

Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach

by

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## **Abstract**

Manitoba has the highest rates of children in care throughout all of the child welfare system in Canada. Manitoba's children in care are one of our most vulnerable populations, who rely on the systems and adults within their lives to provide adequate support to ensure positive life outcomes. Unfortunately, the outcomes for children in care in Manitoba are abysmal. One key statistic that needs immediate attention is the graduation rates of Manitoba's children in care – only about 1/3 of these children will graduate from high school (Government of Manitoba, 2016a.) School counsellors in Manitoba are teachers with specialized training in mental health and wellbeing and are well-positioned to work in collaboration with child welfare social workers who serve as the guardians to children in care in Manitoba. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, this study is based on interviews conducted with three Manitoba school counsellors who work with students in Winnipeg, Manitoba. School counsellors were interviewed individually and asked about their experiences and perceptions in relation to working with children in care and in collaboration with CFS social workers. Data analysis explored the experiences and key themes of Manitoba school counsellors working to improve the educational and life outcomes of children in care. Key findings included the necessity of and call for regular, intentional and ongoing communication between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers, the desire for changes to policies and practices between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers, and the overall need to address issues related to the funding and staffing of both Manitoba's Education and CFS.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to all of the young people whose lives have been impacted by Manitoba's child welfare system, in particular those with whom I've worked as a teacher and school counsellor. While I can't know for sure that this sort of research will lead to meaningful changes in your lives, I promise to continue to dedicate my work to you. It is an honour and a privilege to be allowed to sit with you and walk alongside you, if only for a little while.

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## **Chapter I – Introduction**

Manitoba has an incredibly high number of children in care – the highest in all of Canada. According to Healthy Child Manitoba’s 2017 Child and Youth Report, “10, 714 (3.5 per cent) of Manitoba children were in the care of a Child and Family Services agency” (p. 47) with Indigenous children accounting for nearly “90 per cent of all children in care” (Government of Canada, 2018b, p. 4.) While this number has been steadily on the rise throughout the past ten years, with numbers of children in care in Manitoba having increased by 85% (Government of Manitoba, 2018b), resources to support these children and families have not been increased, and worse still, face substantial cuts (Manitoba Liberal Caucus, 2019). What is even more concerning is that only about 1/3 of children in care graduate from high school, as compared to the nearly 90% of children not in care (Government of Manitoba, 2016a). In addition to the low rates of graduation, children in care are at higher risk for mental health issues, addictions, unemployment and poverty as they age out of care (Tweddle, 2007). These outcomes indicate significant deficits in our current child welfare and education systems. It is clear that the current models of service need to change in order to improve these outcomes for children in care.

### **School Counsellors’ Role to Improve the Outcomes**

As part of a broader solution that addresses systemic and structural issues in the child welfare and education systems, it is important to gain a better understanding of school counsellors’ perspectives and their roles in helping children in care. Furthermore, the impact of an intentional collaborative working relationship between school counsellors and Child and Family Services (CFS) social workers, who are the legal guardians of children in care, should be examined. This is because school counsellors have expertise in both education, child development and mental health. In Manitoba, school counsellors train first as educators and then receive additional training at the post-graduate level in counselling, specializing in child and adolescent development (Manitoba School Counsellors Association, 2002.) With their background and qualifications in education, school counsellors have a strong understanding of the school system and are readily available in school to provide individual support. With their mental health training, school counsellors work with students from a theoretical, therapeutic orientation and provide school-based counselling. School counsellors are well-positioned to help determine the needs for individual students, including children in care, and to form working alliances with their primary care providers, as well as with CFS social workers. Collaborative

efforts yield greater results when “effective child advocacy maintains an interdisciplinary approach” (Cascardi, Brown, Shpiegel & Alvarez, 2015, p. 6). It is crucial, given the abysmal statistics of children in care, the low graduation rates and associated vulnerabilities, that children in care have ongoing access to their school counsellor while at school. According to the Manitoba School Counsellors Association (2002), school counsellors “are in a position to call attention to situations that hinder the success of all students, and to provide leadership in identifying issues, assessing student needs and providing interventions.” In particular, Wirth-Bond, Coyne and Adams (1991) found that marginalized students who receive counselling supports have lower school dropout rates than those who do not engage in counselling.

To support children in care, a strong collaborative working relationship between the school counsellor and the CFS social worker is needed to create a more holistic level of support. Altshuler (2003) writes that “few mechanisms exist to support successful collaboration between public schools and child welfare agencies. One unfortunate consequence is that the children ostensibly being served by either system often end up receiving inadequate services from both systems” (p. 1). Through intentional collaborative efforts between school counsellors and CFS social workers, children in care may have the opportunities to be served adequately by both systems, with the subsequent potential for improved educational and life outcomes.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Understanding the Issue**

To understand the current issues in supporting children in care from the perspectives of school counsellors, I draw on Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (Srivastava & Beer, 2005) and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979; cited in Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). These two theoretical frameworks emphasize that strong and supportive relationships can be a protective factor in improving outcomes for children and are arguably applicable to children in care. Attachment Theory states that our self-concept and our ability to form relationships later on in life is heavily influenced by our earliest relationships (Srivastava & Beer, 2005). John Bowlby has stated “that healthy, happy, and self-reliant adolescents and young adults are the products of stable homes” (1988, p.1). This indicates the importance for children in care to develop a secure, stable relationship with a trusted adult, such as a school counsellor, to alleviate potential setbacks due to separation from their family and the potential instability that being placed into care can bring. In addition, Ecological Systems Theory informs us that children’s development is heavily affected by the different types of environmental systems in which they live and grow, and by the

interactions and connections between these systems (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). Not only does the immediate family environment (for example, within foster care) impact the growth and development of children in care, but the school which they regularly attend also influences and changes their overall experience. With these theoretical frameworks in mind, connecting the environmental systems and focusing on forming healthy, strong relationships within those systems, should improve outcomes for children in care. The working, collaborative relationship between the school counsellor and the CFS social worker are pivotal in forming these connections and improving the educational experiences for children in care, which can subsequently have a much wider impact on the life of the child.

Collaborative efforts involve communication, co-operation, co-ordination, coalition and integration of services (Horwath and Morrison, 2007). Ultimately, collaborative practices allow for existing, separate services to come together to create better outcomes. Children in care spend a substantial amount of time in school and are under the care of a CFS social worker. However, Manitoba's education and child welfare systems currently do not have a defined process of collaboration, although collaborative practices between the two systems have been strongly recommended by the *Manitoba Task Force on Educational Outcomes for Children in Care* (2016a). Collaborative efforts between Manitoba's schools and child welfare agencies can serve to create a much wider safety net for children in care and families facing adversity. By joining together, our province's services—education and child welfare—can focus on the whole child's ecosystem and potentially create more optimal outcomes for children in care.

### **Current Situation**

While there are a lot of good intentions in both Manitoba's education and child welfare systems, efforts are often disjointed. This is made clear by the poor outcomes and low graduation rates of children in care seen in Manitoba's schools (Government of Manitoba, 2016a). School counsellors and CFS social workers are not mandated by policies to collaborate in any sort of ongoing capacity. This means that these professionals are currently working in two separate systems. Without a roadmap for authentic collaboration, it is harder to yield stronger results for children in care in terms of educational successes and improved life outcomes. It is time for systematic changes in how we care for these young people, in and out of schools. As one anonymous respondent from the Government of Manitoba's 2018 report entitled *Transforming Child Welfare Legislation in Manitoba* stated: "Schools. Daycares. Churches and close

neighbours. [It] takes a community to raise a child” (p. 16). The Government of Manitoba’s 2013 document, *Education and CFS Protocol for Children and Youth in Care*, speaks to the basic need for CFS social workers and school personnel to collaborate “to provide the supports and/or resources necessary” (p. 18) for children in care.

### **Purposes of this Study**

As healthy relationships are fundamental to children’s well-being (Naglieri & Goldstein, 2011), in this study I aimed to better understand the perceptions of school counsellors in establishing collaborative relationships with CFS social workers. Specifically, I asked my participants about the following questions:

- What are your biggest concerns regarding the relationship between Manitoba Education and Child and Family Services? There are likely to be challenges when two large systems interact – what might be some of the barriers preventing collaboration between the two systems? What are the barriers with the education system? What are the barriers in the Child and Family Services System?
- Tell me about successes and challenges a school counsellor typically experiences when working with the child welfare system, child welfare case workers, foster and kinship care providers, families of origin and children in care.
- As a school counsellor, what do you think about the roles that trauma, grief and attachment might play in supporting children in care?
- What are the key elements (e.g., policy, support, or behaviours) to enhance school counsellors’ collaboration with child welfare social workers? What might authentic collaboration involve? What might be some of the barriers that could prevent authentic, ongoing collaboration between school counsellors and child welfare social workers?
- Describe the potential role of the school counsellor in improving outcomes for children in care. What should be done by school counsellors, in collaboration with the child welfare system, to have a positive impact on children in care at school? What kinds of supports and changes do you feel are needed in order to see more children in care graduate from high school?
- In what ways might a school counsellor be involved in supporting at-risk, vulnerable families prior to or at the early stages of involvement with the child welfare system?

- What are the key components and factors for school counsellors to have successful collaboration with the child welfare system? What impacts do you feel this collaboration could have on the life of a child in care?

Through my interviews with Manitoba school counsellors, I aimed to better understand the perceptions of Manitoba school counsellors with respects to children in care and education, and how school counsellors feel things could improve. Through this process, I hoped to gain a stronger understanding of what intentional, active collaboration between Manitoba's education and child welfare systems could look like from school counsellors' perspectives.

This research project is small, but meaningful. The conversation needs to begin somewhere, and my professional background and experiences as a school counsellor in Manitoba lend well to opening it with my professional peers. With the insight of even just a few Manitoba school counsellors, we can begin to uncover informative and important information speaking to the current problems that children in care face in Manitoba's public schools. I believe that this research can serve as a contribution to the growing body of research in Manitoba related to child welfare, poverty and education.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Attachment theory considers that our early relationships with our primary caregivers influence the ways in which we relate with others and perceive ourselves later in our lives (Srivastava & Beer, 2005). The roots of attachment theory can be traced back to the research conducted by John Bowlby, who “proposed that a child’s need for protection and proximity to its mother is as fundamental as its need for food or physical comfort” (Naglieri & Goldstein, 2011, p. 139). Bowlby explained that “for a person to know that an attachment figure is available and responsive gives him a strong and pervasive feeling of security” (1988, p. 26). In his work, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (1988) Bowlby writes:

A feature of attachment behaviour...is the intensity of the emotion that accompanies it, the kind of emotion aroused depending on how the relationship between the individual attached and the attachment figure is faring. If it goes well, there is joy and a sense of security. If it is threatened, there is jealousy, anxiety and anger. If broken, there is grief and depression (p. 3).

According to the theory, our attachments can be i) secure and healthy, or ii) insecure and unhealthy, in the forms of anxious or avoidant (Naglieri & Goldstein, 2011) or disorganized, which “has been associated with a variety of adjustment difficulties both in children and in adolescents [and] linked to aggressive externalizing behaviour” (Kobak, Little, Race & Acosta, 2001, p. 244).

Securely attached children know that they are likely to be held safely in life by a trusted caregiver, and are able to exist in “a relaxed state in which one can begin to ‘get on with things’, pursue one’s projects, to explore” (Holmes, 2012, p. 67). By contrast, children separated from their parents experience extreme feelings of pain and distress which has the potential to develop into “neurosis or delinquency in children and adolescents, and mental illness in adults” (Holmes, 2012, p. 62). More specifically, anxious or avoidantly attached children struggle with the need to create their own sense of security in the world, coping by becoming overly clingy or needy of others (the anxious attachment type) or by detaching from others altogether through shutting down or through acts of aggression (the avoidant attachment type), for fear of facing further rejection (Holmes, 2012). Disorganized attachment style may be considered amongst the most concerning type: these children tend to move between avoidance, anger and generally inappropriate behaviours, “for example, they might respond to their caregiver’s departure with inappropriate laughter followed by emotional collapse” (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2004, p. 580).

Attachment theory tells us that our early experiences in connecting to our primary caregivers help us to construct an internal working model, or an internal guidebook that maps our understanding of how relationships work (McWey, 2004) and how we might consider our own role within the world. Strong—secure and healthy—attachments at an early age help a child to form a persistent belief that key attachment figures will be readily and safely responsive and available, creating lasting impressions of security and stability (Cook, 1991). Cook explained that attachment behaviours are “innate to human beings” and that the “biological function attributed to attachment was that of protection” (p. 405). By investing time, energy and effort in building a strong attachment, caregivers help create an adaptive relationship codebook in the next generation (Cook, 1991). Bowlby’s attachment theory serves as an underlying model for understanding the relationship between a person’s early attachment styles and relational experiences and potential difficulties faced later on in life, be they related to academic abilities and school behaviours, mental health, addictions, or any other maladaptive functioning (Cook, 1991). Given the importance of having a secure and healthy attachment in early ages, the use of Bowlby’s attachment theory therefore helps us to better understand children and adolescents who do not have such an opportunity, especially among those who have been apprehended and are under the care of CFS agencies. Children who have been apprehended have been stripped of the opportunity to form healthy, secure attachments to their primary caregivers causing difficulty in forming healthy attachments to others in different contexts. Children in care face, on average, three placement changes during their time in care (Knauss & Geroski, 2000). With these many multiple transitions, children in care are further impacted in forming a strong secure relationship.

Manitoba’s children who are living in the care of Child and Family Services are assigned a social worker. They also continue to attend school in which there is often a school counsellor on staff available to provide supports. A review of literature on collaborative efforts and the distinct yet complementary roles of these two professionals – Manitoba’s school counsellors and CFS social workers – and gaps in collaboration will be provided, followed by the key review of literature regarding the current state of child welfare in Manitoba which informs this research project.

### **Collaborative Efforts to Support Children in Care**

**Current gaps in the support system.** Children spend a significant amount of time in school from kindergarten to graduation. One step in providing meaningful support to children in

care in schools is the formation of authentic, collaborative partnerships between schools and child welfare agencies. This is also consistent with the attachment theoretical perspective. School and child welfare personnel have the potential to act as safe adults in the lives of children in care, to create new and authentic opportunities for those with insecure attachment styles to begin to reframe their internal working models. Kinley and Reyno (2013) describe potential therapeutic impacts on insecure attachment styles, noting the importance of the therapeutic factors of cohesion, acceptance and presence. Too often, Manitoba's education and child welfare systems work in separate silos without recognizing the potential positive impact that we may have as a unified front; one that works toward common goals of health, wellness and stability for the child by being cohesive, unconditionally accepting and present.

In a collaborative partnership, the systems that serve the child can form a safety net for the child in care, a sort of enhanced circle of care model. Manitoba child welfare's existing Circle of Care document (2011) speaks to the practice and importance of collaborative efforts between CFS social workers, foster parents and kinship care providers. However, the document does not speak to the education system even once (Government of Manitoba, 2011). While children in care attend school, the existing model surprisingly does not mention school personnel or the importance of cohesive, ongoing involvement between the education and child welfare systems in promoting the well-being and positive outcomes of Manitoba's children and youth.

Altshuler (2003) advocates for the need for enhanced collaboration between schools and child welfare systems, suggesting that it is as though the two systems have difficulty seeing eye to eye when it comes to children in care. Altshuler (2003) conducted a study in Illinois, United States of America, to investigate the challenges for child welfare social workers teaming with school professionals. One child welfare worker stated that, "we need some sort of respect, a reciprocal respect for each other's professional job. Because it isn't there" (Altshuler, 2003, p. 59). The finding suggests that schools and child welfare systems struggle to work together in meaningful, collaborative ways, and that, "consequently, the children ostensibly being served by either system often receive inadequate services from both systems" (Altshuler, 2003, p. 52). In Altshuler's study, barriers included a sense of mistrust between those working within the education system and those working within child welfare (2003) with one participant stating that, "it just kind of seems like we're just fighting back and forth" (p. 55).

Altshuler's (2003) study is informative and highlights the importance to build a collaborative working model between CFS social workers and school personnel. The existing Manitoba child welfare Circle of Care (2011) model could readily couple with what is called the wraparound model in education, which is "in the emergent stage of implementation in Manitoba" (Bartlett, 2019, p. 850.) Bartlett (2019) describes the education wraparound model as "a highly collaborative process in which the needs of children and youth with mental health and behavioural disorders are addressed through the coordination and delivery of services, supports and resources" (p. 847). Bartlett (2019) explains that the wraparound model is based on the following guiding principles:

- Voice and choice
- Team Based
- Natural Supports
- Collaboration
- Community Based
- Culturally competent
- Individualized
- Strength Based
- Unconditional, and
- Outcome Based (p. 848).

The wraparound model (2019) that Bartlett describes could help to reduce the gaps between the systems of child welfare and education, providing a model in which the two systems can merge together in the best interests of children in care, with the goal of providing an integrated, holistic plan of support.

**Theoretical framework to address the gaps.** The divide between schools and child welfare systems is especially problematic when considering Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011), which explains that children's development is heavily influenced by the different types of environmental systems in which they live and grow, and by the interactions and connections between these systems. Bronfenbrenner used the metaphor of Russian stacking dolls to explain the influence that each system has on the child. The child is contained within multiple systems, including the "microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem that he defined as contexts in which child and youth development

occurs” (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011, p. 25). Bronfenbrenner’s “model allows us to theoretically examine the social setting of foster care, a child’s place within this social setting, its impact on child development and the importance of developing relationships with others” (Bruskas, 2010, p. 233.). Bruskas (2010) emphasizes that if children are to be brought into care, that careful attention to the social settings and the relationships within them can help to ensure protection and better opportunities for children in care, who are “vulnerable and disproportionately susceptible to poor outcomes in adversity” (p. 239).

While the existing Circle of Care model (2011) does not explicitly involve Manitoba’s schools in its discussion of collaborative efforts, both the school and the child in care’s foster placement exist within the microsystem and are ongoing components of the child’s daily life. The mesosystem is related to the relationships that exist among the microsystems – for example, the connections and relationships that exist between the child’s school and the foster placement or between the school and the child welfare agency. The exosystem refers to the social structures that are in place that indirectly influence the child’s daily life. Policies and structures related to education and the child welfare system may not be directly within the child’s awareness but certainly influence the path that his or her life will take. Finally, the macrosystem involves the culture in which the child exists and develops. More recently, Ruppert, Allcock and Gonsier-Gerder (2017) referenced a fifth environmental system called the chronosystem, which speaks to the timing of life events and circumstances. For children in care, a chronosystem might include the timing of apprehension, or the numbers of times that a child in care changes foster placements and, in many cases, school placements. These systems each play an important factor in the child’s ability to live a healthy and stable life and have a ripple effect on one another. When disconnect, conflict or tension exist between the systems, for example, between the school and the CFS social worker, between the school and the foster or kinship placement, between education and child welfare policies, between cultural beliefs and worldviews, or with inappropriate or untimely transitions or disruptions from a foster placement or from the school, the child’s ecological system is disrupted.

When we consider a child, who is potentially in survival mode due to early trauma and disrupted attachment, it seems especially important to create seamless cohesion within the ecological systems. It is up to the adult caregivers in the child in care’s life to work with peak levels of collaboration and care to ensure a sense of continuity in the child’s life systems. This

collaboration and care must be ongoing and vigilant throughout the child in care's experience to ensure that his or her quality of life and care is optimal, and to enhance outcomes for the child as they age out of care. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (cited in Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011) provides a theoretical lens for us to conceptualize the importance of including the school, as well as school counsellors, in the collaborative process of supporting children in care.

**Problems faced by children in care.** Research on the potential power of collaborative relationships from the perspectives of school counsellors is in part rooted in findings from the literature discussing the outcomes of young people who have aged out of care and into adulthood (Tweddle, 2007). The outcomes are quite devastating, begging the question of the validity of the current child welfare model. "There is almost universal agreement that the current system we have to protect children and youth is not working" (Government of Manitoba, 2018b, p. 2). Young people aging out of care face a myriad of difficulties, many related to having not completed high school. According to Tweddle (2007), many of the young people aging out of care deal with un or under employment, live below the poverty line and are more likely to experience homelessness. They are more likely to become a parent at an earlier age than are their same-aged peers. They are more likely to experience mental health problems, substance abuse issues and to be incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system. In consideration of these outcomes, one common goal that schools and child welfare agencies share is to improve graduation rates, as "completing high school can be seen as a major steppingstone towards successful adulthood" (Pecora, et. al, 2006, p. 225). To achieve this common goal, collaborative efforts should involve the schools in which children learn, develop and grow.

In 2015, the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) released a document entitled *The Educational Outcomes of Children in Care in Manitoba*. In the report, researchers found that some factors can potentially help to improve educational outcomes for children in care, such as regular attendance, kinship care, a higher socio-economic status and having fewer episodes of care (Brownell et al., 2015). Despite the aforementioned protective factors, the document also bleakly states that "the overwhelming story...is that children in care have fewer successes in school than children who have not been in care" (Brownell et al., 2015, p. xv). The researchers at MCHP implore for a reduction in child apprehension rates due to the severity of the negative outcomes associated with being raised in the care of the child welfare system. Their report

questions whether or not children in care can have the potential to do well in school given the existing systems in place, stating:

Many of the factors that result in children going into care are the very factors that can impair their development and therefore their performance in school: poverty, poor housing, parental addictions, and family conflict and dysfunction. It appears that the solution to improving the educational outcomes of these children is through intersectoral approaches: social services and education working together with community organizations, and in some cases, the federal government, to alleviate the conditions that lead to children going into care in the first place. Given that the vast majority of children in care are Indigenous, partnerships with Indigenous communities are essential (Brownell et al., 2015, p. xv).

While the situation is bleak, we cannot sit and wait for improvements – children in care deserve better than that. Our services need to respond to the current situation through collaborative or intersectoral approaches as described by MCHP.

MCHP's report paints a dire picture of educational outcomes related to children in care in Manitoba. Children in care are more likely to experience school changes due to changes in foster placement. They often miss school during these school changes and experience gaps in their academics. Children in care are more likely to be truant from school, and to experience suspensions and expulsions. Children in care are more likely to repeat grades and to be placed in alternative schools and special education settings. Children in care are more likely to drop out of school prior to completing grade twelve (Brownell et al., 2015). The call for education and child welfare systems to work collaboratively with the community to mitigate the need for child apprehension is particularly salient. This report also informs the current study which starts to look at school counsellors' perspectives on collaboration with CFS social workers.

**Collaborative practice.** Horwath and Morrison (2007) describe that there are five stages of collaborative practice:

- Communication: individuals from different organizations talking together
- Co-operation: low-key joint working on a case-by-case basis
- Co-ordination: more formalized joint working, but no sanctions for non-compliance
- Coalition: joint structures sacrificing some autonomy
- Integration: organizations merge to create new joint identity (p. 56).

These phases aptly describe the process of multiple agencies, such as education and child welfare, moving from a place of working as two autonomous entities to a proposed place of true integration of services, in which both agencies work jointly in a spirit of true collaboration. They

describe that “the highest degree of integration occurs when whole systems collaborate with regard to the planning, commissioning and management of services” (Horwath & Morrison, 2007, p. 56).

Children in care exist in multiple ecosystems (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). Their development is greatly influenced by their interconnected environmental systems in which they live and grow, and by the interactions and connections between these systems. The recognition of the “interconnected nature of child welfare issues and advocating the highest level of collaboration as a response” (Horwath & Morrison, 2007, p. 56) has become more prominently discussed, including in Manitoba’s data and discussion around the outcomes of children in care (Government of Manitoba, 2016a). The goal is to move from a place of communication, in which both agencies ultimately work in separate silos to support the child in care in individualistic ways, to integration or true collaboration of services. Here, “agencies sacrifice autonomy, work to shared goals and targets [and] focus on whole service” (Horwath & Morrison, 2007, p. 57). Collaboration at its optimal level casts a wider safety net for children in care, focusing on the whole child’s ecosystem, rather than working from a piecemeal approach with some communication between the systems.

**Barriers to Collaboration.** Collaboration can break down between the systems when problems occur, including “inflexible organizational structures, conflicting professional ideologies, communication problems, poor understanding of roles and responsibilities and mistrust among professionals” (Horwath & Morrison, 2007, p. 57). This type of conflict amongst the systems, this sort of stay-in-your-lane mentality, can have the potential to not only dismantle collaborative efforts, but can disrupt the child in care’s ecosystem, potentially causing or exacerbating negative outcomes for the child in care (Bruskas, 2010). Reducing conflict and improving collaborative efforts between systems involves a commitment to focus on the factors that unite the systems, rather than on what may divide them (Horwath & Morrison, 2007).

In the case of education and child welfare, the child in care is the tie that binds the two systems; we are united by our shared goals of improving outcomes for children in care. In Manitoba, there are certainly barriers that may at times feel in the way of improved collaboration. For example, in Manitoba, “staff turnover is a significant problem in the child welfare system” (AMR Planning & Consulting, 2015, p. 30). Manitoba’s CFS’ high rates of staff turnover can be attributed to “burnout, which in turn is linked to high case ratios, high

workloads, and the often unpredictable and stressful nature of work in CFS agencies” (AMR Planning & Consulting, 2015, p. 31). Collaborative efforts between the school counsellor and child welfare social worker will struggle and at times be halted with frequent or unpredictable turnover rates in the CFS social worker. When CFS workers are overloaded, collaboration with the child in care’s school team, including school counsellors, might be affected (Sterritt, 2018).

**The need for collaborative practice in Manitoba.** The Manitoba Task Force (2015) advocates for improvements in the communication and collaboration between education and child welfare systems, to ensure clarity in sharing school records and communicating the educational and personal needs of the child, with continuous check-ins and monitoring of progress. They recommend the creation of a student success plan similar to an individualized education plan for children in care to address any needs or facts that might impact the child’s ability to succeed in school.

The reality is, based on the existing literature and including the recommendations of the MCHP and Manitoba Task Force reports, that with the current state of affairs and existing service models, things simply will not get better without actively choosing to make changes to do better for our children in care. Manitoba’s schools and child welfare agencies must actively and mindfully choose to collaborate. Collaboration between the systems has the potential to improve the educational and overall life outcomes for our children in care, and to reduce the rates of children being apprehended in the first place. This collaboration could potentially stem from Manitoba’s schools developing a proactive mindset in supporting children and families as part of the Circle of Care model (Government of Manitoba, 2011) in collaboration with CFS. The emerging education wraparound model in Manitoba’s schools (Bartlett, 2019) may well serve as a roadmap for such collaboration between the systems. Manitoba has made a start on addressing the issues related to children in care, with the MCHP noting that “Manitoba has been a leader in intersectoral policies and programs” (Brownell et. al, p. 87) and with the province’s commitment to the Family Enhancement program as part of its 2011 Circle of Care model.

Specifically, Family Enhancement child welfare social workers work with vulnerable families to provide supports and keep families of origin together. Manitoba’s preventative programs have included the Families First Home Visiting Program which involves supporting parents of young children including mental health initiatives, as well as the Healthy Baby program which supports low-income parents with new babies (Brownell et. al, 2015). Most

recently, the Canadian federal government's introduction of Bill C-92, *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis Children, Youth and Families* (Parliament of Canada, 2019) suggests a time of major social change and decolonization of the current child welfare model; "reducing the number of Indigenous children in care continues to be one of the Government of Canada's most important priorities" (Government of Canada, 2019). With its passing into law, we will see the potential for Indigenous families and communities to remain intact, with self-governance and within culturally appropriate conditions (Government of Canada, 2019).

While these programs, services and the changes in line with Bill C-92 are an excellent start to creating social change and reducing the numbers of children in care, Manitoba's current child welfare crisis calls for more action. In the 2017-2018 school year, Manitoba's public schools enrolled 183,330 students (Manitoba Education, 2017). This implies a natural point of access for schools to provide supports and care to a large number of Manitoba's children and families. Purposeful and active collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies could serve to provide early, preventative supports to families who are in adverse or at-risk situations. Schools can act as a key component of the Family Enhancement model, if the two systems can agree to work in true collaboration. Schools and child welfare agencies can also collaborate to provide a more actively engaged Circle of Care model (Government of Manitoba, 2011) for children in care. Manitoba Education's vision statement declares the hope that "every learner will complete a high school education with a profound sense of accomplishment, hope and optimism" (Manitoba Education, 2017). This is currently not happening, in particular for our nearly 11,000 children in care. However, gains may be made with improvements to the collaborative efforts between the ecological systems at play – if Manitoba's systems of education and child welfare actively and enthusiastically work collaboratively, as was recommended by the *Manitoba Task Force on Educational Outcomes of Children in Care* (2016a).

Changes at both the school and child welfare levels need to be made. One point to return to is the non-existence of Manitoba Education within the existing Government of Manitoba's child welfare Circle of Care (2011) document. This document notes that "all children deserve the best care possible" (p. 3) and promises to create a circle of care by increasing communication between the key adults involved in the child in care's life. The document at no point mentions the school system as a part of the child's circle, ignoring the fact that the school is an important part of the child's ecological system (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). The *Manitoba Task Force*

*on Educational Outcomes of Children in Care* states that “efforts should be made to explore strategies within existing realities to bring systems together in developing the most efficient, responsible and mutually advantageous working relationships possible” (Government of Manitoba, 2016a, p. 18). The education wraparound model (Bartlett, 2019) that has recently emerged in Manitoba’s schools aims to support children and youth while including all key stakeholders, based in the “concept of unconditional care through needs-driven, individualized and flexible programming” (Government of Manitoba, 2013b). The wraparound model can certainly be looked to as a guideline for collaboration between child welfare and education – a sort of merging of the two approaches of the child welfare Circle of Care (Government of Manitoba, 2011) and the wraparound approach (Bartlett, 2019).

### **The Importance of Including School Professionals in the Circle of Care**

As secure, stable relationships and attachments are important for all children to thrive, it is not difficult to imagine that children in care will face additional challenges in life. Multiple, frequent placement changes substantially disempower children in care and further increase their sense of instability. These frequent moves create confusion and “feelings of powerlessness” (Knauss & Geroski, 2000, p. 154) for the child. A change in placement and in school represents yet another loss in the life of the child in care, exacerbating issues related to mental health, trauma and attachment. This is in connection to the more logistical difficulties of moving to a new school, including the initial registration process and paperwork involved, meeting new teachers and new classmates and adapting to a new set of norms and expectations. Teachers may be working through different sections of the curriculum than the child in care had been studying previously, and gaps in learning can create major obstacles for the child in care to overcome (Knauss & Geroski, 2000). While these logistical obstacles are problematic at the early and middle years of schooling, they become particularly arduous at the high school level, when students are no longer passed or promoted through grades, and failure becomes much more of a reality. Manitoba Education and Training (2019) indicates that high school students are expected to successfully complete thirty course credits in order to graduate with a regular high school diploma. This objective becomes increasingly difficult to reach when children in care are expected to move placements and schools midway through a semester.

**General roles played by school counsellors.** From the onset of school registration, an advocate from the school team is imperative in connecting with the child in care and remaining

as a constant source of support and connection throughout and beyond the school day, acting as a source of “protection and validation” (Ryzin, 2010, p. 132). While the classroom teacher will spend more time in general with the students, school counsellors are positioned to spend focused, intentional, one-to-one time with students, much like a CFS social worker aims to do with a child in care placed under their guardianship. The roles of a school counsellor and a CFS social worker are complementary to one another, with each serving as a strong adult advocate for the children in their care. Advocates for children in care aim to “empower or elevate the status of a child to promote his or her well-being and best interest” (Cascardi et al, 2015, p. 6).

School counsellors serve as “an advocate for students” (Government of Manitoba, 2007, p. 100) and are equipped with specialized training that includes counselling skills, counselling theories, ethical decision-making, record-keeping and information-sharing (Manitoba Education and Training, 2019). Through their professional organizations, school counsellors are also kept abreast of current issues and topics in counselling with opportunities for professional development related to pertinent issues such as mental health, trauma and suicide prevention and intervention skills (Manitoba School Counsellor’s Association, 2019). School counsellors are core members of the school team who have access to the entire student population, and “are concerned with the ‘whole child,’ responsible for his academic, career and personal/social development” (Walker, Shenker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010, p. 36). School counsellors also work in creative ways to connect with students, including, but not limited to, classroom visits and lessons, small group supports and counselling and one to one counselling interventions with students. School counsellors are frequently in the front lines of new registrations, a key component of intake meetings to form connections with new students and their caregivers. School counsellors actively serve as “school-based representatives who work to deliver programs and services to support all students via ‘individual planning’ in the school” (McKillip, Rawls & Barry, 2012, p. 50). Often the school counsellor will connect the student with their teachers and classmates and support with the basic logistics of being new at school – supporting with class selection, creating the course schedule and easing the student’s first day anxiety with a warm, compassionate approach. School counsellors often seek to meet the basic needs of the student at school, including ensuring that the student has had something to eat and has access to necessary school supplies and other basic needs. School counsellors proactively address potential mental health and behavioural concerns with new and existing students (Cory & Wiley, 2013). As

Astramovich and Harris (2007) discuss, school counsellors also play a role in working with disadvantaged students, arguably children in care, in developing self-advocacy skills that would be beneficial to their success. Furthermore, as a stable and trusting relationship is of utmost importance for children in care, school counsellors, who serve the entire school population, can provide stability to children as they transition through grade levels.

**Distinct contributions of school counsellors compared to other professionals.** In Manitoba, a school counsellor is required to have a degree in education and is strongly recommended and increasingly, in many school divisions, required to have post-graduate training in school counselling at the post-baccalaureate or master's level (Government of Manitoba, 2019b). In this way, school counsellors differentiate from school social workers, who are not required to hold a degree in education and have less overall training and background in education and the school system. School social workers are invaluable resources within the school setting and are frequent collaborators with school counsellors. School social workers typically work with select students who have been identified and referred for additional services (Phillippo, et al., 2017). Another difference between the school counsellor and the school social worker is in terms of accessibility to all students. In the Winnipeg School Division, for example, clinicians like school social workers are required to obtain parent or guardian consent prior to beginning any work with an identified student (Winnipeg School Division, Clinical Support Services Process Model, 2018). School counsellors have open, ongoing access to all students and are typically introduced at the point of school intake. With their combination of mental health training, their background in the education system and their open, ongoing accessibility to all students, school counsellors serve as a natural point of contact for children in care at school. The school counsellor has the unique positioning within the life of the child in care while they are at school to provide insights to the child's CFS social worker that can help to create a more fully connected, collaborative, and wraparound model circle of care for the child. The school counsellor has "been trained in leadership, advocacy and collaboration skills" (Walker et al., 2010, p. 36) and is a vital player in advocating for the child and for increased and ongoing collaboration with the child welfare agency. The school counsellor can serve as the school representative in improving and enhancing collaboration between the education and child welfare systems:

Working collaboratives between families, school and community services are a recommended intervention strategy for working with at-risk children. School counsellors can play a key leadership role in these collaborative networks. A collaborative intervention plan involving a mental health counsellor, school counsellor, social worker and the foster parents is necessary when working with children in foster care because of the highly complex layers of trauma and resulting needs for care (Knauss & Geroski, 2000, p. 155).

The key message is that collaborative practices can help to create better outcomes for children in care who are dealing with adversity. Beyond supporting with their present-day situations at school and in their current placements, collaborative practices between school counsellors and CFS social workers can help to create a better future for children as they age out of care and become adults.

Another major role that a school counsellor can play in the life of a child in care is that of early intervention, before an apprehension occurs and while the family of origin lives together. The Manitoba Circle of Care document from 2011 speaks to the Family Enhancement model to create “stronger families of origin” (p. 7). The school counsellor can support this model in collaboration with the family, the child welfare agency and the Family Enhancement worker. Schools have the innate ability to reach out and connect with families prior to their involvement with the child welfare system, or at the Family Enhancement level. School counsellors can be trained in family therapy and positive parenting practices and can provide support groups and training for families of origin as a preventative measure. In 2012, Eisner, Nagin, Ribeaud and Malti studied the impacts of positive parenting programs (commonly referred to as Triple P) in the school settings. Triple P is a training program that has gained popularity not only in working with families who are struggling but with reducing aversive child and adolescent behaviour (Eisner et al., 2012). It was developed “as a parenting and family support strategy that comprises varying levels of intensity [and is] amongst the most thoroughly evaluated parent training programs in the world” (Eisner et al., p. 253). School counsellors trained in positive parenting programs can include this service delivery within their existing school counselling model. In working at this capacity with families of origin in collaboration with the child welfare system’s Family Enhancement program, school counsellors can potentially help to reduce rates of child apprehension and improve outcomes for students and their families as Triple P “fits nicely with and is acceptable to parents among this vulnerable population . . . increasing parenting skills, reducing child behaviour problems and preventing maltreatment recidivism” (Petra & Kohl,

2010, p. 617). This speaks to the unique role school counsellors can play in supporting not only children in care but also prior to apprehension to support the family of origin.

**School counsellors' support to children in care.** Students who are in care can benefit in having regular access, especially during critical transition periods, to a school counsellor who works from an attachment-based theory and from a trauma-informed lens. Using attachment theory, school counsellors can help children in care to develop insights about their experiences living in foster homes and help them to explore and process these experiences in a healthy way (McWey, 2004). School counsellors trained in attachment theory and trauma-informed practice will inherently understand the level of importance in serving as a key relational figure within the school to the child in care and will understand that the therapeutic relationship will take time and mindful, ongoing effort to develop fully (Knauss & Geroski, 2000). Being trauma-informed means that the school counsellor will view mental health problems and maladaptive behaviours not solely from a place of “child psychopathology” (Knauss & Geroski, 2000, p. 153), but, as understandable reactions to previous life experiences. Ongoing, regular consultation and collaboration with the child in care’s CFS social worker will enhance the school counsellor’s understanding of the child in care’s life experiences. Serving as a primary figure of safety and stability within the school, the school counsellor can act as a sort of lighthouse for children in care, knowing that “a history of abuse combined with a dramatic change in environment can result in a defeated child who does not feel worthy of love and respect” (Knauss & Geroski, 2000, p. 154). With easy and regular access to an adult figure trained in providing intervention, children in care are provided with more stable support in school.

The school counsellor can promote stability within the life of the child in care by advocating for fewer disruptions in the child’s life. For example, if a child’s foster or kinship placement must change due to external circumstances, the school counsellor may advocate with their administration and the CFS social worker that the child should be permitted to remain in the current school placement, regardless of their current address and school catchment. Reducing these school-based transitions and disruptions has the potential to improve outcomes (Lovitt & Emerson, 2009). With the vast numbers of children in care in Manitoba not achieving in school, individualized case plans that are created in collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies are vital. The emerging wraparound model (Bartlett, 2019) in Manitoba’s schools can certainly act as a roadmap for such collaborative efforts. Although there are many people and

agencies involved in providing services to children in care, these children often do not thrive as their specific needs are not addressed by disconnected services (Knauss & Geroski, 2000). This speaks to the importance of having a key point person at school who will not only see and support children in care on a regular basis but who also has competency across a broad spectrum to be an advocate for these children through a wraparound approach (Bartlett, 2019). School counsellors are in an optimal position to be a liaison with the child welfare system and can work collaboratively with their school team, including their administration, resource teachers, school clinicians such as social workers and psychologists and of course classroom teachers and assistants who work with the child on a daily basis. Collaboration and role identification amongst the school team can promote best practices and a healthy working environment for all involved.

While it is clear that school counsellor plays a key role in supporting children in care, the current model of child welfare case planning is that “plans should be created within thirty days of the placement of the child” (Government of Manitoba, 2019c). This case plan involves “appropriate matching for the cultural, spiritual and psychosocial needs of the child [and] opportunities for children to establish other life-long relationships” (Government of Manitoba, 2019c) but does not reference the school system at any point. It is time to move beyond the existing child welfare Circle of Care document (Government of Manitoba, 2011) and the existing Child in Care School Registration Form (Government of Manitoba, 2013a). Healthy Child Manitoba released the document, *Education and CFS Protocol for Children and Youth in Care* (2013a) and called for collaboration between the systems, stating that “all children and youth in care benefit from collaborative planning and information sharing by the people who work with them” (p. 16). This means that schools need to be included in child welfare case planning. Through a more holistic, collaborative and wraparound approach (Bartlett, 2019) the school counsellor can work alongside the child and his or her CFS social worker and foster or kinship care providers to develop an individualized and person-centered school plan that is flexible at its core – a plan that promotes opportunities for stability, to enhance a child in care’s opportunities for educational success and potentially improve future outcomes when the child transitions out of care.

### **Gaps in Collaborative Practice across Systems**

The literature related to collaboration between education and child welfare is sparse and nearly absent from Manitoba’s research, with the few exceptions of the calls and

recommendations for collaborative practices in documents like the *Education and CFS Protocol for Children and Youth in Care* (Government of Manitoba, 2013a) and the *Manitoba Task Force on Educational Outcomes of Children in Care* (Government of Manitoba, 2016a). In other parts of the world, this concern has begun to attract researchers' attention, however, there is still limited research examining the concept of inter-professional collaboration between education and child welfare, specifically between school counsellors and child welfare social workers. One research study on this topic that stands out was conducted by Lim and Wong (2018).

**A qualitative study to investigate collaboration in Singapore.** While cultural differences will exist between a study conducted in Manitoba versus one conducted in Singapore, the broader concept of collaboration between education and child welfare, and more specifically school counsellors and CFS social workers, is certainly worth exploring. Lim and Wong's 2018 study explores "the experiences of collaboration between child welfare workers and school counsellors when working together to tackle the multi-dimensional problems that youths face" (p. 1) and posits that collaboration gets better and more meaningful when the roles and responsibilities of the child welfare workers and school counsellors are clarified and viewed as being flexible and able to adapt as needed. Collaboration between child welfare workers and school counsellors is optimal when communication between the two systems is prioritized and ongoing. Lim and Wong (2018) describe the challenges that can present between child welfare social workers and school counsellors, including issues related to confidentiality and clarity about agenda and goals within the collaboration. The challenges tend to come down to communication breakdowns between the two systems.

While not directly referencing attachment theory, Lim and Wong (2018) note that the relationships between children and their parents can contribute to or mitigate a child's engaging in risky or dangerous behaviour. A student's level of school engagement will be impacted by issues existing across the child's ecosystems. This means that issues related to disengagement at school will require "more than autonomous interventions and single perspectives" (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 1). The issues that result in a student not doing well in school are often multi-faceted and complex, existing both in and out of the school setting. Attachment-based issues, trauma, mental health problems and maladaptive behaviours do not exist in compartmentalized silos – these problems exist across the child's ecosystems. The interventions that are necessary to influence the student in any sort of meaningful and sustainable way must therefore also exist

both in and out of the school setting. This, according to Lim and Wong, “demands collaboration amongst professionals” (p. 1). They state that “social work and school counselling services are the closest safety nets” (p. 1) and their study looks at the experiences of collaboration between child welfare social workers and school counsellors.

A 2007 study from Singapore’s Students Care Service and National Council of Social Service called *The State of School Social Work* is referenced in Lim and Wong’s work (2018). The 2007 study indicates that there was limited collaboration happening between the child welfare and school systems at that time in Singapore, and that there were challenges involved in merging the child welfare social workers with the school counsellors in supporting children. There was worry and a noted lack of clarity in navigating issues of confidentiality, which created obstacles in working together with ease. However, Lim and Wong (2018) shared that the 2007 study “concludes that both professionals were eager to tap on each other’s expertise – the school counsellors’ good understanding of the school environment and social workers’ capabilities in tackling family and community issues” (p. 2). Manitoba has not yet conducted this sort of research, leaving one to wonder if the experiences and perceptions in collaborative practices between school counsellors and child welfare social workers might be very similar to those in Singapore, despite our differences in culture, history and population.

Reflecting on the similarities and differences between the “professional cultures” (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 3) of child welfare social workers and school counsellors is an important first step in developing authentic collaboration between the two roles. “For instance, different levels of confidentiality between professions will lead to unmatched willingness to pass on information and different approaches in the use of information” (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 3). It is important to be aware of this potential conflict and to discuss it openly as a first step in developing a collaborative, joint effort between child welfare social workers and school counsellors. In beginning to work as a collaborative team, “establishing common values amongst professionals helps to reduce tensions” (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 3). While CFS social workers and school counsellors come from different backgrounds and training, they share important common values when it comes to children in care. In considering the vision statements of Manitoba’s General CFS Authority and Manitoba’s Education and Training K-12, there are overlapping themes related to healthy and safe children, who experience accomplishment and feelings of hope and optimism. Clearly, Manitoba’s CFS social workers and school counsellors have similar visions

and values – the goal is to provide services that lead to optimal outcomes for children in care. “The social work system is oriented towards people who face difficulty in social functioning, often accentuating their individual needs; but the school system is oriented towards the educational needs of all children” (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 3). Together, the systems can recognize the needs across the ecosystems. When the collaborative efforts between CFS workers and school counsellors is lacking, “the youth may be vulnerable to what is seen as the failures of the other system” (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 3). Clearly, neither Manitoba’s education nor child welfare systems wish to see children in care failing. There is much needed research on the role and potential for collaborative practice, starting from the perspective of school counsellors.

**Barriers in implementing the collaboration model.** Challenges related to confidentiality remain an issue in sharing information between CFS social workers and school counsellors. If not addressed early on and re-addressed in an ongoing way, the tension of maintaining confidentiality can become a barrier to collaboration, and “different levels of confidentiality will result in strained working relationships” (Lim & Wong, 2018, p. 10). The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association’s *Standards of Practice for Counsellors* (2012) speaks to the issues of confidentiality and minors, stating that “as a child grows and matures, the parent’s right to know will diminish and may even terminate when the child achieves the capacity and sufficient understanding to give informed consent” (p. 8). When considering a child in care, the role of the parent is legally fulfilled by the child welfare agency. This implies that as a child in care matures, he or she will take on a major role in the collaborative relationship between the child welfare social worker and the school counsellor. In providing informed consent for the CFS social worker and the school counsellor to share information, concerns related to ethics and confidentiality have the potential to diminish. With the child in care’s informed consent to share information and with adherence to the Province of Manitoba’s *Protecting Children: Information Sharing Act* (2016), communication and collaboration can take place in meaningful ways between the child welfare social worker and the school counsellor.

In their study, Lim and Wong conclude that collaboration is “imperative to provide better services for youths” (2018, p. 13). Based on their findings and on Manitoba’s calls for improvements in collaborative practices between the child welfare and education systems (Government of Manitoba, 2013a) as well as the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada's 2015 *Calls to Action* to improve the educational disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, it is clear that Manitoba's child welfare and education systems should be looking towards a model of collaboration. As part of the child in care's microsystem, the school counsellor and child welfare social worker are a natural starting point for this collaborative work.

### **The Child Welfare Situation in Manitoba**

**High rate of children in care.** In Manitoba, the child welfare system has apprehended a staggeringly high number of children from their parents. The Government of Manitoba released a report in 2018 highlighting the fact that this province, in comparison to other Canadian provinces, has the highest number of children in care. More astonishing, this rate has increased immensely in the last ten years, with Indigenous children accounting for nearly 90% of all children in care in Manitoba (Government of Manitoba, 2018b). According to Healthy Child Manitoba's 2017 *Child and Youth Report*, "10, 714 (3.5%) of Manitoba children were in the care of a CFS agency" (p. 47). The report also explains that:

Children in care refers to children under the age of 18 who have been deemed in need of protection, requiring intervention, as determined by The CFS Act, or are voluntarily placed in care by agreement between the parent or guardian and CFS agency (p. 46).

Child apprehension is a complex issue, a sort of horrifying puzzle with many pieces to consider. Children can be apprehended from their families of origin and placed into foster or kinship care due to adverse, unsafe childhood experiences. These experiences may fall into the broader categories of abuse and neglect within the family of origin and the child welfare system is designed with the intention to provide protection for children living in unsafe situations (Government of Manitoba, 2019a). Healthy Child Manitoba's 2017 *Child and Youth Report* further explains that Manitoba has experienced an overall growth in population, with increased rates of youth pregnancies and increased struggles related to addictions, poverty and family violence with a limited set of resources for families to access. These factors could potentially contribute to more children requiring protection, which in turn means being placed under a CFS agency's care. Regardless of the underlying reasons why children are put under the care of a CFS agency, there is no doubt that these children experience an abrupt disruption in the relationship

with their parent or guardian, which can be as early as hours after birth or at any time when there is a perceived need to protect these vulnerable minors.

**Historical context and continuing struggles.** Healthy Child Manitoba's 2017 *Child and Youth Report* also states that Manitoba's Indigenous children are over-represented (89%) within the child welfare system. The over-representation of Indigenous children and youth involved in Manitoba's child welfare system links directly to Manitoba's dark history of colonization (Brownell, Chartier, Au, MacWilliam, Schultz, Guenette & Valdivia, 2015).

Blackstock explains the impacts of colonization, describing that "beginning in 1497, the world of Aboriginal peoples changed forever – it began with loss of life, then loss of land, and finally a focused attack on their humanity" (1996, p. 17). Poverty, mental health problems, addictions, neglect, physical and sexual abuse stem from "Canada's colonial history, and the harmful impacts of residential schools, the 60's Scoop and intergenerational trauma" (Government of Manitoba, 2018b, p. 2). Colonization has broken down family systems and denied and interrupted the passing down of parenting skills and traditions. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs report, *Lifting Up Children* (2016) states that:

In Canada, from 1960-1980 it was common practice for provincial governments to apprehend Indigenous children and place them into CFS care with non-Indigenous families in different parts of the country, the United States and beyond. In most cases, this was done without the consent of families or First Nation communities. An estimated 20,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed, resulting in a generation of lost children. Many of these children grew up with little to no knowledge of identity, culture or community (p. 3.)

Attachments have been historically disrupted and dismantled, repeatedly, resulting in intergenerational colonial trauma, which is described as "an intergenerational response to colonial policies and programs resulting in multiple health problems that extend beyond the lifespan of a single individual" (Cooper, 2017, p. 35). Intergenerational colonial trauma has the potential to create lifelong barriers and difficulties as it "often manifests in high rates of suicide and suicide ideation, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, feelings of hopelessness, sexual abuse, anxiety and low self-esteem" (Cooper, 2017, p. 35). From an attachment lens, some individuals impacted by intergenerational colonial trauma may have also experienced massive disruptions in attachment, leaving them in an extremely vulnerable and unstable state, without secure and stable attachments to primary caregivers. Nisheducator (2010) shares the work of Dr. Martin Brokenleg, speaking to this issue:

Many children have broken circles, and the fault line usually starts with damaged relationships. Having no bonds to significant adults, they chase counterfeit belongings through gangs, cults and promiscuous relationships. Some are so alienated that they have abandoned the pursuit of human attachment. Guarded, lonely and distrustful, they live in despair or strike out in rage. Families, schools and youth organizations are being challenged to form new ‘tribes’ for all of our children so there will be no ‘psychological orphans’ (p. 27).

Dr. Brokenleg speaks to the challenge of working together to create belonging and safety for children in care, which is the ultimate goal of collaborative practice between Manitoba’s education and child welfare systems.

Alongside Manitoba’s history of colonization, it is crucial to recognize the ongoing and devastating impacts of present-day systemic racism that exists and directly continues to impact the lives of Indigenous peoples, reflecting on the current statistics of the over-representation of Indigenous children who are apprehended from their homes as compared to non-Indigenous children in Manitoba (Government of Canada, 2018b). In response to Manitoba’s child welfare crisis and in recognition of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: *Calls to Action*, which opens with the “call upon the federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care” (2015, p. 1), Bill C-92 has been introduced by the federal government. Bill C-92, now known as “an act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families” (Government of Canada, 2019) proposes that Indigenous children in care should be cared for in culturally safe and appropriate ways, not by the provincial government but instead by First Nations communities and Indigenous peoples. The goal is to begin to decolonize Manitoba’s current child welfare practices. The Government of Canada (2019) explains that “the purpose of the Bill is to affirm the rights and jurisdiction of the Indigenous peoples in relation to CFS and to set out principles applicable, on a national level, to the provision of CFS in relation to Indigenous children.” The intention is to begin a healing process from the wounds of colonization, allowing for communities to raise their children in the roots of their individual customs and traditions and to allow children the opportunities to form healthy, secure attachments within their cultural communities. These proposed changes have the potential for major dismantling of the current child welfare system and for immense changes in the lives of Indigenous children and families. The changes may in fact serve to enhance the opportunities for children to thrive within their home communities, developing attachments to more natural and traditional caregivers (Parliament of Canada, 2019)

as opposed to the current child welfare model in which children are moved to a foster home that simply has available space. Furthermore, the proposed changes would allow for the strengthening of secure attachments. With secure attachments come protective factors, including stability, placing a child on a much more positive trajectory in life.

**Attachment disruption among children in care.** Children who have been apprehended from their families of origin and placed into foster care experience major disruptions in attachment, and “in many respects the effects of attachment disruptions on young children are similar to those of serious trauma” (Kobak et. al, 2001, p. 244). Regardless of the type, secure or insecure, of attachments formed, children being apprehended experience an immediate loss from their parents, and potentially the loss is bigger, including the potential separation from other siblings, friends, relatives and community members (Government of Manitoba, 2018b) as well as the potential separation from pets and the comforts of home. The disruption of the parent-child bond can result in major attachment issues, causing or exacerbating developmental, behavioural and mental health problems. In fact, children who grow up in foster care are “ten times more likely to have mental health problems” (McWey, 2004, p. 439) than their same-aged peers and “children who are placed involuntarily outside of the home show the greatest behavioural deficits...[and] children who have experienced trauma in their attachment relationships are especially prone to developing dissociative symptoms” (Kobak et. al, 2001, p. 244). In Manitoba, we know that children who grow up in care are more likely than their same-aged peers to have worse educational outcomes, to experience “markedly higher hospitalization rates than the rates for the total population” (Government of Manitoba, 2018b, p. 4) and are at a higher risk for attempting or completing suicide (Government of Manitoba, 2018b). These outcomes will often initially present as behavioural issues like inattention, opposition or aggression, which can further compound the child’s ability to form meaningful connections with teachers, peers or their foster families. Bowlby explained that when attachments are ruptured, “the long-term effects of these separations could sometimes be disastrous, leading to neurosis or delinquency in children and adolescents” (Holmes, 2012, p. 62).

The impacts of the ruptured attachments become prevalent in the school setting where from a very young age, positive behaviour is often a social determinant for acceptance (Lindsey, 2017); as an example, those who do not follow the rules in the classroom may not go out to play with the others during recess. Positive expressiveness and positive behaviours tend to be more

inviting for other children: children who express positive emotions and behaviours present as being more approachable, enjoyable and fun than children who express negative emotions or aggressive or withdrawn behaviours (Lindsey, 2017). Generally speaking, “positive emotional expressiveness may be especially salient to the promotion and maintenance of healthy, positive peer relationships” (Lindsey, 2017, p. 350) and this begins from an early age and developmental stage. Children and adolescents with insecure attachment styles have an internal working model which tells them to avoid or aggress, which makes healthy relationships difficult to initiate or maintain (Holmes, 2012). This can create a downward spiral effect for children in care, in which they further experience relationship difficulties due to behavioural issues resulting from ruptured early attachments.

**Intent of child welfare system.** Manitoba’s child welfare Circle of Care model (2011) describes a provincial child welfare system that aims to work seamlessly, with ongoing communication between foster and kinship care providers and child welfare social workers. The system aims to provide ongoing, trauma-informed and attachment-based training for care providers and workers, and to create and maintain stabilized, long-term foster and kinship care placements to minimize transitions and lessen the potential impacts of disruption, upheaval and loss. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that being placed into care can be a devastating, scary and ambiguous process. Children in care face multiple placement changes during their time in care (Knauss & Geroski, 2000). These multiple transitions in care leave the child in the position of “living with everyone but belonging to no one” (Bruskas, 2010, p. 232). Apprehensions and transitions represent loss, and this loss creates further impact on the child in care’s attachment style. Bowlby stated that “whilst separation anxiety is the usual response to a threat or some other risk of loss, mourning is the usual response to a loss after it has occurred” (1988, p. 30). McWey (2004) explained that:

Bowlby gave considerable attention to the impact of loss upon attachment formation, continuation, and security in children. Bowlby asserts that children who experience the loss of an attachment figure will exhibit distress even if the attachment figure is replaced with another capable caretaker. In addition to the loss of their biological parents, children in foster care may experience a number of other losses as well—the loss of their siblings and loss of foster families through repeated moves from foster home to foster home (p. 443).

The story of loss is unfortunately all too familiar for many of Manitoba’s children in care.

**Using a trauma-informed lens to understand children in care.** In many ways, the impacts of disrupted attachments on children and youth are comparable to the effects of intense trauma (Kobak et. al, 2010). When dealing with children and youth who have experienced trauma, it is vital to work from a trauma-informed lens. Hopper, Bassuk and Olivet describe trauma-informed care as a “strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment” (2009, p. 133). When considering the increased rates of mental health problems and behavioural issues of children in care through a trauma-informed lens, the understanding is that these mental health issues and maladaptive behaviours are often “reactions to traumatic events rather than manifestations of child psychopathology” (Knauss and Geroski, 2000, p. 153). White and Benamer (2008) define trauma clearly, stating that:

We are defining trauma as the exposure to life-threatening experiences (actual or perceived) where a person is faced with overwhelming feelings of helplessness and terror at the possibility of annihilation: life and death moments, accompanied by abandonment, isolation, hopelessness, shame, and invisibility. These include experiences that engender a fear of disintegration and threaten a person’s psychic survival far beyond the moment of actual threat (p. 2).

The traumatic events may have occurred prior to apprehension, from the apprehension, or be multi-faceted and involving events both prior to or resulting from or subsequent to the apprehension (Knauss & Geroski, 2000) but the impact of the trauma may continue to affect the child throughout his or her development and into adolescence and adulthood. The experience of trauma may impact the child’s ability to have meaningful involvement in school (Knauss & Geroski, 2000). Children who have experienced trauma can demonstrate “disrupted patterns of eating and sleeping, difficulties in attending and relating, anxious reactions, fearfulness and reexperiencing the trauma” (Osofsky, 1995, p. 785). These features make involvement in school activities, in and out of the classroom, less accessible.

School is an incredibly social place, where from an early age, children are expected to work in pairs and groups and be a part of a classroom and school community. The goal of the K-12 education system is for students to move seamlessly from grade to grade, building upon prior knowledge to enhance skillsets related to literacy, numeracy, technology and global citizenship. Children with disrupted attachment and early traumatic experiences are often strategizing to

survive and ease the ongoing state of terror that exists within (White & Benamer, 2008). They are understandably not in a state of easy readiness to participate meaningfully in the classroom community and may have limited capacity to form bonds or relationships within the school. In consideration of attachment and trust, McWey (2004) comments that “children in foster care have learned to depend primarily on themselves” (p. 448) to survive. The forming of new bonds may in fact pose a risk of further, future loss to a child in care who has already experienced immense loss, trauma and disruptions in attachment and relationships. This makes developing connections with teachers and peers a potentially frightening, risky endeavour.

**Summary of challenges faced by children in care.** In reviewing the literature related to children in care and the education system, there is an abundance of information about the things that are going wrong. The story told again and again throughout the literature is that the outcomes for children in care are devastatingly poor. The problems for children in care stem from disrupted attachment, trauma, and loss that are often present in the forms of mental health and behavioural issues. The educational outcomes for children in care are not good – children in care are overwhelmingly less likely to graduate from high school than are their same-aged peers. These low graduation rates and increased issues related to mental health and maladaptive behaviours link to further challenges as children age out of care, including un and under employment, poverty, addictions and incarceration (Tweddle, 2007). The story of child welfare in Manitoba is heartbreaking and the fragmentation in the provision of supports and services between Manitoba’s education and child welfare systems contributes to the negative educational outcomes for children in care. The lack of collaborative work between the two systems is clear, as none of the existing documents include clear guiding policies or principles for how to create healthy, sustainable collaboration between child welfare and education systems. In Manitoba, with the extremely high numbers of children in care, this issue becomes particularly prevalent when considering the high caseloads and demands placed upon CFS social workers, who experience frequent turn over in their caseloads. According to the National Post, “social workers at [a Manitoba CFS agency] were juggling roughly double the number of cases they should have been” (2014). When CFS social workers are stretched beyond their limits, it is difficult for them to form a truly collaborative relationship with the child in care’s school team.

### **Rationale and Purpose of this Study**

The *Manitoba Task Force on Educational Outcomes of Children in Care* (2016) stated the following ten priorities for improving the educational outcomes of children in care:

- Communication and Data Sharing
- Family Connection
- Measuring Indicators of Success
- Student Voice
- Mental Health and Well-Being
- Indigenous Insights, Education, and Awareness
- School Connectedness
- Professional Training and Education
- School Placement and Continuity
- Student Transitions and Interdepartmental Cooperation (p. 9)

Without fundamental changes first being made to the existing systems in place, it is hard to see how the *Manitoba Task Force on Educational Outcomes of Children in Care's* priorities (2016) can be met. Moreover, no true changes in the educational outcomes of children in care can happen without a commitment from CFS social workers and Manitoba school counsellors to actively seek one another out to create joint, collaborative partnerships in order to best support children in care, and all children and families who are involved, or may become involved, with the child welfare system.

The goal of this research is to examine how school counsellors perceive collaborative practices between themselves and child welfare social workers in Manitoba. This research may advance our understanding of how collaborative efforts between Manitoba's education and child welfare systems can potentially deliver more effective services and, from a preventative approach, may possibly mitigate the high numbers of children being placed into the care of CFS.

## **Chapter III: Research Design and Methods**

### **Research Design**

In this study, I have used a phenomenological research design to study the research questions. Astalin explains that “phenomenology is a way of describing something that exists as an integral part of the world in which we are living” (2013, p. 119) which is an apt way of describing the experience of working with children in care as a school counsellor in Manitoba, with our extreme rates of child apprehension. Olafson (2013) says that phenomenology “provides a natural fit for individual researchers interested in learning about human experience, perception and beliefs” (p. 18) and that the approach involves a relationship between the researcher and participant that looks, sounds and feels similarly to that of a counselling relationship. There is a clear research gap in our current understanding of school counsellors’ thoughts, beliefs and values about Manitoba’s child welfare crisis, and a phenomenological study has allowed me to explore the experiences they have had in working with CFS social workers, agencies and foster and kinship care providers in a systematic way.

This research also looks at the roles that Manitoba school counsellors perceive themselves to have in improving the outcomes for children in care and families who are in at-risk situations, and in creating collaborative partnerships with child welfare social workers, which is currently missing in the literature. The “phenomenological researcher believes that research participants are the experts of their own experience and that understanding is gained from the experiences of the participants through exploration of the meaning behind relationships and everyday events” (Olafson, 2013 p. 18). Through uncovering the stories and experiences of Manitoba school counsellors in relation to children in care and the child welfare system, we stand to gain a stronger understanding of what sorts of changes and practices might be implemented to improve the outcomes for children in care.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on the idea that intentional, collaborative working relationships between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers may serve as safety nets for children in care, with the potential to improve their educational and life outcomes. This

concept is framed within the theoretical workings of John Bowlby and Urie Bronfenbrenner, as well as the concept of collaborative practice.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory helps us to understand the complex needs of children in care, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps to explain how multiple systems working together can impact the outcomes for children in care. In consideration of school counsellors' professional backgrounds in both education and mental health, school counsellors can serve as excellent school-based advocates for children in care. Advocates for children in care aim to "empower or elevate the status of a child to promote his or her well-being and best interest...Effective child advocacy maintains an interdisciplinary approach" (Cascardi, et al, 2015, p. 6). CFS social workers also serve as key advocates in the lives of children in care in Manitoba. A collaborative, inter-professional approach between education and child welfare systems, and more specifically between school counsellors and child welfare social workers, can create an effective safety net of advocacy for children in care and may lead to higher graduation rates and overall improvements in life outcomes for children in care. These theoretical frameworks and the collaborative practice model are informative in guiding the development of this research study.

**Attachment Theory.** Bowlby's Attachment Theory explains that our early attachments to adults help to form our deeper understanding of how the world works, and how we might perceive our own role within it (McWey, 2004). Depending on our early experiences with caregivers, our attachments can be secure or insecure. Secure attachments are created through stability and care and yield "healthy, happy, and self-reliant adolescents and young adults (Bowlby, 1988, p. 1). Alternatively, insecure and disrupted attachments create children, youth and adults who are "guarded, lonely and distrustful" (Nisheducator, 2010, p. 27). Attachments are not fixed and can change over time through the experiences of healthy relationships and "sufficient empathic care on a regular basis" (Heard, D., McCluskey, U., & Lake, B., 2012, p. 5). Since children in care typically face multiple placement changes (Knauss & Geroski, 2000) special attention must be paid to their opportunities for stability and the formation of healthy attachments across their ecosystems.

**Ecological Systems Theory.** Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory uses the metaphor of Russian stacking dolls to explain the influences that our many

environments have upon us. Children's development occurs across multiple ecosystems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). The relationships between these systems can be fluid and seamless, or disjointed, resulting in an increase or decrease in stability. Bruskas (2010) explained that if children are to be apprehended and brought into care, it's crucial that special attention is paid to their social settings and the relationships within them to better provide protection and positive opportunities to kids in care, who are "vulnerable and disproportionately susceptible to poor outcomes in adversity" (p. 239).

School counsellors and child welfare social workers can serve as key relational figures in the life of a child in care. The school is a part of the child's microsystem, serving as part of their daily life. Therefore, the school counsellor exists within the microsystem of the child in care. The child welfare social worker is another vital part of the child in care's ecosystem, serving as the child's legal guardian. The relationship between the school counsellor and the child welfare social worker is referred to as the mesosystem – again, if this relationship can function with fluidity and seamlessness, children in care can serve to be better protected and may be more likely to encounter positive outcomes.

**Collaborative Practices to Improve Outcomes for Children in Care.** The *Manitoba Task Force on Educational Outcomes of Children in Care* (2016a) calls for collaborative efforts to be made between education and child welfare systems. The goals of collaborative efforts are plentiful, including ensuring clarity in sharing school records and communication regarding the educational and personal needs of the child, with regular and ongoing check-ins to monitor progress. Ultimately, the goal of collaboration between Manitoba's education and child welfare systems is to help to improve outcomes for children in care.

My research is based on Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the collaborative practice model to uncover the experiences and attitudes that Manitoba school counsellors have with and towards working collaboratively with child welfare social workers. Moreover, my goal in this research is to open a dialogue around school counsellors' perceptions of intentional, collaborative working relationships with Manitoba's child welfare social workers. It's important to know about the role that collaboration has played in these relationships. Ultimately, this research

aims to better understand what school counsellors believe is necessary in order to improve and enhance collaboration with CFS social workers and the child welfare system as a whole. If educational and life outcomes can improve for children in care through the formation and maintenance of collaborative, working relationships across the ecosystems, then it is crucial that we examine and improve our current policies and practices as school counsellors in Manitoba in relation to working with child welfare social workers.

## **Methods**

In my study, I have taken a phenomenological approach in order to best understand the school counsellors lived experiences, perceptions and beliefs. I feel that this approach fits me well with my background as a counsellor as sort of a person-centered approach to research. A phenomenological study allows me to explore the experiences that school counsellors have had working in collaboration with children in care, and with child welfare social workers, agencies and foster and kinship care providers. I used semi-structured interviews to explore practicing school counsellors' attitudes towards and beliefs in collaborative work with child welfare social workers. The interview questions focused on the perceptions that school counsellors have regarding their roles within the child welfare system, and with children in care and families. My research questions have been developed to be open-ended and focused on the school counsellor's perspectives and perceptions in working with children in care and with Child and Family Services social workers, as well as on positive experiences with, and perceived barriers to, collaboration. These questions support the phenomenological design of my study in that they focus primarily on the lived, professional perceptions and experiences of Manitoba school counsellors. I advertised my study through the Manitoba School Counsellors Association social media and on their website, and my interviews took place through video conferencing.

## **Data Collection**

**Research Participants.** A total of three professional school counsellors have been recruited to participate in the semi-structured interviews. To be included in the study, the potential participants must have post-graduate training in school counselling, at either the post baccalaureate or master's degree level. This additional educational background requirement has helped to ensure that I met with participants who have enhanced theoretical backgrounds and training (Olafson, 2013) related to trauma-informed care and attachment theory. The participants

were recruited through an approach of purposeful sampling, through the Manitoba School Counsellors Association's social media and website. Manitoba school counsellors viewed an advertised call for research participants (see Appendix 2 for a recruitment letter). This allowed members to decide whether or not to contact me to participate in the research study. MSCA is an appropriate recruitment channel as they have unbiased, equitable access to all those who currently work as a school counsellor in Manitoba. I recruited only participants who have at least five years' experience of working as a school counsellor.

**Procedures.** I met with each school counsellor three times. In the first meeting, I introduced myself and my research project, providing a copy of the research questions to each potential participant. I provided a letter of consent (see Appendix 3) and recommended that the potential participant take some time to decide if they would like to choose to participate in the study. When a potential participant ultimately decided to move forward with involvement in the research, I met with them a second time. At this second meeting, I reviewed the letter of consent and asked the participant to provide a signature. I conducted the interview and recorded the audio, then later transcribed the audio.

Throughout the interview process, I kept a written journal of my own perceptions and thoughts, which I later used to enhance the audio recording transcription in order to better capture emerging themes and ideas. After having completed the transcription, I met with each participant a third and final time, to allow for member checking. The meetings took place no more than three weeks apart and occurred via video conferencing.

**Protection of privacy.** Research participants' identities have been kept anonymous throughout the research process with the use of pseudonyms (Participant A, Participant B and Participant C.) While I have used direct quotes and paraphrasing, participants were reminded that they did not need to indicate names of students, families, child welfare social workers, agencies or authorities, or schools. During member checks, I confirmed that participants felt satisfied with the level of anonymity in the transcriptions of their interview. Participants were given two weeks in order to fully ensure their satisfaction with their responses, including the opportunity to revise previous comments and direct quotes. The promise of confidentiality has been ongoing throughout the process and after the research project was completed. The potential risk in participation in this study was in the potential disclosures of what may be uncomfortable stories, thoughts, personal values and beliefs related to the school and child welfare systems. These

disclosures may have felt difficult to talk about and may have triggered uncomfortable feelings within the participant. However, my belief is that the benefits of involvement and disclosure very likely outweigh the risks. Disclosure of difficult stories can help to process uncomfortable feelings, such as stress, frustration and sadness (Graham-Bermann, et al., 2011). In this way, I feel that participation in this research project could have helped participating school counsellors to process their stories and enhance their practice.

### **Plan of Analysis**

Once member checking was completed and I was assured that each participant was satisfied with her interview, I was able to begin working with the qualitative data. I reviewed the final interview transcriptions and look for common themes related to the child welfare crisis in Manitoba, children in care and perceptions toward collaboration with child welfare social workers. I started by completing three separate rounds of read-throughs, looking for themes that spoke to collaboration and outcomes for children in care, as well as beliefs and attitudes toward the potential for collaboration to mitigate the numbers of children being apprehended into care. I used a cutting and sorting technique, which “involves identifying quotes or expressions that seem somehow important and then arranging the quotes/expressions into piles of things that go together” (Ryan & Bernard, 2015, p. 94). After arranging the piles of quotes, I named the piles and have in turn established my overarching research themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2015). These themes have served to guide my understanding in the experiences of school counsellors in working with this extremely vulnerable population and have helped to guide the conversation toward potential next steps in improving the gaps between the existing systems of education and child welfare.<sup>1</sup> Even as a novice researcher, it was apparent early on in the cutting and sorting process that there were similar themes emerging from each of the participants’ stories and responses. I was able to pull together these themes into three main categories.

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<sup>1</sup> The author attempted to collaborate with the First Nations Family Advocate Office for their input or feedback on this research. At the time of writing this thesis, the research has not been shared with the First Nations Family Advocate Office and so their feedback has not been included. It may be noted that at this time, the First Nations Family Advocate Office is working amidst a global pandemic and as such are addressing other priorities.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

### **Characteristics of Participants**

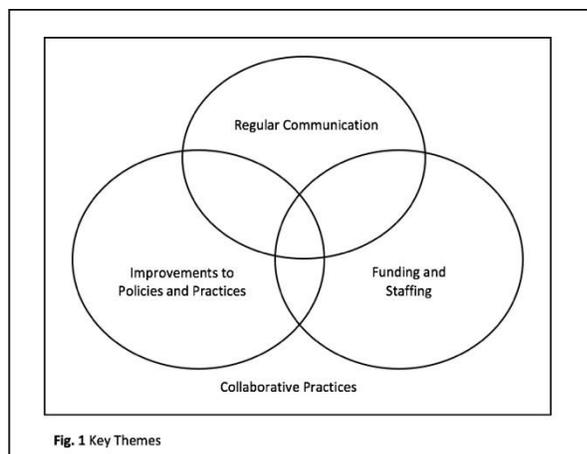
Three participants took part in this study. Each participant identified as having at least five years of professional working experience within the role of a school counsellor in Manitoba, with training at either the post-baccalaureate or master's level in counselling. Each participant identified as having had experiences in working with children in care and Manitoba's CFS social workers. Each participant identified as female. Each participant identified that the majority of their professional experiences have taken place within Winnipeg, Manitoba. For the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, within this paper the participants will be identified as Participant A, Participant B and Participant C.

### **Key Themes**

Key themes that appeared from the analysis of the data included recommendations from Manitoba school counsellors on improvements to policies and practice to enhance collaborative practices as well as the general barriers to true collaborative practice:

- Regular communication - the development of respectful, ongoing working relationships between Manitoba's school counsellors and CFS social workers that involve ongoing, intentional communication
- Improvements to practices and policies – the development of practices and policies between Manitoba Education and CFS that are child-centred with identified, shared values to enhance stability in the lives of children in care and families
- Funding and staffing – as part of supports and changes that participants feel are required in order to see more children in care graduating from high school and ultimately experiencing improved outcomes, participants frequently described the need for increased government funding to both Manitoba Education and CFS to allow for smaller caseloads and to support access to basic needs for children in care and families

These key themes are represented schematically in Fig. 1.



### ***Regular Communication (Table 1)***

Intentional, ongoing communication

between school counsellors and CFS social workers will eventually lead to true collaborative partnerships and practices that will benefit children in care and help to support families prior to or at the early stages of involvement with child welfare.

***Collaboratively designed policies related to communication.*** Policies related to intentional and ongoing communication between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers can be developed between Manitoba Education and CFS to ensure that both parties' views are incorporated and to ensure a clarification of shared values and goals. Manitoba school counsellors identified that they desired to work in collaboration with CFS social workers, and that in order to do so, it is necessary to create policies that both parties feel to be equitable and respectful of one another's roles. Communication should be frequent and fluid, sharing any potentially pertinent details between the school counsellor and the CFS social worker, to ensure that potential problems can be mitigated early and that successes are celebrated for the child in care. Communication can also help to create stronger advocacy from both the school counsellor and the CFS social worker, as sharing information allows for more opportunities to advocate for the needs of the child with key stakeholders and other agencies. For example, if the school is aware that the child is having trouble with specific rules or routines in their current placement and the school counsellor communicates this issue with the CFS social worker, both can communicate with the foster or kinship provider to advocate on behalf of the child, potentially serving to resolve the issue before it becomes a bigger concern.

***Clarification of shared values, beliefs and goals.*** Ensuring that all voices are heard to create policies that are based in shared values, beliefs and goals will spark a stronger sense of collaboration. Potential issues or conflicts can be mitigated through clarification of values,

beliefs and goals from the onset. Ongoing communication can allow for a sense of mutual respect between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers. Manitoba school counsellors identified that the values, beliefs and goals must exist beyond themselves as a representative of the school; they must be embedded amongst the entire school team. The school counsellor can serve as the primary liaison in collaboration with the CFS social worker. Both the school counsellor and the CFS social worker share the value of advocacy for children in care: this is a natural starting point for all of the work that can be done collaboratively between both parties, and the heart of the collaborative process.

***Respectful working relationships between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers.*** Regular communication can lead to the development of respectful working relationships between school counsellors and CFS social workers that are child-centered and reflective of shared values. Potential issues or conflicts related to ego or miscommunication will be greatly reduced by the development and maintenance of healthy working relationships between both parties. Respectful relationships rooted in shared goals and values allow for the understanding that neither party is attempting to be of greater importance in the life of the child in care; that in fact the priority of the collaborative, working relationship is to serve the child in care and help to improve their educational and life outcomes.

***Child-centered policies and practices.*** The needs of the child in care must take precedence over all other goals related to the systems at hand. Policies and practices must be child-centered, with the goals of enhancing outcomes for children in care and families. Policies and practices are not intended to meet the needs or the convenience of the school or the child welfare agency. An example was raised by participants related to the idea of maintaining a school placement when a change needed to be made in the home placement. A child-centered practice could involve the school counsellor and CFS social worker advocating strongly for the child to remain in their current school with familiar teachers and peers, allowing for less disruption to the child's ecosystem and potentially strengthening the child's ability to maintain attachments. The opposite approach might be to place the child in a new school that is more conveniently located to the new placement. While this approach might serve as a convenience in terms of transportation, it may not reflect a child-centered practice. Unfortunately, as the participants noted, it is a practice that is all too common in regard to Manitoba's children in care.

***Increased stability and meeting basic needs of children in care and families.*** Regular communication between the school and the child welfare agency can result in increased stability for the child in care in identifying and accessing basic needs. Communication between the school counsellor, the CFS social worker and families involved (both biological and foster) can help to ensure that there are supports in place when needed and that basic needs are being met. Manitoba school counsellors indicated that regular communication helps to ensure that the needs of children in care are prioritized and that regular communication helps to spur on collaborative efforts from all parties. The example of children in care needing basic supplies, like winter boots or a coat, came up several times throughout the interviews. Because children in care frequently face changes in their placements, which often involves the hastily packing of personal items, participants noted that children in care are often missing necessary items. Communication of the needs of children in care between the school counsellor and the CFS social worker can help to ensure that children in care are able to access these types of items with greater ease and speed. This can allow for children in care to experience greater equity and stability.

**Table 1 Key Themes – Regular Communication**

Intentional, ongoing communication between school counsellors and CFS social workers	<i>I had a social worker who was able and willing to kind of have regular communication with me and then it seemed to me like opportunities for maybe like bio family coming to school, maybe a grandparent coming to an event, things like that were much more fluid and easier to arrange when I had that kind of established relationship with the social worker or the guardian (Participant A)</i>
Collaboratively designed policies related to communication	<i>I think the barrier, what's getting in the way of that, nothing is consistent, nothing is mandated, and who – a little bit of ego – who is in charge of who? Can a school division, can Manitoba Education mandate that this other outside agency does things a certain</i>

	<p><i>way... Maybe coming to the table and coming up with something that works for both systems...To set a policy together (Participant B)</i></p>
<p>Clarification of shared values and goals</p>	<p><i>The key components need to be similar values, between – you’re really going to butt heads if a school thinks right away, a kid shows up without a jacket and that means they need to be apprehended. We need to have similar thoughts, values and understanding of what’s happening (Participant B)</i></p>
<p>Respectful working relationships between school counsellors and CFS social workers</p>	<p><i>We need to try to just keep that human side, that connection side, where we can actually come regularly to check in and plan and keep as much normalcy as possible... (Participant C)</i></p>
<p>Child-centered practices</p>	<p><i>It could be five-minute touch-in, or a half hour conversation or whatever is needed...I feel like it’s doable. It’s not an impossible task...It’s what’s best for kids. (Participant B)</i></p>
<p>Increased stability and meeting basic needs of children in care and families</p>	<p><i>If there’s communication, things are going to happen. Good things are going to happen. There’s where you’re going to get a positive impact for children in care. Children don’t care how they get a bus pass or a lunch pass – they just want their bus pass and they want their lunch pass. They have a right to have a bus pass and have a lunch pass. So, let’s get this done for these kids. If there’s instability, they will fail. Very, very few kids, and adults, are strong enough to make it through when</i></p>

*the house is falling down around them. There needs to be stability (Participant B)*

***Improvements to policies and practices (Table 2)***

The development of practices and policies between Manitoba Education and CFS that are child-centred with identified, shared values may serve to enhance stability in the lives of children in care and families.

***Developing policies for mandated communication between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers.*** Policies and practices related to the necessity of regular, intentional and ongoing communication between school counsellors and CFS social workers will ensure that the basic needs of children in care and families are known and supported by both parties. While the Manitoba school counsellors who were interviewed each expressed hesitation toward the idea of mandating communication, ultimately it was noted by each that mandates are necessary in this important work of supporting children in care. Mandating policies and practices related to communication between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers may lead to a more healthy, collaborative practice between the two services, to eliminate the perception that Manitoba Education and Manitoba CFS are attempting to support our children in care independently. Policies related to communication between Manitoba Education and child welfare can help to put collaborative efforts between the parties at the forefront, which in turn may improve outcomes for children in care. Ultimately, the perception of the participants is that policies that are mandated tend to be prioritized, while policies that are suggested can sometimes fall to the wayside.

***Developing policies related to school registration processes and the issues of guardianship.***

Policies and practices related to school registration have been found to be of significant concern for Manitoba school counsellors. The current school registration process for children in care requires paperwork that has been completed by the child's legal guardian. In the case of a child in care, the legal guardian is the CFS social worker. School counsellors have identified this policy as a frequent barrier for children in care to start school promptly, which has the potential to hold children in care out of school and exacerbates problems related to potential gaps in education and may also cause the child to feel unwelcome in the school setting. The potential for school registration policy redevelopment for children in care, to allow flexibility for the school

registration process to involve other key stakeholders in the child's life, such as the foster parent or kinship care provider may alleviate these problems.

***Developing policies related to accessing consent for children in care to participate in school-related events or extracurricular activities.*** In addition to the issues related to school registration and the need for paperwork that includes a CFS social worker's signature, Manitoba school counsellors noted that children in care are frequently reminded that they differ from their peers when it comes to events like a school trip, or having easy permission to participate in school-related events or extracurricular activities. The barrier can be such that, at times, children in care are not permitted to join in with their peers for such events, causing further educational and social disconnect. While this reflects the need for ongoing, fluid communication, it also suggests the potential for policies that reconsider who might have the authority to give consent on behalf of a child in care (such as a foster parent or another significant adult caregiver in that child's life) which may alleviate these problems.

***Developing policies related to meeting the academic and personal needs of children in care in Manitoba schools.*** With children in care often dealing with multiple placement changes that can result in school changes, there may be gaps in their academic programming. Children in care are more at-risk than their same-aged peers to drop out of school (Brownell et al., 2015.) Policies that consider assessing the literacy and numeracy levels of children in care prior to placement in a classroom, in collaboration with the CFS social worker, the school counsellor and the school resource teacher, can ensure that children in care are receiving appropriate school programming, at their level, to fill in those gaps. Collaborative planning for children in care with the CFS social worker, school counsellor and school team can help to ensure that students are not failing or simply not attending classes that are not taught at their level or ability.

**Table 2 Key Themes – Improvements to policies and practices**

Improvements to policies and practices

*At school, it's supposed to be student-centered, at the agency it's supposed to be family-centered and child-centered. If our choices are reflecting that, then I think that that's the best way that we can try to find that place. That's the ground we're going to collaborate on. That's where we're going to*

Developing policies for mandated communication between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers

*come together, that's where the Venn diagram overlaps. Trying to find a way that we feel we're on the same side, and the whole point is to raise up that child, keep supporting them... (Participant C)*

*I think that it would be great if it was mandated that there was a monthly check-in with social workers, or that it could be a regular, consistent thing that they're communicating by email, have some sort of plan, it's written down, both parties have a copy of it, or it's electronic or whatever. Something that everyone could follow... Participant A)*

Developing policies related to school registration processes and the issues of guardianship

*And we're not letting the foster parents or the bio family or whatever person is trying to help them, do any of those things because of liability... [these kids'] lives would be impacted so concretely if we could change those few things and make that simpler on our end. If the adults could just figure it out... I really feel like trying to get kids who are in care registered for school, it's so hard. And it really should not be. It's something that every kid needs and they always will. And it's a source of such frustration for me, because it's not a surprise, it happens every year at the same time, and every kid under 18 needs this to happen. So, I don't understand why it's such a problem every year. It creates so much*

Developing policies related to accessing consent for children in care to participate in school-related events or extracurricular activities

*stress and anxiety for those kids every*

*September (Participant C)*

*The biggest problem at our school is trying to get the guardian's signature for field trips for field day – they couldn't get their social worker in time, it would be 2-3 weeks or a month in advance, and those poor kids couldn't even track down the social worker to get a signature to participate in a soccer field trip, or to go on our day out to the park. And so all those CFS kids, everyone knows who's in care, because they couldn't come, or they showed up to school and got left behind, because they couldn't get a signature. So, there's – again, that's technically a smaller thing, but how does that person feel? How does that ripple on their feeling included in school and being student-centered? But it's all going back to liability. Everyone's always worried about liability – it's like we're so rigid about these rules and those rules that are in place to help them in one situation – isn't helping them then. Those same rules are actually hurting them in the situation they were created for. It's a very tricky bridge that often I feel like pretty much I'm trying to fix something for a kid in care, it's – they're so burned out trying to deal with their social worker, their social worker is burned out trying to deal with so many kids, and we're trying to fill those gaps on our side, but*

Developing policies related to meeting the academic and personal needs of children in care in Manitoba schools

*there's only so much we can do on the Education side, right? (Participant C)*

*I think a really big issue is that we're taking kids into high school that have very low literacy and numeracy rates. We're talking grades 1, 2 or 3. They're getting socially promoted from grade to grade with abhorrent attendance. And so it's kind of that problem where everybody from elementary is doing their best, it's passed to junior high, junior high blames elementary for the gaps, junior high passes it on to high school, high school blames junior high for the gaps, and then in the high school, these kids for the first time are failing, when they've been promoted from grade to grade with none of the skillset, and they can't do it – they've never read a novel before and we're asking them to do a novel study and write an essay for us, and pass the provincial exam...It doesn't make sense to me, it's not cohesive (Participant C)*

### ***Funding and staffing (Table 3)***

While not directly related to the concept of collaborative practice, it is crucial to describe the overwhelming need identified by the participants for increased government funding being provided to both Manitoba's child welfare and education systems. Each participant strongly spoke about the need for the child welfare system to be able to support CFS social workers by reducing their caseloads through the hiring of additional CFS social workers. Participants also reflected on their own experiences of caseloads that often feel too big to manage properly and effectively, given a high level of need in Manitoba's schools. The participants' desires for increased funding to schools to allow for the hiring of additional school counsellors was prevalent in the study. Participants noted that additional government funding is also required to

provide better, faster access to a child's or family's basic needs, which participants viewed as key to helping create stability for children in care and their families, potentially even helping to mitigate the high numbers of children being apprehended in Manitoba. Without increased funding, participants expressed the concern that collaborative practices might not truly be possible or sustainable.

***Immensely high caseloads in Manitoba.*** Manitoba has a staggeringly high number of children in care. With these immensely high numbers of children in care, come immensely high caseloads for CFS social workers and high numbers of children in care in schools. These high caseloads on both ends create significant barriers in terms of collaborative practice, primarily due to time constraints and burnout. Improved working conditions such as smaller, more manageable caseloads, may result in increased stability for children in care, with less staff turnover. Participants were quick to note that the CFS social workers they have worked with are doing the best work that they can, but, given their incredibly high caseloads (that one participant noted seem to be at times triple the number of children that might be manageable for a single social worker to effectively work with) the current system sets many capable, strong and well-intentioned social workers up to feel burned out.

***Need for additional funding for schools to support access to basic needs for children in care.*** Manitoba school counsellors identified the need for additional funding to help children in care and families access basic needs from the school, which can help to reduce barriers and may lead to positive outcomes for children in care. This funding may act as an emergency fund, which can be later reimbursed through child welfare. Food, transportation and clothing were frequently cited as necessities for children in care, that school counsellors are often working to fulfill. While some community schools in Manitoba have access to funding to support basic needs (The Winnipeg Foundation, 2018) participants noted that this funding, while greatly appreciated, never truly feels like enough to create sustainable change. One participant noted that many schools that have high numbers of children in care do not qualify for such funding due to their geographical location. Participants reflected that additional government funding can help to fill the gaps for children in care to access basic needs at school.

***Need for additional funding for schools to support families.*** Additional funding to support families' access to basic needs might mitigate the high numbers of children who are taken into care in Manitoba. Improving the lives and conditions for families who are currently intact may

reduce stressors and provide relief, potentially helping families to stay together. If families reach out to the school to request support, or the schools are noticing a potential need for supports related to basic needs such as food, clothing or basic supplies, having financial supports in place through the school can help to ensure that families have what they need. Manitoba school counsellors noted that the school can act as a neutral ground for children and families to access supports and resources, which can reduce stigma and increase the likelihood of accessing help when it is needed. One example that a participant shared related to filling the gap for a family who reached out with a financial concern – they were in a situation of needing to choose between paying their rent or paying for bus tokens for their children to attend school in the wintertime. If schools had greater access to government financial supports for these sorts of situations, outcomes for children and their families may improve. If the school can help to fill that gap, it might mean that the family remains in their home, and the child continues to attend school, creating stability and strengthening the relationship between the school and the family.

***Need for collaboration amongst the school, child welfare and community agencies to support children in care and families.*** Collaborative efforts between schools, child welfare agencies and community agencies can yield huge results. Community agencies might include medical or mental health services, or basic needs like housing, food security, or other necessities like clothing or school supplies. Meeting these needs can help to improve the lives of children in care and also support families and potentially mitigate our high numbers of children in care by providing access to resources to all families in need.

### **Table 3 – Key Themes – Funding and Staffing**

Improvements to funding and staffing to produce stability and improve access to basic needs	<i>We're all overworked – too many kids on our caseloads, both for Manitoba Education and CFS. The lack of communication might not be a malicious thing, but simply just that there's no time to return emails or phone calls... We're all maxed, we're all trying our best with what we have (Participant B)</i>
Immensely high CFS social work caseloads in Manitoba	<i>I wonder if part of the problem, if there were smaller caseloads and people who stayed with the same kids longer, then it would be really</i>

Need for additional funding for schools to support access to basic needs for children in care

*easy to know the same social worker from this year to next (Participant A)*

*Food, shelter, clothing, safety and a bus pass – if the kid can't get to school, how is the child going to graduate?...There could be some sort of emergency fund. Being financially dependable would be huge. And also, for the school end, if you have a school with a large amount of kids in care, I think there should be some budget that can bridge the gap of the time between something being requested, for example that pair of boots – they need them now, not in two weeks.*

*Perhaps the school budget could cover those boots, then CFS could send the school a cheque...If you can fill a child's basic needs, they'll go to school. Kids want to go to school (Participant B)*

Need for additional funding for schools to support families who are struggling

*The nature of the school is that we see those kids daily and we have that relationship...If I can buffer that at the beginning as much as possible, then that kind of, with the family itself, to prevent them from going into care, if there's a stressor and we're able to mitigate, then we do that... You call CFS and say, 'I know there's a food security issue, but we are getting a hamper together, we just wanted to know, what can CFS do?' Because if you look at why kids are being apprehended, it has to check quite a few boxes before a child is apprehended. So, if we can fill those gaps,*

Need for collaboration amongst the school, child welfare and community agencies to support children in care and families who are struggling

*and it's not the case of abuse – of course, in that case, a child may need to be removed. But, if it's not and it's simply food security, let's help them with that (Participant B)*

*It could just be basic needs – the school having a good relationship with outside community partners, you know? A kid needs boots, boom, they have boots...If the school can have really good relationships with community members, community business connections...[Helping families meet basic needs] can be the difference between apprehension and not apprehension (Participant B)*

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

This qualitative study has explored the key perceptions and experiences of Manitoba school counsellors in working with CFS social workers and children in care. It provides important insights to support potential changes to policy and practice between both Manitoba Education and Manitoba's child welfare system.

### **Creating Equity through Collaborative Practice**

In this study, participants each shared the goal of enhancing stability for children in care by providing equitable access to education and basic needs through collaborative practices with CFS social workers. It is so important to reiterate that participants in this study did not express criticism towards the work of CFS social workers. Rather, participants expressed frustration with current policies and practices in both our education and child welfare systems, and a strong desire for increased funding from the government to help bring about meaningful, sustainable changes to improve outcomes for children in care. Increased funding to both our education and child welfare systems is imperative to the sustainability of collaborative work between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers.

### **Intentional Communication to Build Collaboration**

This study highlights that Manitoba school counsellors believe that intentional and ongoing communication will lead to true collaboration between themselves and CFS social workers. Reflective of both Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011) and Manitoba Education's wraparound model (Bartlett & Freeze, 2019) Manitoba school counsellors believe that authentic collaboration between service providers will yield greater results than the two systems continuing to work in separate silos. As one participant reflected on the current state of Manitoba's schools and child welfare system, "it's a patchwork system that everyone's trying to put their finger in the hole of the dam together." The Manitoba Task Force (2015) advocates for improvements in the communication and collaboration between education and child welfare systems, to ensure clarity in sharing school records and communicating the educational and personal needs of the child, with continuous check-ins and monitoring of progress. Knowing the diversity of needs that involvement in the child welfare system can involve due to dismantled attachments and the impacts of trauma (Srivastava & Beer, 2005), the participating school counsellors recommend the creation of a student success plan similar to an individualized education plan for children in care to address any needs or facts that

might impact the child's ability to succeed in school. Our current systems are not working because they are not working together, which is supported by the abysmal outcomes of Manitoba's children in care in terms of school. Manitoba school counsellors indicate an interest in the mandating of regular communication between themselves and CFS social workers to ensure that this work is taken seriously and followed through upon, with the potential for a running document to track the communication between the two parties. Manitoba school counsellors noted their desire for a respectful working relationship with CFS social workers where common values and goals can be identified, shared and acted upon.

### **Collaborative Policy Development**

In addition to regular, mandated communication between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers, this study suggests the needs for changes to existing policies and practices, as well as the development of new policies and practices to be established collaboratively between Manitoba Education and CFS. These proposed changes to policies and practices are reflective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bowlby's Attachment Theory, and address not only the need for enhanced communication, but also address gaps in educational programming. Children in care are more likely to experience school changes due to changes in foster placement. They often miss school during these school changes and experience gaps in their academics. Children in care are more likely to be truant from school, and to experience suspensions and expulsions. Children in care are more likely to repeat grades and to be placed in alternative school and special education settings. These children are more likely to drop out prior to completing grade twelve (Brownell et al., 2015). Knowing that these inequities exist, it is vital that schools look to program appropriately for children in care. Manitoba school counsellors also note a strong desire for changes in policy and practices related to the concept of guardianship for Manitoba's children in care. Manitoba school counsellors noted that too many times, children in care are starting school late in the year due to paperwork backlogs and not getting signatures or proper paperwork completed by CFS social workers, who are working with immense caseloads. There is dismay with the consistent fear of liability, which causes children in care to miss out on opportunities like field trips or other extracurricular school events because of not having a CFS social worker's signature on time for the event. Potential changes to policies related to signatures, consent and liability are strongly encouraged by Manitoba school counsellors, to allow for more flexibility when it comes to registration and

opportunities for enjoyable events for kids. The suggestion of the allowance for foster parents, for example, to sign off on school-related paperwork would significantly ease the entire process and reduce stress on the child in care. Starting school on time with the rest of the class allows for more equitable opportunities in the school year than being held out for several days or weeks due to a missing signature from a social worker. Joining in on the field trip with peers can be the difference between a positive school connection and the experience of alienation from the group. The literature tells us that children in care struggle with insecure and disrupted attachment styles at a much greater rate than their peers who are not in care (Nisheducator, 2010) – Manitoba school counsellors note that missing out on opportunities to form natural, enjoyable and developmentally appropriate relationships with peers further pushes children in care out of the social group. Consider Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory and the metaphor of the Russian stacking dolls in relation to the social settings in which children live and grow – each setting and situation plays a role in that child’s development. Being pushed out of the peer group at no fault of their own is yet another example of a trauma that children in care have been expected to endure. Insecure and disrupted attachments create children, youths and adults who are “guarded, lonely and distrustful” (Nisheducator, 2010, p. 27). Small changes to policy and practice, for example, allowing a foster parent to sign off on the permission form to attend field day at school, can be a subtle yet important difference in the life of a child in care.

### **Need for Enhanced Funding**

Interestingly, this study also calls for greater funding and staffing to better support Manitoba’s children in care and Manitoba’s families. Participants noted that CFS social workers are regularly dealing with significantly higher caseloads than is perceived to be manageable. Manitoba school counsellors also reported feeling “maxed out” (Participant C) in terms of their caseloads and expressed their desire for smaller caseloads in schools so that they can better serve the wellbeing and academic needs of their students. Smaller caseloads allow for more authentic opportunities for children in care to develop healthier attachments to key adults in their lives, such as their CFS social worker or their school counsellor. Smaller caseloads can also allow for children in care to have more meaningful time spent with their CFS social worker or school counsellor, which can begin to address the potential trauma that they have endured. Manitoba school counsellors expressed a strong desire for enhanced funding to help bridge the gap between the school and CFS so that schools can quickly identify and help meet the basic needs

of children in care and vulnerable families. Issues like food security and the need for things like transportation, clothing, shoes and boots can all be supported with increased funding to schools who have higher rates of children in care. These funds can also be allocated to supporting families, or the mesosystem of the child in care, who are involved with the child welfare system, or who may be vulnerable to becoming involved with the child welfare system. Manitoba school counsellors reported a desire to help kids and families to access what they need, without needing to wait several weeks or months – consider the examples of winter boots or a bus pass. The child needs those things sooner rather than later or may be at-risk of not attending school due to not having access to what they need. School counsellors proactively address potential mental health and behavioural concerns with new and existing students (Cory & Wiley, 2013) and this can often directly correlate to simply fulfilling a basic need – providing a child with food to eat for breakfast or lunch, or with basic supplies like a winter coat and boots, a calculator for math class, or a binder or a backpack. Each participant in the study noted the dismaying regularity of the occurrence of working with a child in care who had stopped attending school because they did not have a bus pass for the week and had no access to alternative transportation. Increased funding for the school to use specifically for these types of things can have an immense impact on the outcomes for children in care. Manitoba school counsellors also believe that helping support families in accessing basic needs prior to apprehension has the potential to reduce stressors and potentially help to keep families together. As one participant reflected, helping families access food, transportation and clothing “can be the difference between apprehension and not apprehension” (Participant B). This indicates that additional funding might be helpful in enhancing the school counsellors’ work in supporting children in care and families facing adversity.

### **Developing Relationships Based in Trust**

Several studies have noted the impacts of attachment, trauma and loss on children who are apprehended from their families. In Manitoba, this is exacerbated by our history of colonization and the continuing present-day impacts of colonization on the Indigenous population. Ecological Systems Theory informs us that a person’s development is heavily affected by the different types of environmental systems in which they live and grow, and by the interactions and connections between these systems (Fulcher & McGladdery, 2011). There have been many historical and contemporary examples of both Manitoba’s child welfare and school systems breaking the trust

between themselves and our children and families. In this study, Manitoba school counsellors reflected on the sense of fear and distrust that many parents and children express towards both the child welfare and school systems. Participant A noted that:

It's like, we're all, these systems, as well-intentioned as they might be, create such a cloud of fear over everybody. Nobody can be honest and nobody can really change, because we can't be honest or have open conversations about anything. You can't just be human and be like, I screwed up or I messed up, or I'm not the best parent today. And obviously, Indigenous people and parents I've worked with – this is just like, the never-ending story for them. That, what they're doing is never good enough. The same participant also reflected that the school, can tend to be a welcoming and natural place for the family to gather, especially if astute attention is paid toward the cultural competence of the school staff and the school culture that has been cultivated. Developing strong relationships based in trust and empathy between Manitoba school counsellors and families is a primary intervention and goal for improving outcomes.

### **Creating a Wider Safety Net for Children in Care**

Currently, Manitoba's schools and child welfare systems are working in two separate silos. The goal is to work collaboratively. Unfortunately, it seems as though basic communication is currently unsatisfactory. Without regular, intentional communication, we will continue to work separately from one another, and outcomes likely will not improve. Developing strong working relationships that are based in shared values and goals will help Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers to begin to engage in true collaborative practice. We need to create a wider safety net for our children in care through collaborative practice across the realms of their lives, involving their schools, their homes, their families and their social workers.

The theoretical frameworks and model that informed this study include Attachment Theory and Ecological Systems Theory and the collaborative practice model. First, Bowlby's Attachment Theory helps us to understand the complex needs of children in care. Second, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps to explain how multiple systems working together can impact the outcomes for children in care – collaboration between Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers can help to address the complex needs of our children in care. These ideas are represented schematically in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2** Improved Outcomes for Manitoba's Children in Care

### Practical Implications

This study suggests some practices that Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers might consider adopting into their own, current work. For example, a school counsellor might decide to prioritize communication with the CFS social workers involved in their current caseloads and explicitly share their hopes of a plan for ongoing, intentional communication. The creation of a student success plan for children in care, much like the existing wraparound model (Bartlett & Freeze, 2019) can certainly be established at an individual school level, with collaborative efforts from the CFS social worker, the foster or kinship care providers and even the biological family of the child in care, in situations in which that might be appropriate or helpful. At an individual level, a Manitoba school counsellor or CFS social worker cannot control the size of their caseload or the provincial policies at play. These are factors that should be considered at a provincial level, dealing with funding and policy. Collaboratively, a school counsellor might also choose to work with a CFS social worker to incorporate a sort of peer support network involving children in care that they collectively work with, past and present. Studies show that youth peer support can be more impactful than adult support alone, and can “include emotional support, guidance, education and advocacy for youth and young adults” (Gopalan, et. al, 2017, p. 1) particularly in times of transition, such as a child aging out of care. Peer supports can serve a natural role in the child in care's ecosystem and can be put into place collaboratively by their adult advocates, the school counsellor and the CFS social worker.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this study was the in-depth knowledge shared by the participants. Each participant arrived with a rich depth of experience in working with Manitoba's children in care, families and CFS social workers. Each participant was able to reflect and share on both positive and negative experiences and provided an inside look at what is currently happening in Manitoba's schools in connection to Manitoba's child welfare crisis. Each participant had the opportunity for member checking and was able to reflect and provide additional feedback to their original responses, resulting in rich data from each participant.

A clear limitation of this study was that only three participants were involved. All three participants identified as female and as having had the bulk of their professional working experience taken place within Winnipeg, Manitoba. We do not have a strong enough representation within this study to possibly have access to the bigger picture of what is happening in Manitoba as a whole – for example, we do not have any input from Manitoba's school counsellors in Northern or rural communities regarding their experiences in working collaboratively with CFS social workers. We do not know if there is a gender difference in terms of experience as a Manitoba school counsellor. We do not have any input from CFS social workers, nor do we have input from the most important stakeholders involved, Manitoba's children in care or their families. Future research might involve a wider scope of involvement in a similar study on the gaps between Manitoba's Education and child welfare systems, including a larger and more diverse group of participants. Future participants might include additional Manitoba school counsellors with enhanced diversity in terms of professional background (including Northern and rural school counselling experience,) CFS social workers, children in care who are school-aged or who have aged out of care and their foster and kinship care providers and biological family members.

## **Chapter VI: Conclusion**

This study adds to the understanding of the current educational conditions of Manitoba's children in care and the potential for improved outcomes through changes in policy and practice that can be made by and for Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers. A collaborative approach to working with Manitoba's most vulnerable population, children in care, can create stability and a much wider safety net than our two systems continuing to work in isolation from one another. While regular, ongoing and intentional communication is not truly collaboration, it is a natural starting point. In particular, the school can serve as a neutral ground for working with children in care, their foster and kinship care providers and their families of origin. Children in Manitoba are expected to attend school nearly 200 days per year; the school is a natural space to support children in care, and Manitoba school counsellors are well-equipped through their training in both mental health and as educators to act as the natural liaison with CFS social workers. Collaboratively, Manitoba school counsellors and CFS social workers can help to create more equity and help to produce stronger outcomes for Manitoba's children in care.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Questions

To align with the research protocol, as a research participant in this study you do not need to name or identify the names of students, families, child welfare social workers or agencies, your place of employment, institutional policies or specific situations at your place of employment. This research is intended to gain a better understanding of the general impressions of Manitoba school counsellors regarding collaboration with Child and Family Services and ways to support students in care.

1. What are your biggest concerns regarding the relationship between Manitoba Education and Child and Family Services? There are likely to be challenges when two large systems interact – what might be some of the barriers preventing collaboration between the two systems? What are the barriers with the education system? What are the barriers in the Child and Family Services system?
2. Tell me about successes and challenges a school counsellor typically experiences when working with the child welfare system, child welfare case workers, foster and kinship care providers, families of origin, and children in care.
3. As a school counsellor, what do you think about the role trauma, grief and attachment might play in supporting children in care?
4. What are the key elements (e.g., policy, support, or behaviours) to enhance school counsellors' collaboration with child welfare social workers? What might authentic collaboration involve? What might be some of the barriers that could prevent authentic, ongoing collaboration between school counsellors and child welfare social workers?
5. Describe the potential role of the school counsellor in improving outcomes for children in care. What should be done by school counsellors, in collaboration with child welfare system, to have a positive impact on children in care at school? What kinds of supports and changes do you feel are needed in order to see more children in care graduate from high school?

6. In what ways might a school counsellor be involved in supporting at-risk, vulnerable families prior to or at the early stages of involvement with the child welfare system?
7. What are the key components and factors for school counsellors to have successful collaboration with the child welfare system? What impacts do you feel this collaboration could have on the life of a child in care?

## Appendix 2

### Participant Recruitment Letter

June 13, 2020

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Megan Donald and I am a graduate student from the University of Manitoba's Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology in the Faculty of Education **and a practicing school counsellor**. I am conducting research as part of my Master's thesis project entitled: **Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach**, under the supervision of Dr. Virginia Tze. I am seeking your voluntary participation in this study, which I hope will lead to enhanced understanding of the current status of collaboration between school counsellors and child welfare social workers, and potential themes related to the outcomes of children in care. **Research findings will be shared with the First Nations Family Advocate Office, and their feedback will be included in the final project.**

**Background.** Professional school counsellors are teachers who specialize in education and mental health and provide social-emotional supports to children, adolescents and families. School counsellors frequently work with vulnerable and at-risk students and their families, including those involved in the child welfare system. Children in care are arguably amongst the most vulnerable of our population, and there is immense disparity between the outcomes for children in care in Manitoba and their same-aged peers who are not in care. Despite what the research tells us about the languishing outcomes for children in care, there is little research that explores the perceptions of school counsellors in working in collaboration with child welfare social workers and agencies. The goal of this research study is to gain insight and understanding about the perceptions of school counsellors in terms of best practices in collaboration with child welfare social workers and agencies, and how best to support our children in care and vulnerable families.

**Research study.** This study will involve interviewing school counsellors who have at least 5 years of experience as a school counsellor in Manitoba, working with children in care and child welfare social workers, and training in counselling at the post-graduate level. **Upon expression of interest in the study, potential participants will be asked to describe their professional backgrounds, including grade levels (early, middle or senior years) and areas serviced (for example, urban, rural or Northern) to ensure a diverse representation of experiences within the study. Identities of participants will be kept confidential.** School counsellors will be recruited through an approach of purposeful sampling through the Manitoba School Counsellors Association website and social media. Your involvement in the study will be anonymous. Interested school counsellors will be interviewed individually and asked about their thoughts related to the child welfare system and the potential for enhanced collaboration between school counsellors and child welfare social workers.

The interviews will take place on a mutually agreed upon date and time using video conferencing. If you decide to participate in this study, your privacy and confidentiality will be of utmost importance, and pseudonyms will be used. Your participation would involve:

- 1 x 30-minute initial meeting to discuss the project and share information related to interview questions and consent
- 1 x 60-minute interview about your perceptions related to supporting children in care, at-risk families and collaboration within the child welfare system
- 1 x 45-minute final meeting to review and revise the interview transcripts

Interview data will be analyzed using a phenomenological qualitative approach while exploring the perceptions and key themes of school counsellors working with vulnerable and at-risk families, children in care and child welfare social workers. Participants will have the opportunity to review and revise their responses within our final meeting.

You will gain insights into the collaborative work between school counsellors and child welfare social workers to improve outcomes of a vulnerable population—children in care. The potential risks are minimal. If you experience more stress than normal, you could consult with your professional EAP or call the Klinik Crisis Line (204-786-8686) for additional help. Throughout our interview, there is the potential for discovery of abuse against children. Current laws required that allegations of certain offenses against children be reported to legal authorities.

The data collected in the research project will be confidential. Only the primary researcher and her supervisor will have access to the information collected. The confidential information will be stored in a locked cabinet, and identifiable electronic information will be password protected. Identifiable data will be stored in a separate file folder from non-identifiable data.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. Even when you agree to meet with me for the initial 30-minute interview, you will be under no obligation to agree to participate further in this research. If you participate in all three meetings, you can still withdraw your data from the research up to 2 weeks after our third meeting. Confidential information will be stored for 5 years after the completion of study. Non-identifiable data will be kept for as long as it does not merit any further scientific investigation. Findings from this research project may be presented in various conferences and events and published in scientific journals or magazines or reports. This research study has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the Human Ethics Coordinator at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca) or 204-474-7122.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please contact me at [donaldm3@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:donaldm3@myumanitoba.ca) if you would like to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Megan Donald

PBDE, MEd (In Progress)

### Appendix 3

#### Consent Letter

Research Project Title: Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach

Researcher: Megan Donald, under the supervision of Dr. Virginia Tze

My name is Megan Donald and I am a graduate student from the University of Manitoba's Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology in the Faculty of Education **and a practicing school counsellor**. Please note that this consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. My hope is that this form will provide you with some basic information about my area of research, and what your participation will involve. you would like more detailed information about anything mentioned in this letter, or about information potentially not included in this letter, please do feel free to ask. You will be provided with a copy of this signed letter for your records and reference. Please take some time to read this letter thoroughly and reach out with any questions.

**Research study.** This study will involve interviewing school counsellors who have at least 5 years of experience as a school counsellor in Manitoba, working with children in care and child welfare social workers, and training in counselling at the post-graduate level. School counsellors will be recruited through an approach of purposeful sampling through the Manitoba School Counsellors Association website and social media. **Identities of participants will be kept confidential.** Interested school counsellors will be interviewed individually and asked about their experiences and thoughts related to the child welfare system and the potential for enhanced collaboration between school counsellors and child welfare social workers. **Research findings will be shared with the First Nations Family Advocate Office, and their feedback will be included in the final project.**

The interviews will take place on a mutually agreed upon date and time using video conferencing. **I will be conducting the interview and recording the audio track using the app "Voice Recorder and Audio Editor."** There will be a minimum of three participants in this study. **The final research findings will be shared via email with participants upon completion of the research process. There will be no remuneration for participation in this study.** If you decide to participate in this study, your privacy and confidentiality will be of utmost importance, and pseudonyms will be used and identifying details related to your school, students and their families will be changed. Your participation would involve:

- 1 x 30-minute initial meeting to discuss the project and share information related to interview questions and consent
- 1 x 60-minute interview about your perceptions related to supporting children in care, at-risk families and collaboration within the child welfare system
- 1 x 45-minute final meeting to review and revise the interview transcripts

Interview data will be analyzed using a phenomenological qualitative approach while exploring the perceptions and key themes of school counsellors working with vulnerable and at-risk families, children in care and child welfare social workers. Participants will have the opportunity to review and revise their responses within our final meeting. Specifically, you will be given 2 weeks to fully ensure your satisfaction with the responses, including the opportunity to revise previous comments and direct quotes.

You will gain insights into the collaborative work between school counsellors and child welfare social workers to improve outcomes of a vulnerable population—children in care. The potential risks are minimal. If you experience more stress than normal, you could consult with your professional EAP or call the Klinik Crisis Line (204-786-8686) for additional help. Throughout our interview, there is the potential for discovery of abuse against children. Current laws required that allegations of certain offenses against children be reported to legal authorities.

The data collected in the research project will be confidential. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the information collected. The confidential information will be stored in a locked cabinet, and identifiable electronic information will be password protected. Identifiable data will be stored in a separate file folder from non-identifiable data.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. Even when you agree to meet with me for the initial 30-minute interview, you will be under no obligation to agree to participate further in this research. If you participate in all three meetings, you can still withdraw your data from the research up to 2 weeks after our third meeting. Confidential information will be stored for 5 years after the completion of study. Non-identifiable data will be kept for as long as it does not merit any further scientific investigation. Findings from this research project may be

presented in various conferences and events, and published in scientific journals or magazines or reports. This research study has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the Human Ethics Coordinator at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca) or 204-474-7122.

\*\*\*\*\*

I \_\_\_\_\_, agree to take part in the research study entitled **Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach**. This data is collected as part of the Master's thesis of Megan Donald.

I understand that my participation will include:

- 1 x 30-minute initial meeting to discuss the project and share information related to interview questions and consent
- 1 x 60-minute interview about your perceptions related to supporting children in care, at-risk families and collaboration within the child welfare system
- 1 x 45-minute final meeting to review and revise the interview transcripts

I understand that after the interviews, my identity will be kept anonymous with the use of pseudonyms, and I do not need to name or identify students, families, child welfare social workers or agencies, places of employment, institution policies, or specific situations at my place of employment. I also understand that the three meetings will take place via video conferencing. I will have the opportunity to review and revise the interview transcript. This process of review and revision will allow me the opportunity to edit any information that I feel is too sensitive or might serve to identify myself, my school, my students or their families. I understand that my involvement and answers will be kept confidential throughout and after the research process. I understand that only the researcher, thesis advisor and my thesis committee members will have access to the information collected during the study. I understand that the findings of this study may be presented at conferences and could potentially be published. The findings from this research will be used as data for the researcher's thesis. I understand that direct quotes from my interview may be included, and there is no anticipated benefit for participation beyond the potential benefits of disclosure and personal insight and growth. I understand that the identifiable data for this project will be destroyed after five years when the project is completed.

*Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up until one week after your final interview, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way. This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.*

**Participant's Name (Printed)** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Name (Printed)** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions or curiosities about this study, please contact the researcher, Megan Donald, at [donaldrm3@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:donaldrm3@myumanitoba.ca), or Dr. Virginia Tze at [virginia.tze@umanitoba.ca](mailto:virginia.tze@umanitoba.ca).

## Appendix 4

### **Advertisement for Manitoba School Counsellors Association social media:**

Research Project: *Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach*

#### **Attention Manitoba School Counsellors!**

- Do you have at least five years of professional working experience within the role of a school counsellor in Manitoba?
- Do you have training in counselling at the post-baccalaureate or master's level?
- Do you have experience working with children in care and Manitoba's Child and Family Services social workers?
- Do you want to share your experiences and contribute to the growing body of literature on Manitoba's child welfare crisis?

If yes, I'd love to hear from you. I am a practicing school counsellor and a master's level student in the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education, Counselling Psychology program. I am currently completing my thesis, entitled *Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach*, under the supervision of Dr. Virginia Tze (**assistant professor in the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology, University of Manitoba.**)

**Upon expression of interest in the study, potential participants will be asked to describe their professional backgrounds, including grade levels (early, middle or senior years) and areas serviced (for example, urban, rural or Northern) to ensure a diverse representation of experiences within the study. Identities of participants will be kept confidential. Research findings will be shared with the First Nations Family Advocate Office, and their feedback will be included in the final project.**

**If you would like to learn more about the study, please contact Megan Donald at [donaldm3@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:donaldm3@myumanitoba.ca) for more information.**

## Appendix 5

### Standard letter to decline participants who do not meet inclusion criteria

To *(applicant's name here)*,

I want to sincerely thank you for your expressed interest in my research study, *Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach*. Unfortunately, due to not meeting the inclusion criteria of the study, I will not be able to include your input at this time.

Thank you again for your expressed interest – take care!

Sincerely,

Megan Donald  
MEd Counselling Psychology – In Progress  
University of Manitoba

## **Appendix 6**

### **Standard letter to decline additional participants**

To (*applicant's name here*),

I want to sincerely thank you for your expressed interest in my research study, *Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach*. At this time, I have reached the maximum capacity of participants and am not able to include another candidate. Should a current participant's involvement status in the project change, I will reach out to you to determine if you are still interested in becoming involved in the study.

Thank you again for your expressed interest – take care!

Sincerely,

Megan Donald  
MEd Counselling Psychology – In Progress  
University of Manitoba

**Appendix 7**

**Letter to First Nations Family Advocate Office**

**To Whom It May Concern,**

**I am a student in the Master of Education Counselling Psychology program at the University of Manitoba and a practicing school counsellor. I am currently in the process of completing my Master's Thesis, entitled: *Improving Outcomes for Children in Care: A Collaborative Approach*, under the supervision of my adviser, Dr. Virginia Tze.**

**I will be interviewing Manitoba school counsellors to discover their perceptions and perspectives on Manitoba's child welfare crisis and specifically their thoughts on collaborative practices with child welfare social workers. Given the significant over-representation of Indigenous children, youths and families involved in Manitoba's child welfare system, I am seeking your input on the interpretation of findings.**

**I would love for the opportunity to meet and discuss my research findings, in-person or virtually.**

**Thank you for time and consideration,**

**Sincerely,**

**Megan Donald**