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Struggling toward Indigenous representation and service improvement within the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development

Abstract: This article explores organizational conditions for change to promote active Indigenous representation and service outcome improvements in a provincial child welfare program responsible for the ongoing oppression of Indigenous Peoples. Specific structural and environmental variables that support or impede Indigenous professionals' efforts toward critically needed improvements to Indigenous child welfare services are explored. Amidst the ongoing humanitarian crisis level of Indigenous children in care, the results indicate that developing highly specialized and equitably resourced Indigenous services, rather than ongoing ineffective and vague organizational approaches toward "indigenizing" provincial child welfare programs, are strongly indicated.

Sommaire : Cet article se penche sur les conditions organisationnelles favorables au changement, afin de promouvoir une représentation active des Autochtones et d'améliorer les résultats de service au sein d'un programme d'aide à l'enfance provincial qui continue d'oppresser les peuples autochtones. Nous étudions les variables structurelles et environnementales particulières qui soutiennent ou entravent les efforts des professionnels autochtones pour améliorer les services d'aide à l'enfance autochtones qui sont d'une nécessité cruciale. Alors que la crise humanitaire touchant les enfants autochtones pris en charge persiste, nos résultats préconisent fortement le développement de services autochtones hautement spécialisés et dotés de ressources équitables, plutôt que de poursuivre des approches organisationnelles vagues et inefficaces visant à « autochtoniser » les programmes d'aide à l'enfance provinciaux.

The Elders took me out and taught me how to crawl around underneath the trees so I could see the tea. I couldn't see it. "Where is it?" You know what? Unless you are lying on the ground looking, you can't see the tea. The Elder introduced me to the tea and then I could see it and it was everywhere. It's the same with the Ministry – unless you get down on your knees, and you're down here [in the communities] working and experiencing, how do you know what it is? You can't see it. (MCFD Indigenous Professional)

Introduction

Government child welfare involvement with Indigenous Peoples in Canada has had significant and tragic consequences. The result is ongoing intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities, the over-representation

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of Indigenous children within Canadian child welfare systems, alongside underfunding and a critical lack of prevention and support services required to address and ameliorate ongoing impacts (Turpel-Lafond 2015; BC Representative for Children and Youth 2013; Hughes 2006; Walmsley 2005; Hudson 1997; Armitage 1993; Johnston 1983). Provincial child welfare agencies struggle to find adequate policy, practice, and resources to effectively serve Indigenous people. The 2016 finding of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, that the current federal child welfare program (which underfunds Indigenous children in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts) is discriminatory, has been met by ongoing federal government court opposition (Blackstock and Grammond 2017). To say there is resistance by mainstream Canadian systems to address the need for systemic change would be a clear understatement.

The British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provides child protection, foster care, adoption, mental health, youth justice, and disability services to children and their families. In 2010, when the research this article focuses on was conducted, 56% of children in the care of MCFD were Indigenous (Government of British Columbia 2010). Due to the ongoing nature of oppressive and inappropriate system interventions, Indigenous children now represent over 62% of children in the care of MCFD while Indigenous Peoples represent only 9% of the overall population in the province (Sherlock 2017b). This ongoing dramatic upward trend for Indigenous children in care is alarming and reflects what Canadian Indigenous Services Minister Jane Philpott recently referred to as a "humanitarian crisis." Katherine Conroy, the British Columbia minister responsible for MCFD, says the ministry is addressing the situation by transferring services to BC First Nations (Sherlock 2018). Conroy also refers to the need to hire more Indigenous employees and to increase cultural competence/safety training for all ministry employees so they may work more effectively with Indigenous children, families and communities. None of these are new strategies for MCFD; all three have been priorities at one point or another, often simultaneously, for the past thirty years (Rousseau 2014; BC Representative for Children and Youth 2013). The transfer of services has notoriously occurred at a slow and problematic pace – often due to inadequate resources. The result being many Indigenous children and families continue to be served within the provincial child welfare system.

This article focuses on knowledge gained through a combined Indigenous and ethnographic research study undertaken in 2010 that examined the unique perspectives and experiences of MCFD Indigenous human services professionals (Rousseau 2014). The research explored the relationship between Indigenous MCFD professionals' identity, values, beliefs, motivations, practices, and experiences and the organizational variables and approaches

that either increased and sustained, or detracted from, effective Indigenous approaches — potentially leading to improved outcomes for Indigenous children, families, and communities. Findings indicated that due to a number of barriers MCFD Indigenous professionals struggled to implement program, policy and practice approaches to strengthen Indigenous service outcomes. These findings, though dated, provide insight and a benchmark against which to evaluate ongoing attempts by the BC MCFD, and other Canadian provincial child welfare systems, to embrace and promote necessary Indigenous approaches and initiatives. This is salient today because, even as a ministry such as MCFD employs these Indigenous approaches and strategies, outcomes indicate MCFD is failing at crisis levels comparable to the residential school era (Sherlock 2018; Sherlock 2017a; Sherlock 2017b; Turpel-Lafond 2015). It appears that ongoing status quo based organizational strategies, characterized by recruitment of Indigenous professionals, and promoting a generalized approach to Indigenous competency across the organization are failing.

Research results provide critical insight into organizational conditions that impede or promote active and meaningful representation of Indigenous professionals and point to structural, administrative, policy and practice changes necessary to transform conditions for Indigenous children, families and communities within MCFD. They further indicate that a targeted and specialized approach, not ongoing erroneous attempts to "indigenize" the organization, but a dramatic shift in resources toward the creation of specialized Indigenous teams of professionals with demonstrated skills and knowledge is necessary to more immediately improve outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities. While necessary efforts to transfer services to Indigenous communities occur, MCFD needs to simultaneously look at strategies to improve outcomes for Indigenous Peoples it continues to serve in the interim.

Relevant literature provides a background to help illuminate the findings of the study within the current political and organizational context of Indigenous child welfare in Canada. A brief description of the methodology is followed by discussion of the study findings that lend support to the need for provincial child welfare systems, like MCFD, to make radical organizational shifts toward the provision of specialized, dedicated, and equitably funded services for Indigenous children, families and communities in the child welfare context.

Professional tension and the challenge of active representation

This section reviews two streams of literature. The first stream examines role conflict and tension between the competing demands Indigenous

professionals face between their commitment to their Indigenous community values and obligations and experience working within a mainstream child welfare system like MCFD. The second stream of literature suggests that improved outcomes for Indigenous Peoples, so poorly served within current provincial child welfare services, will be best informed by the active representation of Indigenous Peoples who know how best to care for Indigenous children.

Motivation, practice and tensions of Indigenous professionals

Consideration of the unique motivation, practice and experiences of Indigenous professionals is a growing area of research and literature. The movement toward Indigenous Peoples delivering services through child and family programs has resulted in descriptions of practice approaches specifically developed in response to the experiences and needs of Indigenous individuals and communities. Focus on the systemic impacts of colonization, incorporation of Indigenous worldviews and cultural knowledge to foster identity and collective consciousness and empowerment characterize these approaches (Morrissette et al. 1993; Red Horse et al. 1978; Walmsley 2005; Weaver and White 1997). For Indigenous Peoples the deep impacts of colonization require holistic practice approaches based on concepts of healing and wellness of the individual within their collective community moving beyond mainstream approaches that too often situate problems within the individual without considering the barriers they face in a wider context.

Several studies examine the strong values-based motivations, attempts to reconcile cultural knowledge and practice within mainstream organizations, and resulting dual accountabilities of Indigenous professionals within government children service organizations (Reid 2005; Walmsley 2005; Bennett and Zubrzycki 2003). All used qualitative approaches to hear the voices of Indigenous professionals; and all shared key findings that participants pursued their positions in an attempt to change what they perceived as the inability of the system to effectively serve their communities. All three studies found that participants felt mainstream child welfare settings, and their pursuant mandates and policies, constrained them from responding to community needs in culturally consistent ways. Participants in these studies believed their communities were suspicious of them because of the social work profession's complicity in historic and ongoing oppressive practices toward Indigenous Peoples.

These studies all support the concept and premise that Indigenous professionals have a unique values-based commitment for improving the way in which BC MCFD provides services for Indigenous children and families

that are consistent with community values and approaches. They also point to the inherent difficulty of competing accountability between the Indigenous community and children service organizations and resulting tensions when the two cannot be reconciled.

In a recent study, Wylie and McConkey (2018) found significant issues of racial discrimination in mainstream health care system practice with Indigenous Peoples in Ontario. The resulting themes in their research, which examined the perspectives of health care providers and decision makers, were that practice across these systems are widely informed by racism, stereotyping and stigma, in addition to unwelcoming physical environments. The issues were found to significantly compromise standards of care for Indigenous Peoples. The authors recommend a shift in knowledge, skills and attitudes and the development of specific accountabilities for health care systems to provide equitable services.

Also more recently, Levasseur (2018) and MacDonald and Levasseur (2014) examine issues arising from the devolution process in some provinces where Indigenous community agencies have been delegated to provide government services and experience competing accountabilities between the community and government oversight and expectations. Constraints on funding and the insufficiency of existing government policies create an environment for Indigenous agencies whereby they take on an increased share of the risk and responsibility for services and subsequently find themselves unable to transform practice, services or outcomes. Again, an inherent conflict emerges between the policy and organizational environment and the need and desire to transform services for Indigenous Peoples.

Active representation and reflection of Indigenous values

Theories of "representative bureaucracy" stand behind ongoing attempts by government to serve diverse service recipient group interests (Bailey 2004; Mosher 1968; Kingsley 1944). Efforts have largely involved "employment equity" approaches that involve recruiting staff from diverse groups to presumably represent diverse group interests. Kingsley (1944) introduced the idea of a "representative bureaucracy" within Western democratic governments evolving the notion that a bureaucracy can only be responsible and accountable to those it serves to the extent that elected and appointed government representatives reflect similar diverse (ethnic, gender, economic status, ability, sexual orientation/identity, age) backgrounds and views to those of the people they represent.

Mosher (1968) was the first to distinguish between concepts of passive and active forms of diverse group representation. Passive representation is simply the degree to which a public servant shares the same social group distinction as those they represent. Active representation refers to the degree to which the same public servant is expected and able to reflect group values and advocate for diverse group interests. This important distinction points to the difference between a token representative or one in a position to effect change in organizations. Focus on passive representation (which often results in mere tokenism), where hiring practices involve attempts to meet quotas around diversity (hiring more people of colour, women, disabled individuals, etc.), needs to shift toward the active representation of diverse interests by public servants in government organizations (Thompson 1976). Active representation requires concrete opportunities to effect change with respect to diverse group interests.

Several studies have identified variables that affect the ability of diverse professionals to actively represent diverse group interests (Sowa and Selden 2003; Dolan 2000; Selden 1997). Arguably, the most critical variable involves the degree to which diverse professionals are given administrative discretion (essentially the power) to effect change within the organization. Other important variables include cultural climate and attitudes in organizations toward the specific diverse group, the degree of support (throughout the various layers of the hierarchy) for change, and sustained motivation and support from leadership to effect transformational change. Recent literature indicates that variables such as organization size, division of labour and job differentiation, which contribute to poor communication and block access to information for decision making, are important (Gibran 2013).

Also important are the particular characteristics of diverse professionals representing diverse group interests. Findings indicate that diverse bureaucrats with progressive political orientations, and fewer years of conditioning in bureaucratic environments, are more likely to adopt an active orientation to representing diverse group interests (Selden 1997; Selden, Brudney and Kellough 1998, as cited in Sowa and Selden 2003). Professionals may also have a higher likelihood of active representation where issues are highly significant for their demographic group (Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty 2009) and receive messages within the organization that they are expected to use their professional judgment to actively represent group interests (Gibran 2013).

Other studies link diverse worker active representation to social inclusion in organizations as key to connecting to necessary networks of information and opportunity (Chrobot-Mason 2004; Ibarra 1995; Jones and Schaubroeck 2004; Mor Barak and Levin 2002). Findler, Wind and Mor Barak (2007) link diverse employee performance to how well the organizational structure and culture contributes to their perceptions of fairness, inclusion and degree of

social support which ultimately corresponds to stress, well-being, and commitment in organizations.

The literature suggests that for Indigenous professionals to be effective and actively represent the interests of Indigenous children, families and communities, they need to have administrative discretion (power) in their positions, inclusion and access to networks of information, and formal and informal support of individuals at all levels in a ministry. The literature on active representation provides context for the critical need to explore how organizations like MCFD in provincial child welfare systems can move away from the pursuit of ineffective status quo approaches towards more transformational approaches to serve Indigenous Peoples in equitable and socially just ways.

A combined ethnographic/Indigenous research methodology

This article focuses on research conducted through qualitative ethnographic methods which sought to decolonize knowledge and research from dominant and Eurocentric influences that pervade Indigenous Peoples and cultures (Rousseau 2014). Ethnography is not an attempt to capture an objective reality but rather "compels the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities" (Fetterman 2010: 21). Indigenous approaches to knowledge, practice development and research re-centre Indigenous beliefs, values, and approaches in relation to the concepts of critical interest (Bennett and Blackstock 2002; Smith 2012; Wilson 2001).

Bennett and Blackstock (2002) assert that Indigenous knowledge and approaches assured that children were best cared for prior to colonization. Specific values, beliefs, and cultural practices vary for different Indigenous Peoples and communities. However, Indigenous worldviews consistently saw children as "important and respected members of an independent community and ecosystem" (p. 1). Holism, the foundation within all Indigenous community approaches, is essentially antithetical to the individual rights approach found in Canadian child welfare legislation and practice. Moving an Indigenous child welfare agenda forward, therefore, involves building on "the cultural strengths of communal rights, interdependence and knowledge which are often diametrically opposed to the legal requirements to operate within the realm of euro-western provincial values, laws regulations and standards" (p. 1). These principles helped to guide the research.

The research was also guided by an Indigenous research committee, comprised of child welfare colleagues, providing invaluable feedback and direction, sharing their understanding of Indigenous worldviews and encouraging the author to engage in ongoing praxis (dialogue, reflection, action). The researcher was familiar with MCFD, having worked in senior

positions in the Aboriginal Services Branch for three years. The research project received approval through the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board, which complies with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institute of Health Research 2005). Additionally, formal protocols and principles were adopted for conducting research in an Indigenous context as set out by the Faculty of Human and Social Development (University of Victoria 2003).

The methodology involved in-depth interviews with twenty-two Indigenous participants in eighteen different worksites across the province, and one focus group with nine (five also participated in individual interviews) Indigenous professionals. In-depth judgmental sampling techniques, which seek to locate the most appropriate members of a subculture, were used to recruit participants (Fetterman 2010). Twenty-one of the Indigenous participants were employed by MCFD, while five had recently left employment. Efforts were also made to examine organizational information/ documents concerning Indigenous strategic and service planning, and to engage in discussions with non-Indigenous ministry members strategically involved in shaping the Indigenous approach within the ministry.

Interviews were conversational, and while open-ended questions sometimes guided participant responses, initial discussion provided a natural opening and opportunity for participants to speak at length about their experience as an Indigenous employee in MCFD. Kovach (2010) describes using a conversational method in Indigenous research interviewing designed to encourage participants to share their meanings in an unfiltered way. The results reflect rich descriptions of particular themes that emerged through this process.

General research findings

What follows provides a condensation of the extensive thematic results derived from participant in-depth sharing in order to discuss the organizational conditions necessary to make MCFD a meaningful space for Indigenous professionals to seek more effective outcomes for Indigenous Peoples and communities.

Shared, competing and challenged values

While the twenty-six Indigenous professionals (currently or previously employed by MCFD in 2010) came from highly diverse and varied backgrounds, most shared a remarkably collective, values-based orientation and motivation to work in MCFD to improve services to Indigenous children and families. They sought to reduce the number of children entering government care and to reconnect children in care with their cultural communities. All

participants felt that services provided to Indigenous Peoples by MCFD were culturally unresponsive, inadequate and in need of transformative change. The participants were clearly motivated and intrinsically driven to seek better outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities.

Their practice approach reflected Indigenous values: a strong focus on community relationships; acknowledgement of the impacts of colonization; emphasis on empowerment and partnership with individuals and communities; relationship, respect, trust, holistic and strength-based approaches; cultural knowledge and teachings; and a strong reliance on extended family and community support and care giving. These variables are consistent with descriptions of Indigenous practice approaches within the literature (Morrissette et al. 1993; Red Horse et al. 1978; Walmsley 2005; Weaver and White 1997).

Indigenous participants described considerable, often unbearable, tensions inherent in their dual accountabilities. They faced competing responsibilities, as a member of an Indigenous community while working as a ministry professional, resulting in role conflict. They described feelings of role tension (e.g., acting as an advocate for an Indigenous community member and potentially disagreeing with a mainstream approach such as sudden child removal); being tokenized (e.g., asked to be a representative ministry insider to enter a sensitive situation with Indigenous stakeholders but not having their Indigenous voice heard in systemic ministry processes); difficulties achieving a sense of inclusion (e.g., feeling rejected by staff who may feel they were unfairly given affirmative action jobs or even unwanted within their own communities for being co-opted in to an oppressive system); and of feeling unvalued and unheard within the organization. These findings correspond with the previously referenced studies which describe role tensions and dual accountabilities for Indigenous professionals in child welfare settings (Levasseur 2018; MacDonald and Levasseur 2014; Reid 2005; Walmsley 2005; Bennett and Zubrzycki 2003).

Indigenous practice in
unsupportive organizational contexts

Many participants described ongoing tension with non-Indigenous colleagues perceived as having a strong child safety stance while failing to identify and support Indigenous family and community strengths. One participant observed that "a big piece of working with Indigenous people is looking at a strength-based perspective…but a lot of the time we are practicing in fear, a trembling system - if something happens to the child - so sometimes that affects how we practice." Another participant spoke of how her cultural orientation and practice approach conflicted with that of MCFD. She contrasted a highly rigid, task-oriented environment to her

worldview focused on process, patience and presence. Another participant talked about "trying to jam as much as you can into a day" which prevented her from being "on the same page as that person you are walking into the room to talk to." Another said that she gets "really stressed out…because I don't have the time the community wants me to have."

Participants provided examples of discriminatory treatment of themselves and Indigenous children and families in ministry work settings. One described the "blatant use of racist or discriminatory terminology around clients...just always deficit based." One example given was a colleague's statement "oh, they are playing the residential school card now because I said I'm applying for permanent custody." Another participant described hearing co-workers in the halls outside her office "speaking with such disrespect for respected members in our community, it just tears you apart." Another said "some of the situations that I've come up against that really used to hurt me and make me angry are workers mocking Indigenous clients." And yet another participant said "it is disheartening to me to hear.... when they are putting down Indigenous communities and families for whatever reason and they don't believe that some of the things from the past [colonization] have affected where they are today."

Some participants viewed racist expressions as a reflection of wider societal discrimination. One participant, a manager, saw limited support for the ministry's "Indigenous agenda" and witnessed attempts to sabotage its goals to improve services:

Really the root of all that misunderstanding is racism, is prejudice…that affects our system and affects our organization . . . I don't think the values were there. It was very clear, I think to everyone, myself and other managers…the only reason we were doing it in this region, because provincial office was forcing it…none of us saw any commitment to it.

Another participant, when asked about the reluctance to address racism in MCFD, said:

Because this is an organization of social workers. Social workers don't have biases, they can't be racist because they are social workers...so you can't acknowledge that that exists.

 Many non-Indigenous colleagues were seen to dismiss historical perspectives on oppressive practices with Indigenous Peoples and the increased challenges they face due to the colonial impacts. Mainstream attitudes and assumptions, and a distinct lack of Indigenous cultural competence amongst many professionals, were seen to guide ministry practice values, norms and approaches. This led to intolerance and resistance to change, exertion of power and a low risk approach that often results in child removal. As one participant described:

You have too many people delegated to remove children that don't have the experience. Their mentorship is coming from people that practice from an adversarial place....they are not being challenged...they are not being asked to do anything differently.

Participants attributed the low empathy and low-risk behaviour of some non-Indigenous colleagues not only to a lack of cultural competence but also insufficient overall support from the ministry for frontline work which can result in compassion fatigue or burnout. Change fatigue, described as change initiatives being implemented at the frontline without clear organizational direction and support, was also viewed as contributing to powerlessness and apathy at the frontline. This translates into an environment where Indigenous practitioners have to constantly rationalize and justify, often conceal, their practice approaches to colleagues and team leaders. As a result, feelings of being powerless to make change were described by many participants.

The institutional and cold physical environment of ministry offices described by participants is a poor fit for Indigenous staff and service recipients. When all of these variables come together in terms of the impact on Indigenous professionals, the situation is best described as an unsupportive and dehumanized environment where highly motivated and values-driven individuals challenge a bureaucratic, rigid practice environment to become more collaborative and community based.

Gap between Indigenous strategies and frontline experience

While there appeared to be strong conceptual support from ministry regional and provincial leaders for an "Indigenous agenda," many participants felt a disconnection between MCFD's strategic messaging and frontline experience. One participant described how "management had this great dream of change and it really sounded positive, but that didn't trickle down to the frontline." The participants variously attributed this to insufficient program/policy development, implementation, resources (human and financial) and structural support for Indigenous practice change. Participants noted that even mainstream frontline staff "do not respect management" due to the perceived mismanagement of the ministry agenda. In short, due to a succession of policy, budget and structural changes, the ministry environment was a difficult one to navigate and change, even before considering Indigenous issues and perspectives.

Participant observations of MCFD reactivity and risk-adversity are likely connected to an organizational context whereby MCFD (as outlined in the study) has had to contend with ongoing public inquiries, such as the Gove and Hughes reports, precipitated by child deaths (Government of British Columbia 1995; Hughes 2006). The resulting in-depth policy and practice

recommendations and monitoring/scrutiny have translated to high ministry executive turnover, chronic restructuring, scrutinizing media coverage, ongoing and often adversarial engagement with oversight bodies – and high levels of ongoing political intervention. A lack of support from ministry leadership/executive structure for improved Indigenous service delivery was also attributed to what may be unique historical issues for MCFD causing slow and incomplete organizational system responses (because of the reactive and fear-based nature of the organization).

Participants saw MCFD as having a rigid hierarchy which created a disconnect between leadership, management and the service delivery frontline. Participants observed several contributing variables. This is attributed to limited communication, through prescribed narrow and formal channels, which works to decrease the amount of information available both to the frontline and to decision makers throughout the organization. Participants characterized MCFD's hierarchy as being personality-driven, based on longstanding relationships, like-mindedness (selective in-grouping), regional bias and narrow communication. Some participants noted a superficial appearance of compliance with the strategic agenda at the executive level they saw as shielding the deputy minister from the reality of what was really happening at the frontline.

Several participants noted a lack of training, mentorship and support for new Indigenous managers, particularly those hired from outside MCFD. One participant, a manager, observed that the majority of non-Indigenous managers "grew up" in MCFD starting out as frontline workers, and working their way up to management positions:

Those of us coming from the outside in as managers, we don't have that experience or that knowledge of all those systems. So we don't know what we don't know...there is no policy manual that anybody can give you because our whole system is so fragmented...in terms of structured formal support, no, that still doesn't exist.

Indigenous professionals placed into key leadership positions were seen as lacking the organizational and instrumental support necessary to make substantial changes to what was seen as an impenetrable hierarchy.

Participants reported ministry policy as a key area where insufficient engagement of Indigenous professionals, advocacy organizations, or service recipients occurs. Policy was seen as developed with minimal consideration for its impact, becoming a barrier to providing equitable services for Indigenous children, families and communities. Several participants point to a then new policy that intensified requirements for kinship or relative caregivers of Indigenous children to undergo a child protection screening. One participant explained that Indigenous values place a high value on relatives providing care for children in the community and that the newly developed MCFD policy meant "we have to do all the checks on the caregivers...

now the next step is the families will no longer come to anybody for any sort of aid." Another participant agreed saying "that's intrusive...like the concepts in the ministry over the years, they go forward, and they go five steps back...we went back to deficit thinking." Another prevalent theme was how high caseloads translate in to critically high administrative work load demands that de-prioritize collaboration and flexibility to spend time with children, families and in communities.

Perceived relentless ongoing strategic planning, fueled by critiques from oversight bodies and public sentiment, was viewed largely as a rhetorical activity without sustained effort or sufficient resources. Participants noted MCFD as experiencing ongoing implementation of new practice initiatives without adequate resources to sustain them – "it seems like every year it always switches...we got this new thing...you get all excited then – well, we won't put any money in it." A highly bureaucratized workplace, driven by mainstream policy, where staff have limited decision-making autonomy, and where resources for change are deeply constrained, translates to a structure unsupportive to Indigenous employee attempts to shift practice.

In short, several structural and operational factors were perceived as contributing to inadequate support for Indigenous employees and change required for more effective service outcomes for Indigenous children. These included a rigid hierarchy, rhetorical strategic planning, inadequate resourcing, communication, support and training (particularly for Indigenous managers); a disconnect between management and the frontline, improperly implemented change initiatives; team leader conformity to a mainstream agenda, and high caseloads.

Examples of supportive conditions for Indigenous practice

Study participants flagged the tremendous influence and power of team leaders to shape practice (which potentially can lead to positive change). However, participants perceived team leaders to be promoted for mainstream practice and administrative conformity.

A few participants spoke positively about their work with Indigenous service teams in a particular region of MCFD. Preceding the planned transfer of services to an Indigenous community based system of delivery (an initiative rejected by the Indigenous community in 2008 due to the perceived inadequacy of supporting resources) MCFD had in the early-2000s undertaken an initiative to disentangle financial and human resources. Study participants reported widely varying approaches across the then five regions of the province. Many participants criticized these initiatives because they did not appear to improve funding and service approaches for Indigenous

clients or increase the number of Indigenous professionals on teams. The initiative also proceeded in a climate where considerable competition for financial and human resources, where unequal power between mainstream and Indigenous managers resulted in inadequate resources for the newly formed Indigenous teams. However, one region stood apart in the design and implementation of their Indigenous service teams.

In this region, Indigenous services were developed through a culturally competent approach by a dedicated director, deputy director, manager, team leaders, and social workers. The result appeared to participants to provide for more equitable and relevant human and financial resources and subsequently more effective Indigenous teams. Recruitment processes for the Indigenous teams included Indigenous community members on interview panels to screen existing and new ministry professionals. Participants described being a part of shared Indigenous practice teams promoting Indigenous community values. Indigenous teams in this region were able to redesign existing ministry offices focusing on creating culturally safe spaces. Team leaders, though non-Indigenous, had many years of Indigenous practice and community experience, understood the damaging intergenerational impacts of colonization, and were respected by local Indigenous communities. They also had deep inside knowledge of ministry processes. These team leaders were described as committed to Indigenous practice approaches, a critical factor in overall employee level of satisfaction and degree of organizational fit and inclusion.

A specialized regional Indigenous management structure was created to manage the disentanglement process and participants saw this as critical for dedicating adequate human and financial resources for service transformation. A director and deputy director of Indigenous practice, Indigenous service managers and practice consultants formed a corollary management stream to the main regional management stream and supported the newly formed Indigenous service teams. Another progressive initiative, in addition to supporting the development of effective worksites, was an Indigenous support network for Indigenous employees.

Following Indigenous community rejection of the transfer of services from MCFD, the ministry moved to revert back to a generalized management structure – eliminating the specialized Indigenous management stream in this particular region. Participants noted quick deterioration of support for the Indigenous service teams, the Indigenous support network and Indigenous services in the region. This was attributed to the loss of passionate, dedicated Indigenous management and resource support.

The remaining Indigenous manager from this region, who at the time of the study had gone back to working in the mainstream regional structure, identified the impact of the loss and difficulty she alone faced responding to high demands for assistance with frontline practice matters, complaints,

deteriorating community relations, promoting management initiatives, responding to sensitive political situations and the various policy and practice implementations in the region. Study participants felt the reversion to a generalized stream of management resulted in Indigenous services no longer being prioritized as a central focus. They again were dealt with by managers tending to lack knowledge and cultural competence to engage with Indigenous communities and practice.

Indigenous participants and team leaders in this region interpreted these decisions as leadership's de-prioritization of Indigenous services, despite ongoing ministry rhetoric about Indigenous practice as a priority for all ministry employees. They felt the low levels of cultural competence across the ministry meant that the generalist model was unsuitable for responding appropriately to Indigenous practice and organizational matters. Participants indicated that in their experience organizational *specialization* was proven more successful in MCFD than *generalization*.

Indeed, what amounted to an experiment with a specialized stream of Indigenous services led to increased recruitment of Indigenous professionals, more culturally competent and supportive managers and team leaders, increased collaboration with Indigenous communities, greater ability to reconnect children to their cultural communities, increased placement within extended families and cultural communities, less role conflict for Indigenous professionals, and increased focus on the health and well-being of Indigenous professionals.

Implications for Indigenous representation and service transformation in child welfare

Indigenous professionals in this study were motivated to work in what they see as an oppressive organization for the single purpose of transforming services for Indigenous Peoples. They viewed service delivery to Indigenous Peoples in MCFD as culturally unresponsive and inadequate. They shared a collective belief and orientation to community values and restoring capacity within Indigenous communities. A critically important finding is that Indigenous professionals require more support (largely by having obstacles altered and/or removed) to work to their full potential and actively represent Indigenous community interests from within MCFD. Essentially it demonstrates that a significant increase in organizational support was needed for meaningful Indigenous service transformation.

The participants provide descriptions of Indigenous practice and organizational structural approaches that may better serve the interests of Indigenous children and families. They describe significant challenges of

transforming practice in a highly complex and politically exposed organization. Internally, MCFD was characterized as a rigid, mainstream, bureaucratic and hierarchical structure concerned with rhetorical strategic approaches despite a cycle of incomplete and ineffective policy and practice implementation at most levels. Externally, the fall-out resulting from child deaths, inquiries, and oversight body scrutiny led to ongoing political pressure on MCFD and frequent changes in leadership and approaches to manage public perceptions. Indigenous participants were willing to work in these unstable conditions despite the obvious obstacles. Compounding the problem was their significant struggle navigating a complex bureaucratic organizational environment characterized by a command and control structure, ineffective and low internal communication, a low-risk (some would call fear-based) orientation resulting in reluctance to take decisive action toward transformative change.

To create room for Indigenous practice in MCFD-type organizations there must be a deliberate, systemic shift in policy and practice development/implementation, strategic planning, resource allocation, structure, communication, decision-making, support and inclusion and internal cultural competency. This must occur to start addressing the basic interests and needs of Indigenous children, youth, families and communities, let alone transform the services.

Active representation of diverse Indigenous community interests

While participants were committed to and capable of representing community interests, they reported feeling they were prevented from actively representing cultural group interests due to an unsupportive organizational culture and structure. Conversely, the study revealed that a small number of teams were highly functional. There appears to be a powerful relationship between supportive Indigenous service teams—comprised of a dedicated Indigenous executive and administrative management stream, sufficient financial resources, and team leaders with commitment, experience and knowledge of Indigenous communities— and Indigenous participants who reported increased effectiveness and empowerment to practice and achieve goals compatible with community interests (active representation). The latter described having more autonomy and ability to make decisions with the support of their colleagues, team leaders, managers and executives. These findings are consistent with literature demonstrating that successful active group representation depends on administrative discretion, individual attitudes, organizational socialization and administrative actions (Dolan 2000; Meier and Nigro 1976; Selden 1997; Sowa and Selden 2003).

Awareness of Indigenous professionals' dual-role accountabilities

A critical finding is that managing conflicting and dual accountabilities (serving both their child welfare employer and their community) had a significant impact on Indigenous participants. Imagine potentially moving the interests of your oppressed community forward while at times potentially acting in a role viewed as counter to this effort (potentially removing a child or keeping information from an elder or leader during a suicide risk assessment). Also imagine working in a system that is viewed as oppressive to your community. Playing both roles causes considerable stress for Indigenous participants who may feel they may not be effectively contributing to either MCFD or their community. This uneasy struggle and attempt to act as a bridge, if recognized and supported well, could have huge potential for change.

Participants also described low awareness, empathy and support from MCFD colleagues and leadership about the role-conflict they experience. An obvious organizational shift would be to increase awareness, focus and support for Indigenous professionals' experience of conflicting and dual accountabilities. Increased awareness may also assist MCFD colleagues to better understand their collective accountability (on behalf of the government of Canada in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation) to the Indigenous community, given the colonial impacts that government has acknowledged it is responsible for.

Factors affecting diverse worker effectiveness

A significant result of the study is the relationship between participants' perceived effectiveness (retention rates and reported ability to practice consistently within Indigenous beliefs and value systems) and the degree to which participants' values, beliefs and practices were supported and reflected in the workplace. Many participants reported feelings of isolation, lack of belonging, role tension and resulting low workplace satisfaction. This lack of fit flowed from a combination of systemic racism, low staff cultural competence, policy-driven mainstream practice norms, overall feelings of change fatigue in MCFD, unsuitable workplace settings and lack of support for Indigenous practice perspectives. These issues largely account for participants' experiences of dual accountabilities and ongoing struggle to remain with a ministry where Indigenous professionals' experience decreased value and effectiveness. Indeed, many participants had already left

the ministry, were planning to leave, or were struggling to remain at the time of the study.

These findings are consistent with studies indicating that diverse employee job satisfaction and commitment is influenced by perceptions of organizational fit, identification, belonging, opportunity, support, job satisfaction, commitment, fairness and inclusion (Chrobot-Mason 2004; Ensher et al. 2001; Findler et al., 2007; Foley et al. 2005; Friedman and Holtom 2002; Ibarra 1995; Jones and Schaubroeck 2004; Mor Barak et al. 2003; Mor Barak and Levin 2001; R. Smith 2002). These studies underline that exclusion in the workplace affects motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and retention, and provide further insight into the struggle of participants in this study.

MCFD and organizational diversity approach

MCFD's organizational structure, processes, policies and culture demonstrated low support for Indigenous professionals, Indigenous practice approaches, and outcomes for Indigenous people. This led to rudimentary and inadequate approaches to retain Indigenous professionals. There was little if any recognition of the unique challenges facing Indigenous professionals and the lack of opportunity and autonomy for them to contribute to Indigenous service improvements within the ministry.

Research implications were provided to the MCFD Deputy Minister through an executive report and recommendations in October 2014. At the time there appeared to be openness to dialogue. This culminated in a BC cross-ministry forum in April 2016 where the research findings were presented and issues of Indigenous recruitment and retention were discussed.

However, available evidence suggests that the MCFD diversity approach remains situated in a status quo employment equity orientation. The MCFD minister suggests that in 2018 organizational strategies have not changed significantly – with renewed focus on recruitment of Indigenous employees and cross-ministry training to increase employee cultural competence to work with Indigenous Peoples (Sherlock 2018).

The result is a ministry culture, structure and environment that remains unsupportive of Indigenous professionals and service recipients (the percentage of Indigenous children in care continues to rise since the 2010 study) where goals of critical and transformative organizational approaches – which link internal processes to diverse group outcomes can be achieved (Rice 2005; Nagda and Gutierrez 2000; Chesler 1994; Hardiman and Jackson 1994; Frederickson 1990). A significant issue appears to be that, while the goals of some ministry strategic Indigenous planning seem compatible with

an ideal (like higher quality and quantity of services provided to those who need them most), attempts to implement these ideas into the practice environment appear not to be successful – thus rendering organizational planning and implementation as highly rhetorical and ineffective.

Specialist preferred to generalist strategies

Participants strongly indicated in their experiences within the ministry that specialized and equitably based service approaches proved to be a better strategy for increasing effectiveness of Indigenous practice and outcomes. A specialized Indigenous approach (including dedicated directors, managers, team leaders and Indigenous teams of staff) occurred in one MCFD region and reportedly resulted in more support for Indigenous professionals and what they perceived to be better services for the Indigenous communities they were serving.

Expanding this approach to other regions may have increased the number of Indigenous service providers in MCFD, boosted their effectiveness, improved the quality of the work environment, and increased Indigenous staff satisfaction and retention. This may also have increased the numbers and capacity of Indigenous professionals at each level of MCFD to promote ongoing development of a future group of Indigenous leadership. It also had the potential to tap in to the capacity of non-Indigenous allies and to demonstrate, document and evaluate an approach that could be evaluated for more successful outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities.

The link between implementing values-based Indigenous practice approaches also critically depends on ensuring dedicated and equitable funds are accessible to and controlled by Indigenous teams and worksites. Unfortunately, the ministry continues to move away from a specialized approach – instead voicing the need for all employees and functional units within the organization to become culturally competent or "indigenized."

Preconditions for an effective generalist approach

If MCFD, and ministries like it, continue to pursue a generalized approach to improving Indigenous service outcomes, this study suggests several areas where improvements could be made. Ministries may want to evaluate and strengthen their approaches in the following areas:

• Dedicating fair and equitable resources to improve Indigenous services.

- Collaborating with Indigenous Peoples, communities and organizations to guide program, policy and practice development and implementation.
- Initiating and sustaining efforts around true reconciliation that requires humility (awareness of critical issues), dialogue, reflection, accountability and action from all ministry personnel who engage with Indigenous children, families and communities.
- Ensuring support for service change is embedded at all levels within the organization. Particular focus at the supervisory level (ensuring cultural competence and safety) is indicated as being critical to supporting Indigenous practice approaches.
- Acknowledging and supporting Indigenous professionals to manage role conflict and advance motivational drive for service change – providing opportunity for formalized mutual support structures, mentorship, increased training opportunities for Indigenous managers, etc.
- Increasing the administrative discretion of Indigenous professionals through increased opportunities to engage in strategic program, policy, and practice development and implementation. Strategies may include creating horizontal structures which facilitate increased information-sharing and engagement in decision making processes.
- Providing ongoing educational support regarding Indigenous service change for non-Indigenous professionals within the organization that is less training oriented and more embedded in supportive and clinical supervisory functions.
- Creating a zero tolerance environment for discrimination and racism. This requires explicit identification of the issue and a commitment to consistently responding to it.

Initial focus by provincial child welfare executive and senior management in these areas, with complementary performance evaluation strategies, may begin to produce momentum toward necessary and long overdue system-wide change and improvement to services and outcomes for Indigenous Peoples.

Concluding remarks

Indigenous Peoples continue to seek to alter the policy and practice environment to address the inability of mainstream provincial child welfare systems to provide culturally relevant and transformative practices. While many Indigenous communities in Canada are delegated to deliver child welfare services through the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) First Nations Child and Family Services (CFS) Program, the Assembly of First Nations, alongside other Indigenous groups, point out the many inadequacies in the CFS program, including reliance on mainstream provincial legislation, policy, standards and

grossly inadequate funding structures (Blackstock and Grammond 2017). These organizations continue to advocate for autonomous Indigenous child welfare structures that reflect relevant community/cultural practice, policies, standards and equitable funding. While the goal for Indigenous Peoples is to achieve fair and equitable autonomy over children's services, the ongoing egregious over-representation of Indigenous children in government care, and under-representation in preventive and supportive human services, requires immediate focus and priority on promoting Indigenous representation and approaches within provincial child welfare programs like MCFD. Listening to the voices of Indigenous Peoples, and in this instance, Indigenous professionals, is a critical first step to improve services.

This article sets out findings and recommendations from a 2010 study which shows that while Indigenous professionals in MCFD represent the values and interests of diverse group members, they feel they are prevented from actively representing the interests of Indigenous service recipients and the community as a whole. Many Indigenous MCFD staff themselves have experienced detrimental child welfare system intervention and they want to see something better for their people. The dichotomous professional and private roles they face result in stressful and competing accountabilities to their communities, their chosen profession and employer. This tension can become a critical factor in whether they remain in MCFD. And they must stay if services are to improve for Indigenous Peoples.

Some study participants described a specialized Indigenous service stream (that existed for approximately five years) in one MCFD region where they felt supported and successful in pursuing goals toward service improvement for Indigenous children and families. Several factors were shown to contribute to higher levels of Indigenous active organizational representation. These factors included specialized, equitably resourced, Indigenous-specific teams where leaders had extensive experience and knowledge working with Indigenous communities.

Given the low level of existing ministry support for Indigenous professionals, and low capacity for effective practice with Indigenous service recipients, pursuing a specialized Indigenous stream, with ministry professionals (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who demonstrate the ability to work effectively and responsively within Indigenous communities and the highly complex organizational environment of MCFD, shows promise. This seems a more realistic goal than the ongoing and current strategic priority within MCFD of generalizing an Indigenous approach across the organization. Until the ministry moves beyond rhetorical Indigenous approaches and engages a more critical and transformative approach to organizational change, its goal of "indigenizing" the organization will not likely be successful. Despite this, some strategies for strengthening Indigenous professionals' experiences and practice are provided should provincial ministries continue to pursue this approach.

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