REFLECTION ON MY PRACTICUM AND LEARNING AT
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES:
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PROVINCIAL CHILD PROTECTION

A Field Practicum Report
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Abstract

This report is a reflection of my practicum experience which was carried out from September 18 to December 15, 2017 at the Child and Family Services division at the Ministry of Social Services. The primary objective of the practicum was to gain knowledge and practical experience in the provincial child and family welfare system. The Ministry uses theoretical frameworks that are client focused such as critical theory, attachment theory, and solution/strengths-based strategies. The safety and well-being of the child is paramount to all that the Ministry does with an eye to empowering and preserving the family. The workers use an integrated practice strategy (IPS) that attempts to reduce individual biases. Overall, I gained skills in therapeutic practice, personal reflection, utilizing decision making tools and case management. Unfortunately, poverty is an overwhelming obstacle to improving the lives of these children. The work is challenging, and it takes personal strength and team work to successfully protect vulnerable children in our communities.
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For a newly landed immigrant, my MSW studies have been a long and not an easy journey, in a completely different social and political context. It would not be possible to complete my studies without some important people. I would like to start by thanking Lesley Kitsch who trusted me to walk together with her team. Similarly, thank you to all the staff who involved me in their day to day missions. I am grateful to have learned from your skills, compassion and dedication towards those children and families. I am really indebted to those families, children and youth who trusted me with their experiences and allowed me to participate in most confidential proceedings of their family matters. Similarly, I would like to thank the school teachers, community service providers and community-based organizations for providing opportunities to learn about their programs and share their experiences.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................i

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................. ii

**Chapter 1. Introduction** ........................................................................................................ 1

1.1 Organization of Report....................................................................................................... 2

1.2 Rationale for the Practicum............................................................................................... 3

1.3 Practicum Objectives and Learning Activities................................................................. 4

**Chapter 2. Theoretical Frameworks for Practice** ................................................................. 12

2.1 General Systems Theory.................................................................................................... 12

2.2 Critical Theory.................................................................................................................. 14

2.3 Attachment Theory.......................................................................................................... 19

2.4 Solution Focused and Strength Based Approach.......................................................... 22

2.5 How the Practice and Theory Integrate or are Integrated.............................................. 24

2.6 Generalist Practitioner.................................................................................................... 26

**Chapter 3. Primary Principles of the Child and Family Service Programs** ....................... 29

3.1 Safety............................................................................................................................. 29

3.2 Well-Being.................................................................................................................... 30

3.3 Permanency .................................................................................................................. 31

3.4 Ensuring Principles in Practice...................................................................................... 32

**Chapter 4. Determinants of the Problem** .......................................................................... 35

4.1 Integrated Practice Strategy (IPS).................................................................................. 38

**Chapter 5. Implications for the Client/Social worker Relationship** ...................................... 39

**Chapter 6. Values** ............................................................................................................. 42
6.1 The Client’s Values

Chapter 7. Skills Gained

7.1 The Language of Change in the Therapeutic Interview
7.2 Reflective Practice Skills
7.3 Skills in Structured Decision-Making Tool (SDM)
7.4 Accepting Challenges as a Part of Building Strength
7.5 Case Management
7.6 Understanding Family

Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Personal Reflection and Challenges
8.2 Case Management Practice
8.3 High Caseloads and Changing Frontline Practice
8.4 Legal Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect
8.5 Interagency Multidisciplinary Work
8.6 Erosion of Trust
8.7 Increased Parental Substance Abuse
8.8 Poverty is More than Lack of Resources/Money
8.9 The Overrepresentation of Indigenous Children

References
Chapter 1. Introduction

I started my social work career in Nepal, working with a large number of children and families who were affected by an intense civil war. These included orphaned children, child soldiers, mine survivors, victims of sexual violence, and the members of families who lost their loved ones in war. The close working relationships as well as sharing of their past grievances, harrowing experiences, plights and sufferings deeply touched my feelings and drove my interest to provide impact-based services for children and families. I have seen compassion amongst victims from both sides of war, their capacity for resilience, and connecting for communal harmony among survivors. This vivid positive transformation of children and families affected by war further developed my interest to work with these people.

I moved to Canada in 2012 and decided to begin my Master of Social Work degree with the objective of gaining a better understanding of the social and political context of Canada and to establish myself as a social worker. During my MSW program, I started to work with children and youth who are under the Ministry’s long-term care. Coming from a totally different socio-political context, this was a new experience for me as I saw a large number of children and youth in government ward-ship. This developed my curiosity of how these children, with the majority of them being Indigenous, came into care. I wanted to know what the structural violence connected to these peoples’ histories looked like and how the child and family welfare system operates in Saskatchewan. I decided to spend my field practicum with Child and Family Services within the Ministry of Social Services.

Being an immigrant to Canada gives me a new perspective on my identity, culture and sense of belonging. My experiences on social stratification, and possession of resources with unfair power balance in Nepal provided me insight to relate to the Indigenous people’s history of
colonial domination and present impact on them. I learned many things and broadened my knowledge on social work practice in two different contexts. I gained knowledge of two different world views; however, I felt disconnected culturally. I have related my feelings and experiences of marginalization and attempted to locate myself within Indigenous history. During my practicum, I attended to some of the organizations that are dedicated to assist the Indigenous community through programs and services to reconnect them with their traditional cultural heritage. The staff shared how Indigenous culture, tradition and language have been destroyed through colonization. Through hearing these stories, I was able to relate these experiences to my own personal experiences.

1.1 Organization of Report

This practicum report is comprised of several chapters, including an introduction, and discussion on theoretical frameworks, ideology, values, skills, personal reflections and challenges. Chapter one of the report includes discussion regarding the rationale of this practicum at Child and Family services under the Ministry of Social Services. Furthermore, this chapter will also outline practicum objectives and learning activities. Chapter two explains the social work theories that have been utilized during the practicum. These theories helped me to understand and relate different family situations and contemporary issues in child and family services and guide the appropriate practices. Chapter three speaks about primary principles of the Child and Family Services Division under the Ministry of Social Services. Chapter four outlines determinants of the social problems contributing to child protection. Implications for client/social worker relationships has been discussed in Chapter five followed by a discussion of values in Chapter six. Chapter seven identified and discussed skills that were gained during the practicum experience. Finally, Chapter eight concludes by summarizing key ideas from this
report, followed by a discussion of my personal reflections and challenges experienced during the practicum.

The Ministry of Social Services executes a range of programs in the area of income support, child and family services and supports for persons with disabilities. The approaches of these programs are more intended to help citizens to build a better life by themselves through economic independence, strong family and strong communities. The Child and Family Services division works with a diverse range of partners to keep children safe and families strong by delivering intensive services to the children who are in need of protection, as well as to their families. The Ministry of Social Services is responsible for providing protection services for children under the age of 16. The Child and Family Services program, mandated by *The Child and Family Service Act*, is in place in order to provide child welfare services. This legislation emphasizes providing family support with the goal of ensuring safety and well-being of children at home.

**1.2 Rationale for the Practicum**

I am very fortunate to have completed a full-time field practicum at the Ministry of Social Services with Child and Family programs from September 18th, 2017 to December 22nd, 2017. While choosing the practicum placement, my goal was to develop a general understanding of child and family welfare systems and practice as a generalist social worker and to broaden knowledge and experience on mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse and to learn how these issues connect with the child welfare system. Coming from a different social work background, I wanted to learn about these general areas of social work knowledge and practice as they relate to Canada.
This platform proved to be a rewarding experience. Not only did this opportunity strengthened my skills but also helped me to build foundational knowledge and establish myself as a social worker in Canada. I was connected with a number of community-based service organizations and gained familiarity with their programs and collaborations with the child and family service division. Similarly, I met a number of professionals from different areas of work, joined the collaborative meetings with them and visited many families.

During my MSW studies, I was privileged to have connected with agencies such as Child and Youth Mental Health Services, the Autism Center, Ranch Ehrlo Society and the University of Regina. I worked with and met different professionals, professors, colleagues and my class friends. The guidance and mentorship helped to build my confidence and encouraged me to move forward in this different social “cosmology”. Similarly, these opportunities offered to build a comparative lens of social work practices from two different countries - Nepal and Canada: one being a developing country and the other a fully developed country. It was challenging. However, the experience has widened my knowledge and skills and has provided a sense of confidence as a generalist social worker.

1.3 Practicum Objectives and Learning Activities

This report is the product of my reflection of my practicum experience at Child and Family Services under the Ministry of Social Services. As a student coming from a totally different social, political and economic context, I chose more general and broad objectives. My primary objective was to seek to understand the child and family welfare system. Prior to starting my practicum, I established learning activities to meet those objectives. Furthermore, I consulted closely with my professional associate, as well as with the supervisor.
This chapter primarily illustrates how the learning objectives and activities were met throughout the practicum periods.

Objective one was:

*To build knowledge about provincial child protection legislation, policies, protocols and procedures.*

The child and family welfare system is connected with several jurisdictions and the system is governed by several provincial laws and acts. Having an adequate understanding of those jurisdictions, legislations, protocols and policies helps to guide the child protection workers’ interventions with families. This knowledge is considered to be fundamental for practice. At the beginning of my practicum, I had minimal knowledge of how the child welfare system operates. To achieve this objective, a series of three activities were developed and they were focused on researching related literature. My learning activities included studying the following: 1) the *Child and Family Services Act*, 2) related child welfare manuals, and 3) the official protocols.

My literature review helped me to build understanding of relevant provincial legislation. I reviewed legal papers that described different circumstances involving children and their families. I reviewed the *Child and Family Services Act (1989-90)*, the major document mandating the entire system affecting children and families. Further to this, I reviewed child and family service manuals; some of them included the philosophies and values of the child and family programs such as child safety standards, child well-being and permanency planning. In addition, I reviewed court papers and other documents that are required to complete the case planning process. The regular reviews, mentorship and opportunity of consultation with my supervisor and professional associate aided my development of practical knowledge. I was also
fortunate to participate in provincial training workshops while in the practicum placement. The trainers provided further documents and offered discussions on the related policies and legislations. These entire processes helped me to develop my knowledge of the child welfare system including the complexities of this work. Similarly, I was challenged to apply analytical and critical thinking when working with children and their families. For example, I reviewed each and every related section in the *Child and Family Services Act (1989-90)*. Reviews of the various manuals helped me to appreciate the importance of strengthening, enhancing and maintaining the family unit. Through this, I was able to identify how the social worker must work differently with each of the unique family situations.

Further, during the practicum, I have reviewed relevant journal articles, other manuals and documents that are used for the training of child protection workers. These resources provided more insights and understanding on contextual location of child abuse and neglect. Information from these sources also built my confidence to have a meaningful interaction with professionals as I was able to shadow meetings, and attend home visits. Similarly, after home visits and meetings, reflective interactions with co-workers helped me to relate the literature that I had reviewed with real world practice.

Objective two focused on:

*Building experience in child protection case planning and management through the continuum of care from intake child welfare investigations to ongoing family services provision and court related processes.*

To achieve this objective, I shadowed social workers completing a number of child abuse investigations where I had opportunities to listen to families and victims. I observed some resistant family members and witnessed how social workers dealt with those difficult situations.
This activity provided an opportunity to observe the investigation process in different scenarios of child abuse and neglect. I observed the interviewing techniques used with child victims, and other related family members. I also saw how social workers make decisions in various circumstances.

In addition, I participated in five different case conferences along with family members, child protection workers and service providers. Each case conference led to development of a case plan with suitable services identified for the family and children. I saw a positive example of the family-centered approach being utilized while determining the best practice services to address the family issues. I observed the importance of collaborative relationships between workers, clients and service providers. To meet this learning objective, I assisted the workers in managing the child and family service files. I participated in the assessment and referral processes, and in doing so, I wrote several social histories and prepared contact notes. In the process, I observed the use of solution-focused and strength-based approaches. Family-centered casework methods were applied to protect children, ensure their well-being and engage families in case plans. I was able to recognize the importance of engaging family and establishing constructive casework relationships to promote better assessments for case planning. Through these activities, I became familiar with the sequence of steps in the case management and planning processes, including utilization of genograms and ecomaps to assess family hierarchies, dynamics and stressors. Through these case planning applications, I learned to identify family strengths, power imbalances, and dynamics to determine the services that best met the child’s and family’s interests. I believe that I was able to realize the importance of a family-centered approach to achieve the goals of case management.
Aside from this, I also attended child welfare core training consisting of six modules. I was able to successfully complete four of those modules; each module was three days long. The content taught in each of the modules included the knowledge and skills needed by all child welfare caseworkers. I found that the entire training emphasized the context of the family and it provided opportunities to practice the skills through presentations and group work.

Awareness of First Nations child welfare history, residential schools and the development of First Nation agencies is critical to child and family welfare services in Canada. I also now understand the broad perspectives of family-centered case management including its philosophy, goals and responsibility. The highlights of the core training also include physical, emotional and behavioral indicators of abuse, neglect and sexual abuse in child victims and their families. Furthermore, one key point I came to understand is the common nature of child abuse and neglect in Saskatchewan, and I also gained an understanding that there are individual, family and environment factors contributing to this abuse and neglect.

Objective three was:

*To learn to utilize the Ministry of Social Services SDM framework while responding to child protection issues: responsive action, remedial action, and protective environment action.*

The Ministry of Social Services uses the Structured Decision-Making System (SDM) tools in child protection that is managed through a computer-based system called Linkin. The goal of Structured Decision-Making is to reduce subsequent child maltreatment, expedite permanent plans for the children, and improve consistency and validity of decisions made by child protection workers. It is an evidence and research-based system that the child and family welfare program utilizes. It includes 5 components:

- identify critical decision points,
• increase reliability of decisions,
• increase validity of decisions,
• target resources to families at risk, and
• collect data to inform decisions throughout the agency.

To achieve this objective, I participated in 3 days of training and learned the aforementioned five components of the SDM. One major characteristic of SDM is reliability and consistent results. It basically helps the worker to assess families, and decision making, and is guided by the facts of the case rather than by individual judgements. Similarly, validity and accuracy are further outcomes of SDM.

The SDM assessment process is research based, which attempts to classify families according to risk of maltreatment, enabling agencies to target services to families at highest risk. Similarly, the assessment tools of SDM are straightforward. The utility of these assessment tools focuses on information gathering and the process itself.

The three days of training on SDM provided a clear understanding of the definitions of abuses and neglect and the relationship to policy and procedure. Similarly, the training provided clear ideas on different child welfare assessment tools like risk assessment, safety assessment, strengths and needs assessment and reunification assessment. The training also included a number of practice sessions, allowing one to gain more familiarity with these tools.

To continue to pursue this objective, I participated in five different investigations of allegations of neglect and/or abuse. Two of them were situated in the Regina Children’s Justice Center on physical abuse. The Regina Children’s Justice Center works with law enforcement officials on physical and sexual abuse. I got the opportunity to watch an entire session of an interview through a monitoring room. I gathered information on creating a child friendly
interviewing environment and therapeutic way of creating warm and trusting relationships. One of the ideas that struck a chord with me was that the interviewer refrained from directing the child’s report in order to get a factual account of the situation. I observed how the story emerged from the child’s experiences.

For learning objective four, the focus was on the:

*Utilization of social work principles, related theories, the Code of Ethics and social work practices in a professional environment.*

To achieve the above objective, activities included research on social work principles and learning to relate them to day to day practice. This objective was addressed continuously throughout my practicum and was part of all learning situations. Every day, there were new situations and circumstances, making me curious as to how they related to social work principles and theories. The principles of humanity, confidentiality and social justice are the common topics in social work practice. I acknowledged how each activity related to those social work principles, theories and to the Canadian Association of Social Work (CASW) *Code of Ethics* (2005), which I reviewed. The purpose of the CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005) is to set forth values and principles to guide social workers’ professional conduct.

As part of this learning objective, I also reviewed literature on social work-related practice approaches. In particular, I researched solution-focused, strengths-based and family-centered approaches. From the beginning up to the closure of each child welfare case, these approaches are utilized in child and family services. The literature review broadened my understanding and emphasized the importance of those social work approaches in a child welfare practice.
The final learning objective was to have regular discussions:

*To measure whether the learning goals were achieved or not, as well as to identify modifications with my Academic Supervisor and Professional Associate.*

At the beginning of the practicum, we had a planning meeting with my professional associate, and the unit supervisor. We basically discussed the initial objectives and activities and adjusted as was required. Over the term, I had three review meetings, with my professional associate and unit supervisor with whom I worked closely. Furthermore, I had numerous and regular brief meetings for day to day supervision. In each meeting, we reviewed the learning goals and determined if I was meeting my learning objectives.

The next chapter of this report will discuss theoretical frameworks for social work practice in the area of child protection.
Chapter 2. Theoretical Frameworks for Practice

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guided my social work practice. During my practicum, I had the opportunity to visit numerous families who were experiencing different social challenges such as domestic violence, poverty, mental health issues, and substance abuse. These challenges caused variations in many of the families’ life cycles and affected children and other family members. In this context, I saw a wide range of family dynamics with different circumstances and was able to utilize my knowledge of several social work theories to understand and contextualize the situations. For the purpose of this report, I have chosen to focus on General Systems Theory, Critical Theory, and Attachment Theory as they relate to the issues of child and family welfare services.

2.1. General Systems Theory

During my practicum experience, General Systems Theory was an applicable theory to the different challenging family situations I encountered. Originating in the 1940s by Austrian biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, General Systems Theory combined concepts from “systems thinking and biology into a universal theory of living systems - from the human mind to the global ecosphere” (Nichols, 2014, p.54). Beginning with the endocrine system, Bertalanffy “began extrapolating to more complex social systems and developed a model that came to be called general system theory” (Nichols, 2014, p.54). General Systems Theory views families as part of a larger system of community, culture and politics in which families are surrounded. At the social work level, this theory is relevant to understanding how children and parents are affected by different social forces within their social environments. Furthermore, General Systems Theory also can be used to provide a better understanding of the complex structure of family by examining family components such as communication, roles, routine, culture, values,
norms, and financial management. This theory can also be helpful in understanding family dynamics. Similarly, this theory can be used to provide an understanding of deconstructing subsystems and the structure and nature of boundaries between family members. Examining family structure can provide an understanding of how family members relate to each other. For example, it includes what roles they should take and how families handle the complex and changing internal and external world experiences (Constable and Lee, 2015).

Nichols (2014) believes that family problems become entrenched because they are embedded in powerful but unseen structures and are shaped by their interactions with those around them. Reading about this theory taught me to see how families and their lives are shaped by their interchanges with those around them.

General Systems Theory is an appropriate theory for application in child and family welfare where practitioners believe that understanding how family systems operate is more important than devising techniques to change them (Nichols, 2014). The family is considered a unit or system with a number of specific and interesting properties. Using this approach, there is a shift from addressing the individual to addressing the family and focusing on the family as a system and pattern of relationships. Out of General System Theory multiple models of family therapy developed including but not limited to strategic, structural, experiential, and more recently the multi-systemic family systems therapy (MFT) model (Lander, Howsare and Byrne, 2013). The basic principle of systems theory shared by all of these therapeutic models proposes that the individual cannot be fully understood or successfully be treated without an understanding of how that individual functions in his or her family as a system (Lander et al., 2013).
Child and family services practice primarily relies on the General Systems Theory. This theoretical approach is also encouraged by the Ministry when working with families affected by substance abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence and other family situations that threaten the safety of children. This theory is also applicable while developing and designing case plans, and while implementing services for families. Similarly, this theory provides a basis for understanding where the current challenges are and how they can be addressed. For example, the intergenerational impact of colonialism on Indigenous families has been assessed using the General Systems Theory to provide a better understanding. Child and family social workers utilize solution-focused and strength-based approaches widely while General Systems Theory complements the approach. The General Systems Theory views the family as a unit when assessing need, strength and services.

The shortcoming of this theory is that it focuses mostly on individuals and their expanded relationship within the family. It may not useful when focusing on the nuclear family. Similarly, many social systems and families are related to outside influences and this theory generally does not attempt to consider external factors. Instead, it addresses behaviour generated internally within the family. According to Nichols (2014), the goal is not to solve the clients’ existing problems but to help them to learn to see their own role in how their family system operates. In this context, this understanding can be a tool for repairing relationships rather than focusing on the impact of external factors on the family.

2.2. Critical Theory

Critical Theory involves exposing existing modes of domination and oppression and offers alternatives possibilities which may serve to emancipated those once excluded and silenced (Harney, 2014). Critical Theory denotes a school of thought which challenges the
dominant thinking and stereotyping of existing organizational phenomena. With the search for a comprehensive theoretical perspective in the field of child protection, I found Critical Theory to be helpful. Developed out of the Frankfort School by theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, early critical theorists focused on the idea of ‘domination’ and specifically confronting human’s need to control the social and natural environment (Lietz, 2009). Leitz (2009) further explains that this perspective seeks to deconstruct the authority of social institutions’ roles that maintain the status quo. Also, it challenges the idea of being an “objective observer” with no responsibility for producing social change. The theorists responsible for developing Critical Theory argued for justice and social action.

The core purpose of Critical Theory in social work practice is to promote social justice through social structural analysis and a collaborative approach to action. This purpose refers to examining problems situations in the context of structural forces that shape people’s lives, such as capitalism, colonization, patriarchy, and the impact of these dominant structures. Critical Theory also integrates the insight gained through practice with data gathered through empirically driven assessment tools (Lietz, 2009).

Critical Theory also recognizes that there are political implications to working with individuals which often leads to competing and conflicting political interests. Furthermore, Critical Theory also recognizes that social workers should consider their own personal position within an organization, the power or authority of their organization, as well as the need to analyze the political environment of the consumers. This theory is especially relevant for social work. It challenges the social, ideological, and economic structures of society and their impact on individual problems. It argues that most individual problems are, in fact, social problems caused by inequitable social structures (Robbins, Chatterjee, Canda and Leibowitz, 2019).
Child protection workers often have to make difficult and high-risk decisions regarding the lives of children and families. As applied to child protection, this theory suggests that social workers should not choose between the different “critical” theories and perspectives, but rather develop an integrated approach from a range of different perspectives. This theory suggests that an interpretative understanding, and the ability to communicate, is not sufficient for a human organization to function properly. The workers in human service organizations need to incorporate a broader analysis of society. This thought is necessary for an integrated approach in child welfare programs. Critical Theory also highlights the importance of deconstruction, critical thinking, and reflection when responding to the sensitive and complex cases in child welfare (Lawrence, 2004). This includes looking critically at families’ unique cultural perspectives, their own social identities, family norms, values and the histories.

During an assessment of a suspected child welfare case, it is necessary to deconstruct the suspected abuse and assess the situation rather than making immediate judgements. Child welfare decision-making should be based on objective approaches that attempt to suspend personal judgement. This should include engaging in a process of deconstruction and integration of information received from multiple sources including Justice Services, family services history and medical sectors. The data collected should be used to inform critical thinking and critical reflection to make well informed decisions within the context of diverse family situations impacted by social structures (Lietz, 2009). Deconstructing provides a clear understanding of the causes of problems and the process includes analytical review of reports and interviews.

Similarly, Lietz (2009) states that Critical Theory is based in the humanist tradition and is not concerned with either personal or political aspects. I personally found this theory applicable to understanding Indigenous history and their situations that they have lived through which impacts
their present situations. This theory helped me to see the Indigenous history of colonization, and examine its impact on the loss of culture, current social struggle associated with intergenerational trauma, and the problems that are products of their past. Harney (2014) suggests that Critical Theory opens up possibilities for analysis of power, discourse and historical understanding.

Through this Critical Theory, I was also able to analyse the contemporary issues faced by Indigenous peoples in the context of the history of Canadian colonialism. The history of European colonialism in Canada has affected every aspect of the lives, culture and family structures of Indigenous people. In order to understand the social and economic conditions of Indigenous communities, a historical analysis is required. Ned and Frost (2017) describe the historical trauma caused by colonialism and include the cumulative cultural assimilation practices and policies that affected generations of Indigenous people. The past residential school system and sixty’s scoop led to systematic and prolonged break-up of Indigenous families. Generations of children were raised in institutions without parents or in foster homes without cultural ties. The consequences of past experiences have impacted current generations now struggling with parenting, rebuilding family networks and trying to break the cycle of abuse. With the cumulative impact of intergenerational trauma, the coping strategies and practices to deal with these issues become less productive.

It is important for social workers working in child welfare to critically examine and understand the historical context of colonialism when working with Indigenous families in child welfare system. Furthermore, in order to obtain impact-based results, social workers must critically understand the strength of these communities and relevance to child welfare practices.

During my practicum, I witnessed cases of domestic violence that could be analyzed through structural forces such as the imbalanced power structures, patriarchal value systems and
dominant cultural factors. My initial assessments of these cases were often not accurate and insufficient until I applied a critical thinking approach. The application of Critical Theory was useful to understanding those situations and associated factors which also guided the case planning process. It is important to note that further information collection through observations of the home and multiple discussions with family members also helped in my analysis. These factors helped my understanding of the needs of the family and the adjustments required to meet those needs. Even when situations require quick actions, Critical Theory requires ongoing reflection, assisting workers to triangulate new data with their previous or initial understandings of the case (Lietz, 2009).

In child and family welfare case planning, assessment is not a one-time activity. Child and family case planning and management requires ongoing processes throughout the case lifecycle. This must include multiple sources and different types of data and information. This information all needs to be considered along with ongoing personal reflections (Lietz, 2009).

Criticisms of child welfare continue to confront and challenge professionals working at all levels in child protection services. Critical Theory often deconstructs the authority of social institutions in maintaining the status quo. Application of this theory allows the time to deconstruct and reflect on contradictions, inconsistencies, and associate factors that may be relevant in any situation.

Child welfare workers often manage large caseloads with increased paperwork and reporting demands. Large workloads and lack of supervision are barriers to effective utilization of Critical Theory in child and family welfare decision-making (Lietz, 2009). Time and effort should be focused on increasing the level of child and family welfare decision-making. Similarly, this theory argues for change in the structure of existing child and family welfare
systems. It is important to develop skills for workers to deconstruct, critically analyze and reflect on the context of the cases that they work with. The role of supervision is a critical factor in the child welfare system. Supervisors are busy overseeing on entire unit’s caseload and that directly impacts on their ability to apply critical thinking.

**2.3 Attachment Theory**

Attachment Theory is a way of conceptualizing the propensity of human beings to form strong affectional bonds to others and of explaining many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbances (Bowlby, 1988). This theory was originally developed by John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst who was attempting to understand distress of infants separated from their parents (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). Further, Attachment Theory grew out of Bowlby's experiences as a family therapist at the Tavistock Clinic in London. Social and family relationships were considered alongside individual psychodynamics as causes of psychological and social disorders (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). Later, this theory led to renewed interest in the field of family therapy to examine the subconscious thinking of individuals in the family unit.

During my practicum, I was with the child and family welfare unit where I was involved with a range of active child protection cases requiring different levels of services. I had the opportunity to build close working relationships with children and youth who have been in out-of-home care for both short periods of time and for long term periods of time. Attachment Theory describes the dynamics of the parent-child relationship and presenting behaviours. Attachment Theory is also used to provide social workers with viewpoints to aid in the determination of needed services for children, youth and their families.

While other theories focused on broad, systematic influences on family members’ behaviour, Attachment Theory emerged as “a leading theoretical tool for describing the deeper
roots of close relationships” (Nichols, 2014, p. 58). Gottman (1994) highlights that Attachment Theory applies to clinical treatment by identifying fear, anger, stress or disturbance in the attachment relationship. Parents can be helped to understand some of their children’s disruptive behaviours as stemming from the child’s anxiety about the parent’s responsiveness and availability (as cited in Nichols, 2014).

I witnessed the application of Attachment Theory by child and family social workers who often found the approach useful in their work with children, youth and families. The experience that children have when forming an attachment to caregivers, and then becoming separated, has a profound impact on their ability to trust and form relationships in the future. These challenges emerge behaviourally. I witnessed children and youth with long term developmental issues stemming from being separated from their parents. In the context of permanency planning at the Ministry of Social Services, I realized the significance of Attachment Theory to endorse the importance of kinship attachment and to prevent long term family separation. Similarly, this theory also recognizes that children need permanent alternatives families who can repair their separation. It was evident that children who had secure attachments felt comfortable in short term separation with the belief that their caregivers would ultimately return. Children who are not securely attached may feel indifferent to the parent or may overcompensate and seek additional attention and affection (Holden, 2009).

Holden (2009) states that too often, workers underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring; all of which have the potential to turn a life around. Attachment, separation and loss are major themes which have profound impacts on a person’s ability to trust and form relationships.
Through my observations, I came to the conclusion that children and youth need to rely on and trust their care workers to achieve developmental goals and build competencies. The establishment of trusting and caring relationships and bonds, between caregivers and children and youth in care, are key to the success of the placement. Attachments with adults and other children and youth are also essential to learn and physical regulation as well as being essential to meet basic and vital developmental goals for every child. Holden (2009) states that attachment may be gained through several avenues: 1) the arousal-relaxation cycle, in which the child or youth needs are satisfied by a caregiver leading to relaxation; 2) the positive interaction cycle, in which positive social interaction between a child or youth and adult leads to positive feelings on both sides, and 3) inclusion and/or claiming, in which a child is included in and feels a part of a group.

In contrast to the effect of positive relationship-building, maltreatment can have an adverse impact on the child’s attachment. In some of the cases of child abuse I encountered while in this practicum, children often had trouble meeting their needs. This was due to their parents’/caregivers’ limited parenting knowledge, excessive environmental stressors, lack of protective capacity, and their own psychological challenges. Most children who came into care were negatively affected by the separation from parents, regardless of their level of attachment. Children being brought into care may exhibit behaviours associated with fear, withdrawal and/or aggression. However, children who are not attached to parents are particularly vulnerable to separation and may show many behavioural and emotional issues.

The critics of Attachment Theory emphasized that the tenets of this theory are deeply rooted in mainstream western thought and that this requires change when applied to different cultures. The goal is to find the elements of the culture that relate to human attachment.
Attachment Theory fails to recognize the influence of gender, ethnicity and culture on personality development. Attachment Theory, with its belief that bonding only occurs between parents and children, ignores cultural evidence. Children may be attached to other caregivers, particularly in cultures where there is an emphasis on communal child rearing (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake and Morelli, 2000).

2.4 Solution-Focused and Strength-Based Approach

Despite life’s struggle, all persons pose strengths that can be applied to improve the quality of their lives. Social work practitioners should respect these strengths and take the direction which the client wishes to apply them (DeJong and Kim Berg, 1998). Originally conceptualized by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, the strength-based and solution-focused approach refers to the innate strengths and resources people possess (Nichols, 2014). O’Connell (2012) states that the solution-focused approach suggests that people are constrained by narrow views of their problems, perpetuating rigid patterns of false solutions. The unique feature of this approach is that it focuses on solutions, not problems, and it aims to help clients achieve their preferred outcomes by evoking and co-constructing solutions to their problems.

In the last decade, the solution-focused approach and strength-based perspective have become a popular modality in social work practice. Rather than focusing on problems, the solution-focused approach emphasizes on the time when the problem was not a problem. Using this approach, the social worker assists clients to identify and build resources that they can use to address their problems. Moreover, by focusing on progress rather than problems, this approach is considered to be strength oriented.

The solution-focused approach assumes that all client’s situations also have with them potential solutions. Solution-focused practitioners assume that people who seek service are
capable of behaving effectively but that they have been blunted by a negative mind set (Nichols, 2014). Further, Nichols (2014) states that most often problems are viewed by the client as overwhelming; and that other times, the problems are unnoticed or dismissed as trivial. The techniques of a solution-focused approach assists clients to see that there are times when problems are not occurring, and those times will assist them in finding solutions. In my experience, I witnessed many child and family case workers assisting clients to find resources and using those resources to find solutions to client’s problems. There are numerous community-based organizations that are utilizing solution-focused approaches through their service delivery model. Nichols (2014) wrote that more recently, therapists have questioned the emphasis on the model and speculated that qualities of the therapist-client relationship may be at the heart of the model’s effectiveness. This has led to a call for greater collaboration with clients so that their feelings are acknowledged and validated before solution-focused techniques are introduced. The client-worker relationship is the key.

Social workers should convey acceptance of the client’s positions and perspectives rather than making judgement on who is right and who is wrong. Saleebey (1996) contends that clients must be viewed by considering their capacities, talent, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes. These factors may be dashed and distorted due to life circumstances, oppression and trauma. Cohen (1999) argues that professionals, trained to view their clients as human beings using their strengths and resources to cope with adversity, have a much better chance of assisting their clients to find the means to improve their situations. In the past, many approaches focused on how to fix problems and emphasized the weaknesses and limitations of the client. These approaches have been challenged to focus on positive perspectives that
emphasize the strengths, capacities and abilities of the individual in a family with complex circumstances.

Despite its evidence-based success as well as diverse application in social work practice, critics question whether practitioners using the solution-focused approach are really understanding the client’s reality. It is based on conversations when they are focused on optimism. Saleebey (1996) argues that, despite its strengths, a solution-focused perspective essentially downplays or ignores the reality of presenting problems. Nichols (2014) outlines, that focusing on insistently upbeat dialogues, have the effect of silencing people’s doubt and pain. He asks the question: can a solution-focused therapist find ways to honor client perceptions that do not fit the formula? Can client trust the feedback of therapists who never challenge and question them? (Nicholas, 2014). These are interesting challenges to consider regarding this approach.

2.5 How the Practice and Theory Integrate or are Integrated

During my practicum, I witnessed different family situations and circumstances (e.g., poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence) impacting many children and their families. Different theories and approaches were needed to integrate with each unique family situation and to carry out case management. Given the uniqueness of each family’s situation, it is crucial that the practitioners and agencies understand the circumstances of their clients in order to apply and use an appropriate theoretical framework.

While working as a student in the child welfare system, I also used the principles and knowledge of Indigenous approaches to understand the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system. The root causes of the majority of child abuse and neglect cases in Saskatchewan are related to the past history of colonization. The relationship between traumatic colonial experiences and impact of ongoing intergenerational trauma experienced by
many Indigenous communities is the major cause of the high representation of Indigenous children in care (Champagne, 2008). Champagne (2008) believes that an Indigenous approach must be closely constructed to fit with Indigenous historical, political, and cultural experiences. At the same time, it is important to recognize the positive achievements of the Indigenous communities.

An Indigenous approach maintains the rights of Indigenous people to make sense of their time and place in this world. Social work theory and practice continues to be culturally challenged by Indigenous people globally and locally (Young, McKenzie, Omore, Schjelderup and Walker, 2014). Indigenous knowledges and worldviews are particularly important in relation to child welfare protection because of the over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in care. Considering that Indigenous culture is an important element to culturally competent social work practice in the child welfare system, all social work practice should be guided by education and knowledge of the history and contemporary realities of Indigenous people (Stewart, Mika, Cooper, Bidois and Hoskins, 2015). Colonization and urbanization have contributed to the erosion of cultural practices and knowledge of Indigenous people. An example outside of Canada relates to the breakdown of traditional cultural practices that would have once provided alternatives to violence being described as a crisis for New Zealand’s Maori people. This breakdown has caused the loss of protective factors which would otherwise have prevented Maori child maltreatment (Stewart et al., 2015).

The Maori perspective and knowledge in relation to child welfare highlights a historical context that provides an understanding of the present situation in Canada (e.g. high rates of poverty, high rates of violence, child maltreatment). Canadian Indigenous people share a similar history of colonialism (Coates, 2008) with the Maori of New Zealand. Intergenerational traumas
such as child removal, social dislocation, community dislocation, related mental health problems and more generally, the loss of power and community cohesion are all associated with colonization. The residential school system is now widely regarded as reflecting an assimilationist policy, which was intended to break down Canadian Indigenous culture, and force the integration of Indigenous people into white society (Libesman, 2004).

Understanding the traumatic effects of colonialism helps make the connection to the contemporary issues in child welfare; particularly the over-representation of children in care. Any service delivery model must be culturally sensitive, and that must also include contextual cultural sensitivities. During my practicum placement, I found that Indigenous perspectives associated with past and cultural knowledge were consistent and evident in all the practice related to case planning and management. The Ministry of Social Services funded community-based organizations that are practicing and working with Indigenous communities by offering programs and services which are developed collaboratively with Indigenous peoples. This assists in enhancing their tradition and cultural heritage. Prairie Spirit Connection in Regina, Saskatchewan, is an organization established in 1996 that is focused on improving the social, cultural and economic well-being of Indigenous people through sharing information, creating awareness, and through offering personal support, training, coaching and mentoring in the context of cultural awareness and healing.

2.6. Generalist Practitioner

In child protection, the generalist practitioner must continuously integrate theories and practice from different perspectives. While a generalist social work practice maintains a broad-based view of human functioning, this approach also helps people to become resourceful within and their environments. Generalist social work comprises interventions within different elements
of social systems including: society, community, the neighborhood, organizations, groups, the family and the individual. Generalist practice requires an expansive integration of policy, research, and theories.

During my practicum, I had the opportunity to observe many child protection workers practicing with children, individuals, and families and collaborating with groups, organizations, jurisdictions and communities at large in a variety of settings. In addition, I witnessed the emergence of many child protection issues associated with poverty, mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuses. Generalist practitioners in child welfare utilize different related theories based on the presenting situation and circumstances. Specifically, I utilized several theoretical concepts by observing and becoming involved with different cases and family conditions. Practicing generalist social work gives social workers an opportunity to utilize diverse social work theories. At the Child and Family Services division, social work practices are guided by General System Theory, Attachment Theory, Developmental Theory, and Critical Thinking Theory. The social work practitioners who work in this area of practice require the knowledge and skills of these theories in order to facilitate case management.

While in this placement, I witnessed children with unique and complex psychosocial, emotional, and physical needs as well as social work practices involved in assessing their behaviors, feelings, emotions and cultural connections. As a general practitioner, it is important to take a holistic approach to the individual client. This approach includes identifying what is causing their behavior, identifying what is happening to clients, and identifying what changes could be useful. Thus, no single theory can be used to understand all of these related aspects. Therefore, I utilized different theoretical approaches. This experience provided me with an appreciation for on-going professional development.
A common strategy I gained from my observations, was how to employ strength-based and solution-focused approaches. The Ministry of Social Services, Child and Family Services division particularly focuses on solution-focused and strength-based approaches while working with parents. The practitioners conduct strengths and needs assessments on both children and their parents every three months. Based on these assessments, a case plan is developed, and progress is reviewed with a focus on the strengths and needs of an individual situation or child.

Client-centered practice is another important element in the child and family welfare system. To promote client self-determination, it is important to ensure the meaningful participation of clients throughout the case management process. They must be informed and involved in the services that they are provided. During my practicum, this client-centered practice was consistently applied at different stages of case planning. The case workers ensured the meaningful participation of family members in each and every step of case planning and utilized their knowledge, strength, and interest, while paying attention to culture and values. For example, most of the Indigenous families had access to programs and services that helped them to reconnect with their cultural heritage. The Child and Family Services Program also offers these families access to Elders, ceremonies, traditional teachings and crafts. I encountered some parents who were reluctant to participate; however, building cooperation and engaging parents through a client-centered approach is the first priority in the management of each case. The child and family case workers have a wide range of skills and strategies designed to meet the needs of the children and families with whom they work.

The next section of this report will examine relevant principles of child and family service programing in Saskatchewan.
Chapter 3. Primary Principles of the Child and Family Services Programs

The Ministry of Social Services Child Protection Services Manual (2019) states that the Child and Family Services division integrates three core principles: safety, wellbeing, and permanency for children in need of protection as well as family preservation. These core overarching components of safety, wellbeing, and permanency of children guide the Ministry’s mandate within a multidisciplinary setting.

3.1 Safety

Child safety is of paramount importance in the public child welfare system and includes efforts to achieve safety from further abuse and neglect. Child and Family Services utilizes structured decision-making tools to assess a child’s safety. These tools are designed to provide workers with a mechanism to quickly assess the potential for harm to the child in the immediate or near future and take quick action to protect them if needed. This mechanism determines the level of immediate danger to a child. If immediate danger of harm to a child is present, the process considers which interventions are needed to mitigate the threat to the child. Similarly, this tool also utilizes risk assessment to assess future risk. Safety and risk assessment complement each other but do differ. A safety assessment looks at present conditions and dangers resulting from those conditions. Risk assessment looks at the likelihood of the future risk of child maltreatment. The risk assessment tool includes measures of present safety, but all focus is upon the prediction of future harm. Administering these tools requires a substantial investment in time. Workers are obligated to spend significant time collecting data to complete the assessment scores. In some cases, these assessments may be completed without the involvement of parents.
Child welfare workers have always utilized some kind of assessment to determine whether individual children are safe in their homes. The most recent trend has been towards a collaborative approach and a movement away from the assumption of Euro-Christian values within traditional family structures (Callahan and Swift, 2012).

3.2 Well-Being

The idea of well-being refers to the physical health and the behavioral, social and emotional functioning of children. A child’s well-being is related to their quality of life which considers four domains: physical health and development, emotional well-being, behavioral well-being and social well-being. Rees (2017) states that childrens’ wellbeing is an important concept, because it provides an indication of the quality of childhood as a life stage in its own right and because childhood is the foundation for the individual’s future life as an adult.

Conceptualizing of child well-being in the area of child and family services would consider the absence of various forms of neglect, abuse or exploitation. However, over the duration of the case, the focus of the workers should shift from the conditions of risk for maltreatment towards promoting the child’s well-being. Child well-being is defined as a set of dimensions involving a child's environment and individual adjustment (Rees, 2017). During my practicum, I saw social workers utilizing indicators to systematically measure well-being of each child. These indicators of well-being included emotional/behavioral aspects, medical aspects, physical aspects, and cognitive development. In addition, there is an emphasis on educational progress which describes the conditions of the child’s life and outlines outcomes and goals to improve the well-being status of a child. The children’s clinical, functional and environmental assessments are the main indicators to measure well-being scales. The field of research on children’s subjective well-being has expanded rapidly over the last few decades.
3.3 Permanency

Permanency refers to stability when a child is in care and reunification with family or placement through adoption and guardianship. The idea of permanency gives emphasis to long-lasting relationships that every child needs to flourish. The literature states that children raised in a stable and nurturing environment have a better outcome as adults (Holden, 2009). Ideally, children should live safely with their family of origin but, in the realm of child welfare, permanency focuses on the kind of relationships that provide consistent and stable, love and guidance over time. The Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (2019) defines permanency as:

… an enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership; the child or youth has a sense of belonging and affiliation to a family/extended family with significant community connections and provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being (Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2019)

The permanency planning movement started with the recognition that moving children from foster family to foster family could potentially cause them more harm than returning them to their biological families (Lewandowski, 2018).

The Ministry of Social Services, Child and Family Welfare division maintains the belief that permanency as the most important value in the child welfare system. The system believes a child or youth in care achieves permanency when she/he is either safely re-united with their biological family or a permanent transfer of guardianship has occurred; this may involve the extended family. Lewandowski (2018) had developed a model of permanency planning that lists a hierarchy of permanency choices. Reunification is the first choice, followed by adoption,
guardianship, planned long-term care, and independent living. However, Lewandowski (2018) notes that, rather than strict adherence, it is important to weigh what is in the best interests of the child and family.

The workers at the Ministry work towards permanency through various methods. Many children receiving services within the child welfare system remain with their family of origin. However, achieving permanency is the greatest challenge for the Ministry and its workers. The involvement of the state and justice system, as well as the family situation, can make permanency difficult to achieve. In cases in which permanency with the biological family cannot be achieved, the Ministry strives to ensure permanency options through kinship care, extended family, legal custody, adoption, persons with sufficient interest (PSI), and long-term foster care. For Indigenous children, the Ministry collaborates with First Nations Agencies and their Bands utilizing long-term ward reviews and agency meetings to ensure permanency.

Social workers are struggling to find the appropriate type of permanent family placement and, sometimes, fail to recognize the needs of a child. Similarly, permanency decisions seem to be more focused on physical safety and legal status but not on the social and emotional well-being of a child. Therefore, the Ministry is faced with issues of overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care and interruption of permanency plan. A focus on relationship, sense of belongings and identity are the central aspects of permanency planning.

3.4 Ensuring Principles in Practice

To achieve these integrated principles previously discussed, the Child and Family Services division employs practices and case plans that are solution-focused and strength-based. To build the case plan, the child protection worker focuses on a strength-based and client-centered philosophy. The components of this approach uphold the family and individual’s
strengths and provides services that work best for them. During my practicum, I came to believe that all individuals and families have strengths and can bring about changes in their lives.

The case workers with the Ministry of Social Services attempt to execute decisions and deliver services under the mandate of *The Child and Family Services Act (1989-90)*. This is the legislation on which Child and Family Services relies to protect children from harm and to strengthen families. The Act’s primary purpose is to promote the well-being of children in need of protection. The Ministry offers appropriate services that are designed to maintain, support and preserve the family in the least disruptive manner possible (*The Child and Family Service Act*, 1989-90, p.1). The *Child and Family Services Act*, Section 11, outlines that when a child is in need of protection as a result of an action or omission by the child’s parent or guardian. Similarly, Section 13 outlines the duty to investigate and Section 14 outlines the duty to offer services to the family (*The Child and Family Service Act, 1989-90*).

The Ministry of Social Services relies heavily on its policy manuals for service delivery. These manuals outline the provisions of services for children and families. The *Children’s Services Manual 2019, Child Care Manual 2019 and the Child Protection Services Manual 2019* are the main documents that are widely used by protection workers who work in the Out of Home Care and Investigation Unit. These manuals are utilized for residential services, adoption and to achieve permanency for children. The manuals provide clear guidance for service interventions and practices to incorporate elements of various ideologies.

In particular, the strength-based ideology looks for different methods at the individual, family and community levels to facilitate their inherent capabilities and strength. Through my experience with Child and Family Services, I realized that issues related to a lack of awareness of cultural and systematic oppression was impacting clients. The CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005)
raises awareness and highlights the need for social workers to seek out opportunities for social change and justice. “Social workers advocate for change in the best interest of clients and for the overall benefit of society, the environment and global community” (CASW, 2005, p.24).

The next chapter of this report will explore practices utilized to identify determinants of presenting problems.
Chapter 4. Determinants of the Problem

Child abuse and neglect are major societal concerns that involve affected children, their families and society-at-large. The elimination of child abuse and neglect has been an ongoing goal in child welfare services. In the Canadian context, the present position of the child welfare system, with over-representation of Indigenous children, is that the system is liable for the past harms attributed to the residential school system (Lewandowski, 2018). Further, Lewandowski (2018) states that the mass removal of children from their families to residential schools and the ‘60’s scoop’ are directly connected to the over-representation of Indigenous children in Canada’s current child welfare system. The systematic apprehension of First Nations children during the era of residential schools continues to impact the lives of families and communities and, as a result, the representation of Indigenous children in child welfare system is shockingly high. Lewandowski (2018) states that researchers and child welfare professionals who seek to prevent child maltreatment should first identify the risk and protective factors established through research, and then develop interventions to reduce or ameliorate these risks. Child abuse and neglect programs tend to primarily target risk factors rather than the cause of maltreatment; this is because the exact cause of abuse and neglect is difficult to establish. There is a range of contributing factors in each different context and, due to the complexity of the interrelated casual factors, finding the exact determinant of child abuse and neglect can be difficult.

No single factor or theory can fully explain why child abuse and neglect occurs. Social structure and dynamics as well as human acts and attitudes are some of the determinant factors for abuse and neglect. In Anglo–American child protection paradigms, individuals, as opposed to communities, are considered to have primary responsibility for ensuring the well-being of their children (Cameron, Frensch, Quosai, DeGeer and Freymond, 2012). Thus, in the Canadian
context the primary cause of child abuse and neglect is usually defined as a failure in parenting. This factor is supported by the research that finds, even after controlling for poverty and social attributes, abusive and neglectful parents are more likely to be depressed, emotionally immature, or have poor parenting practices (Bywaters, Bunting, Davidson, Hanratty and Mason, 2016).

Material deprivation also considers determinants of abuse and neglect. This idea draws from the cause and effects of intergenerational poverty. This perspective states that poverty induced stress can cause parents to be overwhelmed and unable to meet the material and emotional needs of their children. The link between poverty and child neglect is strong (Bywaters et al., 2016). However, environmental factors that are largely associated with abuse and neglect includes childhood trauma, substance abuse, cognitive deficit and mental health concerns. I came from a developing country (Nepal) that still lacks resources and has rampant poverty. In situations in Nepal, I saw poverty associated with other child protection risk factors such as lack of food, mental health issues, child rearing and parenting practices and lack of parental education.

The cultural perspective of child abuse and neglect must also be taken into consideration. Culture refers to a society’s common beliefs and behaviours and includes concepts of how people should behave. During my practicum, the child rearing practices of some immigrant families were noted to conflict with the Canadian child welfare system and policies. In some cultures, what is considered abusive has more to do with a particular pattern of behaviour and child disciplinary practices. Moreover, the actual definition of who is considered to be a child can have different meanings in different cultures and social context (Reder, Duncan and Gary, 2001). Many factors can influence the meaning that parents attach to children. Reder et al. (2001) outline different paradigms of child abuse and neglect including individual determinants,
offender typology, family system, individual-environment interaction, parent-child interaction, and socio-cultural, socio-biological, learning situational, and ecological factors. During my practicum, I realized that child abuse and neglect are complex issues that requires multidisciplinary involvement. Each case of abuse and neglect reflects unique situations and circumstances. A consistent and more culturally sensitive definition of child protection is very important. There is also lack of consistency in the definition of child maltreatment, and this is a prevalent challenge in this area of practice.

Indigenous families are two times more likely to be investigated and substantiated for child neglect than the majority population, and their children are two-and-a-half to three times more likely to be removed from their homes (Ned and Frost, 2017). Child abuse and neglect statistics indicate that physical abuse is less prominent among Indigenous families but is more prevalent among Caucasian families; however, physical neglect is more often reported for Indigenous families (Ned and Frost, 2017). Ned and Frost (2017) argue for the coordinated input from government structures, child welfare workers, social workers, families, and society to address these contemporary issues in Indigenous child welfare. Understanding issues in child welfare are also associated largely with the historical context of Indigenous people. While Indigenous people represent less than 5% of the Canadian population, Indigenous children account for nearly half (48%) of children in the care of child welfare agencies (Statistics Canada, 2013; Ned and Frost, 2017). In some provinces, this overrepresentation is even more pronounced; for example, Indigenous children account for 87 and 80% of children in care in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2013; Ned and Frost, 2017). Similarly, reports indicate that Indigenous children in British Columbia are seven times more
likely to be taken into care than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2013; Ned and Frost, 2017).

4.1. Integrated Practice Strategy (IPS)

Recently, the Ministry of Social Services has launched an approach called the Integrated Practice Strategy (IPS) which primarily focuses on a flexible and individualized approach to providing child welfare services. The main objectives of this approach is to build the positive working relationships with families. It attempts to view problems away from the individual in a non-judgmental way so as to create alternative perspectives to generate change. The training components of IPS focus on the practice of family-centered, solution-focused and strength-based approaches. The strength-based perspectives takes the view that every individual has the strength to cope with problems. The Ministry of Social Services serves diverse families with multicultural backgrounds. Based on my experience as a practicum student in this setting, the solution-focused approach is applied through various stages of the cases. The process involves the case worker trying to build a collaborative relationship with the parents so change can take place. The case worker is expected to accept the clients’ positions and perspectives rather than becoming invested in who is “right” and who is “wrong.” From the worker’s perspective, the aim is to build collaboration. The language of the problem tends to be different than the language of the solution (Nichols, 2014). Solution-focused approaches assume that people are resilient and resourceful. Nichols (2014) further believes that strength-based and solution-focused approaches are both rooted in the belief that capacity rather than pathology should be the primary focal point of the helping process. Similarly, the family-centered approach is based on the recognition of every family having strengths and case workers believing in the strength and knowledge of the family. I believe that this new strategy has promise.
Chapter 5. Implications for the Client/Social Worker Relationship

The Ministry of Social Services training manuals propose that the family-centered and strength-based approaches are the best ways to support families, children, and the community. All three approaches (family-centered, strength-based and solution-focused) recognize the broader aspects of the issues for the families and individuals who are going through difficult circumstances. From the beginning of the assessment stage through case planning to case management, the family-centered approach helps families to engage in services as well as build collaborative relationships with social workers. These practices are informed by the assessment process, which is more collaborative than a strict investigation response would be. This approach is one of the preferred responses to child protection concerns. This perspective is strongly embedded in most of the policies and basic trainings and child protection workers are expected to implement them throughout the different steps of each case plan. Similarly, this approach helps families to recognize broader systematic problems within their family system that may be hindering success for them. They develop a broader understanding of the causes of their problems which may have initially been perceived by a client as long-term in nature. Every family has problems and goes through various dynamics, but these can be deconstructed and explored through collaboration and acknowledging the strengths of each individual and family.

A review of the literature suggests at least three pathways by which strength-based practices benefit clients: by influencing the extent of client’s engagement in program services, by increasing family efficacy and empowerment, and lastly, by enhancing family relationship through building capacity and social support networks (Green, McAllister and Tarte, 2004).
These techniques are organized by developing meaningful well-focused goals from the client’s frame of reference and generating solutions through collaboration between worker and client.

The residential school system left a dark history that eroded the trusting relationship between governments and Indigenous people that has perpetuated negative sentiments towards child and family welfare services. As residential schools began closing in the mid-20th century, the responsibility for First Nations children shifted from residential schools to the child welfare system. Ned and Frost (2017) argue that beginning in the mid-1950s, provincial child welfare system started to operate on-reserve, with this period now known as the 60’s scoop. At this time, thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their communities and adopted by non-Indigenous families. By 1980, status First Nations children, who made up 2% of Canada’s child population, represented more than 12% of children in care (Ned and Frost, 2017).

Sensitizing front line workers to Indigenous history is of utmost importance. This generation of child removal had devastating consequences for First Nations communities and families. It disrupted the intergenerational transmission of healthy parenting skills, dismantled the communal system of caring for children, instilled doubts about traditional parenting, and resulted in negative behaviors acquired in abusive, neglectful and culturally inappropriate settings. The trauma associated with historic child removal has been linked to substance abuse, depression, suicide, and other psychological problems (Ned and Frost, 2017). These challenges are compounded by the structural context, including continued restriction on First Nations with respect to control over lands, resources and economic activity.

The strong and collaborative working relationship between families and case workers specifically focuses on the identification of children and family’s strengths, their knowledge, and finding solutions together. This collaboration helps to rebuild the relationship between the
government and families, which has been significantly impacted by First Nations’ history within the child welfare system. The pattern can be changed with effective family-based interventions, especially with case workers and agencies who know how to build on family strengths. Now, they can find alternatives to break the negative cycle and find a healthier lifestyle. Collaboration helps to find solutions in partnership rather than imposing the social worker’s own perspective. Knowledge of the family is important in case planning and it is important to incorporate this knowledge. To ensure this, the Ministry of Social Services utilizes Integrated Practice Strategy, Family Services Agreements, Residential Services Agreements, Solution-Focused / Strength-Based and Client-Centered approaches to resolve the conflict with families and build positive/supportive working relationships.

People with childhood histories of trauma, abuse and neglect make up almost the entire criminal justice population (Teplin, et al., 2002). Similarly, physical abuse and neglect are associated with very high rates of arrest for violent offences. Three-quarters of perpetrators of child sexual abuse report that they themselves were sexually abused during childhood (Romano and De Luca, 1997). This is reflective of cycles of violence and child maltreatment in the community. As such, family-focused, strength-based and solution-focused approaches help case workers to use family strengths, enact positive working experiences, and facilitate family interactions that help reverse the negative pattern of victims/abuser that has unfortunately been established. Thus, the approach helps to break the cycle and is safe to use in efforts to establish a favorable environment for family members and case workers.

The next chapter of this report will include a discussion about professional values and how those values impact service delivery within child welfare systems.
Chapter 6. Values

Understanding organizational, professional and personal values, and how they impact the
day-to-day work of case workers and their working relationships with families, is crucial.
Applying values in practice is considered a significant challenge in many situations. Values are
essential to practice and set the boundaries for determining professional responsibilities and what
is appropriate in practice. It is, therefore, important to be able to reflect on and understand the
part they play in influencing all aspects of policy and practice, as well as in strategic decisions
through which interventions are actually put into operation. In this chapter, I discuss my own
values as well as the perception of client values within the delivery of social services.

Coming from Nepal, which has a totally different social and political context, I hold the
value of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of persons as my first priority. I am fortunate
to practice my social work skills and live in a multicultural social context. I believe that each and
every individual has unique qualities, culture, norms, and values. My values align with the
Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and guideline for ethical practice. Once
I came to Canada, I saw it was rich in terms of multiculturalism and I feel fortunate to live and
learn here; this experience has further developed my social work perspective. “Social work is
founded on a long-standing commitment to respect the inherent dignity and individual worth of
all persons” (CASW, 2005, p.4.). Social harmony is comprised of diversities, and with increasing
multiculturalism in Canada, it is crucial to acknowledge the value of the individual. I take this
value very seriously. I learn from differences of people and have had the opportunity to practice
social work in an environment that is rich in diversity.

Another value on which I place utmost importance is the value of service for humanity,
which also aligns with the CASW Code of Ethics (2005). Service to humanity means that a
social worker upholds public service by helping people in need to address, manage, and resolve various social problems. I was born in the developing country of Nepal and grew up in a middle-class family in a very remote area. I saw first-hand the plight and sufferings of people in need and that shaped my desire to bring impact-based services to those sections of the population and work to create a just society. “Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits” (CASW, 2005, p.5). I try to acknowledge that all people are equal and worthy and try to support an egalitarian relationship with the people I serve. These values align with professional social work values and principles, which provides consistency in my practice at my own individual level as a social worker.

My personal and professional values are also consistent with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services principles and beliefs. Several of the values incorporated in the child welfare system in Saskatchewan are also in accordance with those of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). I noticed similarities between social work values and my own personal and professional values. I was continually made aware of how they intersect with practice, which provided me with a sense of satisfaction, as well as the motivation to implement impact-based services.

Anti-oppressive practice is another value that I hold, and this approach to practice focuses on working to end socio-economic oppression at different levels of society. Healy (2014) states that anti-oppressive practice is a critical social work approach that draws on critical social science theories. It is informed by social justice values, including incorporation of the experiences, voices and views of oppressed people. As a generalist practitioner, I believe in the idea of creating a just society. The legacy of residential school, domestic violence, gender discrimination, social inclusion/exclusion, disability, marginalization, and other issues need to
be addressed through anti-oppressive practice to minimize power hierarchies, and to minimize the negative impacts on those with marginalized identities (Stevens, 2016).

During this practicum, I came across many Indigenous families that are over-represented in the child welfare system. The data show that the majority of Indigenous children, youth and families are struggling with chronic challenges such as poverty, mental health issues, housing issues and addictions. Anti-oppressive practice clearly outlines that it is not the parents who cause these issues but the system for not providing adequate resources and supports. I realized that child and family services workers do not just help, interact, and empower families; but are also concerned with reforming the society in the ways that would allow most people to fully participate in society. They facilitate support and advocate for those who are marginalized and oppressed so that they can have opportunities that are currently denied to them. Social work goes beyond just making things better to identifying and recognizing problems in the individual, family, community and societal contexts. The anti-oppressive approach sensitizes social workers to establish links between families and the institutional barriers that make it necessary to take action.

I met a couple of the families during my practicum who were uncooperative with their case workers. I believed there was no way to collaborate with these families, who were very resistant and had negative sentiments towards the case workers. We came across many resistant families and had zero collaboration with them at first. As a practicum student, I shadowed workers during the investigation process as well as during case planning and during the offering of supports. I developed a personal belief about why these families would not cooperate despite all of the supports and resources being offered. The communication and interaction with parents were characterized by mistrust, avoidance, and adamant rejection. I came to generalize the
problem by associating it with their mental health, negative sentiments, and attitudes.

Coming from a developing country, I was exposed to a hegemonic medical model that
aimed to treat mental health issues rather than exploring their cause. However, after efforts of
joining and engaging, which are outlined by the Integrated Practice Strategy, it enabled the case
worker and the family to get ready for discussion. To get to this point, the workers moved
through several steps of learning the family history and deconstructing the cycle of the problems,
and relating these issues with support systems. These learning opportunities introduced
conflicting ideas to me while discussing the issues and circumstances these families were going
through. I was seeing that mental health issues and substance abuse were associated at the
individual level, but I had been avoiding the past experience of the family and the impacts of
intergenerational trauma. I surprised myself by discovering how quickly I had judged some
families without looking at their colonial trauma history and critically examining their current
situations. This experience affected me deeply and reminded me that the focus should be on
reaching clients and understanding where they come from. The CASW Code of Ethics (2005)
reinforces this point: “Social workers strive for impartiality in their professional practice, and
refrain from imposing their personal values, views and preferences on clients” (p.6). The goal is
to provide services to the client, not the worker, so the focus is on reaching clients and
understanding from where they come from.

This experience was a valuable learning opportunity to sensitize myself to various
situations and family circumstances. Further, it affected my judgemental values and helped me
consider the different social and political contexts of Canada. It helped me realize my own
personal values and understand how they were shaped by my own culture and social context. I
realized that not only individual challenges, but also systematic oppression, have played a role in
the lives of the families I encountered. I also became aware that, as workers, we must not impose services and ideas that are successful with other clients in the same circumstances; we can not assume that every client is the same. I realize there are systemic causes to some barriers that many individuals experience. Not every client with whom we work has the same roots of their problems or experiences them in the same way. I completely disagree with automatically framing clients’ problems. A further idea that needs to be considered is that every client may not define their problems in the same way as others may.

6.1. The Client’s Values

Because Canada is rich in terms of multiculturalism and diversity, it is also important to recognize the client’s values. It is not sensible to believe that one set of values applies to each and every client who accesses services. It is also clear that social workers may be challenged in some instances to separate their personal values from their professional responsibilities and their client’s values.

As discussed throughout this report, there is an over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection and this means that the majority of the clients involved in the system are also Indigenous. However, other clients who are not Indigenous represent a range of ethnicities, immigrant families, economic backgrounds, languages, and cultures. Despite the importance of shared professional standards and ethics in social work, there are inevitable differences between the personal values, religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds of social workers and their clients. One of the main value conflicts that happens during interactions is due to people having different meanings of reality and understandings. These meanings are shaped by their own cultural values and ideologies and might contradict each other even when making decisions in the best interests of the client. These conflicts are basically referred to as ethical
dilemmas. During my practicum, I found differences in beliefs, values, and meanings over various subjects. These are the potential causes of conflict between clients and workers. For example, in some cultures, particularly immigrant families, physical discipline of children is acceptable. Further, parents may hold a firm opinion on physical discipline. Power and control are huge issues for those families where a patriarchal value system is common. In such cases, the social worker who holds certain professional values may face an ethical dilemma; on the other side, the clients may view it differently and struggle to understand. While addressing such situations, it is important that the social worker must realize his/her power; this is a crucial aspect of social work practice. Similarly, the case worker also needs to critically analyze the relevant and culturally specific roles and situations to reduce the conflict.

The next chapter in this report will focus on a discussion of the skills that I gained through my experiences in this placement.
Chapter 7. Skills Gained

At the beginning of this practicum, my main objective was to build my knowledge and general understanding about provincial child protection services in Saskatchewan. This practicum placement was an opportunity to practice my social work knowledge in a different social and political context. I directly participated in different family situations, collaborated with different service providers and professionals; all of which further strengthened my understanding of social work practices. This rewarding experience at the Ministry of Social Services has created interest to continue moving forward in the area of child and family services and contribute towards impact-based services. This chapter describes the skills that I gained during my practicum placement.

7.1. The Language of Change in the Therapeutic Interview

One of the most useful skills that I developed during this placement is how to interview clients in a therapeutic manner. This encompasses the way we ask questions, what questions clients ask of us, how forthright and straightforward they are, the compliments given, matching with the client’s thinking and language, and everything else that goes in to make up the interview. Social workers in child welfare, in particular, must give attention to their relationship with clients. In most cases, the best result is achieved by building a positive relationship with clients. I learned this skill by observing other workers; in some cases, I was also involved in discussions during assessment and case planning. In most cases with therapists/caseworkers, the interview became the intervention which involves meaningful interaction in assisting the client in acknowledging the situation. This emphasizes that human face-to-face contact is what makes the most difference rather than grand interventions, strategies and plans (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). Even a child protection investigation can be therapeutic, and it can be valuable way to
develop a family’s understanding of the issues in order to offer support and services. The interview is the intervention precisely because it is the relationship between the worker and clients that is important to affect change.

7.2 Reflective Practice Skills

Reflective practice is an experimental learning process for me. During my practicum placement, I came across the real, complex and very difficult situations that social work practitioners are dealing with. As a generalist child welfare practitioner, I learned to reflect on the situation and expand my thinking to other forthcoming situations. I engaged in group supervision and reviews with workers and supervisors, which helped me to develop my reflective practice skills. I also realized that developing reflective practice skills is the key to continued professional development and acknowledge the value of lifelong learning. Reflective practice skills are of great benefit for increasing self-awareness and developing a better understanding of others. This practice is more like thinking about what you are doing while you are doing it. Similarly, reflective practice skills also develop creative thinking skills. I also realized that it helps to identify gaps in practitioners’ skills and knowledge. Reflective skills allow us to plan, articulate, evaluate and learn about complex issues. In the social work literature, reflection is often tied to the use of self and emotional intelligence (Ferguson, 2017).

7.3. Skills in Structured Decision-Making Tool (SDM)

I had the opportunity to participate in three days of SDM (Structured Decision-Making) training. The use of this assessment tool provides caseworkers with the means to focus on information gathering and validate each decision. Furthermore, the assessment tool facilitates communication between workers and supervisors, as well as between community partners and stakeholders. SDM increases the caseworker’s consistency in assessment and case planning. The
model and its assessment tools are facilitated through a computer-based system which called Linkin.

7.4 Accepting Challenges as a Part of Building Strength

Another skill I realized during my practicum was accepting challenges and using available resources and knowledge that has been gained from theory. The Child and Family Services division provides a supportive environment and develop workers’ confidence through a variety of training opportunities and regular supervision. Using positive language, joining, relationship building, and listening to clients are all techniques that seem rational when working with parents from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, exploring emotions, family dynamics, stressors, anxiety, and the continuing impact of Indigenous history are some of the other factors that need to be taken into consideration. Some of the parents are very resistant and volatile. Dealing with these parents is challenging, but listening to them and employing self-reflection techniques, as well as having a willingness to take on challenges, provides strength to the worker engaged in child welfare practice.

7.5 Case Management

Case management is an effective way of managing services to the client. On-going case management involves maintaining long-term supportive relationships with clients, checking on their needs, reviewing their progress with them, conducting frequent case conferences/meetings, making periodic reviews, and connecting them with several services to address multi-faceted concerns. Similarly, maintaining paperwork for checks and balances is also an important part of case management. This practicum provided me with the opportunity to get involved in these different steps of case management. I learned how to complete these elements of case management and gained a general understanding of the required process.
7.6 Understanding Family

It is important to understand the family with whom you are working. Child protection social workers work with families from diverse backgrounds from different cultures, and with different norms and values. In Canada, which is rich in terms of multiculturalism, it is crucial to have an understanding of the family for whom case planning occurs. Having a good understanding of family values, norms and culture also helps when building the working relationship. Once a positive relationship is built, there can be a smoother flow in each and every aspect of case planning and service.

The previous chapters of this report have documented my learning and skill building within this practicum placement; set within the context of an exploration of relevant social work theories and approaches. The final chapter of this document will summarize this learning, with a particular emphasis on my own personal reflection and challenges.
Chapter 8. Conclusion

This practicum provided me with a rewarding experience to practice social work skills in the child protection field. I have had the opportunity to develop confidence to practice social work skills in a completely different social and political environment. I had the chance to participate in a variety of trainings as well as to participate in other related professional development opportunities. Moreover, I met diverse families and got the chance to listen to their stories and observe their family circumstances. Most of these situations were challenging but I saw the significant and positive impact of the strength-based and family-centered approach in practice. Similarly, there were opportunities to utilize some of the core and applicable social work theories in practice. Families coming from different cultural backgrounds have different beliefs, values, orientations and traditions which gave me the opportunity to learn from their histories. Moreover, these opportunities helped to strengthen my confidence, encouraged reflections and promoted continuous professional and personal growth. My focus remains as a generalist practitioner touching on many aspects of contemporary social problems. This practicum also gave me a sense of satisfaction in terms of seeing changes in clients and family lives. I observed and believe that all people have the strength to change. One major aspect I saw in this placement was the importance of building a strong relationship with your clients, listening to them and validating their feelings and emotions.

Within this practicum, I touched on issues of domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse. As a generalist practitioner, it is crucial to meet the needs of the different people I serve. I had the opportunity to conduct an in-depth analysis of the feelings, thoughts, culture, social context, historical background, and level of understanding of various individuals. This holistic approach broadened my level of knowledge and helped me to see things from a
global perspective. Specifically, I had the opportunity to develop a comparative lens to see these issues; I grew up in a totally different social context and after 28 years found myself in a practicum in the Canadian social context. Consideration of the social work experience in two different social contexts provided me a broad spectrum of knowledge and learning based on differences. It was challenging but I also found it a rewarding experience.

8.1. Personal Reflection and Challenges

My practicum with Child and Family Services was a rewarding experience. The exposure that I gained from this practicum allowed me to acquire knowledge on child welfare at the provincial level. I saw the direct influence of the political and economic context of a country on its welfare system and its changing policies and legislations. I observed the legacy of a particular child welfare system and experienced different family situations and individual circumstances. The experience transformed my knowledge and perspectives on the profession of social work. I saw numerous social issues and factors associated with this area of practice including mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and the impact of the residential school system; which is largely responsible for the over-representation of Indigenous families in the welfare system. I viewed the importance of an anti-oppressive and solution-focused approach, as well as strength-based social work practice in these situations. Similarly, I realized, that developing relationships with clients and families and cultivating an improved understanding, are imperative elements for improvements in the system. The philosophies that guide the child welfare system helped me to practice in a way that is directly related to social work principles. I had the opportunity to review success stories and information from past years. The learning opportunities helped me to identify my own judgemental thoughts and led to an increased personal understanding of biases, challenges, and contemporary issues.
My perspectives on personal reflection and challenges related to child welfare are solely based on my own perceptions and what I saw during the practicum. These lines are drawn from my own analysis, completion of literature review, and my observations of existing practices. I now offer some modest recommendations.

8.2 Case Management Practice

Child abuse and neglect are mostly associated with human behaviour, situations and a cultural context. Every case and decision made are based on a rigid computer-based technology system called Structured Decision Making (SDM), operating through Linkin software. Decisions are made by ticking on the boxes. This means there is less critical thinking and less situational and contextual analysis. This practice may seem credible to practitioners, administrators, and the public, making them believe in appropriate intervention when this might not actually be the case. It is important to record information, but contextual analysis is most important when making decisions related to cases. First, there is no basis of contextual knowledge about child welfare decision-making that a so-called “expert system developer” can incorporate into their digital system. This is clearly a major problem that hinders any of the current efforts to improve decision-making, as the practitioner is forced to make decisions purely based on computer system outputs.

Similarly, protection workers make risk assessment decisions within a statistically established figure of what may be expected when assessing risk level. The risk assessment also includes a practitioner’s general knowledge with an assumed objectivity without looking over associated aspects of issues and concerns. Lawrence (2004) states that decisions are made based on this assumed “objectivity” with regards to the accumulation of research knowledge about abuse, practice knowledge, and ideas about current cultural child rearing practice. Assumed
“objectivity” is now becoming a bias at the heart of child protection practice. For example, the division has a large representation of Indigenous children in the welfare system. The system assumes objectivity regarding the cycle of violence, alcohol and substance abuse and the impact of the residential school system. Similarly, one of the challenges in terms of child protection is to accommodate both the subjective and objective perspectives. The struggle between subjectivism and objectivism is a part of everyday conflict in child protection. For example, an interpersonal conflict can occur when two people view a situation differently. The same challenge confronts practitioners who must make defensible positivistic decisions about incidents that are socially constructed (e.g., child abuse). The social worker is faced with the impossible dilemma of having to make so-called scientific, positivist judgements while at the same time being aware of the social construction of abuse (Lawrence, 2004).

8.3 High Caseloads and Changing Frontline Practice

Case Workers in child protection environments need sufficient time with families to engage and build a collaborative working relationship and trust, so that real change can take place. However, workers are currently compelled to spend significant amounts of time managing their own system of paperwork that includes completing records, compiling the prescribed reports, writing social histories, completing periodic reviews, and making contact notes. The advantage of this tight procedural framework is that it provides checks and balances on individual practices and establishes a standard; however, it takes a significant proportion of time away from direct work with service users. It also places many limits on the social workers’ autonomy. This means that social workers may, at times, have to work in ways they do not necessarily agree with. Sometimes, it can feel as if a child protection agency’s priority is as much about protecting the agency itself than it is about protecting children. At times, the relative
inflexibility of the bureaucratic system can itself seem oppressive or even abusive (Beckett, 2003). Beckett (2003) further states that when procedures become the primary focus of concern, a dangerous and false sense of security can develop. Practitioners then have a tendency to have faith in the formal process and not in the work done with and by families and their communities. This also weakens the relationship between case worker and clients. Thus, it is important that case workers be provided with smaller caseloads and provided more time to work directly with the children and families whom they serve.

Similarly, case worker stress and overload may result in poor decision-making and, particularly, reactive thinking in some of the cases involving immediate risk. Situations may be seen from a management perspective, which rushes individuals from one crisis to the next without addressing underlying problems. They fail to develop long-term plans to address the root cause of the issue at hand. The child protection system tends to be well organized for fear of failure and dominated by strong voices of researchers, policy makers, academics and bureaucrats (Cameron et al., 2012).

8.4 Legal Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect

Social workers primarily deal with physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, but it is important to separate these forms of abuse. Similarly, workers must consider the consequences of abuse and neglect for children, and the harm they may experience. Different types of maltreatment often coexist, and the boundaries between them can often be blurred. Child and family case workers sometimes try to determine whether abuse has taken place but cannot rely on physical symptoms. In some situations, injuries may be symptomatic of abuse but may also have a non-abuse explanation. Many types of abuse may also not have physical symptoms. In addition, there may be an established condition or injury that does have a non-
accidental explanation. Thus, it is important to first understand the social context in order to get to the nature and seriousness of the abuse. Definitions of various kinds of abuses and the way to recognize them and their impact draws attention to the overlapping nature of the different forms of child maltreatment. It is important to consider not just an incident in isolation but in the context in which it occurred. Even the interview or investigation process is largely criticized, viewing social work through a judicial lens and highly dependent on legal definitions. This emphasis on legal definitions in the creation of policy results in rigid operations that exercise legal authority over social workers’ knowledge and experience.

8.5 Interagency Multidisciplinary Work

Child protection work involves various professionals, which presents a challenge for clear understanding and communication. The problem can be experienced in a number of ways, including major interagency practice conflicts as well as theoretical conflicts. The theoretical problem may be created by often-competing social systems of law, welfare, economy and medicine. Each of these separate systems operates with the exclusive use of their own theoretical approach to child protection. The effectiveness and appropriateness of this approach for decision-making for the social work profession can be challenged and questioned. Thus, a broader and more subjectivist framework is required for collaboration. The conflicting views arising from different professions have left many of child protection social workers struggling in a kind of intellectual fog. For example, alternative modes of intervention and their evaluations have been rarely been examined in depth. There are also many overlapping policies and provisions that create additional complexities in the system.

The main formal organizations involved in the child protection system include social services, police, legal, education, and health services. This multidisciplinary approach builds the
core system of child protection. The management of the problem using the interagency multidisciplinary approach continues to be the preferred method of operation to address the problem. However, each organization has a different role, responsibilities, perceptions and level of knowledge relating to child abuse. Similarly, there is also an understandable acceptance in society that there is a hierarchy of status among professions. The medical and legal professions have traditionally been dominant; whereas, social work is a relatively new profession with an eclectic knowledge base. Domestic violence organizations and child welfare agencies are increasingly making attempts to work together. Conflicting goals create major obstacles as child welfare workers focus on child safety and tend to understand parents as alleged mal-treaters, while domestic violence organizations and workers tend to trust a mother’s judgement and work to empower them in family violence situations. Thus, successful collaboration seems to depend first on identifying common shared goals, which is challenging to achieve.

8.6 Erosion of Trust

Canada’s history related to the residential school system and 60’s scoop eroded trust, understanding and solidarity within the child welfare system. The system is largely viewed with negative attitudes. The sense of loss and longing is the unfortunate reality for many Indigenous families. Many clients view the child welfare system with suspicion and distrust while recognizing that greater weight is given to formal controls and reliance on legal authority. Similarly, many parents feel quite vulnerable and powerless in relation to the child welfare system. They believe that the child welfare agency has the power to intervene in their family at any time and find themselves with little knowledge of their legal rights. Historical attempts to undermine tribal sovereignty, destroy tribal cultures, and force the assimilation of Indigenous people through their children was often masked in the language and practice of child welfare.
While awareness and historical understanding seems to have improved, the practice of child removal from Indigenous communities continues to be problematic today (Ned and Frost, 2017). Addressing the removal of Canadian Indigenous children through a policy shift did not begin until the 1980s. Thus, it is important to move from formal investigative and coercive engagement to alternative ways of knowing and engaging families. This process should focus on the development of negotiating and building positive relationships, as well as the creation of positive opportunities for social workers to interact with children and families.

8.7 Increased Parental Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is perhaps a recent addition to the list of parental concerns identified as putting children at risk for abuse and neglect and is often associated with children being removed from the home. For several years, alcohol abuse has created difficulties for families and children, but alcoholism has generally been considered a personal problem that an individual can address. However, the use of illegal drugs has more recently destroyed families and created even greater chaos in the child welfare system which will continue to plague families as well as society at large.

This is a challenging problem in families who mistreat their children and this population is considered the highest risk. Heightened risk of relapse, higher rates of intake and lengthier out-of-home placements are the adverse outcomes of the child welfare system related to substance abuse. A significant percentage of families who are experiencing substance abuse problems are known to child protection services. Similarly, parental substance abuse is increasingly recognized as a significant factor in a child coming into the Ministry’s care, and this includes newly born children as well. During my practicum, I saw substance abuse as an intergenerational issue with a treatment completion rate that may not have changed over many years. In most of
the cases of child maltreatment, parents who use drugs and abuse substances do not intend to harm their children; however, they also do not stop to consider that a single incident of child abuse can result in serious injury to their children. Similarly, the issue of child protection includes issues such as poor parenting as well as different forms of maltreatment, such as lack of parenting skills, unhealthy family life, and inconsistency of care related to a drug-centered life. Likewise, there is increased risk of violence in the family when substance abuse is present. The connection between substance use, domestic violence and child maltreatment is common in current child welfare cases.

One of the challenges is that the timing and duration of substance abuse treatment can work against parents. Such treatment programs generally adhere to a one day at a time orientation and substance abuse treatment providers can view relapse as a part of the recovery process. However, child welfare agencies can be less understanding if a relapse occurs. Furthermore, parents may not get into a treatment program until after their children are placed in out-of-home care, leaving less time to demonstrate successful recovery.

Another potential negative impact of parental drug abuse is that impacts can begin before the child is born. Maternal drug and alcohol use during pregnancy is associated with premature birth, low birth weight, and slow physical, emotional, behavioral and cognitive development. The magnitude of the exposure to the child depends on many factors, such as frequency, timing, and types of substances used during the pregnancy.

8.8 Poverty is More than lack of Resources/Money

Poverty is not simply a lack of money and resources, and is not the sole factor responsible for child maltreatment. It is important that child protection workers are aware of the difficulties faced by the parents in economically poor communities. Most poor people do not
mistreat their children and child abuse certainly does also occur in the middle and upper classes, but workers should not ignore the fact that poverty is a major stress factor. Poverty and exclusion are related to child maltreatment, but the problems child protection workers typically deal with are largely structural in origin. Poverty is a risk factor. Many of the studies related to child protection argue that families who reported to child protection often feature a single mother, an unemployed father, receive public assistance, and/or live in poor neighbourhoods. Care is required in how workers interpret those figures. I personally observed many parents and families have a poor spirit for change which is a more hidden and less realized factor. For one thing, the children in child protection registers, or reported to child protection agencies, may not necessarily accurately represent the distribution of child maltreatment. More prosperous, articulate and powerful parents may be better able to conceal child maltreatment from the authorities than those who are more socio-economically disadvantaged.

8.9 The Over-representation of Indigenous Children

While the over-representation of Indigenous families has been discussed at length, the statistics have remained the same. One difficulty in addressing this disparity is that Canada does not have a national child welfare data collection system, so analyzing comparative information is a challenge (Saskatchewan Child Welfare Review Panel Report, 2010). However, the available data clearly shows that Indigenous children are highly over-represented in child welfare agencies across the country. It is widely believed that the residential school system is one of the major factors contributing to an intergenerational cycle of abuse and neglect. This cycle is considered responsible for the continued overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the welfare system. Many people also believe that we are repeating the pattern of the past through current child welfare system. The structure is different than the residential school system, but the effect
remains the same, namely the removal of a large number of children from their culture and families. Today, there are three times more Indigenous children in care than there were in residential schools when attendance was at its highest (Saskatchewan Child Welfare Review Panel Report, 2010).

Saskatchewan has high rates of alcohol dependency and abuse and the second largest concentration of youth gang members on a per capita basis; as well as high rates of child poverty, youth crime incarceration, disability, family violence and mental health. (Saskatchewan Child Welfare Review Panel Report, 2010). These casual factors are indirectly impacting an in increasing number of child protection cases. If these factors are not effectively addressed, various interventions will be needed. And, if not addressed, the problem will never be solved, and the province will pay a heavy financial price.

Throughout history, poverty has been considered as a major cause of family disruption and placement of the children in institutions. At the beginning of the 20th century, poverty was realized to not be entirely the result of individual failures or short comings. Rycus and Hughes (1998) believe that societal, cultural and governmental institutions may play a part in causing and maintaining poverty. In other words, these institutions have caused, maintained, or failed to prevent some of the root causes of poverty such as racism, political inequalities, dependency and lack of educational and economic opportunities.

Overall, throughout this practicum experience I gained skills in therapeutic practice, personal reflective skills, incorporation of decision-making tools and case management. The work of child protection is challenging, and it takes personal strength and team work to successfully protect vulnerable children in our communities. It is worth the effort.
References


67