions for parents and support children when they, themselves do not know the answers? In my experience, there is a significant learning curve that takes place over the first one or two years, during which, new

workers are just trying to figure out what it is that child protection workers do as they fulfill huge obligations and assume responsibility in the process.

What is most shocking to me is that new workers are thrown into these positions, often without any experience in the field, and are left to find their own way as there is no real opportunity for job shadowing (prior to taking on responsibility of their own cases), and new worker training often occurs months after the worker has been assigned a caseload and has begun the work of child protection. New worker training is not offered on an individual basis, but on a regularly scheduled basis. As such, a new worker may have been on the job for months already, and not have had opportunity for training. When new workers arrive, they often receive a waiting caseload from a departing worker, full of people anxious for their new worker. And although we know better, or we ought to know better, new workers often get inundated with cases at a time when they are getting acquainted with their new role, and are away for extended periods of time at new worker training, amplifying the stress of child protection as a new worker. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is such a high turnover rate within child protection, and that many workers leave before their second anniversary. New workers may be susceptible to burnout and compassion fatigue. With a poor introduction to the work, and big expectations on them to perform within a system that they do not fully understand, they may experience challenges beyond their capacity to effectively address.

Moreover, turnover and an inexperienced workforce can have devastating irreversible consequences for the families we serve. Retention of a highly qualified and trained workforce is of the utmost importance in the field of child welfare where the area of practice is so vast and complex, and demands considerable knowledge of various age groups, developmental processes, normal and abnormal psychology, addictions, intimate partner violence, and an arrange of other

difficulties families face; our understanding of which is constantly evolving. If we want to retain a qualified and experienced workforce, we need to change our approach to ensure that new workers are adequately prepared for the job. For example, other professions have extensive job shadowing which can last several months (such as law students articling); so too should child welfare professionals who carry an enormous amount of responsibility in this very difficult job. This shadowing period for new workers could encompass training opportunities prior to the worker undertaking this responsibility on her own. These opportunities should include new worker training, but also PRIDE training, in order to receive a proper introduction to the full extent of the job, which includes working with children in care and resource families.

Client Engagement in the Child Welfare System

One of the most significant barriers to client engagement within the child welfare context that I see (in addition to the conditions described above) is a systems problem. Quite simply, the timelines (in conjunction with the workload) are just not conducive to the process of enabling the development of a trusting relationship with the client. This is a prerequisite to collaboration in work efforts with the client especially considering the most central and unforgettable factor in this “trusting” relationship, that the worker has the power to take the clients’ child(ren) away. For example, following the initial investigation and assessment, a family who requires further monitoring and support will be assigned to an ongoing worker. This new worker is tasked with the creation of an outcome plan (as it is now referred to in the new Child Protection Information Network) that will serve as a concrete guide for the worker and the family to assess progress over the next six-month period. According to Ministry standards, this plan must be completed within 30 days of receiving the family’s file. Most often, a worker will have only met with the family once or twice prior to developing this plan. And yet, it is the expectation that these plans

are to be developed jointly with the family. Gaining trust, ensuring adequate support, having a presence in the lives of the children and families we work with, and meeting basic needs with concrete help, are strategies we can employ to overcome some of the constraints of the system (Saint Jacques, Turcotte, & Pouliot, 2009).

One of the most profound ways that we can help the people we work with is to help them build up their supports and to enable them to utilize their supports. The most significant barrier to implementing strengths-based approaches to social work within child welfare is the caseload size. In order to deliver services in a manner that is consistent with a strengths-based model, organizations must respond to the need for decreased caseloads. Tanner and Turney (2002) acknowledged that changes can be incremental and they may take a long time to realize. This purposeful work with families over the long term can be difficult to achieve when agencies are understaffed. When workers are strained, and are trying hard to meet their statutory minimums, they tend to prioritize their responses to the families they work with for their most urgent cases, leaving workers with no other option but that of a monitoring role with long-term families. This is when our interventions may be less purposeful, and families may fall through the cracks. Individual workers, through the process of clinical supervision, can develop research-grounded practice rather than routine responses. It is not easy to be reflective in a climate of heavy caseloads and limited resources. It is of the utmost importance that social workers develop ways of thinking that are critical, analytical and reflective (Tanner & Turney, 2002; Marlowe, 2015) so that our interventions are as effective as can be possible.

Depth and Breadth of Child Welfare Practice

I wish to acknowledge the field of child welfare as a vast and expansive area of practice. I also want to recognize that each of the areas of practice I have explored in this thesis are worthy

of their own thorough examination. One could research endlessly and still not achieve a feeling of saturation given the level of complexities, and the variety and interconnectedness of issues throughout the child welfare literature. It is not an easy task to explain the reasons why children come into care, how the child welfare system responds to the needs of these children, all there is to know about the families who foster, or the impact of caring for children on the children who foster (or the impact of this work on the families and children of child welfare workers, for that matter). This thesis cannot possibly do justice to, nor attend to all of, the complexities of the child welfare system, the workers who struggle within it, or the contradictions it poses.

Attachment theory is so engrained in our system, and yet seems lost in our practice when children move homes. Even when children move to forever homes, we have to recognize that this move represents a significant loss to the child. When we try to work with parents and support a return of the children, each move back and forth represents another loss and separation for the child to grieve, and has a significant impact on how the child will interact and form relationships with subsequent caregivers. In this sense, reunification constitutes an attachment disruption (Nadon, 2015). We know from the literature that children are resilient. Perhaps we want to believe that, as protection workers, we did the best we could with what we had, and, accordingly, the children we encounter will be fine.

We ought to know better because our experience working within the field of child welfare tells us that there is an intergenerational component to this work. Child protection alone cannot solve the pervasive problems of neglect and poverty. This is evident when we see multiple openings for a family over time, and the persistence of these issues despite our best efforts. Child protection work, if we are attuned to the subtleties of our practice, can reveal to us, perhaps more than any other social work position, the fundamental importance of social justice

through our first-hand experience with the negative and pervasive consequences of the politics of inequality. The insight that I have developed as a result of my practicum learning experience, for me, represents a tangible outcome of the learning goals I set out to achieve as a result of this process.

This thesis demonstrates the learning process and the achievement of each learning objective as outlined. My first objective was to expand my knowledge of fostering and adoption services within my organization. I accomplished this through my literature review, which provided me with valuable insights throughout my placement. I gained additional insights from learning opportunities within my placement such as my participation in PRIDE training (as a student and a trainer), and my engagement with the resource families I met while on placement. My second objective was to develop a more critical understanding of the theories and knowledge that we, as child welfare professionals, employ in the field. Through my examination of neglect, attachment, social constructionism, strengths-based, structural, and post-structural approaches in child welfare, I feel that I have developed a more knowledgeable and reflexive practice. I have come to understand and appreciate the relevance of clinical supervision to workers' ongoing development, and workers' orientation toward critical practice. My third and final objective was to transfer my knowledge of father involvement (which I have integrated into my protection role) to my learning experience within the resource setting. I incorporated insights I developed from my search for relevant literature on father involvement and the field of child welfare into my role in working with resource families. I was able to deliver training to foster parents on this topic, which revealed further contradictions within the child welfare setting. This reiterated for me, the importance of a reflexive stance in drawing attention to, and resolving tensions that arise in our

work. The achievement of these tasks is evidenced by the insights I developed as a student, and the integration of this knowledge as a child welfare practitioner.

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