

The Importance of Permanency Planning from the Indigenous Child Welfare Survivors' Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Child welfare agencies in Manitoba are facing critical challenges with the ongoing adverse outcomes for Indigenous children under their care. Addressing this issue, a comprehensive qualitative study was conducted, incorporating two Indigenous methodologies, the Talking Circle and The Visiting Way, to provide a culturally relevant and insightful perspective. This research aimed to rigorously evaluate the impact of permanent placement options on the well-being of Indigenous children. It sought to determine if these placements significantly improved outcomes and overall well-being, as experienced and reported by those navigating the child welfare system. The study's findings are pivotal in understanding and enhancing the care strategies for Indigenous children in Manitoba.

Significantly, the Talking Circle method, a cornerstone of this research, unexpectedly fell short in its effectiveness for data collection. Despite this, the study revealed critical insights. Participants consistently reported profound difficulties stemming from frequent transitions between various living environments within the foster care system. This constant movement severely undermined their sense of stability and predictability. Most notably, these unstable conditions had a profoundly adverse impact on the mental health and overall well-being of the participants, highlighting a crucial area for urgent intervention in the child welfare system.

This research unequivocally demonstrates that the lack of a stable, long-term home environment is crucial to participants' hardships. A consistent and secure living situation is not merely beneficial but crucial for fostering a sense of safety, belonging, and overall well-being among these individuals, as evidenced by the study's findings. Therefore, integrating these insights into policy and practice is imperative for transforming Manitoba's Child Welfare system, particularly to enhance the outcomes for Indigenous children under its care. The paper culminates in a detailed analysis of these findings and proposes strategic directions for future research, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change.

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## DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my mother  
and to the future of my daughter.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PERMANENCY PLANNING FROM THE INDIGENOUS CHILD WELFARE SURVIVOR’S PERSPECTIVE

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## ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

**ADP** – Authority Determination Protocol - The process for determining which child and family services authority provides services to individual families. Families have a choice in deciding which agency they wish to receive services through, regardless of the region in which they reside. Families may also request a change of Authority except when an abuse investigation or adoption is in process.

**AJIC** – The Aboriginal Justice Implementation Committee is the committee that was formed in November 1999 to develop a plan based on the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry's (AJI's) recommendations for child welfare in Manitoba.

**AJI-CWI** – Aboriginal Justice Inquiry-Child Welfare Initiative – refers to the joint initiative among the Province of Manitoba, Manitoba Metis Federation, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and Manitoba Keewatinook Ininew Okimowin to work together to develop and implement plans to restructure the child welfare system in Manitoba.

**CFS** – Child and Family Services

*Child Welfare Act* – In Manitoba, the child welfare system is called Child and Family Services (CFS). Its purpose is to protect children and youth and encourage family stability. The main aim of CFS is to safeguard children from abuse and neglect. The *Child Welfare Act* is legal legislation that guides decision-making when a child needs protection.

**CICs** – Children in Care

Designated Intake Agencies (DIA)-are mandated CFS agencies responsible for CFS intakes in specific regions of the province. DIAs conduct initial intakes and determine if there is a need for ongoing services. If services are deemed necessary, the child/family is referred to an ongoing service agency of the authority of the family's choosing.

**Devolution** – Devolution involves transferring a federal responsibility to the provincial or territorial level.

**Family Enhancement (FE)** – These are voluntary services for families without imminent risks of harm to children but who need support to strengthen parenting capacity or keep children safer at home. This strategy is geared towards prevention and strengthening families.

**Indigenous** – The term Indigenous is used throughout this study to refer to all Indigenous people who self-identify as Aboriginal, Métis, First Nation, Inuit, status/non-status, and as members of their traditional ancestral territories. The term Aboriginal, popularized in the Constitution Act 1982 and including only the 'Indian, Metis and Inuit' peoples, will generally only be found within direct quotes. The term 'Indian' will only be used in a legal context or direct quotes.

**"Forever Family"** – A family has chosen you, claims you as their own and is committed to caring for you forever. They have proven their love for you, sometimes by formally adopting you, sometimes in other ways such as family ceremonies, but nonetheless have welcomed you into their family and their hearts.

**Places of Safety** – Homes are generally provided by extended family or other community members who agree to look after a child who requires care within their community.

**Sixties Scoop** – Patrick Johnson coined the term in his 1983 report on Indigenous children in the Child Welfare system. The Sixties Scoop refers to the period, *primarily* throughout the 1960s, when Indigenous children were taken or “scooped away” from their birth *families* and *communities*, usually without the consent of their family and band. Many Indigenous children were taken from their communities and adopted into predominantly white, middle-class families throughout North America (Paradis, 2015).

## 1.0 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Before settlers arrived on Indigenous lands, Indigenous people long-held traditional knowledge and child-rearing practices to keep themselves, their families, their communities, and all their relations healthy, balanced, and well (Hart, 2008; Simpson, 2014). Through ongoing colonization, Indigenous people have endured genocidal oppression that saw their way of life fragmented, their oral traditions severed, their ceremonies outlawed, their mobility restricted, loss of language, and perhaps worst of all, the kidnapping of their children (Sinclair, 2017). The impact of this colonial devastation was a cultural fragmentation still reverberating within Indigenous families and communities today (Tait et al., 2013). To gain a genuine comprehension of the history of Indigenous people, we must examine the impact that colonization has had on Indigenous peoples.

### 1.2 BACKGROUND

Colonialism accounts for many vicious, demoralizing legacies. The first colonial assault on Indigenous peoples was the assimilation project, known as Residential Schools, also referred to as Canada's first child welfare institution (Bennett, 2016). The introduction of the current day child welfare system as a dominating and destructive force in Indigenous people's lives emerged consequently during the deterioration of the Residential Schools (Sinclair, 2017). It continued alongside the "Sixties Scoop" (Sinha et al., 2011). The child welfare system has been described by many as an extension of the colonial project (Blackstock et al., 2007; McKenzie & Hudson, 1985).

The most insidious and disguised form of colonization is the continuous domination of the Eurocentric ideology that influences the creation of various policies and legislation, such as the Child Welfare System (Blackstock et al., 2020; Sinha et al., 2011). The child welfare system and other colonial policies imposed on Indigenous people by the provincial and federal governments have affected Indigenous families significantly, and the impact continues today (Gough et al., 2005). For example,

colonial legislation, such as the *Child Welfare Act*, and the existing legislative framework perpetuate racist ideals of "the perfect Western family." It has significantly affected Indigenous families' ability to live according to their cultural and spiritual beliefs, traditional values, laws, and customs - values that have enabled them to raise their children in healthy and appropriate environments (Sinclair, 2017; Sinha et al., 2011). Tragically, this violent attack on Indigenous peoples, alongside the sixties scoop, is one of the many assaults that have resulted in an overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care (Blackstock et al., 2007).

In the 1970s, statistics illustrated that the child welfare system separated approximately one in every three Indigenous children from their biological families (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Sinclair, 2017). Currently, Indigenous child-in-care statistics are even more frightening, considering Indigenous children make up than 7.7% of the child population in Canada and account for 52.2% of all children in care (Statistics Canada, 2016; Sinha et al., 2011; Sinclair, 2017; Albert & Herbert, 2006). According to the 2015-2016 Annual Report from Manitoba Family Services, the overall number of Indigenous children in care stands at 9,205; this is a significant number of children that are impacted by such horrific outcomes (Gwen, 2017; Manitoba Family Services, 2017).

The "Sixties Scoop," which continued well into the 1970s, was a horrendous and grotesque misuse of government power and authority where mass amounts of Indigenous children were removed from their homes and placed for adoption in nonculturally appropriate homes without proper documentation or options to locate their birth family. The children became lost in a system through no fault of their own. As a result, many adoptees experienced a loss of cultural identity (Sixties Scoop, Encyclopedia). Thus, it was logical that a change needed to occur.

In 1982, to combat the above atrocities, several pivotal events transpired in response to Indigenous communities' concerns regarding the substantial removal of children from their homes and placement in foster care or adoption outside their provinces. One significant action taken was the

Provincial NDP Government, which ordered a stop to all **out-of-province** adoptions of Indigenous children. Secondly, the Provincial Government appointed Associate Chief Judge Edwin C. Kimelman of the Provincial Court, Family Division, to investigate the child welfare system process and procedures. In summary, Judge Kimelman's scope involved investigating the decision-making processes involved in the placement of Indigenous children into foster homes and placing them up for adoption. Additionally, it encompassed the formulation of guidelines for these processes, emphasizing cultural considerations. Furthermore, he aimed to propose initiatives to raise awareness about the need for adoptive and foster parents, specifically encouraging Indigenous families to offer their homes as placement resources (Kimelman, 1985, p. 6). His inquiry methodology included public hearings, specialized sessions, written submissions, interviews with various childcare agencies, examination of adoption files, interactions with selected group homes and organizations, and a review of relevant literature (Kimelman, 1985, p. ii).

Throughout the review, Judge Kimelman encountered several obstacles typical of the early 1980s context. At the initial meeting in May 1982, realizing the conflicting perspectives among representatives from mainstream child welfare agencies, provincial entities, and Indigenous welfare and political groups, he opted to serve as the sole member of the review committee, with the others continuing as advisors (Kimelman, 1985). Challenges characteristic of that era included the scarcity of reliable statistical data, research, and pertinent literature on child welfare (Kimelman, 1985, p. 3). Nevertheless, Judge Kimelman extensively examined files and policy manuals engaged with the public, agency personnel, and Indigenous community members. As part of his fact-finding, he reviewed the 1981 files. He identified that 108 children were placed outside the province, 51 within Canada and 57 in the United States, with 93 of these children being of Native descent (52 Treaty Indians, 4 non-treaty Indians, and 37 Métis) (Kimelman, 1985, p. 23).

In his final report, *No Quiet Place*, Chief Judge Kimelman concluded that the Aboriginal leaders were right; the child welfare system was guilty of “cultural genocide.” (Kimelman, 1985; Taylor-Henley &

Hudson, 1992). However, his report did not outlaw adoption or permanent plans altogether, which is how many working in various child welfare agencies came to understand it. This simple misunderstanding and reactionary response impacted the delivery of Indigenous child welfare services and child-in-care plans across the country. This caused many Indigenous children to 'linger in care' and to move from home to home without a sense of stability or belonging.

As tensions rose, many Indigenous communities in Canada embarked on taking back responsibility from the government to care for their children. Thus, Manitoba initiated agreements with Indigenous communities, enabling them to manage their own child welfare services. This push began in the early 1980s. The establishment of Indigenous child welfare Authorities through devolution in 2002 occurred within the framework of provincial legislation, supervised by a provincial minister, and lacked increased resources (Libesman, 2014; Simchura-Jerome, 2006). These reforms, guided by the government, maintain a top-down approach.

Bennett (2016) hoped, as did many that with devolution and the increased involvement of mandated Indigenous child welfare agencies, there would be a reduced number of children apprehended from the communities. However, statistics have shown that this has not been the case. Despite the advancements made by Indigenous agencies, there remains a disproportionate representation of Indigenous children within child protection systems, and these children are frequently placed in out-of-home care for longer durations compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Bennett, 2016). This is a tragedy because the outcomes for Indigenous children within the child welfare system are catastrophic.

Currently, the Child Welfare system tends to produce atrocious outcomes for Indigenous children in care, which marks the beginnings of a tragic legacy. For example, Indigenous youth being placed in care are often separated from their family, community, and culture, which puts them at a high risk for poor future outcomes and creates denigration of their culture. Related to this issue, several

Indigenous children in care struggle with identity, a lack of belonging and permanency. Nationwide, children in foster care constitute a significant portion of homeless youth and a third of homeless adults (Hyslop, 2018). Studies in Manitoba have discovered that Indigenous children in care have poorer educational outcomes, experience higher hospitalization incidents, and are at greater risk of attempting or committing suicide than other children and adolescents who are not in care (Government of Manitoba, 2018).

Additionally, Indigenous youth encounter substantial challenges compared to non-Indigenous counterparts due to systemic racism, oppression, and socio-economic disparities. For instance, they face an overrepresentation in the child welfare system, poverty, substandard housing, and homelessness, as well as adverse living conditions (Brooks et al., 2015; McDowell, 2015). Moreover, rates of involvement in the youth justice system and substance abuse are notably elevated among Indigenous youth (Brooks et al., 2015). For example, studies demonstrate that kids in care in British Columbia are more prone to incarceration than high school graduation (Hyslop, 2018). The child welfare system continues to fall short in addressing fundamental problems and the social determinants of health, contributing to the ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005a).

Tragically, despite several significant and necessary changes to the child welfare system, such as devolution, introducing the ADP, incorporating cultural plans, acknowledging the importance of family connections for Indigenous families, changing the funding model, moving towards a prevention approach, and banning adoptions, etc., the disparities remain and the numbers inexcusable. The child welfare system continues to produce appalling outcomes for Indigenous children. The results for Indigenous children who have aged out of care in Manitoba are inexcusable, heartbreaking, and horrendous not only for the children themselves but continue to have a rippling effect on their extended families and their respective communities. Many studies have been conducted on the child welfare system from the perspectives of social workers, community members, and foster parents; however, few

studies have captured emerging adults' views of the system that significantly impacted and influenced their lives. More importantly, no studies have explicitly examined the impact of permanency and permanency planning.

Ideally, children should be raised by their biological families when possible, and all supports and measures should be directed to supporting familial rights. However, heartbreakingly, there are instances when this is not possible. Dansey, Shbero, & John's (2019) and Carey's (2023) study, as well as my firsthand experience working in the system, clearly demonstrate that there is significant emotional damage created when a child grows up with the stigma of being a "foster child" or are bounced from home to home, after numerous failed reunification attempts. Demonstrated in interviews Carey (2023) conducted with twenty former youth in care, Carey's study shed light on the negative experiences and consequences of those who frequently encountered stigmatization due to their status as a youth in care. The adverse effects of long-term foster care placement on a child's well-being are mounting (Testa, 2004). Several studies documented the detrimental impact of children languishing indeterminately in foster care without a plan for permanence (Testa, 2004; Skivnes, 2010).

The research findings reinforced the importance of permanent attachments and relationships for healthy child development and provided a solid evidence base. However, literature noted that Indigenous youth in care are typically less likely than other children to achieve permanency through legal adoption or guardianship (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010; Turpel & Lafond, 2014). This is partly due to narrow conceptualizations of permanency within current child welfare practices; thus it is crucial to clarify that I am not referring to permanency within the conventional, stringent framework commonly defined in legal terms, encompassing three custody forms: (1) reunification with a biological parent, (2) adoption entailing the complete transfer of parental rights from the biological parent to another adult, or (3) legal guardianship, where the responsibility for the child shifts from the parent to an alternative caregiver. This definition significantly differs from my vision and the concept of 'adoption' within

Indigenous communities, where the sharing of children is ingrained in traditional law. In these communities, a practice exists where, when appropriate, children are entrusted to others with respect shown to all involved parties with the consent or consultation of their biological parents (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010, p. 101). Bertsch and Bidgood (2010) elaborate on this practice, explaining that there is no separation from their community, birth families, or culture in the lifelong planning for children. Consequently, First Nations languages lack a traditional term for adoption.

For this paper, permanency can take different forms, such as placement or private arrangements with family members when reunification with the biological family is unsafe or not in the child's best interest. Many Indigenous communities feel customary adoptions to be far more culturally acceptable. This Kimmelman Report (1985) acknowledged custom adoptions as a suitable option and the ability of children to relate healthily to several adult caregivers (p. 36). There are some cases where children may find permanency in long-term foster care with a foster family that becomes their stable and supportive home environment. Legal Guardianship provides a permanent arrangement where a relative or another caregiver takes on the legal responsibility for the child's well-being and upbringing, even if they are not the child's biological parents. Adoption becomes necessary when reunification with a birth family is not feasible. The child becomes a legal and emotional member of their adoptive family, with all the rights and responsibilities that come with it.

The goal of achieving permanency is to ensure that children have a consistent and loving environment to grow, learn, and thrive, ultimately providing them with opportunities for a successful and fulfilling future. Therefore, should we not explore from the emerging adults' perspectives whether having a family 'claim' them as their own would have improved their overall well-being? If this is something that the children value, then given their desire and the positive statistics shown in literature, should we, as social workers, not advocate for more secure and long-term placement options for Indigenous children in care? Of course, this should be done only if the children cannot return home

safely. Thus, this thesis is an urgent call for creative pathways of engagement that delineate places of belonging for and with Indigenous children in care. Our young people in care need us to engage with them to create collaborative, unique, and flexible practices that sustain safe, healthy, loving, and permanent caregiving arrangements (de Finney & di Tomassob, 2015).

## 1.2 PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES

This Master of Social Work thesis sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Indigenous child's experience and perspective of the child welfare system since emancipation from care. This thesis study examined their thoughts and feelings around the importance of permanency planning and the role that permanency planning (or a lack of it) played in their life trajectory. My goal has always been to plan *'with'* the children we serve, not *for* them; gaining their insight will help achieve this. I want to contribute a better understanding of the permanency goals of Indigenous children and to influence the outcomes for emerging children in care in a positive manner, leaving the children feeling more satisfied with their level of care and sustaining a better future. I ultimately sought to learn what emerging adults want for their future and what is important to them, not necessarily to policymakers. The research focused on whether permanency or permanent placement options, such as having a forever family, being claimed, or being adopted, would have improved the 'emerging adult's (Arnett, 2000) sense of stability and overall well-being from their perspective.

Additionally, this study aims to provide an additional lens to the current literature for those seeking information and potential policymakers. The main objective was first to give child welfare survivors a voice and let them know that what they have to say matters. Secondly, to improve the child welfare system and encourage better outcomes for Indigenous children in care.

Since starting my social work career eighteen years ago, I have approached my work with curiosity and compassionate inquiry, seeking to learn from others and discover what constitutes good care. I have been honoured to speak to many Indigenous individuals who have aged out of agency care

and adopted from the child welfare system. As a social worker, I asked them, “What is one thing that your social worker could have done differently that would have made things better for you as a child in care”? The individuals stated they longed for a sense of belonging, someone to love and claim them as their own, to stop bouncing from home to home, and to have someone to count on in their time of need. Shockingly, given Indigenous child welfare policy to date, there has not been one person I have spoken to personally who has said they wished they would have remained in care or were not adopted from the child welfare system. Thus, this thesis gives emerging adults a voice to share what they want to see regarding placement options and what permanency planning means to them and their future.

In my research, I identified improved ways to transition emerging adults out of care so they feel loved and supported. My other objectives included empowering Indigenous emerging adult survivors of child welfare to feel comfortable sharing their desires, stories, and ideas; promoting better outcomes and healing for Indigenous emerging adult survivors of child welfare during the process; and encouraging decision-makers to put the child first on a case-by-case basis, rather than meeting political agendas.

### **1.3 LOCATING SELF**

Kovach (2009) believes that a self-locating statement is vital in Indigenous methodologies for various reasons, including clarification, theoretical consistency, and acknowledgment. It is essential to provide transparency so the participants understand any biases or lack of knowledge I may have. Being transparent clarifies who I am, where I come from, and how I obtained my knowledge; it also holds me accountable (Absolon, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

My spirit name is Waabiski Mashkode-bizhiki Ike, which translates to White Buffalo Woman. I received my spirit name in 2005 from the late Garry Raven of Hollow Water First Nation. Garry stated that the Buffalo provided Indigenous peoples everything they needed to survive: hides for warmth and shelter, meat for eating, muscle for sinew, and bones for tools. The Buffalo gives every part of itself so

that others can survive, sometimes to its demise; Garry shared that he saw this within me. The teaching of respect is also taught to us by the Buffalo.

I was born and raised in the North End of Winnipeg, Manitoba, in a working-class household with alcoholism and the dysfunction that comes with that. As a child, I often wondered where Child and Family Services was, why they had not come to save the day, and whether I would have felt safer and a sense of calm in foster care. However, through my gained experience, I now know better; I was very naïve, and I am grateful and blessed to have been raised with my biological family. I am a woman of Métis, French, and German ancestry born in Treaty 1 territory. Unfortunately, as a child, I struggled with my cultural identity, as the impact of colonization distorted my understanding and expression of myself as a proud Métis woman. As a teenager, I often felt lost and disconnected, yet I found an indescribable sense of peace and solace while on the land and near a drum. Hence, I started searching for answers about my cultural identity. My paternal grandmother, who will be called my "Meme," was born and raised in St. Anne's, Manitoba. I knew one of my Meme's sisters had Treaty Status, so I continued to press every time my family tried to skirt the issue. Eventually, we completed a genealogy that confirmed my suspicions that we were, at a minimum, of Métis ancestry. We have found documents stating that our ancestors were one of the first Indigenous people on Turtle Island. Her family had a form of monetary contractual agreement with the Canadian government called a script, which stripped us of our treaty status.

Since childhood, I have felt that my purpose on Mother Earth was to serve and help others. Therefore, it was my dream to become a social worker, as I believed this was the most effective way to help others and affect positive change. In 2000, I applied to the Social Work program at the University of Manitoba Fort Garry Campus and was accepted. Attending University, I felt a tremendous amount of responsibility to succeed, as I was the first person in my immediate family to graduate high school and attend University. In 2005, as I was finishing my last semester at the University of Manitoba, I

unexpectedly lost my mother; she was one of my best friends and biggest supporters. I graduated with my Bachelor of Social Work in 2006, nine months pregnant with my first child, Sean Jr.

I am a mother of two beautiful and healthy children; my children are the light of my life and my greatest accomplishment. Our second child, Skyla, is a precious little girl gifted to us by the Creator. She was not born in my body but was born in our hearts. We fell in love with her the minute we met and knew our union was meant to be. Skyla was placed with us when she was ten weeks old, and for the past nine years, I have had the privilege and honour of being her mom. Through great difficulty, she has become a permanent family member through guardianship. Our daughter is our angel, and I cherish her with all I am. I embarked on this journey to seek knowledge and do this research for her and other children in similar situations.

Professionally, I have worked within various Child and Family Services agencies for fifteen years and have been a foster parent off and on for the last thirteen years, with the desire to improve the life of at least one child by providing them with unconditional love, support, and a positive role model. I fostered children, not because I sought to become a foster parent but because various people have asked me to take care of these unique gifts from the Creator, and I graciously accepted.

My passion for this research topic came from my professional and personal experiences. As an Indigenous social worker, I strive to provide the best care for the children I have had the pleasure of serving and caring for. I quickly noticed disparities in the outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous emerging adults from care were riveting. An area of intrigue was that there were significantly fewer non-Indigenous children “aged out” of the child welfare system than Indigenous children, from my observation. Therefore, I began to search for answers to why this would be, besides the blatant and obvious cultural atrocities. One reason found was that Caucasian children in care did not linger in the foster care system as long as Indigenous children in care did. Typically, their foster parents

either received guardianship of them or they were adopted, as the agencies involved, usually Winnipeg Child and Family Services, supported these planning options when there was no chance for reunification.

Bennett (2016) states that this trend results from funding and structural issues beyond the control of Indigenous agencies and populations (Shangreaux, 2004; Blackstock, 2010). I would partially agree with this statement. My professional and personal experience demonstrated that there were additional reasons that there were a higher number of Indigenous children in care over their counterparts due to political issues, funding reasons, and overall ideology towards permanency.

I no longer work in the Child and Family sector due to years of working in a system that does not support children and families to the best of their ability. I was at a place in my life where I needed to help children more realistically as I felt I was no longer servicing children that was in their best interest. Currently, I am a mental health therapist, providing culturally appropriate counselling and completing various assessments and consultations. I intend to continue to help others and influence positive change for all people, specifically to empower our Indigenous community. This may be in day-to-day advocacy and awareness or the policy sector. Explaining my position in depth allows the participants to understand my location, purpose, motivation, and experiences within the context of my research (Kovach, 2010). Putting myself forward provides accountability and my positionality to remain clear within and throughout the study (Absolon & Willett, 2005).

### **1.3 RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL WORK**

My graduate thesis focused on Indigenous children who have exited the child welfare system, which demonstrates my dedication and continued desire to improve their lives, the betterment of the community, and the systems that serve our Indigenous children. I chose to pursue the experiences of emerging adults who have grown up in the child welfare system to empower them and give them a voice. Sadly, social workers and policymakers have not adequately heard their stories. Indigenous emerging adults have rarely been asked to reflect on their experiences and provide feedback to

influence change. Their stories can shed wisdom and guidance to those who create policy. Therefore, due to the current state of child welfare, I believe this study can significantly benefit social work.

When conducting my literature review, there appears to be a gap in the resources available concerning emerging adults' perspectives on what constitutes good care and what aspects they feel are vital to improving their overall well-being. Some studies were conducted on permanent placement options, such as guardianship and adoption; however, they are not specific to Indigenous children in care. Therefore, they must include the importance of incorporating family connections and culture. A holistic approach to permanency should consist of all the crucial aspects of well-being important to the Indigenous community.

Plenty of research supports the notion that children with a sense of permanency, or a 'forever family,' have a greater understanding of security and belonging. This, in turn, contributes to better long-term outcomes for the emerging adult. Nevertheless, many agencies, organizations, and communities do not allow these options to occur for Indigenous children in care, partly due to personal, professional, and political beliefs and partly due to recommendations made in the *Kimelman Report: No Quiet Place Manitoba Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoptions and Placements* (1985). My contribution to the social work profession is that a new perspective will be offered. Adult Child Welfare survivors had their voices heard and had the opportunity to possibly influence the policies that dictate the system that has profoundly affected their lives.

#### 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The three overall guiding questions for my thesis study were:

- 1) Was permanency vital to you as a child in care? Did you know what that meant at the time?
- 2) Would permanent placement options, such as having a forever family, being claimed, or being adopted, have improved your sense of stability and overall well-being?

- 3) Now that you know the impact being a child in care had, would you have wanted your social worker to do anything differently on your behalf?

## 1.5 SUMMARY

As professionals and social workers, we must continue to evolve, look for growth opportunities, and look for ways to improve the lives of Indigenous peoples and those we help through our work. It is critical to continue seeking knowledge and never settle for the status quo; we must strive to improve. This vital thesis was necessary so that Indigenous children, as the primary stakeholders of the child welfare system, finally have their voices heard and assist in driving policy changes to improve outcomes for Indigenous children in care. I desire to continue to learn from Indigenous peoples, contribute to their healing journey, and assist in shaping a better child welfare system in their honour.

In the following section, I reviewed the literature to understand children's well-being, aging out of care, adoption experiences, and what emerging adults from Indigenous communities had to say about their experiences in care. I found a gap in the literature that failed to answer the specific questions that my research sought, and the voices of emerging adults needed to be captured.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The focus of this chapter is to highlight the literature reviewed for this thesis and research study, which provides a context and outlines what the research demonstrates on child welfare-related topics. There are several options to consider for transitioning Emerging Youth out of care so that they feel more satisfied. All adolescents transition toward adulthood as part of their life course (Bennett, 2016). All people need to be loved, require help and encouragement, and have a support network, whether in child welfare care or not when making this critical life transition.

The literature review for this thesis focuses primarily on what the research shows is the success rate of the available options for emerging adults exiting child welfare systems. Specifically, studies were done on the topic of adoption, foster care, foster care and attachment, the child welfare system, and foster care outcomes. However, nothing was found in my literature review regarding the Indigenous emerging adults' perspective on permanency and increasing their overall well-being. Therefore, there was a significant gap in the research, which made the literature review difficult but affirmed for me how necessary it is to capture the voices of the Indigenous individuals directly affected by our agencies and communities' daily decisions. This literature review will point to the importance of including these voices, including the benefits of why the voice of the adults from care matter... through a comprehensive literature review, I examine the various voices and bring them forward in a cohesive way by exploring qualitative data gathered.

### **2.2 CONCEPT OF BEST INTEREST**

Over the past century, neoliberal law and colonial policies and procedures set the stage for the treatment and care of children in the child welfare system – the history of neoliberalism documents and accounts for various views of the best interest of the child. The history of colonization led to the ongoing debate on the child's best interest under a capitalistic framework, which led to the formation of the child

welfare system. The best interest of the child debate accounts for multiple views of what could be viewed as a child's best interest and whether this accounts for culture or not. However, the history of colonization of Indigenous people pertains to a history of structural violence amongst Indigenous peoples, leading to a higher rate of Indigenous children within the child welfare system (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Ikeda, 2013). Under the child welfare system, practices put into place involve emergency placements, foster care, reunification, adoption, and permanency planning. In my studies, I discovered the immense need for permanency planning and the inclusion of the adults emerging from care, recognizing the importance of their voices. However, an ongoing question guides our work as social workers: Is this decision in the "child's best interest"?

In 1979, the *Child Welfare Act* in Manitoba introduced the first legal definition of the "best interests of the child." The first definition was colonial and based solely on Western ideals of what constitutes reasonable care. Since the introduction of the initial definition, consensus has been that the meaning and ideology surrounding the 'best interests of the child' concept is ambiguous and can become contentious. Scholars, ideologies, and cultures often prioritize different aspects of the definition and how it relates to the child's overall well-being (Skivenes, 2010). Long & Sephton (2010) and Zermatten (2010) further state that the child principle's best interests can vary in interpretation based on the context of the application, values, beliefs, culture, and individual or collective perspectives. However, although the definition remains subjective and acknowledges the significance of cultural relativism/rights, it is crucial to note that scholars such as Zermatten (2010) firmly argue that the rights of parents cannot override the child's rights, as supported by the TRC (2015). However, this is often the case in Manitoba.

For decades, the best interest of the child principle within Canadian child welfare has been criticized as problematic for Indigenous communities (AJIC, 1999; Choate et al., 2019; NIMMIWG, n.d.; Sinclair, 2016; TRC, 2015). Kowal (2023) further states that "the best interest of the child doctrine is

intended to protect children; the concept failed in every way to address the needs of Indigenous children and families (p.19)." I agree with this statement; however, I would strongly caution that it is essential not to negate the primary intention of child welfare and protective services, which is to protect vulnerable children for the latter part of the statement. It would be like putting the cart before the horse; if we prioritize family and culture over the protection and well-being of the children, then there would be no children to preserve the culture and families, or the families would be damaged due to ongoing trauma.

In 1985, revisions to *The Child and Family Services Act* broadened the scope of the best interests of the child principle under section 2(1) of the Act, encompassing "cultural and linguistic heritage." However, the act still allowed adoption without consent during this period. Additionally, section 6(14) of the Act (1985) marked the initial mention of Manitoba's capacity to form "Agreements with Indian bands" to enable Indigenous communities to deliver their services. However, the overall outcomes for children in care remained unchanged despite this change.

There are several competing and legitimate ways of bringing up a child. Mnookin and Szwed, prominent legal scholars whose extensive work delves into this topic, argue that determining what is optimal for a child or children as a whole is frequently uncertain and speculative. They assert that this determination necessitates highly personalized decision-making between various options (Mnookin & Szwed, 1983, p. 8). Skivenes (2010) states that assessing a child's best interests entails foreseeing outcomes and repercussions that pose significant challenges for estimation (Archard & Skivenes, 2009). It requires making value-based judgments concerning what is morally sound and appropriate for a child and their parents. The definition of a child's best interests fluctuates among cultures, religions, status, race, and geographical regions (Alston, 1994; Parker, 1994; Eriksen & Skivenes, 1998). Sinclair (2016) additionally challenges the legitimacy of non-Indigenous individuals within the legal system who interpret and define what constitutes the best interests of Indigenous children.

The dilemma then becomes: how do decision-makers decide what is supposedly in the child's best interests; what areas/considerations are deemed necessary, and are decisions based on rational reasoning or subjective presumption? This definition is vague and subjective, thus creating all kinds of issues and debates. Do decision-making discussions then become around normative issues of the current political climate?

*The Act* (2019) stipulates that the interpretation of the best interests of the child should align "in a manner consistent with a provision of a law of the Indigenous group, community, or people to which the child belongs" (Section 4). This implies that the determination of the child's best interests should be viewed from the perspective of the child's Indigenous community, respecting the sovereignty of that Indigenous community. Thus, The NIMMIWG Call to Justice 12.3 states:

We call upon all governments and Indigenous organizations to develop and apply a definition of "best interests of the child" based on distinct Indigenous perspectives, world views, needs, and priorities, including the perspective of Indigenous children and youth. The primary focus and objective of all child and family services agencies **must uphold and protect the child's rights by ensuring the health and well-being of children**, their families, and communities, as well as family unification and reunification. (NIMMIWG, n.d., p. 194).

I agree that all things are created equal; however, if not, what about the critical components underlined? I believe they are in the first part of that sentence for valid reasons.

Norwegian law emphasizes the biological principle that it is in the child's best interest to grow up with their birth parents. The third consideration is that the child's opinion should be heard and given weight when determining their best interests. This tenet is not strongly considered in Manitoba, and more emphasis should be placed on it. These factors provide significant direction for decision-makers but can potentially conflict, as the biological aspect may clash with the child's perspective and stability considerations (Skivenes, 2002; Skivenes, 2010). Most legislations worldwide, all actions concerning

children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, state that the child's best interests shall be a primary consideration. The overarching question is who determines best interests; although I agree we should not consider Eurocentric ideals, I would hypothesize that a child in need is going to have a different view than an Indigenous political body or community.

Alexy (1989) and Habermas (1996) state that legitimate answers to these questions, such as competing ideas of best, can be achieved through rational and respectful discourse in which all parties involved participate, and all relevant arguments are presented for open and discussion supported by pragmatic and ethical evidence (Skivenes, 2010). In Skivenes's (2010) article, the Supreme Court's deliberation focuses on adopting four foster children, centring on whether adoption aligns with their best interests. These children are distinct individuals, each with unique abilities and requirements. They reside in diverse circumstances and possess varying desires and aspirations. Hence, it is imperative to tailor individual considerations for each child, necessitating a detailed depiction of their perspectives and life situations.

### **2.3 PERMANENCE**

Placement stability is a significant concern for all stakeholders after a child enters foster care. Based on this study and prior research, focusing on permanent placement outcomes can be beneficial and is warranted. Consequently, permanent placement success or failure following foster care may be an essential determinant of other psychosocial outcomes; as such, examining permanent placement outcomes is a well-justified first step in understanding the long-term impact of an intervention. For example, when studying the outcomes of adoption versus long-term fostering, Triseliotis (2002) found that for children who cannot return to live with their birth families, the defining difference between these two forms of substitute parenting was that there were higher levels of emotional security, sense of belonging and general well-being reported by those growing up as adopted compared with those

fostered long term. Which directly correlates to the struggles experienced by the participants in this study. Chateaufeuf et al.'s (2022) study results show that children placed in non-relative foster care are more likely than those identified in foster to adopt homes to experience multiple out-of-home placements and, thus, placement instability. Moreover, several studies documented the detrimental impact of children languishing indeterminately in foster care without a plan for permanence. The research findings reinforced the importance of permanent attachments and relationships for healthy child development and provided a solid evidence base (Testa, 2004).

This is demonstrated in one research study where a young lady shared her own story of being an Indigenous youth in care: "It is not easy. When I first got to high school, there were many times when my parents had to sign forms, permissions forms, or something. I would not know whether to give it to my foster parent or my social worker. I remember one time asking who I gave it to (...). Many were shocked that I was in care, and many kids started trying to talk about me being in care. There were not very many kids that were racist, but there were some." She further discussed the stigma associated with foster care (Cary, 2023).

Permanency can mean various things, encompass many options, and look unique for each individual, each requiring careful planning and examination. The child and their families' specific needs would have to be delicately explored, in addition to the likelihood of reunification or resurgence of extended family involvement. Their attachment to their current parental figure(s), their wishes, current family contact, and cultural appropriateness are also areas that should be considered and incorporated into any long-term plan for a child.

As we move towards resurgence with an open mind and a search for better, British Columbia introduced implementing the practice of "cultural permanence," which is defined explicitly concerning Indigenous children and youth in care (Bennett, 2015). It denotes the right of these individuals to maintain stability and endure meaningful relationships with their family, extended family, community,

and culture (Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network, 2011; Bennett, 2015). The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) has begun to incorporate this concept as a vital element of permanency (Bennett, 2015). For Indigenous individuals, culture defines their core identity (Carrière, 2007; Hart, 2007; Smith, 2012; Thomas, 2005). It is crucial not to overlook the cultural identity of Indigenous children and youth in care because their welfare relies on cultural recovery (Carrière, 2010). Jeannine Carrière (2007) stresses that understanding oneself and belonging to a broader community gives significance to one's existence. Therefore, at the University of Victoria's Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network (ICWRN), cultural permanence encompasses customary care practices, including traditional adoptions and informal methods, ensuring that Indigenous children and youth in care establish or sustain lasting connections with their families, communities, and culture. These practices are integrated into a child's cultural plan of care (CPOC) (Bennett, 2015).

Furthermore, there are both formal arrangements, such as custom adoption, kinship care, and guardianship, as well as informal practices for cultural permanence, like off-reserve homecoming ceremonies for children or youth, that can occur to address each child's unique needs (Bennett, 2015). As stated by Bennette (2015), "Permanency is the overall goal and context for cultural plans" (p. 104). As per Turpel-Lafond, permanency planning focuses beyond mere placement; it encompasses reinforcing the child's connections, cultural identity, and feeling of belonging, thus alleviating the concerns if a kinship placement cannot be found. However, she further states that even though Indigenous scholars, Chiefs, leaders and community members (e.g., Sinclair, 2007; Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002) emphasize the significance of community engagement in decisions impacting the children within their communities, in her March 2013 report to the BC legislative assembly there was scarce or negligible involvement from First Nations communities in developing plans for their children and youth (Bennett, 2015), sadly this is still the case. Consequently, this lack of action and follow-through leaves the innocent children as casualties along the way.

## 2.4 CONCEPTS OF BELONGING FROM DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS

Individuals and cultures uniquely see and react to the world, people, and ideas. For instance, Western ideas about how kids should grow up emphasize the bond between a child and their primary caregiver, often the mother. However, from an Indigenous perspective, being connected involves the community, extended family, cultural traditions, and collective care. Here, planning for children should be led by the family, with valuable input from the child's Indigenous community (Bennett, 2015).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors discussing connections for Indigenous kids share similarities in content and definition. However, they can significantly differ in their beliefs, settings, and approach. For instance, non-Indigenous experts like Gordon Neufeld and Lakota professor Martin Brokenleg agree that children benefit from caring adults who offer consistent support and act as a bridge for connections. However, Neufeld leans toward individual clinical methods, while Brokenleg and other Indigenous authors favour a more collective, cultural approach involving extended family and community. Indigenous ideology views connectedness and belonging as a holistic concept tied to the extended family, where multiple relatives contribute to raising each child. Western ideology may argue that this could create future attachment and relationship issues.

Indigenous identities are intertwined with many people, the land, and their history, as demonstrated when they introduce themselves in connection to their clan, family lineage, and community (Bennett, 2015). These views differ because Westerners often introduce themselves individually, focusing on their achievements (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Carrière and Richardson (2009) argue that an Indigenous view of cultural connections and identity is more fitting for Indigenous children than the Western concept of attachment. They suggest replacing the term "attachment" with "connection" or "connectedness," which better reflects mutual relationships. According to these authors, a child's cultural connections and sense of belonging can grow through relationships with the land, nature, spirituality, ceremonies, and ancestors (Carrière & Richardson, 2009). These connections

give children a sense of purpose and belonging (Carrière & Richardson, 2009; Bennett, 2015). The following sections will explore additional ways in which a sense of belonging has been achieved.

#### **2.4.a Adoption**

Adoption is considered a vital permanency planning option where children are adopted into a family. Despite popular belief and the current political narrative, adoption has shown high satisfaction levels among studies conducted on Indigenous emerging adults (Swidrowich, 2004). According to Hollinger (2002) and Skivenes (2010), adoption is widely acknowledged in the literature as the most efficient means of ensuring stability and a stable, enduring family environment for children unable to reside with their biological parents. An abundance of research underscores the significance and benefits of permanency in children's lives (Goldstein et al., 1973; Skivenes, 2009). Among children in care, adoption yields superior outcomes compared to alternative solutions (Christoffersen et al., 2007).

The above is further supported by Barroso and Barbosa-Ducharne (2019) study that focused on the adoptee's point of view of adoption-related feelings, including feelings of loss, curiosity about the birth family, and pre-adoption life. The data collected allowed for identifying the adopted adolescents' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding their stories before and after adoption and their feelings towards their birth family. The results showed that most participants did not identify adoption-related losses; overall, it was a positive experience. The assessment was based on how the adoptee interprets the meaning of being adopted and assesses the options available to cope with the adoptive status's conflicts, demands, and challenges (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019).

Adoption is a permanency planning option; knowing what the research says about the adoptee's experiences is essential and could be drawn upon for meeting Indigenous children's needs for belonging, as was shared in many of the participant's stories. However, this study did not mention nor reference the adoptee's culture or cross-cultural adoptions. Thus, for more culturally inclusive research, I draw upon Carriere's (2007) article *Promising Practice for Maintaining Identities in First Nation Adoption*,

which looked at Indigenous adoptees and the importance of identity. While acknowledging historical challenges faced by Indigenous adoptees, which I would concur with, Carriere's (2007) exploration of Indigenous adults raised in non-Indigenous settings reveals a theme of identity and loss among participants; however, this theme is contradicted in Swidrovich (2004) study, as seen below. The researcher's lens could have influenced this outcome, the research agenda, and the questions raised in the study; thus, this demonstrates the importance of looking at the researchers' goals when considering the data. In Carriere's (2007) study, this theme significantly impacted their overall well-being, leading to a shared yearning among adoptees to reconnect with their birth families and discover their roots (p. 41). While this finding is crucial, implementing comprehensive cultural plans and establishing regular family visits could mitigate the abovementioned issues.

Moreover, Carriere (2007) draws upon Fanshel's research (as cited in CWLA, 2000), suggesting that outcomes for Indigenous children adopted by Caucasian families are primarily linked to personality-related challenges rather than systemic issues. This underscores the criticality of careful matching in adoption processes, highlighting its profound impact on children's welfare. This emphasizes the need for improved social work practices, emphasizing meticulous assessment and matching strategies rather than dismissing adoption as an unsuitable option for Indigenous children. Furthermore, Fulcher's emphasis on cultural safety in child welfare services is strongly supported (2002). Bennett's assessment of the Southern Manitoba First Nation Repatriation Program (2001) revealed a prevailing sentiment among adoptees for learning about their ancestral heritage (p. 31). Importantly, adoptees accepted adoption itself but expressed a need for a profound understanding of their heritage, which should be incorporated into their lives or plans.

Citing Anderson's experience (as referenced in Carriere, 2007), the struggle to understand one's identity as an Indigenous woman raised away from family and community elucidates the complexities Indigenous individuals face. By proactively addressing these issues through cultural plans, family

connections, and comprehensive support, strides can be made to enhance children's experiences in care. In comparison to the results of my study, Carriere's adoptees' overall well-being, satisfaction with their lives, and societal success (academic and workforce) were much higher.

In response to such issues, the British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth (2016) sought improved data and issued a report entitled *Finding Forever Families: A Review of the Provincial Adoption System*. This report showed that Indigenous children are significantly over-represented in the British Columbia (BC) child welfare system. Therefore, a focus had been placed on collecting adoption and permanency statistics for that cohort. There were 69 Indigenous children and youth in care who were placed for adoption between April 1 and November 30, 2015. Indigenous children in care with adoption plans in B.C. have increased by 31 percent (British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth, 2016). The report examined various permanency planning options and their related outcomes for children in care. The report highlighted that various B.C. Indigenous agencies supported adoption as one of their permanency planning options, which is contrary to the overall general practices of Indigenous Child welfare practices in Manitoba.

A representative for Children and Youth (2017) published a report that updated the progress of British Columbia Child and Family Development's permanency planning goals. This report pays close attention to the permanency plans of Indigenous children in the province and found that fewer Aboriginal children were placed in 2017 than in previous years, despite the option of customary care in the province. This report, along with Swidrovich's (2004), illustrates the strengths and outcomes associated with adoption and offers an alternative to aging out of care. Swidrovich's (2004) doctoral dissertation on *Positive Experiences of First Nations in Non-Aboriginal Foster or Adoptive Care: Deconstructing the "Sixties Scoop."* Like Carrier (2007), Swidrovich is an Indigenous individual raised within the foster care system, and she states that she naturally felt inclined to explore the research advancements and ongoing developments surrounding foster care and adoptions. Swidrovich says that

she recognizes that in Canada, the delivery of child welfare services to Indigenous People is a profoundly contentious area.

Swidrowich (2004) argues in her thesis that in the discourse on Indigenous child welfare, the colonial paradigm is evident in the term "the Sixties Scoop. " This label is often associated with a sense of victimization among many First Nations people. Consequently, discussions around child protective services typically emphasize negative consequences, overshadowing the positive experiences of First Nations individuals within this system and skewing the data available.

Swidrowich (2004) illustrates that the prevalence of the Sixties Scoop model has led to an overwhelming focus on adverse outcomes, silencing the voices of those who had fulfilling or positive encounters with the child welfare system. Swidrowich (2004) aims to prove that this bias, deeply entrenched in the literature, has been bolstered by the politicized nature of the discourse, preventing a thorough examination of positive experiences and critical evaluation of the model's limitations. Swidrowich's study aims to broaden the discussion of Indigenous child welfare by acknowledging and validating experiences not commonly addressed in existing literature.

However, integrating these positive experiences into the discourse poses challenges due to their stark contrast to the dominant narrative of the Sixties Scoop model. Reconciling these opposing viewpoints within the discourse is essential to prevent dismissing positive experiences as exceptions to the colonial assertions embedded in the prevailing framework. Additionally, critical analysis of the Sixties Scoop model might be misconstrued as diminishing the impact of child welfare interventions on Indigenous individuals. Therefore, her thesis seeks to evaluate positive substitute care experiences and deconstruct the Sixties Scoop model to integrate these experiences into meaningful discussions on Indigenous child welfare.

The realization that relatives could pursue adoption when provided with comprehensive information about their choices emerged from inventive initiatives aiming to establish substitute

permanence options rooted in the cultural practices of informal adoption and kinship care within Indigenous communities. Nevertheless, historically, there was opposition to the notion of relatives adopting their family members. Consequently, numerous child welfare agencies have revisited the effectiveness of legal guardianship as a strategy to transition children out of the child welfare system, ensuring enduring legal kinship care arrangements (Testa, 2004) or customary adoptions.

Customary Adoption is another culturally appropriate possibility that could be explored to promote belonging, stability, and connection through permanence (Keewatin, 2004). Customary Adoption is a longstanding Indigenous tradition of affection, assistance, and nurturing care that dates to the beginning of time (pre-contact) (Keewatin, 2004). Indigenous custom adoption finds its roots within traditional oral or customary law, built upon social connections and traditions (Keewatin, 2004). In contrast, Western adoption models are often rooted in written legal systems (Keewatin, 2004; Hepworth, 1980). In stark contrast to this Western approach, most Indigenous societies practiced adoption within well-known family networks based on trust. Adoption occurred exclusively between families familiar with each other, reinforcing and strengthening existing kinship ties through adoption (Keewatin, 2004; Guemple, 1976; Shomaker, 1989).

The topic of adoption highlights related points surrounding identity and cultural loss, feelings associated with loss, curiosity about biological family, which may impact well-being, consideration around matching strategies, cultural planning, and further assessment of the impacts and consequences of the '60s scoop. The following section draws attention to an alternative option for children whom their biological family cannot raise due to immediate protection concerns.

#### **2.4.b Foster Care**

Foster care is a substitute form of childcare within the child welfare system. The goal within the foster care system is to establish a place of safety for children until a more permanent solution can be found. There is no dispute that the foster care system is floundering and needs significant

reconstruction (Whiting, 2020). Tragically, foster children are often negatively impacted by adult-centred decisions that cause trauma beyond their initial entrance into care (Bennett, 2016). Though laws and policies are meant to increase a child's well-being, foster care decisions often prioritize adult-centred concerns or political agendas over a child's attachment needs (Rafeedie et al., 2019). In this section, several authors point to the difficulties associated with the foster care system itself, including competing political views, roles of workers within CFS, movement of children, how those growing up in foster care feel, and how foster care sets individuals up for poorer outcomes associated to foster care.

Rafeedie et al.'s (2019) research illustrated that complex decisions are often made for children in foster care and that the needs of adult caregivers and children may sometimes reflect competing priorities. However, this article failed to capture that Indigenous families and communities would have different priorities than those of mainstream helping professions, as stated in Cameron et al. (2007), Bennett (2015); & Kline (1992). Eurocentric ideals are at play and center around what is considered safe. Several Indigenous communities implemented a collateral strategy that leaned on extended families and clan structures. This approach served various purposes, including defining roles and duties, managing marital alliances, resolving conflicts, and fostering community solidarity. Extended families collaborated to provide mutual support during adversity (Gosek, 2017). Similarly, Bennett (2016) describes how many Indigenous cultures place significance on relationships and the interconnectedness of life, which informs Indigenous people's respect and learning (Mandell et al., 2003). In the Rafeedie et al. (2019) article, there continues to be a lack of acceptance that Western standards played a role and were a substantial contributing factor to destabilizing Indigenous families, which resulted in many Indigenous children coming into agency care.

Wood and Selwyn (2017) focused on improving the subjective well-being of all children. In meeting this goal, Wood and Selwyn made substantial efforts to identify what makes a good life and find ways to measure it. Limited information about whether "looked" after children identify the exact

domains and indicators essential to their well-being. This article reported specifically on the critical areas of well-being identified by looked-after children. Although there was an agreement with children in the general population about the importance of some domains of well-being (e.g., relationships), the looked-after children identified other areas of significance specific to their situation (e.g., having a good understanding of their life history).

Wood and Selwyn's (2017) article looks at the well-being of children and the importance of stability and explores whether stability can be achieved through permanency planning. The issues illustrated in this article are what worries me about our Indigenous children in care today. In several assessment areas, including permanency goals for children, needs assessment and services to parents, social worker visits with the child, and social worker visits with parents, none of these assessments achieved a "strength" rating (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018a). Reimer and Schäfer's (2015) article sought to fill this gap by discussing the views of former foster children as reported in autobiographical interviews. It expanded research on biographical narratives, life courses, and theories of social pedagogy concerned with risk and protective factors by exploring young people's perceptions, interpretations, and coping strategies alongside critical events and turning points in their lives. A distinctive feature of the approach is the inclusion of objective and subjective dimensions of favourable or unfavourable life courses.

Dansey, Shbero, and John's (2019) article used grounded theory and discussed how children in care understandably want to be seen as 'normal' and not the stigma around being a "child in care" (Martin & Jackson, 2002). As the authors learned, children perceive themselves as different once they are in care. This may relate to living with a foster family, their birth family background, and past or current experiences associated with being part of both worlds at different times. Many children seemed to feel stigmatized and marginalized, believing they would be bullied about their 'foster kid' status, including ridicule, rumours being spread about them, and withdrawing friendships. Children who have

internalized a sense of stigma may be susceptible to rejection. This article shared the voices of children who, in a broader study, commented about their experiences or beliefs around the stigma and bullying of being in foster care and how they decided to keep this secret. Consideration was given to how this links with emotional well-being and mental health, particularly the potential impact on children.

Bennett's (2016) doctoral research study investigates the experiences of emerging First Nations adults in extensions of care and transitioning out of child welfare in Manitoba. Bennett's research states that the outlook for teens exiting or "aging out" of foster care without a permanent home or a meaningful adult relationship is not favourable. Bennett's study contributes to the growing body of knowledge about the experiences of Indigenous children in care and enhances the understanding of transitioning out of the foster care system. This thesis illustrates problems within the child welfare system, historical contexts, and emerging adults' struggles.

The author's findings suggest that Indigenous emerging adults in extensions of care and transitioning from care in Manitoba will continue to experience difficulties on their journeys toward adulthood, especially when they encounter frequent moves. This is an area that I addressed in my research, however, from a different perspective. My thesis focus is connected to a statement made in this thesis: "The process of reconnecting with a family or a significant other represents an important step toward emancipation and healthy functioning in the community and solidifies identity." Therefore, if the biological family is not an option, what are the alternatives for our Indigenous youth in care?

Similarly, if we can improve placement stability, does that result in looked-after children feeling more secure? It is crucial to understand both objective and subjective circumstances and experiences. Moreover, developmental and circumstantial experiences shape children within care. In this next section, focus will be placed on foster care and the impacts of attachment.

## 2.5 FOSTER CARE AND ATTACHMENT

Below are accounts of attachment from those within foster care highlighted within the body of research. Various authors highlight the detrimental impacts of foster care on the attachment styles of kids within care. Hyde, Fullerton, Lohan, Dunne, and Macdonald's (2017) article discusses the concept of 'family connectedness,' which includes supportive parenting, a sense of belonging, emotional attachment, and parental monitoring. The theoretical lens used in this article to explain the influence of caregivers was attachment theory. The article's basic premise is that a secure attachment with a caregiver in childhood positively impacts later adult relationships. After leaving care, many young people 'harboured tremendous feelings of loneliness, rejection, and abandonment by their families,' which later affected relationships with other adults and peers. This study contributes to existing literature and my research project by demonstrating how care providers' permanency and long-term commitment can strengthen attachment, feelings of belonging, and overall well-being. This literature supports the arguments made in my thesis.

Miranda, Molla, and Tadros's (2019) article reviews the literature on attachment theory, outcomes of being in foster care, impacts of trauma, and long-term attachment outcomes and their implications for foster care alums. Attachment outcomes of foster care alums are essential to understand because of the connection between attachment and relational functioning. The article aims to help understand the experiences of foster care alums and how those experiences may impact their development of attachment styles. Having secure and stable relationships, acceptance, cooperation, and family membership during foster family placement increases the resilience of children and adolescents in foster care. This article states that research indicates, contradictory to the belief that the ideal place for children is with their parent(s), reunification often leads to a higher risk of long-term behavioural problems than remaining in foster care. I found these statements surprising and would like to explore this further. This study was conducted in the United States and did not examine other countries or

cultural groups. Therefore, the article needed to have awareness that all cultures are unique and may experience attachment differently, especially concerning what is important to them.

Feelings of abandonment, loneliness, rejection, and a lack of belonging create poorer attachment outcomes for children within the foster care system. Thus, elaborating an exploration of attachment theory may offer further insight into the world of children in care.

### **2.5.a Attachment**

Dubois's (2014) thesis on *Attachment Theory in Child Welfare* explored the integration of attachment theory in child welfare practice. It investigated the extent of child protection workers' knowledge of attachment theory and whether they integrated it into their child welfare practice. The participants in this study were General Authority child welfare workers in Manitoba. Social workers were questioned on their degree of knowledge of attachment theory, opportunities to engage in the theory-informed practice, and various agency pressures. Participants acknowledged the attachment theory concepts of transmission of parenting behaviours and attachment strategies through relationships.

Participants considered the therapeutic capacity of relational and attachment-focused interventions to change maladaptive parenting behaviours. Attachment is essential to a person's overall well-being and feelings of security. This thesis highlights that healthy attachment can assist Indigenous children in care to feel a sense of belonging, identity, love, and pride. When you have a healthy adult you can trust and rely on to ensure your safety; more opportunities exist to explore your world and flourish. Critically speaking, contextual variations must be systematically incorporated into attachment theory. There needs to be a radical shift from the view of attachment as a universal human concept since attachment emerges differently across all cultures and is not based solely on Western socioecology (Keller & Otto, 2014). Others, such as McCormick (1997), cited in Bennett (2016), view relationships as fundamental aspects through which Indigenous families exhibit attachment behaviours. The collectivism

and interrelatedness of individuals, families, communities, and cultures hold significance within these practices (Bennett, 2016; Carriere & Richardson, 2009).

Keller and Otto (2014) explore the above further in *Different Faces of Attachment: Cultural Variations on a Universal Human Need*, which studies various cultures' views of attachment and what is important to each specific culture. Although attachment researchers have long recognized attachment to nonmaternal caregivers, methodologies for assessing attachment security do not consider cultural variation, nor do they allow researchers to examine the magnitude of children's attachment networks. The mainstream attachment theory John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth developed needs to accommodate varied cultures adequately (Keller & Otto, 2014). Keller and Otto (2014) concluded that although there is no doubt that attachment is a basic human need, this world is not a uniform environment with one adaptive ideology of parenting, one concept of "good parenting," and one interpretation of valued achievements. Current attachment theory has concentrated on the universal aspects of the necessity of attachment relationships.

Cultural variations on attachment are often ignored. However, some advances have been made that acknowledge multiple caregiving arrangements. This finding should lead to de-emphasizing the mother as the primary influence on children's developmental outcomes in all cultural environments. The sole consideration of the mother may not do justice to the complexity of children's developmental pathways, as seen in the Indigenous culture, where grandmothers and extended family often play a primary attachment figure.

Simard's (2019) article, *Culturally Restorative Child Welfare Practice: A Special Emphasis on Cultural Attachment Theory*, shares that Indigenous people and social work advocates have an ethical responsibility and obligation to transform laws, policies, and frameworks that influence Indigenous peoples. Indigenous people and social work advocates need to eradicate the numerous laws, policies, and regulations that continue to oppress and marginalize Indigenous peoples.

Simard (2019) states that examining the history of Indigenous people is a step toward culturally competent social work practice. It is knowing the truth, appreciating and understanding the history of Indigenous people, and understanding how this history often brings about strong feelings towards cultural restoration in Indigenous communities. Furthermore, Simard demonstrated how cultural attachment is an instrument that can be used to rebuild a nation and resurgence in Indigenous communities. Simard illustrates similar thoughts on a progressive social work system; involving Indigenous children will ensure their needs are met.

Poorer outcomes and maladaptive behaviours associated with children within the child welfare system are often associated with attachment concerns, leading to difficulties in identity and difficulties within relationships due to trust, boundaries, and stability.

### **2.5.b Adoption vs Foster Care Outcomes**

Hjern, Vinnerljung, and Brännström's (2019) study *Outcomes in adulthood of adoption after long-term foster care: A sibling study* is unique in that it reported the positive impact adoption could have on developmental outcomes for children with experiences in foster care. However, to guide decisions about permanent care arrangements, a study was conducted on a population of siblings consisting of 194 children who had been in out-of-home care (OHC), aka foster care, for at least five years and were never adopted, compared to their birth siblings who also had been in foster care at least five years before their teens and were then adopted before adolescence. The study looked at many variables, from social, educational, and health outcomes in adults. Results showed that adopted siblings tended to have considerably better yields as adults in academic achievement, income, criminality, disability, and suicidality. Findings related to mental health and substance abuse were more similar. However, differences pointed in the same direction.

Implications for child welfare policy and practice were also discussed. This study aimed to test the hypothesis that adoption positively impacts developmental outcomes in children with long-term

foster care experiences. Almost all adopted children in this sample felt they had “a family for life” with their adoptive home. In contrast, a sizeable proportion of the foster children were painfully aware that their place in the substitute family could be terminated at will by the foster parents or the child welfare authorities. It seems reasonable to assume that the increased stability and security for the adopted siblings benefitted their long-term development compared to their fostered brothers and sisters.

This research was fascinating because it displayed that aging out of adoption has better outcomes for youth than aging out of the foster care system. This study creates further curiosity as to why allowing so many Indigenous children to live with the stigma of being in care and then later age out of care with few supports and connections is acceptable.

## 2.6 CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Grand Chief Ed John's (2016) report, *Indigenous Resilience, Connectedness, and Reunification - From Root Causes to Root Solutions: A Report on Indigenous Child Welfare in British Columbia (BC)*, focuses on British Columbia's Indigenous child welfare service delivery to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and families. Despite the tremendous potential for Indigenous youth to contribute to economic success, many are unfairly held back in BC as they struggle to overcome myriad challenges within their families, communities, and the child welfare system that is meant to support them. This report supports the argument that permanency planning for Indigenous children in care should be systematic, consistent, and done early. Many Indigenous children in care do not have effective permanency planning in place, and surprisingly, Indigenous children in care are often without permanency planning, three years longer than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Of course, the reunification of a child is prioritized as the goal for children in care; however, there are cases where this is not possible. In British Columbia, should a child be placed in long-term care, the Minister of Child and Family Development (MCFD) considers adoption the preferred option for achieving a stable and familial environment. However, many Indigenous communities refuse to consider

adoption as an option for their children, despite recent advancements to safeguard against previous atrocities such as the sixties scoop. I believe adoption, cultural identity, and culturally restorative practices should not be considered mutually exclusive and be combined to meet the child's needs. Although many examples of adopted Indigenous children have had positive experiences, it is clear that adoption still is not the focus of permanency planning for Indigenous children in care. This report demonstrates that decisions made by political bodies on behalf of children are proving not to be “in the children’s best interest.” If a family would like to claim and love the child, and it is proven this would contribute to their overall well-being, should this not be considered an option?

Lindstrom and Choate (2017) note that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report challenged Canada to alter its relationship with Indigenous peoples nationwide. They have specifically identified child protection as one area requiring a significant reconsideration of how agencies charged with this responsibility interact with Indigenous people on and off reserves. Residential schools’ legacy, the Sixties Scoop, and other assimilation and cultural genocide policies and practices are found in several existing social policies and procedures, including child protection. This work examines the depth of change needed in child protection methodologies by challenging the current assessment practice, which seeks to determine if parents are ‘good enough’ to raise their children from a Western child-rearing perspective. The project demonstrates the disparities between current and historical practices and Indigenous cultures. Mundy, Neufeld, and Wells (2016) note that child welfare professionals increasingly recognize the importance of the client's perspective in evaluating service outcomes. There continues to be an absence of well-developed instruments that meet the needs of service providers, planners, and, most importantly, children in care (Mundy et al., 2016; Lindstrom & Choate, 2017).

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Alberta (2016) paper *Voices for Change: Aboriginal Child Welfare in Alberta* outlines how Indigenous young people have been let down or ill-served by child welfare systems, sometimes with tragic consequences. This report is essential to discover what people

in the child welfare system and those involved from January 2015 to January 2016 reflected upon. Children, youth, caregivers, and other stakeholders shared their perspectives about what was important to them before, during, and after their involvement with the system. It was exciting and inspirational that this study valued and included the child's and the community's perspectives. I compared this with my research findings. Many spoke of the importance of having at least one loving individual involved with every child. Others shared that no one could love a child as much as their family. However, several young people shared that they lacked loving individuals when they came into care, felt alone, and wished affection had been more present in their lives. Young people repeatedly noted that when they came to the attention of the child welfare system, they wanted to have stability and feel safe.

## 2.7 SUMMARY

My research question and focus changed several times throughout my initial literary review because the data and research did not directly fit or answer my questions. The data appeared to contradict the Manitoba Indigenous belief system concerning adoption and guardianship. The scientific literature supported permanency planning options and demonstrated how this leads to more positive outcomes overall. However, there seemed to be a gap in the research on Indigenous emerging adults' perspectives on permanency planning. Emerging adults aging out of child welfare were rarely consulted or engaged in the research. However, when they stated they wanted stability and safety, they were continuously moved or returned to unsafe homes without consultation. I find the lack of in-depth data and studies appalling, and I could not understand why something so important has not been further studied or researched. This clearly illustrated to me the need for my research in this area.

The next chapter examines my research's methodologies, methods, and data analysis process. In addition, I discuss how I interpreted, validated, and received feedback on the results of my study.

## **3.0 PROJECT METHODOLOGY, METHODS, PROJECT DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, VALIDATION, AND FEEDBACK**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology and methods employed in my research study, emphasizing the qualitative research approach focusing on conducting Talking Circles and the Visiting Way. The methodology incorporates an Indigenous framework for conducting research, reflecting on oral storytelling traditions. This approach aligns with Indigenous cultural practices and values. This chapter describes how the research participants were identified and invited to participate. It will touch on the criteria used for selection and the process of obtaining informed consent from participants. The primary research tool for data collection was the Visiting Way and Talking Circles, which will be discussed in-depth.

This chapter also outlines the potential risks and benefits for the research participants, as this is important to ensure ethical considerations are addressed and participants' well-being is safeguarded. This chapter explains how confidentiality issues were managed, including how participants' identities and responses were protected to maintain their privacy and security. A brief overview of the data analysis process is provided. The emphasis is on how the collected data was transformed into meaningful insights. This chapter discusses the role of the researcher in conducting the study, including the researcher's positionality, potential biases, and the relationship with the participants.

This chapter is vital for understanding how data was collected, ensuring transparency, ethical considerations, and the cultural sensitivity required when working within an Indigenous framework. It provides the reader with a clear understanding of how the research was conducted and how the data was analyzed and interpreted.

The research is considered a qualitative study by speaking to former children in care who have aged out of the child welfare system at 18. The goal was to gain insight into their experiences, current

satisfaction, and perception of their quality of life since exiting the child welfare system. The sample of emerging adults was between the ages of 21 and 50, and most participants were recruited through Facebook and social work contacts.

## **3.2 METHODOLOGIES**

### ***3.2.a Research Methodologies***

My research study was exploratory to capture the stories and experiences of Indigenous emerging adults aged out of the child welfare system. This thesis study captured data and answered the question: “Is permanency important to Indigenous children in care who have now aged out of the child welfare system?” Capturing the voices of emerging adult participants is of primary importance, so using qualitative methods to capture the essence of their lived experiences while in care is the most appropriate data collection method. Qualitative research examines the meanings people give to their experiences and how they interpret their reality (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Holliday (2002) describes qualitative research as “open-ended and sets up research opportunities designed to lead the researcher into unforeseen areas of discovery within the lives of the people she is investigating” (p. 5). Qualitative research methods enable researchers to provide the audience with a more in-depth understanding of the issue than quantitative data could. Qualitative research adds a ‘personalization’ of the data that quantitative data collection does not.

Exploratory qualitative research design opens the research, eliciting more questions and details that may require further examination (Parse, 2001). Qualitative descriptive studies are valuable in obtaining responses to a particular issue relevant to informing policy and practitioners, which was precisely my purpose (Sword et al., 2012). Therefore, I used a descriptive inquiry as it documents the voice of a specific group (Sandelowski, 2000). I feel this approach provides a means to record the voices of those who have experienced the child welfare system in Manitoba.

The research was done using a holistic approach and an Indigenous perspective. Two research methodologies were used to conduct my research; both align with my theoretical framework. The first was a partial approach to Community-Based Participation Action Research (CBPR). Due to time constraints and my current physical location, I could not form a formal advisory council; however, I did engage the study participants in every step of the process that I could, the second being an Indigenous methodology.

As an Indigenous researcher completing research with an Indigenous community, it was crucial to approach this research from an Indigenous perspective. As an Indigenous woman researching with Indigenous people in a field I am intimately involved in, it will be near impossible for this research not to affect me personally. National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (2013) states that the study must include an Indigenous worldview in the research framework to employ an Indigenous methodology. Kanua (2000) suggests that Indigenous researchers work from an influential standpoint with a subjective and informed perspective. I chose my research topic because, as a researcher, I am interested in elements that affect a child's overall well-being, specifically Indigenous children. Loppie (2007) supports this and states that learning and using Indigenous knowledge should come from a deeply personal place. Absolon and Willett (2005) argue that researchers who study any question with no stake do not care what the answer is and thus may need to be more accurate with what the stories may mean to those who have told them.

As stated earlier, I have a daughter with Treaty status, who sadly was placed into child and family services care at birth. There was no extended family involvement or plan for reunification with her mother. After a great struggle, emotional hardship, and a huge financial undertaking, we eventually received guardianship of our little girl with her mother's blessing, and we raised her alongside her birth family as much as we could. My first-hand experience with this topic and the implications it could have had on my daughter's future and emotional well-being gave me a whole new perspective. This research

is deeply personal to me, and for the sake of my daughter and other Indigenous children like her, who may not have a voice to express their wants and desires, I sought to find answers.

Russell-Mundine (2012) states that the critical principles of applying an Indigenous methodology should be to empower Indigenous peoples, decolonize and reframe research, privilege Indigenous voices, and recognize and represent the diversity of cultures, voices, and experiences. The CBR and Indigenous approach allowed the emerging Indigenous participants to set the agenda. The areas we focused on were essential and necessary to the emerging adults, as Indigenous methodologies privilege Indigenous people's voices, experiences, and lives (Peters, 2013). This methodology emphasizes the social, historical, and political context that has shaped a person's experience (Peters, 2013; Russell-Mundine, 2012). As stated by Peters (2013), "Indigenous research must make a difference in people's lives, not as an afterthought or as a separate applied step, but as a function of the entire research process" (p. 19). As Wilson (2008) described, Indigenous worldviews and knowledge are often seen as communal and relational rather than individualistic. It is understood that knowledge is not owned by any person but is shared, passed down through generations, and connected to the community and the land.

Smith (1999) maintains that the researcher must center on Indigenous values and follow Indigenous protocols to decolonize research. Thus, I used a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to decolonize the research. CBPR is oriented towards a more dialogical and egalitarian research methodology. CBPR is an orientation to research that advances the development of culturally-centred research designs and interventions and allows for integrating Indigenous research methods. This research model is well-suited for working with others while displaying respect, care, and curiosity. Participants in my research were encouraged to be involved in each aspect of the study, starting with the research design and methods used for the questions, reviewing the transcripts, and distributing

information. Therefore, the Indigenous participants had much input and control over the research process.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a methodological practice that places community partnerships at the forefront. Community-based research is inclusive; it seeks to decolonize knowledge by identifying and valuing all clients' unique assets and perspectives in the research process, especially the community members (Strand, 2003). Some Indigenous community members often conduct Community-based research. The participants involved in this study were Indigenous and were child welfare survivors. Thus, I chose to modify my research to make it more conducive to the Indigenous population by centring on Indigenous methods and knowledge.

### **3.3 INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGIES**

Increasingly, Indigenous research methodologies are being articulated out of a necessity to define the parameters of methods which reflect Indigenous worldviews and their historical relationships with settler populations. The ontological differences between Western civilizations and Indigenous peoples have historically been defined through racist and stereotypical discourse as civilized versus uncivilized ways of being (Frideres & Gadacz, 2012; Harding, 2006; Williams, Jr., 2012). This section aims to define a methodological approach that describes the Indigenous values and principles that guide and support the process of this study.

Each meeting began with reciprocity per the Indigenous methodology outlined by Weber-Pillwax (2004). This interchange took place in the form of food, gifts, and the passing of tobacco. The two Indigenous methodologies most conducive to my research were storytelling through the relational act of “the Visiting Way” and Talking Circles. I employed various forms of storytelling as my primary method, as I aimed to respect the storyteller as the authority on their own experience. Below, I will explain these Indigenous methods in more detail.

### 3.3.a Storytelling

The storytelling tradition is a culturally relevant Indigenous method that helps interpret how foster children comprehend and process their world. Stories serve as a tool to aid these children in gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and enable case managers, therapists, foster parents, teachers, and policymakers to listen and cater to their needs more effectively. These children seek a more significant role in decisions impacting their lives, so emphasizing the significance of listening to them and respecting each child's individual and impactful story is paramount (Whiting, 2000).

Storytelling is a way of honouring Indigenous traditions and honouring Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous peoples have traditionally used stories to teach and examine their communities as a primary method for learning, providing explanations, and cultivating a more in-depth understanding that can facilitate positive changes for community members. It is a way to connect the generations and develop identity through family storytelling (Huisman, 2014). Simpson and Manitowabi (2013) elucidate that "these stories set the "theoretical framework" or give us the ontological context from within which we can interpret other stories, teachings, and experiences" (p 280). In the literature on Indigenous research paradigms, predicting and controlling behaviours is not a priority. Some researchers have explained the importance of storytelling for other tribes and classify storytelling as an integral Indigenous research methodology (Kovach, 2010).

Storytelling is the oral backbone of Indigenous knowledge being transferred from generation to generation. Storytelling is the primary method Indigenous peoples use to connect with their community, their ancestors, their history, and each other. Each story told holds lessons and maintains a personal attachment to the storyteller. This is important to Indigenous cultures as storytelling creates bonding among its listeners. Simpson (2011) illustrates that "Storytelling is an evolving practice, and the significance for each listener will inherently vary...Understanding the essence of a story within one's heart may take numerous years after its initial hearing..." (p. 104). Dyck (1992) further elaborates on this

process, recounting how his grandfather "never articulated the purpose behind his stories; he compelled the listeners to discern it on their own" (quoted in McLeod, n.d., p. 42).

### **3.3.b 'The Visiting Way'**

These approaches share common objectives and procedures regardless of the terminology employed—storytelling, re-storying, talking circles, storytelling circles, conversational method, talk story, or Indigenous narratives. They encompass honouring the storytelling heritage of their communities, specifically Indigenous communities, by acknowledging the relational dynamics in communication, valuing equity in research relationships, accommodating community requirements, amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals, and reclaiming collective narratives (Benham, 2007; Corntassel et al., 2009; Kovach, 2009; 2010; Wilson, 2008).

The stories of the adult child in care were captured using The Visiting Way. During her doctoral research, an Indigenous methodology called "The Visiting Way" was articulated by Janice Cindy Gaudet (2019) and is based on her relationship with the O mushkego people, the Moose Cree First Nation. This methodology places relationality at its core, re-centers Indigenous ways of being, and "presents a practical and meaningful methodology that fosters *mino pimatisiwin*" (Hart, 2002), as well as "living and being well in relation" (Gaudet, 2019, p. 47). From the Indigenous paradigm in which this research was grounded, this methodology draws on the relational forms of knowing, doing, being, and feeling central to an Indigenous worldview (Wilson, 2008). The Visiting Way places relationality at its core and presents a practical and meaningful methodology that fosters living and sharing emotions, knowledge, ideas, and food. Nothing is lazy about visiting; it is practical, social, political, and spiritual (Gaudet, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2014) writes that visiting is "a sharing of oneself through a story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being" (p. 18). Visiting has the potential to renew relationships, foster safety, and resolve disputes (Gaudet, 2019). Gaudet

describes the practical application of the Visiting Way as it “creates and fortifies connections that unify and build a community from the ground up. It is how humour, silence, news, concerns, pain, knowledge, ideas, and discussions are disseminated at a grassroots/ground level” (p. 53). From this description, there is an understanding that ‘visiting’ happens every day, an ‘informal’ experience of being in a community where we are given space to open ourselves up to each other in stories and experiences of humour, news, and knowledge, or shared connections. We fostered as many opportunities as possible for this study’s informal, lighthearted moments.

### **3.4 INDIGENOUS METHODS**

Indigenous methods incorporate observational learning, where each participant copiously engages (Lavallée, 2009). How data is collected is respectful and includes Indigenous protocols, epistemologies, values, and beliefs that are vital to the specific community. Indigenous knowledge is based on the oral tradition of sharing knowledge. The CBR methodology can include several types of data collection methods; my method of inquiry will be gathering stories ‘or storytelling’ through two conversational methods: Talking Circle or the Visiting Way, depending on the participant’s comfort level in sharing.

The study started with a Feast to show reciprocity and build relationships. The Feast was an attempt to establish trust and comfort. The Feast was followed by a Talking Circle or ‘visiting’ to hear the participants’ personal experiences. Participants were asked whether they were more comfortable sharing their stories individually by visiting or participating in a group talking circle. These methods are classified as qualitative because they do not involve collecting numeric data (Lavallée, 2009).

#### **3.4.a Conversational Methods**

Kovach (2010) insightfully shared that the conversational method gathers knowledge within Indigenous research. The conversational approach is significant to Indigenous methodologies because it gathers intelligence based on an oral storytelling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm

(Kovach, 2010). It involves dialogic participation that holds a deep meaning in sharing a story and is relational at its core (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). Four core values must be present in Indigenous research: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2016; Kovach, 2009). These corresponding values ensure that research is done in a good way. For instance, the value of respect highlights the importance of the relationships built with the research participants. The value of relevance works with the value of respect to ensure that research has meaning to participants (Kovach, 2009). The value of reciprocity and responsibility ensures that the researcher remains accountable to the community and that there is some form of giving back through the research process (Kovach, 2009). These values speak to the essence of my soul and the way I aspire to interact with others in life and research. The conversational method can be used in a Talking Circle or the Visiting Way.

### ***3.4.b Talking Circle Method***

Talking Circles and Sharing Circles are a foundational methodology to Indigenous pedagogy - that encourages dialogue, respect, the co-creation of learning, connection, and social discourse (Kovach, 2009; "Talking Circles Overview," 2009). Talking circles are based on oral tradition and create safe spaces where participants can share as much or as little as they would like without interruption. Participants are guided to sit in a circle and asked to reflect on a specific question or topic while everyone else listens respectfully. Everyone in the circle can speak and respond to the same question or pass if they like (Wright et al., 2016). Like a sharing circle, Talking Circle participants' voices are received respectfully and attentively; the learning becomes a rich source of information, identity, and interaction ("Talking Circles Overview," 2009). Talking Circle experiences can be profound and allow one to disengage from a preplanned narrative and teach one how to speak from the heart and the mind (Wright et al., 2016). The subtle energy created from this respectful approach to talking with others provides a sense of unity and connectedness not often present in conventional research methods ("Talking Circles Overview," 2009). I chose to use a Talking Circle instead of a Sharing Circle due to the sacred nature of the Sharing Circle.

Talking Circles, also called Sharing Circles, have been utilized by Indigenous peoples for centuries.

Talking Circles ensures that everyone has a voice and is heard.

For my study, recording the circle and transcribing the data would allow accurate results without error or bias due to the importance of the information being shared. The hope for the Talking Circle was for participants to share their experiences and feelings around attachment, belonging, and permanency. However, the studies' primary purpose was to contribute to their healing journey and allow their voices to be heard; thus, when the participants veered away from the questions, they were left to share freely and were not re-directed.

### **3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN**

My research journey started with the traditional ceremony of passing tobacco to the Elder/Knowledge Keeper as a request that they walk alongside me and guide me throughout the research process. The Elder/Knowledge Keeper offered prayer and thanks to the Creator for allowing us to be on this journey. I thanked those gracious enough to participate and share their stories. A Feast followed the Elders/Knowledge Keeper's opening prayer before the first circle began to establish a level of comfort and trust.

The Talking Circle was opened with a prayer from the Elder/Knowledge Keeper, followed by a smudge ceremony to cleanse each participant. The Talking Circle began once a relationship was established, and all parties were comfortable. The Talking Circle was structured like a sharing circle, with the Elder/Knowledge Keeper's assistance in facilitating. Before the Talking Circle commenced, this researcher sought the participant's permission to record the Talking Circle for transcribing purposes. The Talking Circle requires that participants not share what was discussed after the Circle concludes. Thus, all participants signed an oath of confidentiality before the circle started. The circle included the participants sharing their stories about their experience in the care of the child welfare system. They were encouraged to share as much or as little as they were comfortable divulging. There were three

open-ended questions the participants reviewed during the Feast to help guide the circle. However, as the facilitator, we allowed the conversation to evolve organically based on the participant's needs.

### ***3.5.a Participant Criteria***

This study aimed to have 12 emerging adult participants who had aged out of the care of the Manitoba child welfare system. The aim was for 12, so I would have a robust and in-depth variety of experiences to draw from; however, the study was completed with eight participants. The target population was adults ages 19 to 40 who were in the care of Child and Family Services for at least two years and have since transitioned out of the child welfare system as a “child in care.” However, this criterion was extended to age 50.

The participants from this target population no longer receive any financial support from Child and Family Services and have been out of care for at least one year at the time of participation. The rationale for the age criteria was that the participants would be ‘old’ enough to reflect meaningfully on their time in care while still being young enough to recall details of their experience. I recruited an Elder/Knowledge Keeper to be involved in the Talking Circle who is familiar with Indigenous ways of being, the University’s Code of Ethics, and the oath of confidentiality.

Recruitment was done initially by emailing Voices: Manitoba’s Youth in Care Network to recruit the sample needed to request permission to put up posters and access their database. However, no participants were generated through this measure. Additionally, my goal was to put up posters to recruit participants at various community centers, such as the Aboriginal Centre, Mount Carmel Clinic, the North End Women’s Resource Centre and Urban Circle Training Centre, Universities, Adult learning centers, various CFS agencies, MacDonald Youth Services, and any other office that might allow it. However, since my proposal was completed and I have moved internationally, this is no longer a physical option. Therefore, I sent my poster to several of my former social work colleagues for them to

distribute. I also posted a recruitment poster on Facebook to obtain the number of participants needed, as I could not meet the minimum number of participants through other measures.

Interested participants contacted me by telephone or email, and we reviewed the criteria questions to determine if they were eligible to participate. Once an interest in participating in the research was established, the participant was invited to attend the Feast and Talking Circle or visit. Visting meetings were held in private, comfortable, and convenient locations for the participants. Privacy is vital and will assist with the ability to maintain confidentiality.

Participants were selected based on the criteria above, referred to as purposive sampling (Lavrakas, 2008). "The main objective of a purposive sample is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a non-random manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population" (Lavrakas, 2008, p. 1). The length of the participants' time in care allowed the participants to have experienced child welfare services policies and procedures, service provisions, placement options, and various levels of care. The sample was drawn from those that reached out. All participants were informed about the study's purpose and the activities that they would engage in.

Once the participants were established, we started the process of relationship-building. We gathered for a Feast, an informal meet and greet, and an explanation of the study before the Talking Circle commenced. Gathering first for a ceremonial Feast provided a safe space to share laughter and stories. At this stage, the dialogue was open and free-flowing, allowing the adults to get to know each other. During this time, participants were introduced to the researcher, and the process and purpose of the study were explained to them. Following the Indigenous Methodology protocol, I located myself in my research for this group. An appropriate introduction clarifies who I am and where my knowledge came from. Absolon and Willet (2005) believe that self-locating statements can assist in developing trust

with research participants. Understandably, many Indigenous communities are skeptical of researchers; self-locating statements provide transparency, help participants understand the researcher's intention, and build "relatedness" (Absolon & Willet, 2005, p. 104).

If the participants agreed to continue, they signed the oath of confidentiality forms, participation agreements and alias forms. We reviewed the consent form before signing it and allowed for an opportunity to ask questions regarding consent or other issues. The researcher then reiterated that participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw without fear of consequence or retribution.

### **3.6 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS/EQUIPMENT**

The following research instruments and equipment were developed or purchased to assist me in conducting my research (see Appendices A to E):

1. Recruitment poster listing all the details of the study.
2. Script outlining how I plan to respond to the individuals interested in participating in my study and details on how to move forward.
3. Created a Facebook page to enlist interest in the group.
4. Invitation to a Feast and Talking Circle to discuss the details of the study.
5. An information sheet was given to participants at the first circle outlining the study, timeline, purpose, roles and responsibilities, goals, and any additional information needed for prospective participants interested in my research. In addition, the information sheet advised the participants of their rights, emergency contact numbers, what they could expect from the study, and what benefits they could expect from being involved in the study.
6. Consent forms were given to both participants (emerging adults and Indigenous Knowledge Keepers).
7. My research question ideas were refined with the group.

8. Agenda for the Talking Circle.
  - a. Interview or Talking Circle schedule for participants, depending on their chosen interview style.
9. Audio Recorder.
10. The interview transcripts for the participants to review were provided.
11. Any other documentation that may be necessary for conducting my research.

The above research instruments were submitted to the University of Manitoba's Ethics Review Board and my MSW-IK advisory council for approval.

### **3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Approval from the University of Manitoba Fort Garry Campus Research Ethics Board was obtained before conducting any research. As mentioned in previous areas, I have found that some specific ethical considerations are automatically incorporated into my research design using an Indigenous framework, methodologies, and the Community Based Research model. As stated by Kovach (2010), ethics and values are interconnected. Consistent with an Indigenous worldview, the research process was conducted respectfully, honouring the importance of relationships, reciprocity, collectivism, and sacred knowledge (Kovach, 2010). The community-based research model explained to the participants how they were chosen, the purpose of the study, the process involved in the study, and the benefits the research may hold. (Kovach, 2010). I was as transparent and collaborative as possible throughout the research process.

#### ***3.7.a Participation and Consent***

When the partnership began, we established protocols for our collaboration. I obtained informed consent to speak to the participants privately and in a group setting. "Informed Consent is a voluntary agreement to participate in research. It is not merely a signed form but is a process in which the subject understands the research and its risks" (Office for the Protection of Research Subjects, n.d.,

p. 3). This researcher obtained each participant's consent via traditional methods of passing tobacco and Western methods of obtaining informed consent by signing consent forms. The participants were informed of their rights to change their minds and exit the study if they no longer wished to participate. It is also essential to follow ethics and proper protocol to gain the permission of the Elder/Knowledge Keeper and the emerging adults (Arnett, 2000) to audio record and transcribe their data from each interview (Wilson, 2008; Younging, 2018). The recording of the sessions permitted me to give the participants my undivided attention instead of extensive notetaking. Furthermore, it allowed me to be an active listener and honour the participant's story with an open heart and mind (Wilson, 2008).

When researching the Indigenous population, the researcher must adhere to specific principles to prevent harm. Therefore, I will stick to the four critical principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) (Kovach, 2010; First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC), 2014). The ownership principle states that the ownership of community knowledge belongs to the community, and any information compiled from the study belongs to the group and the individual participants. Therefore, consent is required should the researcher want to publish this knowledge (Kovach, 2010; FNIGC, 2014). Participants were made aware of what would occur at each stage of the research process; thus, they could make an informed decision regarding ongoing participation, privacy and confidentiality, and risks and benefits they may encounter throughout their involvement in the research. The above is consistent with the values of respect and safety, as Hart (2007) outlined.

For my study, I obtained collective and individual permission from the group, and the group will own the information collectively (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Center, 2014). My study was conducted in Winnipeg with Indigenous participants from various Treaty Lands. The study was not undertaken on reserve lands or with one specific Indigenous group, so it is unknown which Indigenous community would own the information (Kovach, 2010). A community is "a group of people with a shared identity or interest that can act or express itself as a collective," therefore, based on this

definition, the collective personal experiences of emerging adults could be considered a community, as they are all child welfare survivors (Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2018).

The control principle asserts that Indigenous people have the right to control the research, including the framework, data analysis and management, and dissemination (Kovach, 2010; FNIGC, 2014). As stated earlier, participants were asked to be involved in every aspect of the research, from the research design and methods used to decide the questions that will be asked, reviewing the transcripts, and distributing information. Therefore, the participants had much control over the entire research process.

The access principle ensures that Indigenous communities have the right and ability to examine all data and research related to them and have the data easily accessible. (Kovach, 2010; FNIGC, 2014). The participants had access to the research data as it was being gathered. Participants were encouraged to review the data and change the transcripts if they or the data was represented incorrectly. I provided each participant with a transcript and will give the final thesis if they want a copy. Finally, the possession principle confirms that Indigenous communities will determine where and how data will be stored and maintained (Kovach, 2009; FNIGC, 2014). This area was discussed and agreed upon with my participants at our introductory meeting. "Possession of data and information helps ensure ownership is asserted and protected" (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Center, 2014, p.4).

### ***3.7.b Relationship Dynamics***

I acknowledge the power inherent in my researcher/social worker role and recognize that participants may also mistrust Child and Family Service agencies and any social workers attached to such agencies due to the historical and ongoing pain the system has caused their families and many other Indigenous families. My goal is to ensure that I do not cause any additional harm and that any individuals who choose to participate in this study will do so willingly, with a complete understanding of the purposes of this study and the use of the data collected.

### **3.7.c Risk of Harm**

Before starting research, it was imperative to consider the possible strain and consequences on the participants due to the sensitive nature of this study. Since my research included a population of people who are considered vulnerable, special care was taken to ensure no harm befell on the participants. Due to the sensitive topic, the possible risks associated with discussing such a delicate subject must be considered. There is the possibility of emotional stress for the participants, especially with any vulnerable participants in the group. To mitigate this risk, I reminded the participants that they did not have to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable and that choosing not to answer them was acceptable. I provided a variety of measures to support the participants, the first of which was a list of counselling resources each participant could access if need be (TCPS2, 2018). This researcher and an Elder/Knowledge Keeper were also available to debrief after concluding the study.

I remained aware of the sensitive and delicate nature of my research. Recounting one's time in agency care can trigger challenges and emotions for the participants. Therefore, my mission was to remain vigilant, empathetic, and supportive of the participant's emotional and mental state throughout the process. Participants could experience distress throughout the interviews with such a sensitive and personal topic. If a participant had difficulty proceeding with the discussion, I offered to stop and give a short break. During the break, this researcher discussed ending the interview with the participant. If they felt they could not continue, I inquired if they needed me to contact their emergency contact or support person identified at the initial meeting, as this would help guard against any further trauma. After each session, I provided a debriefing, and each participant was given the phone numbers for crisis hotlines and mental health support services. During each circle, an Elder/Knowledge Keeper was on-site to provide guidance and wisdom to mitigate participants' concerns.

I provided specific instructions for accessing these resources, including phone numbers and addresses. I had the opportunity to explain the services offered by the Mobile Crisis Team, the Crisis

Stabilization Unit, and the Crisis Response Centre. At the onset of interviews, I requested an emergency contact person the participant felt safe with and could confide in if they became distressed during the research and needed assistance accessing this support person. The participant could choose to identify an emergency contact on the form provided when the consent form was explained and signed.

Because of the nature of the study and the ongoing challenges faced in the child welfare system, the participants may disclose past abuse during the study. The consent form detailed the limitations to which I could maintain confidentiality. It was discussed that should information be shared during the circle regarding hurting oneself or others abusing a child or a person in care, I must legally report this abuse to the authorities.

### ***3.7.d Validity/Creditability***

Credibility refers to the believability and truthfulness of the research, the data, and the accuracy of the analysis. In seeking data using an Indigenous methodology, the researcher is responsible for remaining accountable for improving the lives of the participants and the community through the research (Wright et al., 2016; Pinto & Smylie, 2013; Wilson, 2008; Young, 2018). Conducting good research depends upon the context of social interactions, and the researcher must demonstrate that a high degree of rigour was maintained (Wright et al., 2016). Wilson (2008) also speaks about Indigenous research being valid because it is subjective and relies upon the motives and emotions of those involved in the study.

This researcher aimed to have the findings as trustworthy and credible as possible; every research study must be evaluated concerning the procedures used to generate the conclusions (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Credibility, validity, dependability, and transferability describe trustworthiness in qualitative research (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Kovach (2010) states that the reliability of the methodology used evaluates the credibility of research findings. Rigour was achieved as

this research had deep, profound, and insightful interactions with the participants and data throughout the research process.

Choosing participants with various experiences increases the possibility of achieving an unbiased, more abundant variety of data concerning the research question (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Patton, 1987; Adler & Adler, 1988). This definition is the reason behind this researcher choosing the methods described above. This has been viewed as the most authentic way to capture the experience of emerging adults. The critical issue for achieving credibility in this study will be selecting the most suitable meaning unit (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Due to the rule of credibility and the utmost respect for the participants, this researcher consulted with them on the meaning codes/units to keep them three to five words long. Participants' recognition of the data and the findings are also an aspect of credibility.

Another aspect of trustworthiness is dependability. To establish consistency, it is essential to ask the same questions for all the participants. This researcher compiled questions to guide the process and ensure dependable results. Trustworthiness also includes the issue of transferability, which refers to "the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or groups" (Polit & Hungler, 1999, p. 717). To facilitate transferability, it is valuable to give a clear, sufficiently detailed, and distinct description of demographics, culture, contextual information, selection and characteristics of participants, data collection, and analysis process (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Polit & Beck, 2010). A rich and vigorous presentation of the findings and appropriate quotations enhance transferability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

I utilized member checking as a strategy to enhance the credibility and accuracy of my research. The member check was completed by individuals involved in this study. This step also aligns with the CBR philosophy. Member checking, often termed "the cornerstone of credibility," aims to eradicate researcher bias (Anney, 2014, p. 277). According to Curtin and Fossey (2007), member checks involve

storytellers in representing their narratives, allowing them to read, offer comments, and contribute to the outcomes (Gosek, 2017). In this study, member checking was pivotal, aligning with a respectful and relational approach. Specifically, this involved assuring each participant of the chance to review their transcripts, ensuring confidentiality and accurate representation of their intended sharing in the public domain. This meticulous process reassured storytellers regarding privacy and control over their narratives and gave me confidence in the accurate transcription of their stories (Poland, 1995; Poland, 2003).

Member checking is more about relational responsibility, respect, and authenticity than liability (Kovach, 2010). Credibility must be established and is the cornerstone of any good research study (Kovach, 2010). The research participants and my assistants conducted member checking at various stages by connecting with Elders/ Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and professionals in the community who have a wealth of knowledge regarding the child welfare system (Nowell, Norris; White; & Moules, 2017).

Participants and my advisory council were essential in interpreting the data to ensure that the experiences, transcriptions, and themes that emerge from coding align with Indigenous ways of knowing (Kovach, 2009). I kept a journal to record all my thoughts and perceptions as the research unfolded, referred to as an audit trail. An audit trail consists of leaving a trail of raw data that others can examine to prove whether your results are reproducible and credible (Rubin, 2000). Reflexivity can be integral in research. Therefore, I documented my process of analyzing my interpretations to help organize thoughts and ideas in a research journal. By keeping a paper trail in my journal, I demonstrated my ability to be reflexive, and I showed how I reached my conclusions and addressed any challenges I encountered (Nowell et al., 2017). Through conversations with my Indigenous advisor and member checking with the participants, I adhered to the principles of OCAP.

### ***3.7.e Privacy and Confidentiality***

“Integral to sharing knowledge is the matter of confidentiality.” Participants can request anonymity at any point during the research study (Kovach, 2010, p. 148). In situations where the risk to participants is minimal, confidentiality and anonymity are at the discretion of the participants. In the Indigenous way of life, our stories are our truths and how we pass on our knowledge. The validity of a story lies in the integrity of who is sharing the story (Stevenson, 2000). However, the Tri-Council Policy (2018) states that every individual has the right to be free from interference by others.

Furthermore, individuals have the right to privacy concerning their thoughts, opinions, bodies, personal communications, and spaces. Therefore, researchers must keep all information collected from research subjects confidential, secure, and anonymous. I hold all data collected from participants in this research in a safe and locked filing cabinet. For participants who wished to remain anonymous, I created identifiers only the researcher would know about for contact purposes. However, only one person chose to use an alias. Thus, the transcripts will not use their real name, but a pseudonym will be used. Since Band permission was not sought, none of the emerging adult Indigenous communities will be named to maintain community and participants' anonymity. All audio and paper materials were destroyed once the research was completed.

### ***3.7.f Conflict of Interest***

I did not have recent relationships with the participants, as I recruited a random sample of emerging adults. However, a few enlisted participants were known to me from my work several years ago. There was no direct involvement with the participants during the study. I addressed this dynamic by being as transparent and honest as possible, ensuring participants knew they were not obligated to participate and could stop participating without fear of penalty or repercussion.

## **3.8 DATA COLLECTION**

### ***3.8.a Introduction***

In this thesis, storytelling served as the primary method of data collection. I was honoured to sit with the participants and participate in their journeys. Thus, I viewed my responsibility as being a learner, listener, recorder, and facilitator (Gosek, 2017). In this capacity, it was crucial for me, as a researcher, to honour the sacred and approach everyone involved with mindfulness. This involved acknowledging the sanctity of the individuals and their narratives and understanding that our voices—whether spoken or written—served as conduits for conveying reverence for the spirit inherent in the information entrusted to us through our research endeavours (Gosek, 2017). Upholding this principle was fundamental throughout both the research and writing phases.

Kovach (2010) states that four core values must be present in Indigenous research: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. These corresponding values ensure that the research is done in a good and kind way. For instance, the value of respect highlights the importance of relationships built with the research participant. The value of relevance works with the value of respect to ensure that research has meaning to participants (Kovach, 2010). The importance of reciprocity and responsibility ensures that researchers remain accountable to the community and that there is some form of giving back through the research process (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

### ***3.8.b Data Sources***

As discussed, I utilized Talking Circles and the Indigenous tradition of the Visiting Way to gather data from the eight emerging adult participants once informed consent was received (Kovach, 2010). Alongside an Elder/Knowledge Keeper, we facilitated a two-hour Talking Circle and attended a Feast. Participants shared their deeply personal experiences of their involvement with Child Welfare during the Talking Circle. The Talking Circle method was cathartic and allowed participants to share individual and collective experiences.

An alternate or additional form of data collection was one-on-one conversations in 'The Visiting Way' (Kovach, 2010). This was an option for participants who were uncomfortable sharing in a Talking Circle setting. However, these participants were asked the same questions as the group. For those in the group who had more to share and wanted to do so privately or would like to speak outside of the Talking Circle, the visiting interview was offered so this researcher could expand on participants' experiences and have participants answer research questions in a smaller setting. An additional tool used for data collection was an audio recorder. Using an audio recorder allowed me to remain engaged and attentive to the participants during the process instead of taking notes.

I sought consent from the participants and our Elder/Knowledge Keeper to audio record the Talking Circle discussions. The audio data was transcribed into a written format by this researcher. Eight rough drafts of the transcripts were emailed to participants to review their research portion. Participants could edit and finalize the transcript if they wished. Upon completion, four transcriptions were from the Talking Circle and three from "The Visiting Way."

### ***3.8.c Data Analysis***

Once the Talking Circle and 'visiting' interviews were complete, audio recordings were transcribed and organized into written data. Throughout the research process, I was mindful that the stories and traditional knowledge were not mine to own, and the individual and Indigenous community retained ownership of these stories (Wilson, 2008; Younging, 2018). Therefore, I utilized collaborative analysis (Wilson, 2008; Younging, 2018) to allow the participants to check the accuracy of the data collected from our meetings and give feedback and suggestions, similar to member checking.

As participants were sharing, healing, and gaining a sense of empowerment by having their voices heard and speaking their truths, I was also learning, thus allowing for a reciprocal relationship. In this process, everyone in the Talking Circle was helping each other understand and accurately conceptualize the information and data being collected. Thus, the analysis is collaborative and ongoing

(Wilson, 2008). Younging (2018) states that researchers should seek collaboration and consultation with the Indigenous community and participants in all cases. Once the interviews were transcribed, I followed up with each participant to review the transcripts and ensure my interpretation of their shared experiences was done in the context the participants intended. This protocol is consistent with number 3 of Hart's (2010) values of reciprocity and responsibility with the intent of supporting a community.

### ***3.8.d Interpretation and Feedback***

It can be arduous and challenging to interpret the meaning of stories without fragmenting the story or taking it out of its original context (Kovach, 2010). Qualitative research requires interpretive and analytical methods to find meaning from the data collected (Kovach, 2010). Once the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the participants and their truths were accurately reported, I analyzed the written data using inductive methods (Thomas, 2006; Thorne, 2000). The inductive approach aims to understand the meaning of the data set collected to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory. While interpreting and transcribing the data, it is paramount to remember that "the truths of the stories are held within the life context of the storyteller" (Kovach, 2010, p. 131). Thus, I read and re-read the transcripts in this process, enabling patterns and themes to emerge (Kovach, 2010) while doing my best to relive the moment and recall every detail and emotion attached to each story.

Younging (2018) stated that being true to Indigenous research means allowing yourself the time and space for the concepts and conclusions to emerge and reveal themselves. I sat with the data from the transcripts and then analyzed them to develop 'meaning units' or themes (Kovach, 2010). A pivotal point to acknowledge is that every culture and person is distinct in their discourse patterns. This is an aspect that I remained aware of, as although I am Indigenous, I have also been submerged in child welfare and Western culture daily due to my previous employment. This Western lens I wear for work must be challenged and balanced.

A Knowledge Keeper once shared with me that everyone takes something different from a story depending on what they need at the time and what resonates with their experience; Wilson (2008) would concur. Therefore, one must show humility. Creating a conclusion based solely on this researcher's point of view would be disrespectful to the brave participants who have gifted me with their experiences. Once their stories were captured, I consulted the literature for other studies supporting the participant's positions and experiences. Throughout this research study, I maintained an open mind and went into it without preconceived ideas about what the participants might say and where their thoughts may lead the research.

### **3.8.e Coding**

I reflected on the raw data, which in my research was the transcripts, to decipher their core meaning (decoding). I determined its appropriate code and labelled it (encoding). I used short and concise descriptions of anywhere from one to five words. An example was a lack of belonging, lack of a forever family, lack of support issues around identity, etc. (Saldaña, 2009; Yi, 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once I coded all the data from each participant, I used thematic analysis to group the data into various themes (Saldaña, 2009; Yi, 2018; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). "Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis" (Saldaña, 2009). This researcher did not want to break down the data too far into several themes for fear of losing the original meaning and importance to the participant.

As Kovach (2010) states, Western procedures used to organize and analyze Indigenous cultural inquiries limit the authentic validity; however, it must occur for the findings to be viewed as credible by academia. My primary goal was to repeat patterns, themes, and experiences within the data. A researcher rarely gets the coding right the first time; this researcher listened to the recordings, re-read the transcripts, and re-coded the data several times (Saldaña, 2009; Yi, 2018). Qualitative research "demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and

meanings of human experience” (Saldaña, 2009). Coding requires a researcher’s analytic lens; how you receive and interpret the data will depend on what type of worldview covers your lens (Saldaña, 2009). During this process stage, I often wanted to reach out to the participants to ask additional probing questions to ensure I was interpreting their words correctly. However, I did not wish to re-trigger them. Thus, I was careful to ensure that my location and personal experiences did not interfere with the participant's true meaning to the best of my ability (Kovach, 2010).

### **3.9 SUMMARY**

The two research methodologies aligned with my theoretical framework: (1) partial Community-Based Participation Action Research and (2) Indigenous methodologies. I used the following methods to gather data from the eight emerging adult participants: several Talking Circles and a traditional Indigenous conversational method called ‘visiting’ (Kovach, 2010). I, along with the Elder/Knowledge Keeper, a Talking Circle was held. The participants were allowed to share their experiences while in child welfare care. I respectfully sought consent from the participants and our Elder/Knowledge Keeper to audio record the Talking Circle. This researcher transcribed the audio data into written format. The participants had the opportunity to review and finalize their portion of the rough drafts of the transcripts, and upon completion, there were eight transcriptions altogether.

I committed to the relationships, reflexivity, and praxis throughout the study. I exercised reflexivity for the findings to be valid and was aware of my participation in the various cultures throughout the process (Wright et al., 2016). Indigenous knowledge was collected by capturing a participant’s experience firsthand through circles and visits, relying upon subjective interpretations and experiences of individuals (Hart, 2007). Therefore, the knowledge and experience the research participants shared are considered reliable information contributing to understanding a broader phenomenon. To ensure that my findings were aligned with the participant’s goals and points of view,

they received a final copy of their transcript at the end of the study during a closing celebration, as “Indigenous research is a life-changing ceremony” (Wilson, 2008, p. 61).

This chapter was vital for understanding the research's methodology and how data was collected, ensuring transparency, ethical considerations, and the cultural sensitivity required when working within an Indigenous framework. It provides the reader with a clear understanding of how the research was conducted and how the data was analyzed and interpreted.

## 4.0 RESULTS

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This section is structured in two parts; the first part introduces readers to each participant (storyteller) in this study. The second section will discuss the findings. In the realm of scientific inquiry, it is easy to become engrossed in the pursuit of data, statistics, and results, inadvertently overshadowing human beings whose experiences and narratives form the heart of any research endeavour. The participants in a study are not mere data points or anonymous subjects; they are living, breathing individuals with unique stories, emotions, and perspectives. Humanizing participants is rooted in the belief that everyone has a story to tell, a perspective to share, and a unique contribution. It entails approaching research and their stories with a deep sense of empathy and ethical responsibility, ensuring that participants are treated with the dignity and consideration they deserve.

By humanizing research participants, I created a research environment that valued their voices, experiences, and perspectives, and in doing so, I reproduced research outcomes that were more authentic and ethically sound. This recognition is particularly crucial in research that touches on sensitive topics, explores marginalized communities, or delves into the intricate tapestry of human life. Humanizing research participants is rooted in empathy, respect, and a commitment to ethical inquiry. It is an approach grounded in the belief that each participant has a unique story. As researchers, we are responsible for listening to and honouring these narratives.

Most importantly, who are our storytellers (participants)? The individuals sharing their stories encompassed various experiences and backgrounds, hailing from various Indigenous reservations, different Indigenous child welfare agencies, and rural and urban contexts. They also reflected diverse experiences, cultural identities, and educational backgrounds. Maintaining awareness and respect for the diversity present in terms of individual cultures, languages, spirituality, lived experiences, and viewpoints was crucial during my interactions with my participants.

## 4.2 PART I: SHARED STORIES

### 4.2.a *Matthew*

Matthew's roots trace back to Treaty Two territory on his mother's side and Treaty 5 territory on his father's side. By age 6, Matthew had been placed in eleven homes under the care of child and family services. These early experiences left an indelible mark on him, leading him to remain under the care of child and family services for a staggering thirteen and a half years before he reached the age of majority. However, Matthew has deeply understood his biological family through all these tumultuous times. He believes his family, like so many others, were products of their environment—environments that were, in his view, designed to let Indigenous communities down through governmental legislation and policy. This belief is rooted in a history of pain, where intergenerational trauma weaved through his lineage.

Matthew's family history is a testament to the resilience and the consequences of systemic injustices. His grandmother endured the harrowing experiences of a residential school. His mother faced the challenges of day school, and his aunt bore the scars of the '60s scoop. Matthew himself knows the inner workings of the child welfare system all too well. Amidst this backdrop, his family also grappled with the shadows of incarceration and mental health challenges. Matthew recalls three varying narratives about why he was taken from his mother: one from his mother, another from his grandma, and the third from the child welfare social worker. The official account from Child and Family Services paints a picture of a transient, addicted, and unstable mother. However, Matthew has uncovered documents suggesting a flawed child welfare system that does not promote a community-based or "village" approach.

### 4.2.b *Whitney*

Significant challenges and adversity marked Whitney's early life. Born at St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg, Manitoba, she came from a large family of ten children. Her life was tumultuous from the

beginning, as she was apprehended at birth and placed in various care settings, shuttling between her biological parents and foster homes within her community. This instability in her living situation led to at least fifty different placement changes, profoundly impacting her upbringing and sense of security.

Whitney's biological parents struggled with alcoholism, and her home life was marred by physical abuse. She and her siblings endured physical and emotional trauma, often without food for days. Despite the difficult circumstances, Whitney still longed for her mother's love and approval, reflecting the complex emotions that can develop in such situations.

Around the age of 9 or 10, Whitney and most of her siblings relocated to Winnipeg. At a young age, she had to take on the role of caregiver for her siblings, further compounding her responsibilities and challenges. Tragically, her experiences in foster homes also subjected her to mistreatment, adding to the emotional and mental health struggles she had to endure. Whitney's early life experiences are a testament to her resilience and the incredible challenges she had to overcome. These early hardships impacted, shaped, and influenced her outlook on her life's future.

#### **4.2.c Travis**

Travis's experience in the child welfare system is complex and challenging. His journey highlights some of the significant issues children face while in the care of Child and Family Services. Travis entered the child welfare system at a very young age, where Travis and his twelve sisters were separated. Visits with his mother being inconsistent are all heart-wrenching aspects of his story. The absence of consistent family connections, especially with his mother, profoundly impacted his upbringing. It is reassuring to hear that the child welfare services facilitated visits with his sisters, helping him maintain relationships, even though some of Travis's siblings were not in child welfare's care. Research has shown that these relationships are vital for children's well-being and emotional development in care.

#### **4.2.d Alias: “The Indian Boy”**

“The Indian Boy’s” life has been deeply intertwined with Child and Family Services since the tender age of eleven, marked by his removal from his mother's care and initiating a tumultuous journey within an often-broken system. His early years were marred by profound physical, mental, and sexual abuse while residing with his alcoholic mother. The involvement of child and family services seemed to strip him of his voice and leave him feeling voiceless and vulnerable. Unfortunately, the Indian Boy’s life continued to be marred by abuse, as he was marginalized within his family and foster homes, schools, and the broader community. He encountered discrimination, bullying, and the shattering effects of racism, further eroding his sense of self-worth.

Living predominantly in Winnipeg, “the Indian Boy’s” life consisted of briefly returning to his mother's home before transitioning back into care. During one of these visits, the harsh reality of insufficient resources became evident as the family struggled with food, hydro, and water. To support his family, “The Indian Boy” reluctantly turned to selling drugs. This choice led him to incarceration and eventual affiliation with the Indian Posse gang. Although he sought belonging and family in this newfound connection, “The Indian Boy’s” involvement in illegal activities perpetuated a cycle of imprisonment.

“The Indian Boy's” life significantly changed when he became a father. Holding his first daughter was transformative, but the pressure to provide for his growing family led him back into the drug trade. Several incarcerations followed, and his daughters were apprehended and placed in care. “The Indian Boy's” emotional scars from a tumultuous life and the trauma of his own experiences with an alcoholic mother and the child welfare system led him to seek solace in alcohol. His efforts to maintain contact with his children were met with frustration, and he felt that social workers were uncooperative in facilitating communication.

Despite his immense hardships, “The Indian Boy’s” life is profoundly impacted by the tragic story of Tina Fontaine, a First Nations girl who was murdered while in the care of child and family services. This spurred “The Indian Boy” to reevaluate his life and discontinue his reliance on alcohol. He spends his time in introspection and healing, seeking solace with other fathers who have also lost their children to the system. Although he has taken small steps on the path to recovery, the scars of abuse continue to weigh heavily on him. “The Indian Boy’s” most profound hope is for systemic change, where children are no longer viewed as objects and families receive the support they need to create safe environments for their children. Life remains an uphill battle for “The Indian Boy.” Still, he aspires to break the cycle, ensuring that his grandchildren are not subjected to an unfeeling system and hoping for a better relationship with his adolescent daughters.

#### **4.2.e Jaylene**

Jaylene's life took a significant turn when she was 13 years old, transitioning from a content and happy family environment to the care of Child Welfare. Her journey into the child welfare system began with stories encouraged by her sister that led to the intervention of social workers. Jaylene was told that she and her siblings would be taken into care because their mother was not deemed a good parent. Child Welfare workers assured Jaylene that this change would provide them with a loving, stable home where they would be together and receive the care and resources their mother could not or would not offer. However, these promises were not fulfilled, leaving Jaylene and her siblings separated from each other and their mother.

Jaylene's time in the Child Welfare system was marked by instability and inconsistency. She experienced over ten placements, with all but one showing little belief in her potential or future success. Her wish for a long-term "home" remained unfulfilled. The high turnover rate of social workers in the Child Welfare system added to Jaylene's challenges. At sixteen, Jaylene became a mother while residing

in a moms-and-babes home. She had to navigate the complexities of parenting mainly on her own.

When Jaylene turned eighteen and aged out of care, an extension of services was not offered to her.

Despite these challenges, Jaylene managed to reconnect with her biological mother and siblings in later years. The forced separation had weakened their family bonds, but Jaylene persevered and built meaningful relationships with her birth family. She also became a devoted and capable mother to her child, defying the unfulfilled promises made by Child Welfare workers of a "better life." Jaylene's story is one of resilience, determination, and the enduring strength of familial bonds despite the disruptions caused by the child welfare system.

#### **4.2.f Lisa**

Lisa's life journey is complex, marked by a blend of cultural backgrounds and challenging family circumstances. As a status member of her mother's Garden Hill band, Lisa's family had a mixture of English and Indigenous heritage. Her parents were together for eight years, but her father eventually moved out of their family home. This change led to a pivotal moment in Lisa's life, as her mother, grappling with alcoholism, temporarily left her children with Lisa's maternal aunt and uncle in Garden Hill First Nation, only to never return.

Lisa's biological father would visit Garden Hill twice yearly to spend time with her, fostering a positive relationship. However, his frequent travels left Lisa in the care of his new wife, who subjected her to severe physical abuse, pushing Lisa to the brink of a tragic fate. Although Lisa was briefly returned to her mother's care, the cycle of alcohol abuse persisted, ultimately leading to her involvement with Child Welfare due to her mother's history.

Lisa's father took the initiative to contact Child Welfare in Winnipeg to remove her from her mother's care and place her in Garden Hill with her maternal aunt and uncle; however, contrary to Lisa's expectations, she was not returned to her aunt and uncle but instead placed in the care of her maternal grandparents; an environment where she experienced both physical and financial abuse. Her resilience

shines through her story, as Lisa, a survivor of a residential school, managed to secure a job there. Now a mother of four children, she has lived with her common-law partner for over two decades. She acknowledges that she might have benefited from being in care but was never fully informed of what that would mean for her life. Despite her traumatic experiences, Lisa's determination to be a loving and caring parent is a testament to her strength. While she has cultivated loving relationships, she still seeks validation, love, and approval, reflecting the enduring impact of her challenging past.

#### **4.2.g Bethany**

Bethany is a young woman who carries many wounds from mistreatments in foster placements. Bethany's biological parents are from a First Nation to the north of the city. Bethany was removed from her parent's care, along with her siblings, due to alcohol abuse by the parents. Bethany and her siblings were placed in multiple homes before finding a forever home with a distant family member. Bethany's two brothers were placed in one foster kinship home, and Bethany and her brother were placed in another. Through reflection, Bethany felt that she was not wanted in that foster home; however, she was scared to say anything for fear of having to move again. Bethany was sexually and emotionally abused in the foster placements.

Bethany has been alone since she was thirteen and left the legal guardianship foster home at fifteen years old. No one looked for Bethany or cared what she was going through. Bethany had multiple child and family services, social workers and over five foster placements until the legal guardianship went through the court system. Bethany struggled with addiction issues and abusive relationships. Bethany now has a mentor at the shelter she resides in, who assists Bethany in navigating external services for adults. Bethany is currently homeless; however, through everything, Bethany still maintains hope for a bright future and has a good sense of humour. Bethany was not shown love, compassion or care growing up, and these feelings led to several therapists. However, they did not assist Bethany with her issues.

Bethany continues to seek acknowledgement and tries to please those around her, even when those around her can be potentially harmful to her. Bethany realizes that having her children is not an option until she can deal with her mental health issues. Bethany uses her trauma, abuse, and lack of parental support to build herself the future she longs for.

#### **4.2.h Sherry**

Sherry's life has been a whirlwind of uncertainties and challenges from a young age. She was swept into the foster care system early, her childhood blurred by shifting homes, separations from siblings, and the elusive concept of permanency. Despite moments of stability in certain foster homes, those were often fleeting, disrupted by divorces or family issues. The semblance of a 'forever home' was a foreign notion during her formative years.

Her relationship with her biological mother was complex, marred by the struggles of addiction and instability. Sherry's yearning for a stable, supportive figure led her to find nurturing care in her older sister, Ashley, who became the motherly figure she craved amidst the turbulence of foster care. The notion of stability and a reliable home, something she lacked throughout her upbringing, became a nostalgic dream, overshadowed by the transient nature of her circumstances. In summary, it was evident that deep emotion was still present regarding their experiences in care, triggering even those who thought their healing journey was complete. For many participants, this was the first time they could share their experiences without interruption and be heard. Many participants shared a common experience of having their stories dismissed by their social workers and caretakers.

## **4.2 SUMMARY**

I found it intriguing that I used various methods to gather data. In one sense, the culturally appropriate Talking Circle allowed the participants the freedom to use their voices and be heard; this accomplished my first goal of empowering them to speak and share their stories. However, at times, the stories were not directly related to the questions and did not collect the data required to answer the

research questions. This was acceptable as the data collected shed some light again that what was important to me was not necessarily the participant's primary focus in their healing journeys, which speaks volumes. While the Talking Circle allowed the participants to feel heard, a common theme arose throughout their stories. Participants shared that they thought they did not have a voice and often did not feel heard or believed. It is essential to note that the questionnaire was more direct and provided more clarity and answers to the research questions than the Talking Circle. However, the themes appearing in the Talking Circle and the questionnaire were on par with each other and led to sub-themes. Although each participant's story and experience varied in this study, common themes arose from each story.

## **4.3 PART II: MAIN THEMES**

### ***4.3.a Multiple placements***

As aligned with the literature, we saw that one of the most prevailing themes evident in the stories shared by participants was the negative impacts they experienced because of multiple moves (Bennett, 2016; Unrau et al., 2008). The findings indicate that unstable placement histories and frequent relocations damaged the emotional and behavioural well-being of foster children (Gosek, 2017; Bennett, 2016). Moreover, those subjected to multiple placement changes might be especially vulnerable to harmful consequences (Newton et al., 2000). Similar to other studies conducted in the field, several participants recalled moving over ten times in one year. One young lady recalled moving foster placements 13 teen times when the data revealed that the number of moves was significantly higher. These moves are perceived by participants as having imprinted damaging emotional scars, particularly in the area of trusting people and building and maintaining relationships (Bennett, 2016; Unrau et al., 2008). The constant moving between different homes in foster care can create social problems, leading to feelings of rejection, unworthiness, and negative labels such as "bad" or "difficult."

Research indicates that placement instability is strongly linked to adverse outcomes for children and youth (Benett, 2016; Unrau et al., 2008).

Numerous factors contributed to the frequent moves experienced by children in the foster care system. One significant reason is the challenge of unsuccessful reunifications and subsequent re-apprehensions, as observed by various participants. For instance, research by Terling (1999) revealed that 37% of children who were reunited with their birth families re-entered the system within 3.5 years, showcasing the difficulty of maintaining these reunifications. Jones (1998) supported this argument and stated that low success rates often led to long-term poor outcomes. Many participants in this study shared that they were often moved from good foster homes to be reunited with their biological parents. Participants shared that when they were re-apprehended, tragically, they were placed in a different home as there was no longer bed space available in their previous foster homes. Upon reflection, they shared that they were often scared or upset when they were moved from an excellent foster home that they were attached to and back to their biological families. Whitney shared that she was often bounced back and forth between her foster home and her biological parents when nothing had changed; this left her very confused and lonely for one of her closest allies, Alma.

Interestingly, research indicates that reunification might not always be the optimal choice for the child (Miranda et al., 2019; Fuller, 2005; Lau et al., 2003; Jones, 1998). On average, children who return to their primary caregiver tend to have poorer outcomes compared to those who remain in foster care, especially regarding attachment and security (Miranda et al., 2019; Bellamy, 2008; Jones, 1998). The challenges upon reunification with the original caregiver likely stem partially from insufficient development of a secure attachment with that caregiver (Bretherton, 1992; Schofield & Beek, 2009), strengthening the importance of permanency and attachment. Participants shared that their hopes of feeling secure and having the sense of belonging they yearned for were not present after being returned home to their families. Many had to learn to create boundaries regarding their current relationship with

their parents. As participants shared, the relationship became toxic, and they felt that they were often used for money.

Fallon, Chabot, Fluke, Blackstock, MacLaurin and Tonmyr's (2013) investigation concerning the contributing factors for multiple placements for Indigenous children shed light on two critical factors at the agency level that significantly impact these decisions. Their findings suggest a compelling correlation between the educational qualifications of agency staff and the degree of centralization within the agency. Agencies with more staff possessing formal social work education tend to decrease the probability of placing a child in out-of-home care following an investigation. Additionally, a centralized intake model, indicative of a standardized approach in addressing concerns related to child maltreatment, shows the potential to lower the chances of out-of-home placement, particularly when managing substantial caseloads involving Indigenous children (Gosek, 2017, p. 72).

The third contributing factor participants noted in this study for frequent moves was placement breakdown, which was that several foster parents need more substantial training, guidance, and support in fostering, especially around the inclusivity of biological families and the importance of maintaining cultural ties. Usually, foster parents have not had any formal training in how to care for children who have come from homes where they have been abused. This lack of training causes foster parents to give up on foster children and treat them differently as opposed to their biological children. This happens in familial and culturally appropriate homes. The vagueness surrounding their role also contributes to a stark divide between fostering practices, impacting the stability of placements (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002). Trained foster parents are more likely to sustain placements and avoid placement breakdowns. Training specifically related to how to support and recognize behavioural challenges in children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and family disconnection. Regrettably, the Province of Manitoba currently lacks educational initiatives addressing the perpetuation of colonial attitudes among foster parents (Manitoba Foster Family Network Newsletter, January 2009). Addressing

these issues, there is a pressing need to develop a replicable and efficient training program to benefit the fostering community, children in care, and biological families.

Horrifically, a repetitive and common heavy theme shared throughout the Talking Circle was that the participants felt that the foster homes that they resided in were not genuinely motivated to foster children. Participants felt that the only reason children were placed in these homes was for the financial benefit of the foster parents, a belief supported by research (Bennett, 2016; Croce, 2013). These children are taken away from their culture, family, community, and heritage, placed in homes that, most times, are not culturally appropriate and 'get paid' to keep the children. Thus, once the children age out, they find they no longer have a family and are left alone in the world. These children have no families, agency support, life skills, or home community to seek guidance. The outcomes of this study align with existing literature that commonly outlines adverse consequences for young individuals transitioning out of the foster care system (Unrau et al., 2008; Pecora et al., 2005; Keller et al., 2007).

Furthermore, should the child violate or act against the house rules, the foster placement informs the social worker to 'move' the child, and they are placed "where there is space," as Bethany shared. Sadly, this is just one of the dire consequences that occur when the foster home is not adequately trained to deal with complex behaviors and is financially motivated. When there is no emotional attachment between the child and caregiver, there becomes no motivation for the foster parent to weather the storm. Tragically, the consequences of the above are directly felt by the innocent child who wants nothing more than to feel seen and safe. Sadly, when the above occurs, no one asks the child about their feelings, what happened or why they acted out. No one considers each move's effects on the child's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Thus, the child begins to feel, "Why should I even bother trying"? These narratives send a very emotionally damaging message to a child as they are trying to find love, acceptance, and their place in the world. The literature concurs with the participant's experiences and demonstrates that children in the care of child welfare systems often

experience multiple foster placements, receiving homes and short-term shelter placements. Children who are made to move numerous times within a short period experience separation anxiety, depression, addiction issues, lack of motivation, difficulty making and maintaining friendships and often, anger issues, all of which were experienced by the participants. Children who have experienced multiple placements sometimes enter the criminal justice system after they leave care, as many of their support and resources are cut, leaving them to do what they can to survive.

This study and research indicate that the multiple shifts in foster care placements were recalled as significant losses and were believed to have enduring, adverse effects on the current lives of the individuals who participated in the study (Unrau et al., 2008). In Sherry's story, she recognized the value of a stable, permanent home over the tumultuous environment she experienced. Her desire for the stability she missed out on as a child is a poignant reflection of her journey through a system that often struggled to provide the permanence she needed. Nevertheless, despite the hardships, she finds solace in her relationship with her sister. She is now navigating the complexities of raising her children, striving to offer them the stability she yearned for but never entirely found.

This study found that the above area was closely connected to a sub-theme of feeling like they "lost their childhood." All participants shared that they had to grow up way too fast and felt they had no childhood because they had to parent their younger siblings and, in some cases, their parents. There were things no child should be exposed to at any age. Most participants' experience indicated they were often in survival mode and focused on safety and meeting their basic needs. Participants expressed that they did not think about their optimal well-being or permanency while in care, primarily due to being in survival mode; however, they do recognize the impact it would have had now.

The final cause found for frequent moves between foster homes was abuse, which leads us to the next emerging theme.

#### ***4.3. b. Abuse in foster homes, both familial and culturally appropriate***

A nauseating and heart-wrenching theme expressed throughout the emerging adults' experience in foster care was ongoing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The abuse occurred at the hands of familial foster parents and siblings, foster placements in their home communities, thus culturally appropriate, as well as general foster placements. All foster homes were equally guilty; there was no distinction between one type of home producing better outcomes than the others. Tragically, the high demand for foster homes has often led to the acceptance of foster parents who complete the Provincially required basic checks; however, these have not been thoroughly investigated or studied.

All too often, due to the high demand and high workloads, social workers and foster parents are not adequately trained to recognize the signs of abuse or those who are grooming the children. If workers were in the homes more often and could recognize the signs, they may be able to prevent the length of abuse. When the social worker does not spend time explaining to children what it means to be in care, the child's right to safety, and whom to talk to if in need, the child has no expectations except for what they have been exposed to most of their lives thus, may normalize the terrible treatment they are receiving. Most participants said that when they experienced abuse, they did not know who they could talk to and often feared the consequences that followed. Participants stated that in the rare instances when they did speak out, they were blamed, they were moved, or nothing was ever done. No one followed up with them, leaving them to feel unvalidated and alone. This leads us to the next theme. Participants expressed that when they did disclose abuse, they were not taken seriously; they were not believed. They felt their experiences were dismissed, and their feelings and disclosure were not validated.

#### ***4.3.c Not being heard or validated by adults in their lives.***

The third most predominant theme that emerged from participants' stories was that the participants felt they were not treated as valued individuals by their biological family, foster family, or

social workers. They often felt dismissed and disregarded, especially when disclosing abuse or maltreatment. More than half of the participants shared that when they disclosed abuse to their social workers or foster parents, nothing was done, and no investigation took place. This left them feeling worthless and confused. The effects of not being heard or validated as a child within a family can be profound and have lasting consequences. These actions by the authority figures and people who were supposed to keep them safe left many participants feeling unworthy of protection and affection from the adults in their lives. When individuals, especially children, do not feel heard or validated in their families, it can lead to emotional, psychological, and interpersonal challenges.

The impact of not feeling heard as a child can be long-lasting and emotionally damaging. When children's voices and emotions are not acknowledged or validated, it can lead to a sense of invisibility and emotional neglect. For these participants, the lack of validation resulted in low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Children who do not feel heard may struggle to express their emotions, leading to pent-up frustration, anger, or sadness. This was the direct consequence for Whitney and Bethany, who remained silent after constant rejection and lack of validation, as their voices were essentially stolen from them. Over time, this can affect their mental health and emotional well-being, potentially leading to conditions like anxiety and depression.

Furthermore, as demonstrated above, feeling heard can help the development of healthy communication and interpersonal skills. Children may have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships, as they may struggle to express themselves or to listen to others empathetically. The consequences can extend into adulthood, affecting their ability to navigate personal and professional relationships. In essence, feeling unheard as a child can have a lasting impact on one's emotional and social development, making it crucial to prioritize active listening and validation of children. Part of the challenge is that child and family service agencies in Manitoba vary extensively in their training of foster parents (Watson, 2009). Various foster family associations (regional and local) exist in the Province of

Manitoba, but none mandate a standard of training for their foster parents (Child and Family Services Act, 2005). Thus, many foster parents are not adequately equipped to handle the complexities that foster children face, which in turn causes further unintentional emotional damage.

#### ***4.3.d Lack of belonging***

The emerging adults in the study expressed that they felt like they did not belong to their biological families, foster families, or the communities around them. They felt that their foster parents cared for them at arm's length, both parties being fully aware that the child could be moved at any time. Thus, neither party was fully emotionally invested in the other to protect themselves from heartbreak. Children growing up without a sense of belonging face a myriad of emotional and psychological challenges that can have lasting impacts on their lives, which is what we saw among these participants.

Belonging, whether within a family, a community, or a cultural context, is a fundamental human need. Without this sense of connection, children may experience feelings of isolation, insecurity, and low self-esteem. They may struggle to develop a strong sense of identity and often find it difficult to establish healthy relationships with peers, other adults, and, at times, their children. The absence of belonging can lead to a sense of drifting and a lack of purpose, potentially leading to a range of adverse outcomes, including difficulties in academic achievement and increased vulnerability to risky behaviours. As one participant stated, "Permanency was important to me as a child as I felt like I did not belong in the neighbourhood I was being raised in (mostly a whiter neighbourhood, and I am indigenous), and the permanency of my placement made me feel more loved and a part of a family." This participant felt that the love and stability of a constant family helped give him the building blocks required to build a bright future as a social worker.

Furthermore, children who lack a sense of belonging may grapple with emotional and mental health issues. Feelings of loneliness and alienation can contribute to anxiety and depression, impacting their overall well-being. These children may not have a reliable support system to turn to in need, and

they might carry a pervasive sense of emptiness throughout their lives. Society must recognize the significance of creating environments and opportunities that foster a sense of belonging for all children, as it is essential for their healthy development and emotional stability.

Every adult and child should feel wanted, valued, and loved; it is part of our makeup. Children in care are no different. In the words of Greg, an eighteen-year-old Cree/Métis youth living independently, of course, you want to say, “I am adopted, I belong, someone wants me, an adoption ceremony would be awesome” (de Finney, di Tomasso, 2015). This is a similar feeling that was distinctly present in six out of the eight participants in this study.

#### ***4.3.e Lack of information and transparency***

The absence of information and transparency from Child and Family Services provided to the families, including explanations of their child’s foster placement and the services available to them, was a common concern among participants—specifically mental health resources and placement options. Many participants expressed the need for clear information from their child welfare social workers and greater process transparency. Access to more comprehensive input about the available choices would have allowed them to become more engaged and make more informed decisions about their future, ultimately granting them a heightened sense of authority and independence. Often, when information was given, it was provided in terminology that was misunderstood, and the consequence of the misunderstanding was further separation between the parents and their children.

A horrific example of this is Lisa was in care for most of her life, only with Lisa; she did not realize she was in the care of child welfare. Lisa remembered her mother taking her and her sibling to her uncle and aunt’s home, as her mother wanted to ‘go out.’ Lisa reflected that she had never seen her mother again. Lisa recalls that she was lucky she had a father to reside with; however, again, Lisa was abused at the hands of her father’s new wife. Lisa was not placed with her aunt and uncle when she returned from living with her father; instead, agency workers put her with her grandmother and

grandfather. Social workers never visited Lisa and were never told she was a child in care. Lisa was informed she was a child in care by a cousin, who explained that Lisa's family was getting 'paid' to keep her. Lisa has been able to grow attachment skills with others and has been able to find a partner who shows her love; Lisa continues to yearn for love as she did not receive love while in the care of child welfare.

#### ***4.3.f Lack of support provided to them and their families.***

Child Welfare survivors have consistently voiced their concerns about the lack of adequate mental health support and counselling services for parents who have lost custody of their children and for the children in care who grapple with profound loss and emotional turmoil. Separation from one's children is a deeply distressing experience for parents, often accompanied by feelings of grief, guilt, and emotional upheaval. Equally, children in care undergo significant emotional challenges as they contend with separation from their families and the complexities of their situations. Without the necessary mental health support, these individuals may find it challenging to navigate their emotions and establish a path to healing. Comprehensive counselling services are crucial in providing a safe and supportive environment for processing these feelings, addressing grief, and developing effective coping mechanisms. Recognizing and addressing these needs is essential in helping parents and children on their journey to recovery, building resilience and adapting to educational environments.

In this study, the participants noted that once they were brought into the care of child welfare, some of the participants were no longer able to maintain contact with their biological parents, receive any knowledge of their siblings' placements, no information given to the children in care that their parents had reached out to inquire about them and had no information on what the next steps were. The participants were not allowed to voice what or where they would like to reside. They were not given a voice to inform social workers of family members who could provide alternative care. For those participants who were returned to their parents on and off, these children were not consulted to see if

they wanted to return to their parents and, thus, ended up suffering more trauma as their parents had not changed their dysfunctional and inappropriate lifestyle. Participants shared that, to their knowledge, there was no help provided to the parents to overcome dysfunctional behaviour or to deal with the removal of their children, which often caused the dysfunction to become more severe. The children would then be returned to a home that was more restrictive than it had been previously. Child and Family Service's very design is for failure and emotional trauma on both child and family.

"The Indian Boy" was fortunate enough to have a social worker who encouraged visits between his twelve siblings; however, he was often sent back home to his mother, where the conditions were unbearable for "the Indian Boy," and ultimately was forced to sell illegal drugs to make ends meet. Whitney reflected on her time between foster placements and her mother. Whitney noted that returning home to her mother and the condition of her mother led to more trauma for Whitney. The other participants did not have regular visits with their siblings, and when visits did happen, as in Mathew's recollection, the visits were very short and uncomfortable.

#### ***4.3.g The negative impact of family visits***

A common theme among participants was that visits with their parents were often problematic and caused emotional distress for a variety of reasons. Participants shared that when they went long periods without visits with their parents, one of two things occurred for them internally: they either blamed themselves for no visits and felt inadequate, further stating that they felt that their parents loved them or did not want to see them. Alternatively, they fantasized about their union, getting excited about how their parent may have bettered themselves, only to be greatly disappointed. In either scenario, the child is left with some big feelings and challenging emotions that later imprint on their emotional well-being. As a result of the children's age and expressive language development, they would not know how to express their feelings adequately without the help of an adult. Tragically, the

consensus was that in all cases, social workers did not adequately address it or help them process these feelings,

Moreover, participants who had visits shared that they were often left in emotional turmoil after each visit, as they were often left disappointed because the visits did not often live up to their expectations or their parents did not show up, which left them feeling a sense of rejection or caused them to worry extensively about their parent's wellbeing. At this stage in their lives, the participants were still unaware of how to rectify this challenge for children in care, except for more support and conversations with their social workers around the realistic expectations around visits and feelings it may trigger. Moyers, Farmer, and Lipscombe (2006) interviewed sixty-eight foster carers, young people and their social workers and reported that 57% had poor contact with family members pre and post-test. The report also noted that the youth and research recommended increased arranged communication, including more social worker involvement in contact.

#### ***4.3.h Frequent change in social workers and no follow-up***

Many child welfare agencies have a high social worker turnover, which affects the children in ways that are often never explored. Many Indigenous children find it difficult to express their feelings to adults (specifically child welfare workers or foster parents) when they have been abused or hurt. Kowal (2023), in her thesis, questions whether the consequences of inconsistent, disconnected Child and Family Service workers may, at times, be worse than the instability children were apprehended from in the first place. Her study mirrored several of my findings regarding themes despite very different objectives.

In this study, the participants noted that they all had been placed in abusive homes at one point or another. Several participants had been placed in multiple abusive homes, and six of the eight participants shared that they had told their social workers or foster parents of the abuse they suffered. However, all six participants noted that after telling of this abuse, nothing happened to the abuser, and

no one came to check up on them after the disclosure. Mathew shared that after he told his social worker and foster parents of the abuse, realizing that nothing was being investigated, he began to feel that he was not “worthy” enough to protect. Bethany noted that she was also abused and had several placements and social workers; however, in Bethany’s case, she had already been moved so many times that she was afraid to tell anyone of her abuses in the foster placements because she was afraid to move placements again.

Parents are expected to protect and support their children. However, when parents are unable or unwilling to do so, children are apprehended. When apprehended, the child should automatically have a social worker and foster parents who can step in and provide feelings of security and safety. The social worker should be there to give age-appropriate information to the child and listen to all the child’s concerns. The foster family should be well-trained in areas related to supporting the needs of the children, as well as providing love, nurturing, and stability. When a child is placed in a situation where the person who is supposed to be there for them does not listen to their feelings or validate those feelings, there is little doubt the child will leave child welfare with mental health issues and in need of counselling. When no action is taken when children express their feelings, it can lead the child to think that they are not worth protecting. Tragically, many Indigenous children commit suicide or become addicted to alcohol and other substances. These addictions often lead the child down the path of criminal activity and, thus, involvement with the criminal justice system.

#### ***4.3.i Attachment issues***

In the 1970s, Bowlby’s attachment theory studied how humans develop attachments during their developmental years (Miranda et al., 2019; Bretherton, 1992). Unrau et al. (2008) and Lawrence et al. (2000) concurred that there would be significant attachment issues for a child because of being taken out of a hazardous or neglectful setting, placing the child in repeated placement failures where they will be prone to struggle with trusting adults or forming connections with both adults and peers. This is

tragic because children, as do adults, require the feeling of belonging to feel attached to something or someone. Akin's (2011) study, as did this study, found that participants expressed a dire need for continuity and connections. The results for kinship placements, sibling placements, and early stability offer new insight into the importance of social work practices and policies that strive to keep children connected to family and stable in their placements.

In this study, attachment issues were another dominant factor that each participant discussed at length. In Whitney's story, Alma, a foster parent, seems to have provided some respite from the pain Whitney experienced, offering love and compassion. However, the damage done by the early trauma was already deeply ingrained, leading to emotional outbursts and challenges in attachment and trust. This underscores the long-lasting impact that early childhood trauma can have on a person's mental and emotional well-being. Whitney expressed that having been in over fifty foster placements made it unrealistic for her to form any attachment to other humans. It has taken Whitney many years to grow the skill of accepting her attachment disorder. Whitney is currently pregnant with her first child, and in speaking, Whitney disclosed that she is afraid she will not be able to bond with her newborn child as she has only experienced parental love from one foster placement, and that was short-lived.

In Jaylene's story, she had experienced thirteen years of being attached to her family and, thus, could form bonds with her children. Jaylene's time in child welfare care did scar her ability to manage her emotions and tainted her ability to steer clear of unhealthy relationships; however, since Jaylene did not spend as many years in the care of child welfare, she had the advantage of finding a mom-and-babes home that offered Jaylene solace from child welfare and taught her how to become an excellent mother to her child.

Mathew's story is a rarity when it comes to children in care. Although Mathew also had multiple placements and suffered from attachment issues, Mathew was also fortunate enough to be placed in a home where the foster father took Mathew as one of his own. Mathew notes that being in this home

provided him with love and stability, and he could learn life skills that other foster placements did not teach him. Mathew notes that he still considers this foster father as his father figure.

Bethany continues to struggle with attachment issues as the kinship foster placement did not include nor accept Bethany as part of their family unit. As Bethany grew older, her attachment seemed to drift towards those who were very abusive and toxic towards her. Bethany did not have positive love or caring role models, so the gravitation toward negative people stemmed from her need-to-please mentality. For Bethany, any love shown to her was accepted as 'normal love,' as she had nothing to compare it to. Bethany is finally starting to trust and realizes that her attachment issues, her need to please and her need to belong are directly related to her time spent in child welfare care.

#### **4.3 j. Need for Permanency**

Travis's experience demonstrates the importance of permanency from his perspective, as he indicated that the permanency and stability he experienced while in a long-term foster home made him feel loved and secure. Travis stated that he often felt very grateful because compared to his sister and other friends who had grown up in short-term homes and family placements, his emotional well-being, self-esteem, and desire to strive remained intact. Travis has earned his bachelor's in social work and is currently a youth mentor. Travis stated that he often encourages the youth he works with to extend their time in care, something he wishes he would have done.

Sherry would concur with Travis and stated that knowing what she knows now, she would have preferred "a forever home, a stable home and knew my mom was not stable," yet she was returned to her care several times. "It was the drugs and alcohol." Sherry feels that a permanent home would have positively impacted her future success. Sherry stated that she loved the group home that she was in before she got pregnant. "I loved it; I wanted to be there like they were my run to if I did not have my mom. My mom was drunk when I was placed with my mom; she would drink up the cheques and spend it on her boyfriend. Sherry felt her basic needs were met in the group home. "I got everything I wanted; I

just had to do everything I was supposed to do.” “The stuff I know now and being that age, I would just stay in that group home and finish school. I have five kids and have not finished grade 12 yet, which is sad. I know I could be in a better place now than sitting here with five kids. I am pretty much just going to be a single mom parent.”

#### 4.4 SUMMARY

The outcomes created by the Child Welfare System for Indigenous children generate a cycle of state dependency, as shared by the participants. As stated in the Transforming Child Welfare Legislation in Manitoba Research (2018), children who have been emancipated from care encounter high unemployment rates, higher incidents of contact with the justice system, and housing instability, such as homelessness, which were all areas that each of our eight participants struggled (Government of Manitoba, 2018). Overall, studies show that former Indigenous youth in care face poverty, physical and sexual violence, substance abuse, and incarceration at alarming rates compared to their peers not in care. (Bennett, 2016; Cohen, 2016; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Navia, 2015; Palmater, 2017). Tragically, this fact was supported by my research participants.

Another report insinuated that a child's time in care is the "care to prison pipeline," suggesting that Indigenous children who grow up in care overwhelmingly end up serving time in prison (Cohen, 2016, p. 1). In British Columbia, children in care are more likely to wind up in jail than graduate high school. Graduation rates for Indigenous youth continue to remain the lowest out of Canada's identifiable group (Brooks et al., 2015). Across Canada, children in the foster care system make up 60 percent of homeless youth and a third of our homeless adults (Hyslop & Keddell, 2018). The child welfare systems' failure to meet Indigenous youth's needs stems directly from neo-colonial policies that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples (McDowell, 2015). These tragic outcomes result in a poor life span for Indigenous people.

Interestingly, Skivnes (2010) argued that permanent placements such as the adoption of a child have been proven to create a stronger emotional attachment and feeling of community in addition to legal ties, which would assist with disrupting some of the challenges felt by the participants. In addition, Swirovich's (2004) research study involving Indigenous adoptees within non-Indigenous adoptive or long-term foster care settings viewed this life as positive. They reflected on these experiences by highlighting how their home environments fulfilled their emotional requirements. Words like "love" were commonly used to describe the affectionate atmosphere or their relationships with foster or adoptive parents. Cindy's story exemplifies this trend, recalling her foster placement as her genuine family, feeling loved and reciprocating that affection. Similarly, Carol and other participants echoed warmth and love in their adoptive homes, expressing a sense of familial belonging, safety, and security.

For those raised in adoptive families, emotional fulfillment was deeply tied to their initial years. Lynn vividly recalled a childhood brimming with love and affection, while Denise emphasized not just a loving home but also the acceptance and support from their extended family (Swirovich, 2004). The narratives consistently highlighted themes of love, security, and a sense of safety within these environments, with some participants specifically noting the contrast between their stable substitute care settings and the instability of their original homes (Swirovich, 2004).

The participants' stories in this and the Swirovich (2004) study underscore the importance of emotional needs during their formative years, with love and security often serving as foundational elements in their narratives. Whether it was the warmth of familial bonds, the assurance of safety, or the contrast to previous tumultuous environments, these themes overwhelmingly defined their early experiences. They led to positive and productive outcomes in the Swirovich (2004) study. No participant in this study expressed a lack of validation, a lack of being heard or a lack of belonging. Is this a piece of the puzzle that the social services field may be looking for? A crucial element within the mentioned positive experiences is their role in amplifying the voices that have typically remained unheard in the

ongoing conversation around Indigenous adoption in non-Indigenous homes due to ongoing political pressure to silence those who were happy with their care.

As seen in the stories gathered from the participants and supported by numerous studies, there are several adverse effects on children lingering indefinitely in foster care without a clear permanent plan (Tesla, 2004). Tesla's (2004) research outcomes concurred with our findings. Tesla's study emphasized the significance of lasting connections, creating secure attachments and relationships in fostering healthy child development and establishing a robust evidential foundation supporting permanence for children in care (Tesla, 2004; Bowlby, 1969). Further evidence in *Creating Places of Belonging: Expanding Notions of Permanency with Indigenous Youth in Care* highlighted that continuity of relationships and cultural connectedness is central for Indigenous youth in care (Bennett, 2015; Quash-Mah et al., 2010). Therefore, because of the findings, securing lasting stability for foster children has been a central concern for child welfare experts ever since the issue of children lingering in foster care emerged in 1959 (Tesla, 2004).

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous young adults in Manitoba who transitioned out of care, focusing primarily on their views of permanency through Talking Circles and the Visiting Way. The study intended to understand their thoughts and feelings on permanency planning options. More specifically, how does this relate to their current outcomes and overall well-being? The purpose of this study was multilayered; my primary goal revolved around collaborating '*with*' rather than '*for*' the children in the child welfare system. Engaging their perspectives is crucial to achieving this goal. Thus, it empowers Indigenous emerging adults who survived the child welfare system and gives them a voice to share their aspirations, narratives, and ideas comfortably with those who have felt voiceless and unheard of for decades.

Secondly, this study sought to offer a vital and missing perspective to existing literature and fill in the gaps, catering to decision-makers and policymakers. This study aims to drive systemic enhancements, fostering better outcomes for Indigenous children in care. I aim to catalyze improved outcomes and healing for these individuals while urging decision-makers to prioritize the child's well-being over political agendas on a case-by-case basis. These intentions guided the formulation of the research inquiries posed to participants during the Talking Circle and Visits. The guiding questions were: 1) Was permanency vital to you as a child in care? Did you know what that meant at the time? 2) Would permanent placement options, such as having a forever family, being claimed, or being adopted, have improved your sense of stability and overall well-being from your perspective? 3) Now that you know the impact it could have, would you have wanted your social worker to do anything differently on your behalf?

These questions were given to the participants to review during the introductory feast and to keep beside them as guides during the Talking Circle. However, as stated in the limitations, the participants veered away from the intended questions at times during the Talking Circle, partly due to

the ceremonial structure. Those participants who engaged in the Visiting Way responded more directly to the above questions. Interestingly, both methods revealed several overlapping themes. Embedded within the eight transcripts were the emerging adults' thoughts and feelings about their time spent in care and what improvements can be made.

The current study used the Indigenous methods of a Talking Circle and the Visiting Way to elicit the thoughts and experiences of emerging adult survivors of the Child Welfare System in Manitoba regarding permanence. This chapter will present the meanings and implications of the above findings in this study.

## **5.1 KEY FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS**

The findings from this research signify that the participants in this study had negative memories associated with their time before care, their experiences in care, as well as the impact being in care had on their adulthood, with specific themes emerging, which will be discussed below. It is imperative that before we proceed with the findings, I address some common themes and statements made by the participants that did not directly pertain to my research questions. However, I feel ethically compelled to mention them on the participants' behalf if I am to meet my first objective, which was to give them a voice.

Unsolicited, six out of eight participants shared that they were in care due to their parents' addiction issues. Addiction is one of the leading causes of apprehension, as supported by literature and my professional experience (Wright, 2004). Shockingly, not one participant stated that they felt their apprehension was unwarranted. If this was the case, this opinion was not expressed during our time together. This came as a surprise to me, as this contradicts the research and current-day narrative around the apprehensions of Indigenous children. Furthermore, contrary to the literature consulted, participants expressed no dissatisfaction, need, or desire for improved outcomes around culture or

cultural connections. Given my personal experiences and the influx of research in this area, I found this finding perplexing.

The emerging adults in my study stated that they had reconnected or remained connected to their biological families, which is consistent with the literature (Bennett, 2016). Most participants moved back to their biological family's aftercare. However, these living arrangements were short-lived, as they recognized that residing with their family was chaotic and not in their best interests. Some participants said they wished their social worker had connected them via visits sooner. It was evident that maintaining this relationship was important to participants, even though the relationships were tenuous, and they characterized these relationships as unreliable, toxic, unhealthy, requiring strict boundaries, and reported emotional unrest and trauma after visits. None of the participants expressed a desire to deepen or spend more energy on strengthening these relationships.

Consistent with the results found in Bennett's (2016) study, the participants in my thesis were more interested in creating their own families and ensuring they did not repeat the historical patterns found in their biological families. That said, participants did appear to enjoy the autonomy and ability to choose whether they engaged with their biological family members. These were important areas to note on behalf of the participants. However, we will focus specifically on those experiences and central themes that emerged during their time in care.

The research findings have shed light on several profound and interconnected themes that emerged throughout this research, underscoring the complexity of the issues faced by Emerging adults in care. The consensus among participants and the recurring themes that emerged strongly indicated that the cyclical movement between different living environments, whether it involved reunification and subsequent re-entry into the foster care system or placement breakdown, significantly disrupted the participant's sense of connection, belonging, stability, and predictability. These unsettling disruptions

then affected the participants' sense of belonging, attachment, self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being. Each aspect has a correlating effect on another, creating a snowball effect.

Consequently, participants expressed a profound lack of validation for their experiences within the child welfare system, as there was no attachment or reliable adult they could talk to. Participants felt their voices were unheard and their feelings unacknowledged, leading to a deep sense of marginalization and unworthiness. The pervasive sense of not belonging, of being adrift without a stable home environment, was also a recurring theme. This lack of belonging contributed to a profound feeling of detachment and a struggle to establish meaningful attachments with caregivers and peers. Participants often recounted their experiences as a loss of childhood, a time that should have been marked by innocence and joy but was overshadowed by constant transitions, instability, and turmoil.

All eight participants shared that since emancipation from care, they have struggled with addiction issues and relationship issues, while a few spent time incarcerated. In addition, all eight participants in this study shared that they have experienced housing issues, with a few still actively homeless at the time of the study. Sadly, this finding is supported by Rutman, Hubberstey, and Feduniw's (2007) study that illustrated a momentous amount of housing instability among youth who age out of care (Bennett, 2016). The above disturbances undoubtedly affect every other aspect of the emerging adult's life.

From a research-based perspective, it is evident that the absence of a consistent, long-term home environment/placement played a pivotal role in exacerbating the challenges faced by these Indigenous children in care. Such an environment would have contributed significantly to their sense of security, belonging, and well-being. This is supported by Hjern and Brännström's (2019) study that demonstrates considerably better outcomes for children aging out of 'forever homes and adoption than those in foster care. This is further proven by Bennett's (2016) research outcomes that indicate Indigenous youth departing from foster care continue to struggle and require increased support in

transitioning out and encounter ongoing challenges during the initial stages of adulthood. They experience challenges in securing housing and facing homelessness; unemployment or lack of work opportunities; ongoing educational pursuits; navigating parenthood; influence of peer pressure and decision-making challenges; difficulties in obtaining identification and a driver's license; developing independence; extensions of care; loss of assistance and available resources; and issues related to substance use, mental well-being, and post-care adjustment. In comparison, studies on permanent placement options have lower issues in these areas and substantially improved outcomes.

The results of this study demonstrated that failed placement attempts significantly impact a child's overall well-being. Beyond disrupted caregiver relationships, these children grapple with the instability of their daily lives, enduring changes in home settings, neighbourhoods, schools, and peer groups. Additionally, this study has shown that children in care want to be consulted about their options, childcare plans, and placement options. Being unheard and left to 'linger' or languish in care has contributed to their feelings of rejection, loneliness, and disconnection. Participants expressed that feeling a 'forever home' would have contributed to feelings of belonging and security. This thesis identifies the importance of the adults in the child's life, especially those involved in making lifelong decisions for children in care. Any decisions adults make should not be entered into lightly, as we can see the rippling effect and devastating outcome they can have. The participants stressed how paramount it is that social workers take the time and make an effort to engage and inform the children they serve. Several participants expressed that they were never informed of their rights and entitlements, with one not being aware that she was in care for several years.

It is appalling that these innocent and pure children were raised in a system that left them feeling uninformed, unappreciated, and merely seen as a financial asset. These participants rightfully criticize foster parents for treating them as nothing more than a monetary income. However, how is this different from the many situations I observed within Indigenous child welfare where Indigenous children

are left in unsafe homes on reserve so that the reserve can continue receiving funding for each child? Or when the child is left to linger in care so that an agency can continue to receive government funding? Tragically, there is no difference. However, this is not commonly discussed. Indigenous child welfare agencies also receive financial support from the government for each child in care, creating a financial incentive for them to prolong a child's stay in care, causing them to linger in care until the age of majority. As a result, decisions may be driven by financial gain and the political agenda rather than genuine care for the child's well-being or what is in their best interest.

Unanimously, the participants mentioned a common theme: they lacked feeling seen, heard, valued, or wanted. As I reflect upon this, I think about what strategies the social work field can adopt to rectify these issues and provide better support to children in care. The child welfare system must be examined and replaced with a system that places the child's needs as its focus. It is detrimental that children in care do not leave care more damaged than they were before entering. Based on participants' experiences, significantly few social workers explained the child welfare system or allowed the children to have a voice. They were not listened to or validated, causing severe emotional trauma that affected not only them now but also the generation that followed.

Follow-up is crucial for each child, and every child should have a say in what type of care would be ideal for them. I cannot imagine a child saying they want to be placed in numerous foster homes as they journey through the child welfare system. The alternative is a forever home; however, this also has drawbacks. A drawback for a forever home, outside of kinship, often leaves the child unattached to their biological family, extended family, and cultural ties. Many long-term foster placements or adoptive homes make little to no effort to connect the children to their familial ties or maintain connections to the child's culture. Each strategy to rectify the situation and improve the child's overall well-being has positive and negative consequences. I struggle morally with how you choose which is better. Would permanency have been a better option so the children would have felt they had a natural home without

worrying about being disrupted, moved, or transferred? Each case is so individual that it is difficult to discern a collective decision, as each child and each family must be examined separately.

## 5.2 BROADER IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this research are far-reaching, as they underscore the critical need for reform and improvement within the child welfare system in Manitoba, getting rid of the one-size-fits-all plans and ideology and instead looking at each child and their family as unique beings requiring special care and attention. The findings presented in this thesis must catalyze change and strive for policy adjustments and practices that prioritize the stability and well-being of Indigenous children in care. By addressing these issues at their core, we can work towards a more nondiscriminatory and supportive child welfare system, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to thrive and flourish.

The child welfare system in Manitoba must address these atrocities and the deep-rooted issues they represent. Policies and practices need to be reformed to ensure that children in care, especially Indigenous children, are validated, supported, and provided with a stable, nurturing, and secure environment that fosters a sense of belonging and attachment. We have heard from the eight participants that they wanted to be seen, heard, valued, and loved. From their perspective, this could have been achieved by finding a forever home. The findings of this research have significant practical implications for real-world settings, particularly in the context of policy, practice, and research about child welfare agencies in the Province of Manitoba.

### *Policy:*

Although there have been some significant and necessary changes to the child welfare system, its policies and the new legislation, such as devolution, modifications made to the *Child Welfare Act* to incorporate culture, amendments to the best interest definition to remove neglect items, changes to funding model, banning adoptions, the shift to prevention (Family Enhancement), Bill-C92, the TRC Calls to Action recommendations and the pleas of children and parents; the shift within child welfare is to

return children to their parents, to the home community, to another Indigenous community before placing Indigenous children in non-Indigenous foster homes. According to these participants, the system continues to fail Indigenous emerging adults, resulting in a devastating life trajectory for most.

The outcomes for Indigenous children who are forced to remain in care (linger) and have later aged out in Manitoba are inexcusable, heartbreaking, and horrendous for the children, their families, and their respective communities. The research underscores the necessity of pursuing permanency and permanent placement options, prioritizing long-term stability for these children. Implementing more robust policies and practices that promote stable, enduring home environments can mitigate the constant upheaval experienced by the children, ultimately improving their mental health and overall well-being. However, permanency in terms of adoption and guardianship, despite the evidence of better outcomes, are not famous words in the Indigenous social services sector; thus, this data may not be received with enthusiasm.

Additionally, the findings show that there needs to be more funding for additional workers and mandated lower caseloads written into policy and enforced, which greatly benefit emerging adults' overall well-being and satisfaction.

***Practice:***

The profound themes that emerged from this study, such as the lack of validation, the absence of a sense of belonging, detachment from caregivers, and experiences of abuse in care, serve as crucial pointers for immediate and long-term actions. These are everyday struggles seen in the literature as plaguing emerging adults. To see a correlation between permanency and these adverse effects calls workers into action.

First and foremost, child welfare agencies and practitioners must prioritize validating children's experiences in care. Acknowledging their feelings and experiences is fundamental to establishing trust and fostering a therapeutic environment. By actively listening to the voices of these children and

validating their emotions, agencies can build more effective relationships, leading to a greater sense of security and belonging for the children in their care.

Furthermore, the findings demand a critical examination of the training and support provided to caregivers within the child welfare system. Ensuring that caregivers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources to provide nurturing, safe, and consistent care is paramount in addressing the issues of detachment and attachment that emerged in this research. Social workers need further support from the child welfare system and their organizations. Specific to the issue of increased training, social workers are expected to step in and offer the types of support children in care genuinely need. Unfortunately, for this to succeed, government funding must be increased to cover the cost of the necessary training. With the high rate of abuse among participants in the study, it is suspected that children who are currently in care could be experiencing a similar fate. The possible implications on the children themselves, society, and the magnitude of this issue demand that Child and Family Services delve more thoroughly into the foster system and the abuse that seems to be rampant amongst Indigenous children in care.

Additionally, there is an urgent need for oversight and accountability mechanisms within child welfare agencies to prevent and address instances of abuse. The experiences of abuse within the care system, as revealed in this study, are profoundly troubling and require immediate action to protect the well-being of children in care.

#### ***Research:***

Theoretically, this research contributes to knowledge on child welfare and Indigenous child well-being. It underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by these children, which goes beyond the conventional understanding of child welfare issues. The emergence of themes related to a profound lack of validation and a pervasive sense of not belonging highlights the importance of acknowledging the emotional and psychological dimensions of child welfare. These challenges prevail

over theoretical paradigms and encourage a more holistic approach to understanding children's experiences in care.

Furthermore, this research suggests that the concept of "Permanency" and its placement options should be reevaluated within the theoretical framework of child welfare. This study emphasizes the critical role of stability and predictability in child development, leading to a reconsideration of the theoretical foundations upon which child welfare policies are built.

In conclusion, this research offers practical solutions for improving the child welfare system and enriches the field's theoretical underpinnings. By addressing the issues that have emerged from this study, child welfare agencies can better serve Indigenous children and enhance their overall well-being. At the same time, theoretical frameworks can evolve to encompass the complexity of these experiences and the need for stability and emotional support in the child welfare system.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM**

The outcomes for children within the child welfare system, regardless of Indigenous status, are bleak. Kids in care are more prone to incarceration than to graduate high school. Nationwide, children in foster care constitute a significant portion of homeless youth and a third of homeless adults (Hyslop, 2018). Indigenous youth in care confront alarming rates of homelessness, poverty, physical and sexual violence, substance abuse, and incarceration compared to their peers not in care (Cohen, 2016; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Navia, 2015; Palmater, 2017). Many Indigenous children in care battle with a sense of belonging and permanence, further aggravated by the systemic failings of the child welfare system. Thus, the following recommendations will be made to improve the system and, ultimately, the lives of Indigenous children and communities.

Working with Child and Family Services for over a decade certainly provided the experience to comment on a system that I know can, at times, be more damaging than helpful, especially to Indigenous children. Even so, I find I am still shocked at how much trauma each of the participants went

through. I know the workload is colossal, but it is no excuse for not providing the best essential services possible to the children in our care. The funders and stakeholders must be held accountable, as the consequences of their actions are destroying children's lives, not to mention mentally scarring burnout workers.

The first recommendation would be to increase government funding to add additional frontline workers. Child and Family service social workers who work in the field are overworked and need more time to develop meaningful relationships with the children they care for. In addition to the mounting job duties, training and improvements are continuously recommended, rightfully so. Increased funding for lower caseloads for genuinely motivated workers will help combat many of the research participants' previously discussed challenges. In this scenario, distinguish lower caseloads from a request for less work; lower caseloads equate to just as much work, if not more, but more specifically, higher quality work. For example, if workers had more time, they could give more attention to each child and family on their caseload, building more substantial and meaningful relationships based on trust.

More time and lower caseloads would allow social workers to conduct more face-to-face visits with the children to monitor the foster placements and have extended meaningful conversations. Lower caseloads would enable workers to explore whether the existing home is loving, qualified and interested in keeping the children on a long-term basis, should the need arise. Increased face-to-face visits will enable workers to recognize if maltreatment or abuse is occurring in foster homes by identifying the warning signs earlier. This would also allow time for stricter foster home follow-up and guidelines/penalties, especially if children divulge abuse. Additionally, increased visits to multiple settings will enable social workers to conduct better assessments concerning the child's physical, mental, and overall well-being and proactively intervene. Workers would be more attuned to the children in their caseload and get children into therapy earlier if they need to work on feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

Other positive outcomes for lower caseloads are that social workers will have time to educate the children about why they are in care and be transparent. They can inform them of the legal process and what is needed for their parents to get them back or to apprehend them (when age-appropriate). Social workers can educate children in care on placement options and hear the children's opinions on what they would like to see regarding reunification or forever home. In addition, there would be better and more concurrent planning by caseworkers, where they must explore and pursue multiple avenues to build lasting relationships between youth in care and unrelated caregivers, working together simultaneously to construct other avenues of connection and belonging.

It would allow social workers to work towards inclusion and devise case plans guided by the child that include what is important to them concerning culture and family—including them as much as possible in the case planning process. Such as asking them whether they feel safe going home if they would like to stay in their current placement long-term, or if the child even wants to return home to their parents. Too often, due to time constraints and hot topic policies at the time, workers are compelled to use generic and blanket case plans, not considering that each child's case is unique. As noted in some participants in this study, returning home caused more trauma for them. Thus, I would like to see children in care have some form of stability and permanence, and this will look different for everyone, whether it is a permanent long-term placement, adoption, guardianship, customary adoption, cultural permanence or tight extended support network or support in the home so they can remain with their parents.

Furthermore, the participants requested permanent workers. However, we know this is impossible; we must note that many participants mentioned that they went through multiple social workers and commented about the impact of social worker burnout and turnover. This impacts the ability to build relationships and often shuts children in care as they do not want to keep repeating their stories. Children internalize others' actions, leaving children to blame themselves and not feel worthy of

the worker staying around. It is another individual in their life that has disappeared. Perhaps if caseloads and case demands were lower, this would help workers stay around longer.

This issue is not new and infuriating because there have been many Calls to Action to rectify it, yet it continues to be an issue we hear about. For example, the comprehensive document "The Legacy of Phoenix Sinclair: Striving for the Well-being of All Our Children" presented 62 suggestions for safeguarding children in Manitoba. Upon its publication, 31 recommendations were fulfilled or underway, leaving the remaining 31 in the hands of an implementation planning team for further action (AMR et al., 2015). The facts remain the same: Social workers need lower caseloads to have the time to listen and educate each child on the process they are involved in and let the children have a voice in their care.

Let us recognize and acknowledge the issue of how children from care often end up homeless, in poverty, in addiction, and with mental health issues. This is the beginning of change. Numerous Indigenous people, especially those residing in northern and remote areas, encounter significant challenges in accessing fundamental healthcare, including resources for family planning. In instances where families confront poverty and unsafe living conditions, compounded by caregivers grappling with addiction, neglect often ensues. A notable challenge lies in the absence of addiction treatment that aligns with cultural norms and is readily accessible. Child protection agencies predominantly concentrate on individual and family concerns, providing limited assistance in addressing broader issues such as poverty, insufficient housing, and caregiver substance abuse (Bennett, 2016; Shangreux, 2004). Indigenous communities need to receive funding for culturally appropriate and adequate treatment centers with little to no wait times. My firsthand experience working on reserves for four years demonstrates that parents do not want to leave their children, especially to come to a large city they are unfamiliar with; creating healing centers on reserve would be a massive asset to the overall well-being of families and communities.

Secondly, to combat homelessness for Indigenous emerging adults, I would strongly support and recommend continuing with raising the age at which children “age out,” as studies have shown that many of these emerging adults are not ready and do not have the skills needed to live on their own successfully. Additionally, increase services to help youth transition, such as independent living, Manitoba youth in care, Manitoba advocate and other community services that could be expanded to help children emerging from care. Often, services are cut as the child turns 18, and they are transferred from children’s services to adult services, and they lose the help they currently must become a number on the list as wait times for assistance are long and not necessarily as helpful. Perhaps having services expanded to fill this gap, such as action therapy services for the children and foster families, would assist with ensuring they have adequate care and resources before the children age out. This service can help the children stay connected with their families, ensure they have positive role models in their lives, and equip them to continue care beyond the age of majority.

Child Welfare and the foster care system need to improve its approach to addressing the overall needs of children and youth in our care. Specifically, ensure they maintain ties with their extended families and communities. Provide opportunities for them to understand and embrace their languages, spiritual teachings, and cultural customs from Elders, families, and communities. Directing resources toward fair, culturally rooted child welfare initiatives that address systemic risks alongside sustainable socio-economic progress led by First Nations communities appears to offer the most potential in tackling neglect issues within these communities (Bennett, 2016; Bennett & Auger, 2013; Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005a).

**Recommendation for belonging and security:**

The claim supporting adoption for children in the custody of the child welfare system is grounded in pragmatic reasoning supported by well-documented scientific evidence available in the literature and at the time of the Supreme Court's case review found in Skivnes (2010). Furthermore, a

comprehensive meta-study conducted in 2007, which examined 3,300 empirical studies, unequivocally affirmed that adopted children exhibit better outcomes across all domains, specifically concerning achieving stability (Christoffersen et al., 2007). Additionally, in contrast to Carriers' position, Swidrowich (2004) argues that Indigenous people who had positive experiences may also be less visible in the statistics. Furthermore, they may not have the same reasons to speak out as those with negative experiences; the subversive effects of the polemic discourse may also inhibit such perspectives. The politicization of this narrative, in my experience, has convincingly silenced successful and satisfied Indigenous individuals with adoption experiences from coming forward to share their stories in fear of the political repercussions to their livelihood (Swidrowich, 2004). Therefore, as a result of those mentioned above, I strongly encourage permanency planning options such as guardianship and open- or customary adoption, not to be discounted immediately but to be open for conversation.

Alexy (1989) and Habermas (1996) believe that there is potential for a legitimate resolution by all parties surrounding the discussion of whether adoption is in the child's best interest. A theory raised by Alexy (1989) and Habermas (1996) to achieve satisfaction in this area is to engage all parties in a normative discussion. This process involves the active participation of all involved parties, allowing for the presentation of all pertinent arguments in an open and unrestricted discussion. This would also include the child's wishes and desires. As the right of children to be heard (CRC, art. 12) is manifested in the *Child Welfare Act*, their opinions should carry weight (Archard & Skivenes, 2009).

One way to address concerns Indigenous communities raise is to have an open agreement for family contact and a cultural plan on every file. Indigenous children and youth experience belonging and connectivity that surpass traditional familial structures like maternal bonds and nuclear families. They are intricately linked to an expansive extended family, with specific affiliations to clans and households. As service providers, we can facilitate connections with culture and community using diverse approaches. Children and youth in care must have well-documented cultural plans that address their

distinct requirements for connectivity, identity, and belonging. These plans should outline activities, programs, and services that cater to their well-being and aim to restore harmony to their complex lives. Ultimately, we aspire to empower Indigenous children and youth, nurturing a sense of cultural pride and fostering positive self-esteem, allowing them to thrive (Bennett, 2015).

Indigenous children need to feel secure, safe and wanted in their homes, be that a foster placement, kinship placement or adoptive home. Failing to provide this necessary nurturing results in adults lacking skills, self-esteem, and the ability to function at high levels. It has been documented that Indigenous children in care have higher suicide rates, addiction issues and criminal justice system involvement. Changing the way child welfare provides care and control over these young children and provides permanency planning or 'forever homes' could alleviate the adverse outcomes for children in care. Providing opportunities for children to experience culture, ceremonies, and traditions will maintain the connection to ancestors and create balance in Indigenous children's lives. Continuing to allow and provide opportunities for children in care to rebuild and grow relationships with biological families is vital to emotional well-being.

The change of attitudes, policies and laws will only occur when workers and politicians step up and begin by putting the children first and listening to what they have to say and to the adults who have emerged from care. If the system changed and children were the focus, these issues would be better addressed, and the adults would be less likely to experience such hardship. The complexity of this subject extends beyond the scope of this research, but the participants and I have initiated a dialogue. I aspire that our discussions have offered valuable insights for Indigenous governments, policy lawmakers, support workers, and social workers, enabling them to assist Indigenous children and their families better.

## 5.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of my study is the ability to replicate or generalize the study to other groups, as the selection criteria for this study was a specific group of Indigenous people. Another concern that arose was documenting the participants' oral stories accurately so readers could comprehend the entire message the participants were portraying. "The written word objectifies understandings and can be manipulated outside of the relationship in which the understanding was shared" (Voss, Douville; Soldier; & Twiss, 2002). While this study aimed to establish if permanency was better for children in care, it was difficult for the participants to stay on topic. As they were telling their story, they spoke from the heart, reliving the abuse and feelings of abandonment and pain. It can be understood why they veered from the topic of permanency when they were finally being listened to and validated. This limited the objective but also divulged more issues surrounding Indigenous children in care in Manitoba. All participants agree they would have done better in a loving home where they were accepted for themselves. While it is always optimum for a child to remain in their home where possible, permanency or permanent placement options should be considered. A permanent option that would provide more consistency and emotional stability.

Similar to fellow social workers who genuinely care and serve Indigenous children and families, I aim to foster well-being, connection, a sense of belonging, and enduring cultural roots for the Indigenous children and youth under our care. However, hurdles often stem from the lack of well-defined policies, guidelines, common misconceptions, comprehensive training to support and include cultural plans of care, insufficient government funding to support cultural connections and a decrease in caseloads. Moreover, fear and time constraints on workers are also barriers to comprehensive planning (Bennett, 2015). Time constraints were a limitation for this study, as quality relationship building takes time, and resources may be limited.

In the spirit of transparency, my primary ethical concern for this study was and continues to be the possible outcome and what the results show. Indigenous communities have made it known that the common belief is that children should be returned to their parents, sometimes at any cost and sometimes multiple times as a collective. Agencies do this despite the trauma it causes the children and their families. Permanent placement options such as guardianship and adoptions for Indigenous children in care are highly contested and unsupported in some Manitoba Indigenous communities. The historical genocidal events and the fears stemming from those events justify why some Indigenous communities do not support these options. I am not trying to ignore or disregard the pain and devastation created by the Sixties Scoop; however, I believe there are ways to safeguard against history repeating itself.

As outlined above, this researcher remained unbiased, ethical, and sensitive toward the participants throughout the research process and allowed their voices to be heard. My research team was held accountable by the principles of OCAP and my research panel.

## **5.5 FINAL THOUGHTS AND CALL TO ACTION**

The feedback provided suggests that Talking Circles and storytelling, as a methodology, is a transformative and healing approach to conducting research with Indigenous emerging adults who have had previous child welfare histories. This project was an empowering experience for the participants involved. Honouring young people's perspectives and acknowledging the comprehension of their connections and identities as a foundation for fostering collaborative discussions regarding permanency is essential. Canada is losing an irreplaceable piece of its social fabric—its young people, who cannot help shaping their communities' presents and futures when raised in a climate of disconnection and shame. However, being left in care without permanency planning adds to this because you tack on the stigma and label of being a child in care. Fanshel and Shinn (1978) cautioned that foster children experienced harm in aspects that are challenging to quantify, such as experiencing feelings of stigma or inferiority (Whiting, 2020). Thus, remaining in care cannot be the solution. From the story of participant

Travis: ‘the need for continued efforts to improve the child welfare system and ensure that children in care have access to consistent support and resources and can maintain connections with their family members when appropriate. Travis’s experiences remind him of the importance of prioritizing the child’s well-being and relationships and addressing the challenges children like him face in the system’.

Rightfully so, Indigenous families and communities have a pressing and justifiable desire to reestablish connections with their young members and preserve their cultural heritage. Stemming from deep dedication, love, and pride, these aspirations can sometimes lead to challenges; however, as the participants suggested, an overly rigid or one-dimensional cultural approach, whether Indigenous or Western, falls short of meeting their needs. The conversations with the child welfare survivors revealed that endeavours to pursue these admirable objectives could inadvertently disempower or isolate them if their perspectives and voices are not prioritized in the decision-making process.

Tragically, permanency planning often unfolds within the intricate landscape of political circumstances. Indigenous nations are asserting their self-determination in the context of a heavily regulated settler-state colonial system, and this overarching system tends to overlook the multifaceted issues we have highlighted here. The fact that even foster homes on the reserve, which should ideally provide culturally appropriate care, were also abusive further highlights the systemic issues and challenges within the foster care system. Davies (1992) posits that although the shift towards independence has positive implications, the Band or First Nation’s focus on safeguarding its culture and autonomy might inadvertently put children in a challenging position. She argues explicitly that granting discretionary authority to Bands could lead to arbitrary decisions, especially if political priorities and band funding overshadow the child’s immediate needs (Davies, 1992).

These children’s experiences call for a thorough examination of how children in the foster care system are placed, monitored, and supported, focusing on their well-being and safety. Their stories are a poignant reminder of the need for reform and support for vulnerable children in similar situations. This

study was unique because it focused on the perspective and experiences of former Indigenous children in care, not the workers, the parents, political ideals, or the body in power. Many studies have been done on the professionals and adults who govern the system but never on the children themselves (Bennett, 2016; Gosek, 2017). It is time to give emerging adults a seat at the table to share what aspects are important to them since it is their lives that we are determining. These adult children have survived a large and robust system, and their voices must be heard. Thus, the research findings presented in this thesis serve as a compelling call to action, compelling us to prioritize children's well-being and development and create a system that consistently nurtures growth and potential. By doing this, we are working towards a more equitable and just child welfare system. A system where every child, regardless of their background, can reclaim their childhood and experience the love, care, and support they so rightfully deserve.

Our responsibility as helpers, caregivers, mothers, and as a society is to improve the system these participants grew up in, as we owe it to them and future generations. This improvement will, in turn, improve their lives and outcomes. "We must be constantly vigilant and ensure our decisions are truly in the families' best interests" (Gosek, 2017). This study discussed achieving better permanency planning outcomes for the Indigenous children exiting care. The ideal system would include all the support a child needs to thrive in family, culture, love, and a forever home.

My entire perspective has been to consider each person unique, with many strengths. My purpose has been and will continue to be to strive to do what is in the best interest of each child on a case-by-case basis from a holistic approach. I seek to avoid getting sidetracked about what is best for the agency or the collective, and at times, this is very challenging, but this is the gift I was given. The Creator made us all different; therefore, a plan that works for one may not work for all. It is time for the voices of Indigenous emerging adults to be heard (Wilson, 2008). This thesis explored ways to honour and share their stories around permanency planning within the child welfare system.

## 5.6 PERSONAL REFLECTION

Throughout this journey, I have been challenged and pushed to reflect on my ideology, teachings, and upbringing. I was raised with a critical and analytical lens to see the world as personally motivated and dangerous. In addition, in my journey, I took many critical theory courses; thus, critically analyzing literature was always my first instinct. It has not helped during my time in this robust system. There have been many times that support the former theory. However, I aim to be the best, most open-minded and inclusive version of myself. I had to challenge myself not to do this and to sit with the literature for what it was and call upon teaching I received from a Knowledge Keeper that everyone's perspective was true to them based on where they are sitting. I believe this to be true unequivocally. However, I worry that there could be dire implications when motivation is not pure or well-intended.

Moreover, I questioned the teachings I was given as a child, where these may have come from and whether they served a motive or were based on a Eurocentric lens. Such as phrases like "we are only as strong as our weakest link" and the importance of individualism and independence. I tried my best to challenge this belief and to understand and apply it to the Indigenous model of collectivism. However, I continued to get stuck; I could not help but wonder if there are many individuals in a group who are not doing well and will not be the beneficiary of decisions to better their future because we are looking at the whole (community) instead of the sum of its parts (the child), does this that not then affect the whole group and culture because it would be like a virus that would eventually spread throughout the community? While I fully understood the teaching and its importance, I could not be satisfied with this explanation when applying it to children in care.

Ideally, children belong with their parents or biological family when possible; however, given that this is not always possible or the safest option, when do we, as social service agencies, start to look at what the child wants and what would produce better long-term outcomes and stability? Just as much as anyone else, I wholeheartedly want our Indigenous population and communities to be thriving,

healthy and well. To be happy and have success in life and relationships. However, at some points, how do we “break the cycle” that so many emerging adults talk about? What is the best way to do this? I do not know. However, I wonder why one innocent child should suffer for a parent or community that did not prioritize them initially, such as stepping in or making necessary changes. Does this teach our young indigenous children that they do not matter and give them a low self-worth?

I feel that the current practices that are in place lead to poorer outcomes for children and youth coming out of care, such as a lack of cultural identity, feelings of loneliness, rejection, and lack of belonging. The structure of the system leaves children susceptible in society, making them easy targets for addictions, gang membership and criminal activity. Based on the research I reviewed and the statements of participants, I feel that adoption may be, in some cases, the best form of placement, providing that it is permanent and stable. However, limitations exist (Skivenes, 2010).

On a more personal note, I could not believe some of the stories and deep emotional wounds that were created by those who were trusted to care for our vulnerable children. I reflected on my time as a child and family services worker and hoped that the children I served felt heard and validated by me. My heart broke at hearing the impact that rushed service had on these children and the lifelong effects that it created. As a worker, I was aware of how the overburdened system and swamped workers were affected mentally and emotionally, as I, too, experienced these struggles. However, hearing and realizing the effects of the lack of services, shortage of workers and heavy caseloads on the children was devastating.

Personally, as a foster parent, I can fully appreciate and understand the boundaries and walls one must put up to protect one's heart. Foster parents know that the child you love and become attached to can also be ripped from you at any moment. Foster parents are often terrified and reminded of the potential for removal. Becoming a foster parent is very conflicting, especially if you are in it for the right reasons; speaking from experience, it will test everything you have. You are consistently given

mixed messages with no support. For example, you are told to love and treat them like your children, BUT they are NOT YOURS! Attach but not too much because there is a possibility they can be moved. Thus, when you emotionally invest in the children you care for as a foster parent, you risk having your heart broken.

This is an unfortunate message that is sent because, ultimately, it is the vulnerable children who pay the prices, which is unacceptable. Therefore, compromises and better strategies need to be created.

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## 7.0 APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A



University  
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Research Ethics and Compliance

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**PROTOCOL APPROVAL**

Effective: July 12, 2023

Expiry: July 11, 2024

Principal Investigator: Nicole Duhamel  
 Advisor(s): Marlyn Bennett  
 Protocol Number: HE2022-0368  
 Protocol Title: *The importance of permanency from the Indigenous Child Welfare Survivors' perspective*

Hai Luo, Chair, REB1

**Research Ethics Board 1** has reviewed and approved the above research. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2 (2022)*.

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

- i. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the protocol only.
- ii. Any changes to the protocol or research materials must be approved by the HEO before implementation.
- iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.
- iv. This approval is valid for one year only. A Renewal Request must be submitted and approved prior to the above expiry date.
- v. A Protocol Closure must be submitted to the HEO when the research is complete or if the research is terminated.
- vi. The University of Manitoba may request to audit your research documentation to confirm compliance with this approved protocol, and with the UM *Ethics of Research Involving Humans* [Ethics of Research Involving Humans](#) policies and procedures.

## APPENDIX B



## APPENDIX C



## Research Study on the Importance of Permanency from the Indigenous Child Welfare Survivors' Perspective

Research Title:

### **The Importance of Permanency from the Indigenous Child Welfare Survivors' perspective**

I am looking for Indigenous adults ages 19 to 40 who were in the care of Child and Family Services for a minimum of two years and have since transitioned out of the care of the child welfare system. The participants must no longer receive any financial support from Child and Family Services and have been out of care for at least one year at participation.

**Please join us for a feast and “Talking circle,” where we will discuss your experiences.** This research aims to contribute a deeper understanding of your experience and perspective of the child welfare system since leaving care. This research study will look specifically at your thoughts and feelings about the importance of permanency and the role that permanency (or a lack of it) played in your life. The research focuses on whether permanency or permanent placement options, such as having a forever family, being claimed, or being adopted, would have improved your sense of stability and overall well-being.

Your participation is voluntary, and the identity of all participants can be excluded from the final report\*. If you choose to participate in this research, you will receive a \$50.00 honorarium for your participation. There is also an optional opportunity to participate in a short reflection paper following the “Talking Circles” for an additional \$30 honorarium.

If you are interested in participating or want more information about this research study, don't hesitate to contact the researcher, Nicole Duhamel, directly by September 20, 2023, at [REDACTED] or [umduham1@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umduham1@myumanitoba.ca) or my supervisor Dr. Marlyn Bennett at [marlyn.bennett@umanitoba.ca](mailto:marlyn.bennett@umanitoba.ca)

## APPENDIX D



**University  
of Manitoba**

**Faculty of Social Work**

521 Tier Building  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Telephone (204) 474-7050  
Fax (204) 474-7594

### **Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Script**

**Research Title:** The importance of permanency from the Indigenous Child Welfare Survivors' perspective

#### **First contact Script for Interview**

##### **Researcher:**

Hi, my name is Nicole Duhamel. I'm a student in the Master of Social Work based in Indigenous Knowledge program at the University of Manitoba. I'm Metis, with ancestors from Ontario and the Winnipeg Red River area. I'm working on my thesis project, which aims to contribute a deeper understanding of your experience and perspective of the child welfare system since exiting from care. This research will look specifically at your thoughts and feelings about the importance of permanency and the role that permanency (or a lack of it) played in your life outcomes. The research focuses on whether permanency or permanent placement options, such as having a forever family, being claimed, or being adopted, would have improved your sense of stability and overall well-being from your perspective.

I would love the opportunity to discuss this research with you and the possibility of your participation in the study. I can provide detailed information on the research, answer any questions you might have, share the questions with you, and review the consent form.

**(A) Would you be interested in learning more?** I can share more details now, or we can meet to discuss further.

**(A) If No:** Thank you for your time. If you know anyone you believe would be a good fit for this study, please give them my phone number or email address.

**(A) If Yes:** Participating in the study includes a Feast and a Talking Circle, which would be recorded with your consent, and later transcribed for analysis. Afterward, the interview transcripts and the results will be shared with you. Also, you will be invited to participate in a final reflection paper, which is optional.

During the research study, you can decline to answer any question if you are uncomfortable. You can also withdraw from the study at any time. You can also participate anonymously or include your name in the research story and findings.

**(B)** If this is still something you'd be interested in, would you like to meet to review the forms? Alternatively, I can email them to you for review.

**(B)** *If Yes, meet in person:* When is a good time to meet? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**(B)** *If Yes, email:* What is your email address? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**(B)** *If No:* Thank you for your time.

Researcher Supervisor:  
Marlyn Bennett  
Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba  
marlyn.bennett@umanitoba.ca

## APPENDIX E



Faculty of Social Work  
 521 Tier Building  
 Winnipeg, Manitoba  
 Canada R3T 2N2

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANT'S ENGAGEMENT

Research Project Title:

**The Importance of Permanency from the Indigenous Child Welfare Survivors' Perspective**

**Principal Investigator and contact information:**

Nicole Duhamel, BSW

MSW Candidate, Faculty of Social Work/Graduate Studies

University of Manitoba Phone: [REDACTED]

Umduham1@myumanitoba.ca

**Research Supervisor (if applicable) and contact information:**

Dr. Marlyn Bennett

Faculty of Social Work

University of Manitoba

Phone: [REDACTED]

Marlyn.Bennett@umanitoba.ca

**Research Summary:**

**1. Purpose of the research.**

This research aims to contribute a deeper understanding of the Indigenous child's experience and perspective of the child welfare system since emancipation from care. This research will look specifically at your thoughts and feelings about the importance of permanency and the role that permanency (or a lack of it) played in your life outcomes. The research focuses on whether permanency or permanent placement options, such as having a forever family, being claimed, or being adopted, would have improved your sense of stability and overall well-being from your perspective.

**2. Description of the procedures involving the participant**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw at any time without adverse consequences. Participating in this research will require approximately 4-5 hours in total. You will be asked to discuss your experience in the Child Welfare system, which will be recorded with an audio recording device for accuracy.

The research will start with a feast to build relationships and establish trust and comfort; during this time, we will review the Oaths of confidentiality and consent forms (which will take approximately an hour and a half). After informing everyone, I will conduct a Talking Circle to hear the participants' personal experiences; this will take about 2 hours.

The researcher will ask a series of guiding questions at the beginning of the circle regarding your experiences surrounding permanency while in the Child Welfare system, and you will be asked to share your personal experiences. After the session, the researcher will provide a debriefing, and each participant will be given/reminded of the phone numbers for crisis hotlines and mental health support. An Elder or knowledge keeper will also be on-site to provide guidance and wisdom to mitigate participants' concerns.

### **3. Confidentiality**

This researcher will keep everything that is shared during the Talking Circle confidential and will not be shared with anyone. All participants and staff involved in the study will be asked to sign an oath of confidentiality and keep all information confidential. However, this researcher cannot guarantee the actions of other participants. Therefore, participants should only share what they are comfortable sharing.

### **4. Risks and Benefits**

You will have the opportunity to have your voice heard and assist in identifying improved ways to transition emerging adults out of care feeling loved and supported. Through this process, you will have the opportunity to promote better outcomes and healing for Indigenous emerging adult survivors of child welfare and encourage decision-makers to put the child first on a case-by-case basis rather than meeting others' political agendas.

The primary benefit to the participant will be the healing that comes through sharing their stories.

Due to the sensitive topic being discussed, there is the possibility of emotional stress for the participants. Thus, a variety of measures to support the participants will be provided to each participant, the first of which is a list of counseling resources. This researcher and a knowledge Keeper or Elder will also be available to debrief after each session. Before the study, an emergency contact support person will be gathered from each participant, with the purpose being that in the event of any distress, the participant's support person could be contacted. This data will be destroyed on December 1, 2023.

There is a risk that those who know you may be able to identify you based on what you share.

### **5. Anonymity**

In situations where the risk to participants is minimal, anonymity will be at the discretion of the participants. You may choose whether to be identified. For participants that wish to remain anonymous, we will create an alias of the participants choosing that only the researcher will be aware of for contact

purposes. Their real names will not be recorded in any documentation completed for the final thesis. However, it is essential to be aware that there is a risk that those who know you personally, such as family or friends, may be able to identify you based on your story.

Duty to report -The researcher is obligated to report incidents of child abuse that may be disclosed during the interview. In addition, any threats to harm yourself or others will be reported to the Winnipeg Police Service. This applies even if you decide to withdraw your consent to participate.

## **6. Compensation**

Honorariums for participating in the Talking Circle will be \$50 per participant. The honorariums will be given at the beginning of the meeting. Participants will also be invited to participate in an optional one-page reflection paper on their experience with the study for an additional \$30 Honorarium, which will be given as soon as they agree to participate in the reflection paper. Food and refreshments will be provided throughout our encounters.

## **7. Dissemination of results**

Once the talking circle is complete, this researcher will manually transcribe the audio recordings. Each participant will be allowed to check the accuracy of the data collected and give feedback and suggestions, which is optional. I will contact each participant by phone or email to review the transcripts immediately after transcribing is completed, which is hoped to be October 23, 2023. Participants will have two weeks to respond with any edits. Once the report has been finalized, each participant will be given a copy, if they choose, and it will be reviewed by phone. All data will be destroyed after one year.

## **8. Withdrawal**

If you need to withdraw from the study, you can contact Nicole at [REDACTED] or Dr. Marlyn Bennett at [REDACTED]. The final deadline to withdraw would be November 14, 2023.

## **9. Data storage**

The data will be compiled on a newly purchased audio recorder, then stored in a lock box. This researcher and my advisor will only access the recorder until the information is transcribed.

Once the data has been transcribed, the information and identifiers will be removed and replaced with an alias if they wish to remain anonymous. The recording and any other data will be destroyed after one year of the study by December 1, 2024.

## **10. Final Draft**

Before any publications or finalizing this research, participants will be invited to provide feedback should they wish to do so. I will give a 1-3 page summary will also be provided to each participant for feedback through email, mail, or in person. This will be done by the end of November 14, 2023.

**This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the informed consent process. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. Please take the time to read this carefully and understand any accompanying information.**

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study? Yes No

Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes No

Do you understand that you can refuse to participate or withdraw Yes No

from the focus group at any time? You do not have to give a reason, which will not affect you. There is no penalty for withdrawing from the focus group at any time.

Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Yes No

Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide? Yes No

Please indicate if you would like to receive a copy of the final research report Yes No

The Research Ethics Board has approved this research at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus.

**For this study, I want to be identified by the following name/alias:**

-----

**This study was explained to me by:** \_\_\_\_\_

Name

**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 and refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent.**

I agree to take part in this study.

---

**Participant's Signature**

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**Date**

---

**Participant Printed Name**

The person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

---

**Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature**

**Printed Name**

**Date**

**Do you have Questions?**

If you have more questions, please get in touch with Nicole Duhamel at [REDACTED] or email her at [REDACTED] or Dr. Marlyn Bennett, who can be reached by Phone: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. Thank you for your interest and participation in this project. The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done safely and correctly. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, contact the persons mentioned earlier or the Human Ethics Secretariat at [REDACTED] or [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). This person is not linked to the project.