

**THE STRENGTH OF THE SASH: THE MÉTIS PEOPLE AND THE BRITISH  
COLUMBIA CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM**

by

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## Abstract

*The Strength of the Sash: The Métis and the Child and Family Welfare System in BC* presents a Métis perspective on the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Furthermore, this dissertation articulates a Métis alternative to MCFD services and programs based on 20 Métis research participants' stories. These participants are actively engaged in the Métis community as Elders, leaders, and social workers. This alternative is called the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. One of the major concerns for many Métis people in this province is the disappearance of our children when these children are taken into the care of MCFD. By disappearance I mean that our children, once taken into the system, are misidentified as Aboriginal or even non-Aboriginal. Once identified in these terms, Métis children are placed outside of their cultural environment, often in non-Métis homes without any cultural support. Sometimes these placements sever our children's ties to the Métis community. This dissertation addresses those missing children and the problems associated with the provincial government's use of the term "Aboriginal," not only in practice, but in its legislation and in its policies. More than a simple critique, however, this dissertation presents a Métis worldview and from that worldview develops the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. This model suggests some of the ways that Ministry workers can begin to understand Métis communities. The *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* recognizes that the Métis people in this province have kept our traditions, our ways and our worldview alive, despite continuing colonization. Our family systems are cracked but not broken by colonization. This *Model* maintains our ways of living and asserts that we have the cultural resources to best care for our children.

## **Preface**

This work is approved by:

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Earl Joseph Canada, who taught me how to walk in the world in a good way and to remember the ways of the Métis people; and to my mother, Ethel Ester Elvina Vickers-Canada, who taught me how to stand strong in the face of adversity.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my new grand-daughter Avery May Canada who is one of the beautiful Métis children wrapped safely in the arms of the Métis sash. Finally I want to thank the Great Spirit for the gift of making me Métis.

## Chapter One: Introduction

One of the most egregious issues in child welfare, not only in British Columbia but throughout Canada was the enforced separation of Aboriginal children from their parents and community during their learning years (Brian Wharf, 1994, p.7).

The number of Aboriginal children in the care of the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) of British Columbia today triples the number in care during the 1960s when government employees systematically began removing Métis, First Nations and Inuit children from their parents, homes and communities.<sup>1</sup> For the Métis people this enforced separation is compounded by the fact that many of our children who are removed from their family homes by MCFD social workers are also often misidentified by those workers. Because they are misidentified, usually under the generic catch-all phrase “Aboriginal”, there are no provisions to make sure that these children stay connected to their Métis cultural inheritance. These children are often lost to the Métis Nation and grow-up separated from their community, history and culture with no sense of who they are as Métis. To restate Wharfs’ observation in the postscript to this introduction, “One of the most egregious issues in child welfare *is* the enforced separation of Métis children from their

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<sup>1</sup> Any reference in this dissertation to First Nations people is made based on the knowledge that the First Nations and Métis people struggle with the Provincial Child Welfare system. I want to clearly articulate that I have the utmost respect for First Nations people and their desire to care for their children and families; I support and understand the need for full decision making authority in the devolution process and overall in the care of the First Nation children. First Nations people, like the Métis, must be the primary care givers, teachers, and the cultural knowledge holders for their children. Furthermore, I say to the many First Nations colleagues, friends, and relatives that as long as we struggle together and not against each other we can overcome the bonds of colonization.

parents and community”. For the Métis people this enforced separation is not merely an issue of the past, it is an egregious issue of the present.

### **Research Questions**

We, the Métis, share the experience of colonization, oppression, and marginalization from government systems and structures with First Nations peoples. The struggle that we engage in as First Nation and Métis peoples is not a battle against each other but a collective battle against a system that continues to implement colonial child welfare legislation, policy and practice. This system continues to marginalize and oppress Métis and First Nation peoples. Until the Government of British Columbia officially acknowledges our distinct identity and respects our sovereignty, their Ministries will continue the process of colonization. In order to present a Métis perspective on this colonization and a Métis alternative to this current system the following questions guide this research:

How can a Métis worldview, cultural knowledge and values improve the care of Métis children placed in British Columbia’s foster care system, especially those placed in non-Métis homes?

How can MCFD’s system incorporate Métis cultural knowledge in their policies and practices for Métis children in foster care?

How can social workers provide culturally appropriate, culturally safe care to Métis children and families?

While one of my main concerns in this dissertation is with the Métis experience of colonization from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), I want to acknowledge that this colonization is a systemic problem. It is not about individuals. Throughout this dissertation my critique is levelled at this system and, when necessary, at the

maintenance of legislation, policies and practices that oppresses the Métis people.

Nevertheless, I have encountered many people within MCFD who champion the Métis cause, who recognize the colonial injustices and who are doing everything in their power to bring about a better social order for Métis people living in BC. As Kundouqk [Jacquie Green] and Qwul'sih'yah'maht [Robina Thomas] (2009) note, "Anti-oppressive *practice* is not enough. We cannot decide when or when not to practice in a good way; it must be about living – anti-oppressive living. Anti-oppressive social work, in essence, is A Way of Life" (p. 35).

Sometimes the most oppressive activities are perpetuated in the name of expediency.

Properly identifying Métis children in care takes time and effort that some MCFD workers believe they cannot spare, but from my perspective an extra minute, hour, day, week, month or year spent identifying a Métis child and connecting that child with the Métis community (with aunties, uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers) is well worth the effort. Such effort defies the limits of economic or time management measures. Our survival hangs in the balance. One misidentified Métis child is a child lost. Several misidentified Métis children are a Nation lost. These lost and misidentified children mean that we cannot even report numbers to MCFD. This truly is a problem beyond all measure. That one child is worth more to us, the Métis people, than any dollar value.

MCFD's colonizing activities are intimately connected to other colonial government practices across Canada (the sixties scoop and the residential schools come to mind). Thus this introduction frames MCFD's colonial practices, especially that of child removal, in terms of broader, trans-national, trans-historical colonial activities. By so doing, this dissertation recognizes that the provincial (and national) borders that currently exist are themselves forms of colonization. Against current and historical MCFD practices, this

dissertation presents a Métis model of service delivery, the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*, grounded in traditional Métis understandings of family.<sup>2</sup> This dissertation argues that despite more than 100 years of colonization at the hands of the Government of British Columbia, as a collective, the Métis people still have the cultural resources to safely rear our children because we have maintained traditional understandings of kinship ties. Furthermore, these understandings of kinship are grounded in our distinct identity, our distinct ways of knowing and our distinct ways of doing. These ways of knowing and ways of doing are transferred from generation to generation through our stories. Through these stories and our Métis ways, we hold the key to our own liberation. It is the government's job to recognize and respect our right to look after our children.

### **My Story, My Commitment to the Métis People**

This dissertation is motivated by my personal commitment to empower Métis people to have more control of their lives and children. This commitment directs my research and enacts inherent responsibilities passed on to me through the teachings of my Métis father and my Métis community. Throughout my life I have known that I am part of the courageous and resilient Métis people of the prairies. I was born in Saskatchewan, but I grew up in the north-end of Winnipeg, a city identified as the largest urban Métis settlement in Canada. I was (and continue to be) surrounded by extended family. Some family members are blood-related;

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I discuss the need for a Métis child and family welfare system. Often such systems are referred to as child welfare systems. This view of children as somehow completely separate from family negates Métis values. A healthy child means a healthy family and vice versa. Furthermore, throughout this dissertation, I refer to a Métis child and family welfare system. This is a dangerous phrase that suggests the potential to simply colonize ourselves with a non-Métis institution. I want to be clear that such a system would be grounded in Métis understandings of kinship and family systems. No more removals from the Métis community. This would mean prevention, not apprehension. This would mean supporting the whole Métis family not just removing the child.

others are not. Yet, in the Métis way, they are all acknowledged as family. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) recognizes this sense of family in the wider Aboriginal community. According to RCAP,

To Aboriginal people, family signifies the biological unit of parents and children living together in a household. But it also has a much broader meaning. Family also encompasses an extended network of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins (Vol. 3, pp. 11-12).

The experience of growing up in the north-end of Winnipeg surrounded by other Métis people shaped my inclusive sense of family. Early in life I learned to recognize the beauty, as well as the struggle, of being Métis. This upbringing also shaped my sense of responsibility to myself, my family (in the Métis sense of the word), my community and my people.

When I was young, my father often spoke of the importance of making the best of every situation and of finding something valuable in every experience no matter how trying or frustrating that experience might be. I remember, for example, when I was ten years old the “white” kids at school used to call me names and hurt my feelings. When I told my father, he replied, “daughter, remember that some of those kids don’t know any better. They’re simply ignorant. Nobody has taught them how to act in a good way and that’s not their fault.” He went on to say that it was my responsibility to show them what it means to act in a good way because, after all, I was a good daughter, a good person and I knew what to do. To this day, my mind and spirit carry a strong sense of pride tempered by humility for having been recognized as a good daughter and a good person. This experience instilled a sense of responsibility in me – I know that my behavior, whether good or bad, has an impact on others. Because of my father’s teachings I also know that to behave in an unkind or thoughtless way brings shame on me, my family, my community and my people. As

Barkwell, Dorion and Hourie (2006) note, “The desire to maintain the family’s good name has always been central to the social order in Métis communities” (p.56). The responsibility to honor myself, my family, my community, and my people informs my academic work.

I earned a Bachelor of Social Work Degree from the University of Manitoba and survived the challenges of carrying a Métis worldview into western academia. Graduating with a BSW from the University of Manitoba armed me with the academic credentials necessary to work in the human services field. However, my sense of identity as a Métis person has given me true insight into the plight of the many people I have served. I view social work practice through Métis eyes and these eyes see the world through a Métis value system which emphasizes respect and inclusiveness. I applied these values to my social work, and these values also shaped my understanding that an effective social work practitioner is an agent of change. Over the years, the focus of my work has been with Métis people in several capacities, such as client and clinical support, program and community development, education and policy development, and management. While I am currently the Chief Executive Officer for the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC (MCCF), I was a front-line worker for several years before moving onto community and policy development, post-secondary instruction and management. Though I hold a Master’s of Education from Simon Fraser University and I am working on my doctorate, I believe that it was my time as a front-line worker when my most profound experiences took place.

During the early 1990s in Winnipeg I was employed by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba. In this capacity I provided release planning, visitation, counseling and transition back into the community for predominantly Métis and First Nations women housed in the Portage la Prairie Women’s Provincial Correctional Institution and in the Kingston Women’s

Federal Penitentiary. Many of these women were survivors of the residential school system and/or the provincial child welfare system, and as a result, they had all experienced some form of trauma. Many of the women shared their concerns with me that while they were incarcerated, their children were apprehended and placed in foster care. This concern was especially troublesome for Métis and First Nation women who were culturally attached and who experienced colonization inside and outside the child welfare system at the hands of government workers woefully unaware of these women's cultures or any practices relevant to Métis' and First Nations' life. As with other government ministries,

The intrusion by child welfare authorities in the past has been paternalistic and colonial in nature, condescending and demeaning in fact and often insensitive and brutal to Aboriginal people. Aboriginal children have been taken from their families, communities, and societies, first by the residential school system and later by the child welfare system (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, 1991, chap. 14).<sup>3</sup>

Although I related to a history of oppression and colonization, I confess that I had no point of reference to associate with these women's pains over the placement of their children away from family in a foreign cultural environment. My closest association to this disenfranchisement was the occasional struggle within my family around parenting,

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<sup>3</sup> I frequently reference information obtained from the Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission (AJIC) (2001) *Final Report*, and other documentation created by the AJIC, due to the direct relevance of associated findings. The AJIC *Final Report* is online and appears without any page numbers. In lieu of page numbers I reference chapter headings. The associated relevance of findings with the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry can be recognized within the AJIC mandate and scope of inquiry, including the following consideration of the "...extent to which aboriginal and non-aboriginal persons are treated differently... and whether there are specific adverse effects, including possible systemic discrimination against aboriginal people" (Appendix II). A series of recommendations regarding families also appeared in the AJIC Final Report; "...two themes stand out in presentations by Aboriginal people at our public hearings: the overwhelming concern for the well-being of children, and the belief that families are at the crux of personal and community healing" (Appendix II). This research project is more than just a set of policy problems and practices; it is about the defense of a culturally vibrant population in Canada. It is about the cultural identity of the Métis in a social context that buries their identities under the "Aboriginal category".



discipline or lack of resources. My family's struggles, however, did not result in the absolute removal of a child. Rather, in the Métis way, these struggles resulted in a child or two going to the care of the grandparents or aunties. Hearing the women's stories touched me. I was humbled, angry and terrified all at the same time. Their stories led me to question how many Métis children were being placed into short and long-term foster care. How many Métis children knew their history and where they came from? How many did or did not experience the embrace of their community? How many knew that they belonged somewhere? How harmful was the removal and placement outside of their cultural environment? Frequently, when Métis children are taken from their parents they are also removed from a tightly knit community of extended family members, and neighbors who could have provided some support. These children are removed from a unique, distinct and familiar culture (AJIC, 2001, chap. 14). I wondered if the mainstream system comprehended that "the best interest of a child" is more than the provision of a safe environment, plentiful food and consistent shelter. Did workers consider that in the Métis world, the "best interests" of the child also means cultural safety<sup>4</sup> and that this safety would result in a good self-image and high self-esteem?

Over the years I became what is known in mainstream as a "seasoned social worker" and I went on to earn a Master of Education. I was welcomed into the academic and professional ranks and enjoyed respectful and fulfilling relationships with non-Métis/First

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<sup>4</sup> I use the phrase cultural safety throughout this dissertation. As Robyn Williams (1999) notes in "Cultural Safety – What Does it Mean for Practice?"

A commonly accepted definition of cultural safety is an environment which is 'safe' for people where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity of who they are and what they need. It is about a shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening (p.213).

Nation colleagues. Looking out of a Métis lens I moved in and out of the fringes of mainstream practice learning the art of negotiating, navigating and finding the middle ground so that I could push the Métis agenda forward. I continually sought ways in which to partake in honest and respectful compromise without bringing negative repercussions to my people and to our children, but in true Métis fashion I often failed miserably. I discovered that much more than being a “credentialed” social worker and educator, I was a Métis mother and servant to my people and my Nation.

Upon reflection, I often think about the Métis and First Nations women incarcerated in the Portage la Prairie and Kingston Correctional Institutions. They were my teachers. Without them would I have known, I mean really known, the anger, fear and sorrow associated with loss of culture when a child is placed into the foster care system? Their plight motivated me to critically examine how far down cultural safety was on the provincial child welfare system’s check list in 1990. It provoked me to critically question the system’s mainstream definition of safety when Métis children were apprehended and placed into foster care outside of their cultural environment. Even though child apprehensions and placements are not my experience, living within the field of oppression and dodging the impact of that oppression is my experience. Not surprisingly, over the years clients and colleagues shared their stories of oppression with me about the loss of culture and connection to their people, the pain of not knowing who they were due to provincial foster care placement and adoption away from their people and communities. I concluded that mainstream social work philosophy and practice has had and continues to have disastrous outcomes in its failed, often unilateral attempts to address the needs of Métis children and families involved in foster care.

## **Historical Context: The Colonial Roots of the Child and Family Welfare System in Canada**

In the early 1960s the provincial and federal child welfare agencies across Canada starting removing Métis, Inuit and First Nations children from their families and communities. In *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*, a report published by the Canadian Federal Department of Social Policy, Patrick Johnston (1983) coined the phrase “sixties scoop” to identify this systematic removal. Though Johnston used the phrase “sixties scoop” to identify the removal of Aboriginal children in the sixties, the removals continued *en masse* well into the 1980s. By the time his report was published in 1983, the removals numbered in the thousands. As Johnston (1983) notes, “The sixties scoop describes a period in Aboriginal history in Canada in which thousands of Aboriginal children were removed from their birth families, communities, and cultures, and placed them in mainstream society” (p. 34). These removals disconnected Métis, Inuit and First Nations children from their homes, language, land and culture.

While the sixties scoop took place across Canada, the “scoops” in Manitoba, which has the largest Métis population were particularly devastating. Between 1971 and 1981, 70-80% of Manitoba’s First Nation and Métis adoptions were into non-Native homes. By 1982 no one, except the First Nations and Métis people, believed that Native children were routinely being sent to adoption homes in the United States and to other provinces in Canada. In fact in 1982, Manitoba was the only remaining province to allow adoptions outside of Canada. Just as with the misplacement of Métis children in care in the province of BC, every social worker, every administrator and every agency or region in Manitoba viewed the situation from a narrow perspective and saw each individual case as an exception, as a case involving extenuating circumstances. In fact 25% of all children placed for adoption at this

time were placed outside of Manitoba. Most of those children were of Native descent. According to statistics for Manitoba, 38% of First Nations children adopted and 17% of Métis children adopted in 1981 were adopted by families living in the United States. No one comprehended that, of all the provinces, Manitoba was alone in its continuation of this abysmal adoption practice (AJIC, 2001). Aboriginal leaders strenuously objected to these practices and accused the Government of Manitoba of “selling babies” and “cultural genocide.”

While Manitoba represents perhaps the worst case in its adoptive practices during the sixties scoop, currently the Métis and two First Nations (Dakota/Ojibway and Awasis) in Manitoba have their own child and family services authority. In other words, the Province of Manitoba has recognized the unique identities of Métis and First Nations and has supported the development of independent child and family welfare systems. The Manitoba Métis now have jurisdiction over their children. In BC as in Manitoba, the provincial child and family services actively participated in the sixties scoop, yet MCFD retains its authority over Métis children to this day. Their track record for Métis children is appalling. The twenty-year period of systematic removal in BC saw a significant increase in the placement of Métis and First Nations children in the care of the provincial child welfare system. In 1955, there were 3,433 children in the care of BC’s child welfare branch. Of that number it was estimated that 29 children, or less than 1% of that total, were of Indian ancestry. By 1964, however, 1,446 children in care in BC were of Indian extraction. That number represented 34.2% of all children in care. Within ten years, in other words, the representation of Native children in BC’s child welfare system had jumped from almost nil to a third. It was a pattern being repeated in other parts of Canada as well (AJIC, 2001). In fact, to this day, there are Métis

families who have had several generations (from the sixties on) grow up in the care of the province.

To complicate matters, during the sixties scoop there was an incredible disparity from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in terms of removal practices. The lack of comprehensive and specific data on Métis and First Nations children compounded these disparities and helped reinforce the narrow perspective of provincial government representatives. To this day, the extant data does not accurately identify whether the children in custody during the sixties scoop were First Nations, Métis or Inuit. What is known is that in 1980 there were 302,749 registered status Indians in Canada of whom 160,135 were 19 years of age or under. It was estimated by the Native Council of Canada that in 1979 there were between 750,000 and 1,000,000 Métis, non-status Indians (Johnston, 1983, p. 25). Despite these statistics, accurate numbers for children in care across Canada are difficult to find.

From this perspective the child welfare system was doing essentially the same thing with Métis and First Nations children that the residential schools had done. In fact Emily Alston-O'Connor (2010) suggests that the sixties scoop was a continuation of the colonial practices of the residential school removals. According to Alston-O'Connor,

The closure of the residential schools did not end the attempt to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream Anglo-Canadian society through separation from their families. A sudden acceleration in child welfare workers removing Native children from their Aboriginal communities coincided with the dismantling of the church run education system. As the next painful chapter in the history of the colonization of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the Sixties Scoop quickly evolved into an aggressive tool for assimilation and cultural genocide. Its legacy has implications for social work practice today (p. 56).

Like residential schools, the sixties scoop saw government workers remove Métis and First Nations children from their families, communities and culture. Child welfare workers

removed Métis and First Nations children from their families and communities because they felt the best homes for the children were non-Aboriginal homes. For the workers, the ideal home would instill the values and lifestyles with which they were most familiar: white, middle-class and patriarchal. Workers deemed “Aboriginal” parents, “Aboriginal” families and “Aboriginal” communities unfit. But the difficulty with this term is that there is no such thing as a single “Aboriginal” culture. The term “Aboriginal” leads to reductive understandings of unique peoples. The Métis, First Nations, and Inuit have their own distinct cultures. However, as I point out shortly, much of the academic literature around the sixties scoop and residential schools uses this problematic term “Aboriginal.” I do not endorse this term. Yet I still have to navigate its use in academic and government discourse. In the academic and government literature it is difficult to find comprehensive statistics specific to Métis people because these statistics are often aggregated as “Aboriginal”. For example, the following statistical information regarding “Aboriginal” children taken during the sixties scoop is plentiful.

As a result, between 1971 and 1981 alone, over 3,400 Aboriginal children were shipped away to adoptive parents in other societies and sometimes other countries (AJIC, 2001). The effects of these displacements, however, were – and are – no less devastating than the effects of residential schooling. In fact, like residential schooling, the sixties scoop is recognized as the continuation of the Canadian and provincial governments’ attempts to assimilate and colonize the Métis, First Nations and Inuit people.

While the phrase “sixties scoop” suggests that the systematic removal of Métis children is a thing of the past, Cathy Richardson and Bill Nelson (2007), Métis scholars and seasoned social workers, provide personal insights into the implications of this legacy for

Métis people. The devastating effects of child removals drive Richardson's and Nelson's work.

The authors of this paper both experienced a particular resonance with the life of Richard Cardinal. Richard came from the same community as Cathy's mother, Fort Chipewyan; Bill worked at a northern Alberta Child and Family serving agency that was held partly responsible for letting Richard fall through the cracks. Both the authors felt moved to influence child welfare practice in ways that respect the integrity of family and Aboriginal communities. (p. 75)

Richardson and Nelson express their distress at the lack of value placed on children in foster care,

Not unlike many children in the care of the state today, Richard had been removed from his parents, removed from his home community, and finally separated from his siblings without his consent. He was placed in twenty eight different living situations: these included sixteen foster homes, twelve group homes and locked facilities, as well as time spent on the street while trying to escape from abusive foster parents. He died at age seventeen. It was a Métis organization that brought Richard's plight into the public eye. The abuse, degradation, and inhumanity endured by this Métis child were exposed. (p. 75)

A removal of Métis, First Nations and Inuit children from their families is still a pressing issue. On Vancouver Island, for example, 45-50% of the children currently in care are Aboriginal and one-third of those are Métis. It is important to acknowledge the sixties scoop due to the impact it had upon Métis, Inuit and First Nations children and families. The scoop set a precedent the consequences of which influence provincial child and family welfare practices to this day.

### **Government Responses: The Same Old Story?**

In November of 1996, The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) published its final report. The subsection, "Our Children, Our future" of *Gathering Strength: Vol 3* of the final report notes that,

The source of social dysfunction we heard most about in public testimony was residential schooling, but inappropriate child welfare policies have also been a persistent and destructive force. The effect of these policies, as applied to Aboriginal children, was to tear more holes in the family web and detach more Aboriginal people from their roots. (¶ 5)

In 1997 the Federal Government of Canada responded to the report by developing *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*. This long-term planned policy approach was designed to renew the government's relationship with Métis, First Nations and Inuit peoples. As part of *The Plan*, in response to the RCAP report, the Government of Canada also formally acknowledged that, "An investment in Aboriginal People begins with an investment in children. Healthy lives start with healthy beginnings" (p. 16). The principles expressed within the policy plan acknowledged mutual respect, mutual recognition and mutual responsibility. These principles provided a foundation for the Federal Government of Canada's decision to re-evaluate and establish policies for Métis, First Nations and Inuit peoples, particularly policies that affect Métis, First Nations and Inuit quality of life.

In 1999 the child and family welfare department in British Columbia (now known as the Ministry for Children and Family Development), followed the Federal Government of Canada's lead and finally acknowledged the disruption caused by their interference in the lives of Métis, First Nations and Inuit children and families. As a response to this disruption, MCFD published *The Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Services* (1999) which states that, "The Ministry for Children and Families recognizes that improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal children and families is crucial to the overall achievement of the Ministry's goals" (p. 5). This strategic plan acknowledged the importance of culturally appropriate services and articulated MCFD's intention to partner with Aboriginal communities to devolve control of child and family services by restoring Métis, First Nations and Inuit



authority over their children and families. In fact MCFD began the process of devolution (the process whereby MCFD slowly relinquishes control of child and family welfare to Métis, First Nations, and Inuit service providers) in 1999 in order to be more cost effective. In 2001 MCFD reviewed all of its programs and services to assess their ability to meet the government's economic, fiscal and social objectives. The report revealed that 18 Aboriginal agencies representing 25 target communities were approved for funding for urban Aboriginal programs yet not one Métis agency was listed (2001-2002 Annual Report "A New Era Update". p.37).

In 2007, as a follow-up to *The Strategic Plan*, MCFD developed their regional operations plan entitled *Strong, Safe and Supported: A Commitment to B.C.'s Children and Youth*. The plan provided details on how MCFD intended to work with Aboriginal communities over the next several years. *Strong, Safe and Supported* constructed a framework for child and family services based on five pillars. While pillars one, two, and three focus on protecting vulnerable children, pillar four focuses specifically on Métis, First Nations and Inuit children in the care of the Ministry. A summary of the four pillars follows: Pillar 1 – Prevention: government will place a primary focus on preventing vulnerability in children and youth by providing strong supports for individuals, families and communities; Pillar 2 – Early Intervention: government agencies will provide Early Intervention services to vulnerable children and youth within their families and communities; Pillar 3 – Intervention and Support: government will provide intervention services and supports based on the assessment of individual needs; Pillar 5 – Quality Assurance: Child, youth and family development services will be based on evidence gathered through a strong quality assurance system.

Pillar Four, “The Aboriginal Approach” focuses on the following areas: (1) mechanisms for quality assurance; (2) support for a full range of services which are culturally appropriate; (3) adoption based on Indigenous practices; (4) design and implementation of an Indigenous child welfare system; and (5) the provision of support for Aboriginal people to identify and reclaim Indigenous child protection development practices which existed in the past. “The Aboriginal Approach” acknowledged that MCFD would respect Aboriginal peoples’ jurisdiction over their children and families. MCFD went further to indicate that they would actively support an Aboriginal System which would connect children and youth to their culture and traditions. Suffice it to say, each principle within pillar four constitutes the ingredients necessary to ensure culturally safe foster placement for Métis children involved in the British Columbia child welfare system but for this one problem: pillar four does not adequately address the Métis (or First Nations and Inuit) as a unique people.

Thus more than thirteen years after *The Strategic Plan*, and more than eighteen years after the *RCAP Report* (despite commitments from the provincial and federal governments) MCFD still has legislative authority over Métis children and families in BC. The Métis do not have the decision making power to offer culturally safe support to our children and families. As in the past, MCFD’s control of Métis children and families in care still yields appalling statistics. The Ministry for Children and Family Development’s *Aboriginal Children in Care Quarterly Report* (2006) indicated that the total children in care (CIC) by caseload displayed an upward trend between 1998 and 2001. After peaking at 10,775 cases in June 2001, the trend reversed and has leveled off since January 2004. Non-Aboriginal CIC exhibited a downward trend in the past eight years, while the opposite is true for Aboriginal

CIC. As a result, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal CIC is narrowing with the Aboriginal CIC caseload exhibiting only 10 cases lower than non-Aboriginal CIC (p. 4). Despite this apparent improvement in national statistics, in BC in 2006 and 2007 of the 3,992 school aged children under a continuing custody order, 57% or 2274 were Métis (*Select Standing Committee Child and Youth Report 2007*).

Given the number of Métis children placed in care, the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC (the legislated community in for Métis child welfare matters) has grave concerns about MCFD's control. MCFD maintains this control with its funding model which sets up Métis and First Nations to compete against each other when this competition goes against their values. Unlike the Ministry service providers, Métis and First Nations service providers operate despite severely limited funding from the provincial government. The Métis Commission cites the lack of capacity within Métis Child and Family Service Agencies in BC due to limited funding as a major cause for removals. As Commission President Marlene Swears notes,

Our families are not given the same level of support that mainstream families receive and because of this our kids are being taken into care. Instead of helping our families to cope and make changes the kids are removed and put into someone else's home. (Marlene Swears, President Métis Commission, Interview, Oct. 2010)

The current lack of recognition and the lack of inclusion of Métis cultural knowledge, values and worldview within the provincial child welfare system contribute to the lack of culturally responsive social work practices and planning for Métis children in foster care. More troubling, however, is that this lack of recognition contributes to the elimination of the cultural identity of Métis children and families. Once in the care of MCFD, many of our children (the future of the Métis people) are lost.

There is no shortage of research beyond the aforementioned government reports identifying the need for inclusive, culturally appropriate, social work practices for Aboriginal children and families. However, as the following literature review illustrates, while there is no shortage of research on “Aboriginal” concerns about the child and family service system, there is a lack of research focused on Métis concerns about the provincial system. More specifically, there are no systematic analyses of the effects of MCFD’s removal or misidentification of Métis children from their families and communities. Nor are there any systematic analyses of the effects of MCFD’s placement of these children in non-Métis homes. Thus most literature on Métis child welfare was collected from sources in other provinces. The lack of research for BC Métis children in care proved an obstacle to any attempts at providing a provincial context for this research. In fact, this current research project begins to fill that gap.

As I noted earlier, faced with the loss of our children in this province, we are dealing with a problem that to date, is beyond measure. My hope is that the Government of BC will acknowledge this problem and begin to use its vast resources, human or otherwise, to accurately measure the number of Métis children in care and to support the Métis as we build a child and family welfare system that meets the needs of our people. While Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta all have Métis controlled service agencies for Métis children and families, Métis child and family welfare appears to be a new notion in the Province of British Columbia. Despite this gap in current research, the literature consistently supports the view that the interests of “Aboriginal” children are best served by “Aboriginal” people.

While I agree in principle with this viewpoint, I am also suggesting that it is high-time the government representatives and academics move beyond the generic categories and

participate more actively with the diverse peoples that the term “Aboriginal” is meant to identify so that they (the academics and BC government staff) can begin to understand the important differences between Métis and First Nations, between First Nation and First Nation, between Inuit and Inuit, and finally, between Métis, First Nations and Inuit. In any case the extant literature illustrates that this detailed understanding is a long way off for many provincial government staff and many academics.

### **Literature Review**

In 1992 the Aboriginal Committee report, *Liberating Our Children - Liberating Our Nations* was developed by an Aboriginal Community Panel for Family and Children’s Services Review in British Columbia. This report addressed concerns about the child welfare system and offered several recommendations from Aboriginal communities across British Columbia to the provincial government. One key finding from the report argued that the government must recognize the right of each Aboriginal Nation to extend its responsibility for family and child services and decision-making to all members of the Nation, whether they are registered under the Indian Act or not, and whether or not they reside on (or off) reserve land (Jacobs and White, 1992, p.97).

Furthermore, this report noted that it is the right of Métis and First Nations to make decisions, and resolve problems for their children and families (p.97). The report revealed that in addition to legislation, transformative action must include giving control to Métis and First Nations people to design and develop service delivery methods that are culturally safe and relevant to our distinct ways of living. “Aboriginal nations and communities must be allowed to design methods of sharing and expanding knowledge so that these methods are culturally appropriate to Aboriginal life” (p.31). The *Liberating Our Children* (1992) argued

further that, “What must be achieved is a system of child care and healing [for] our families where our traditions and cultures become the primary guideline” (p.43). For years, Métis and First Nations leaders have struggled to regain control of the welfare of our children and families from provincial and federal government ministries in Canada so that we can provide our children and families with culturally appropriate and culturally specific care.

*Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth, and Families* (2006) captures the essence of why it is essential for the mainstream child welfare system to recognize the significance for Métis and First Nations people of retaining a connection to their cultures. The report notes that, in summary, for thousands of years Aboriginal communities successfully used traditional systems of care to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. Instead of affirming these Aboriginal systems of care, provincial child welfare systems disregarded them and imposed foreign child care practices on these children, youth and families. This imposition has been a failure and many Métis people are suspicious of provincial child and family welfare agencies. President of the Manitoba Métis Federation, David Chartrand’s (1999) words powerfully convey many Métis peoples’ mistrust and their understandable hatred for provincial child and family welfare agencies across Canada:

You adopt a Métis child into a white community and you expect it to work? You take his total culture away from him, his heritage and you expect it to work? I really had a tough time in school. They expected us all to work out, to come out beautiful. I was supposed to come out with a scholarship and become a lawyer or a doctor. This is what they thought. I came back and I didn’t have nothing to show for it. I have nothing but hate. Hate for the system, the welfare system, the child and family services system that has put me in this situation as well as other people. (p. 426)

Though addressed to members of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry Commission in Manitoba, Chartrand’s statement identifies the effect of the sixties scoop on Métis people in

other provinces across Canada. As a response to this inquiry, the Province of Manitoba not only acknowledged their active colonization of Métis, First Nations and Inuit people, but restored Métis, First Nations and Inuit jurisdiction of children and families. Thus as I noted earlier, the Métis in Manitoba now have their own provincial Métis Child and Family Service Authority.

In BC, tragically, this is not the case. Aboriginal children and youth continue to be removed from their families and communities at disproportionate rates, and alternate care provided by child welfare systems has not had positive results. These historic and contemporary realities have resulted in many Aboriginal communities viewing, like Chartrand, child and family welfare agencies as instruments of colonialization rather than as supports for the safety and well-being of Aboriginal children and youth. Despite consistent failure, provincial child and family welfare agencies in BC continue to claim superiority over the original peoples. Workers within these agencies often undermine Métis' and First Nations' cultural ways, and, what is worse, they use child custody as a means of extinguishing these cultures (Blackstock, C., Brown, G., and Formsma, 2006, p. 6).

Although provincial child and family welfare agencies, specifically MCFD, engage in colonial practices, as the province of Manitoba indicates, there is still opportunity for reconciliation and, with this reconciliation, transformative change. Such transformative change would ultimately mean that the Métis (as well as with First Nations and Inuit) have full control of their own child and family welfare system. However, transformative change needs to start somewhere and, in this case, that somewhere is with MCFD understanding and then applying a Métis worldview to their policies and practices when these policies and practices apply to Métis children and families. The end goal, in my mind, is a full Métis child

and family welfare system that is controlled by the Métis people. Indeed, such vision is shared with the research participants (as we will see in the third chapter) and, in a more general way, the academic community, even if the academic community only goes so far as to recognize the need for “Aboriginal” child and family welfare systems.

This view is further supported by the Federal Government Advisory Committee, the National Council of Welfare (NCW). In *The First Nations, Métis and Inuit Children and Youth: Time to Act Report* (2007) the NCW provides “a portrait of Aboriginal peoples from the perspective of the communities and social connections on which children and youth depend” (p. 1). The report also provides examples of what is working within the social services sector. Furthermore, this report recommends steps for reconciliation between Canadian governments (including the Government of BC) and First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. According to the report “reconciliation” within the child welfare system is at least a two part process that must incorporate multiple perspectives and acknowledge traditional child welfare practices that pre-date the systematic practices that governments in Canada are using today. This report suggests the following steps for reconciliation:

telling the truth about child welfare from multiple perspectives, including non-Indigenous peoples. The other thing that it involves is looking at the values and beliefs that drove us to do certain things. Part of the reason we don’t learn is that we don’t look underneath our actions to understand how it helped us rationalize bad outcomes when they were in front of us. The second part of it is that once we have heard the truths we need to acknowledge that non-Aboriginal child welfare has been around for about 100 years and the diverse Indigenous communities in Canada have been practicing various forms of child welfare going back for about 20,000 years. (p. 89)

The ability to begin this process of reconciliation would mean setting aside the “we know what’s best for you” approach and creating a system that, for the sake and safety of



Indigenous children, can be built on the basis of embracing alternative ways of knowing and looking at the world.

According to NCW's *The Time to Act Report* (2007), an alternative system of child and family welfare would require that the Provincial Government of BC and the Federal Government of Canada acknowledge

the current system is not working and is culturally loaded. People assume that the current child welfare system is culturally neutral but it's only neutral to the European because it's based on that worldview. So, it's not surprising that, Aboriginal people and new Canadians are the least well served by the child welfare system. (p. 89)

For the Métis people this means that we are living under a foreign system of government and that system is detrimental to the health and well-being of our children and families.

Similarly in "Métis Experiences of Social Work Practice", Cathy Richardson (2009) provides the following insight regarding the long-term failure of provincially and federally controlled child welfare systems: "the structural reasons why Aboriginal children are being taken into care must be dealt with, including poverty, lack of education, unemployment, housing, and myriad other interconnected factors" (p. 110). Richardson also identifies the importance of culture, and therefore culturally specific systems, that acknowledge culture as it relates to connectedness, healing and one's sense of belonging.

When we find out that families need help they are really severed from their culture. So that process of reconnecting with their cultural roots has been a really helpful part of the healing process for people and so that's one of the main mandates of many Métis agencies is to help people sort of re-discover who they are culturally. (p. 110)

As Richardson notes, life for Métis families in Canada was disrupted by colonial violence and the white settlement program in Canada. Much of the damage remains

unrepaired today. Most Métis children never received emotional support or social restoration for their trauma. Many Métis families could not talk about being Métis or ‘wear’ their cultural identity publicly without fear of overt racialized violence and more subtle forms of discrimination including economic deprivation (p. 111). According to Richardson, there are four critical issues in working with Métis children and families; (1) decolonization; (2) dignity; (3) resistance; (4) identity theft/identity recovery. She notes that regardless of whether or not social-work practitioners provide services in Métis or non-Métis agencies, these workers must orient themselves to a framework for decolonization. They must actively restore balance individually and collectively in order to right the injustices of the historical violence against the Métis (p.113). As possible solutions to some of the problems created by provincial and federal governments’ interferences in the life of Métis, Richardson suggests some practical recommendations for social workers entrusted with the well-being of Métis children. Interaction between social workers and Métis families must begin with a partnership whereby the Métis community and social workers identify a set of dignifying practices to restore and acknowledge Métis children in terms of Métis culture. Dignifying practices, according to Richardson, includes restoring to families what has been taken from them, either literally or symbolically, in child protection encounters.

In *Wícihitowin*, Bruyere’s, Michael’s and Sinclair’s (2009) findings align with Richardson’s. According to Bruyere et al., it is important for social workers in particular to understand the people with whom they work (p. 4). In BC, MCFD social workers need to be aware that many Métis parents may have been victims of abuse themselves. Furthermore, the extant literature confirms that there is no other practice that creates as much anxiety, doubt or trauma than that of removing children from their families and communities. The disruption to

Métis, Inuit and First Nations family life contributes to an individual's loss of culture and an individual's loss of identity.

In *Beat of a Different Drum* (1998), Hammersmith and Sawatsky state that when Aboriginal children are taken from the shelter of their home and/or community and are placed into a non-Aboriginal environment, they become emotionally weakened.

when children involved in the child welfare system are not placed within their own cultural environment the core of their value system begins to disintegrate; the impact the loss of cultural has on identity is detrimental in terms of how we learn and discover things. (p.11)

Hammersmith and Sawatsky argue further that the loss of an inherently acquired value system (a value-system which would normally be learned/ transferred from birth within a cultural context) leads to emotional disintegration in children. Cultural oppression is traumatic and shame-inducing. If this oppression is not addressed, children (the future of the nations) internalize it and this internalized oppression creates a shame-based existence. As the Nechi Training Research and Health Promotion centre (1999) notes, "The internalization becomes an unconscious defence mechanism that results in feelings of isolation which is beyond the ability of the person to name" (p. 16). The removal of Métis children from their families and cultural environment has long-term, negative effects on a child's connection to culture and, ultimately, on that child's self-image.

A national briefing paper prepared by Lawrence Barkwell, Lyle N. Longclaws, and David N. Chartrand (1989) for the Métis National Council asserts that with few exceptions, the provincial child and family services and their supporting legislation are geared to values and concepts originally derived from a colonial worldview. Furthermore, this report notes that these services and programs are devoid of cultural relevance and delivered by staff that has little sensitivity to Métis culture or values. Suffice it to say, this ignorance results in a

disproportionate number of Métis children taken into care, many for no other reason than the systemic poverty and overcrowded living conditions of Métis families and communities.

It has been well documented that removing Métis, First Nations and Inuit children from their home and placing them into foster care outside of their cultural environment has a devastating effect on these children and the family systems, communities and nations to which they belong. As Johnston (1983) noted years ago, many experts in the child welfare field are finally realizing that the removal of any child from his/her parents is inherently damaging. However, according to the extant literature, the effects of apprehension on Métis, First Nations and Inuit children will often be much more traumatic than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts (p.59). For the Métis, this is due in part to our understanding of family and kinship.

While I will explore Métis understandings of family, for now it is enough to note with Barkwell et al. (2006) that in Métis understandings of the family unit, “The extended family was and is the basic unit of Métis society; most social control mechanisms operate first at the family level and then at the community level” (p.56). Barkwell et al. argue the importance of traditional child welfare practices that are Métis specific, “In Métis families it is the custom for a grandparent to adopt a child. It later becomes the duty of the child to care for this grandparent as the grandparent, with age, needs more help with everyday living” (p. 61). Until these practices are restored, until Métis people are fully supported in the care of their children by MCFD and the Provincial Government of BC, service provision will not adequately meet the needs of Métis children. Removing these children without any sense of their family connections is particularly damaging.

In *Protecting Aboriginal Children*, Christopher Walmsley (2005) states that, “Those who grew up in the non-Aboriginal child welfare system lost not only family and community relationships but also a positive cultural identity as an Aboriginal person. The imposition of system of laws, policies, and values on Aboriginal peoples by non-Aboriginal society is at the heart of these experiences of loss of culture and identity (p. 95). Furthermore, corroborating Walmsley’s analysis, the *AJIC: Final Report* (2001) observes that in most provinces, child welfare services were never provided in any meaningful or culturally appropriate way.

When Métis children are placed outside of their cultural environment they lose not only a connection to their culture but also to a shared belief system, and thus they experience a sense of loss of identity. In “Métis Identity”, Tom McCallum and Lois Edge (2006) explain the importance of understanding Métis history as it relates to identity. They also note the deep-seated consequences to the Métis of years of colonization. “The depth and extent of ancestral pain is not yet known and therefore it is crucial that Métis know and understand this aspect of their history” (p. 100). This history is not over. Even today, those Métis children who are forcibly removed from Métis communities encounter what I see as a dual adjustment: their transition to a completely new environment requires a physical/mental adjustment. The child must deal with the presence of unfamiliar objects and the absence of familiar objects, for example a different bed and pillow. Their transition to an environment that is culturally unfamiliar also requires an emotional/spiritual adjustment. The child must deal with different ways of being, for example praying to God instead of talking to Manitou. When this displacement happens, it often manifests as an obstruction of their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health and wellness. The lost experience of learning

traditional ways based on a clan mentality further devastates a child's ability to grow and develop in a Métis context. In effect, Métis children in care are alienated from their families, their communities and their culture solely for economic reasons.

Instead of consulting with families and communities about alternative social work practices, the apprehension of Aboriginal children becomes the standard operating procedure for child welfare authorities in the provinces. Like Richard Cardinal, other Métis children taken into culturally unsafe care are often condemned to a succession of foster homes. This serial movement from foster home to foster home creates terrible instability in children's lives and ultimately defeats the apparent reasons for taking them into care in the first place (Barkwell, Longclaws et al. 1989)

The AJIC's *Final Report* (2001) suggests that these experiences cut across tribal and national boundaries to affect all Aboriginal people in Canada and beyond:

Although Aboriginal families have survived, many are suffering and exhibiting stress in a number of ways. A primary indicator is the number of Aboriginal children in custody of provincial and Aboriginal child welfare agencies. (p.34)

For the Métis people, the loss of our children and families in MCFD's care is only one continuing form of colonization. Such traumatic loss is not new to the Métis people. Métis Elders often refer to the many losses experienced by Métis people due to colonization. Experiences such as the loss of Métis identity, loss of Michif, death of family members from infectious diseases, loss of access to land and resources, loss of access to hunting, fishing and trapping rights, loss of traditional teachings, experiences of violence and abuse, loss of parenting skills, influences from unfamiliar religions and churches, the trauma of residential schools, and the displacement from our ancestral lands, as well as the systematic removal of

our children from our homes, communities and nation have threatened the well-being and survival of Métis people.

As with other colonial practices, these practices exacerbate social problems that contribute to the removal of Métis children. A respected Elder, grandmother, teacher, leader and Commissioner in the Thompson/Okanagan Region for the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC, Agda Neumann, notes,

When Métis children are taken into care of the BC child welfare system they experience cultural loss becoming oppressed by a system that doesn't understand their cultural needs. The removal of children from our communities has had devastating effects on our families and communities. (Neumann, 2007)

Throughout our history the Métis Nation has overcome displacement from land, racism from European and some First Nations peoples and insidious internalized colonization. Despite this assault on Métis identity, the undeniable strength of the Métis value system ultimately binds and unites us together as a family, a people and a Nation. For Elder Agda Neumann, cultural teachings of responsibility, self-determination, honesty and respect are mandatory components for parenting and child-rearing.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Métis People's Child Welfare Model**

In order to address MCFD's control of Métis children and family services, I frame my critique of the child and family welfare system, the subsequent research participants' responses and the development of a Métis model for child and family welfare within Paulo Freire's (2006) concept of "liberation." While Freire discusses liberation in terms of systems of education (he notes self-awareness of one's oppression as a key moment in the process of liberation) in my reading, his analysis applies to child and family welfare systems. According to Freire (2006), liberation occurs in dialectic. The first step in this dialectic is the

recognition by the oppressed that they are, in fact, oppressed. However, for the oppressed to recognize their oppression, they must have time for reflection. According to Freire, liberation

cannot be achieved in idealistic terms. In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. (p. 49)

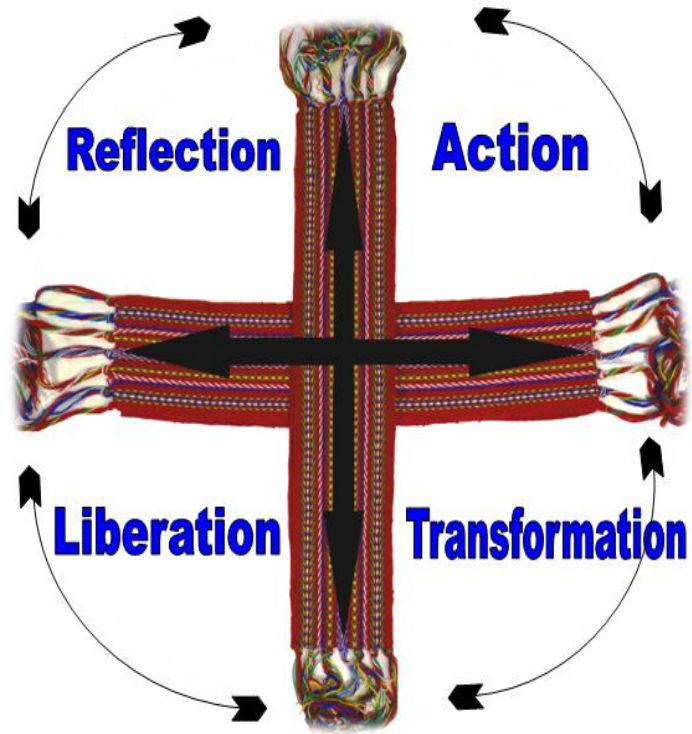
For Freire, the awareness that comes from reflection must be combined with action. In other words, this awareness is only the beginning of transformation that moves one toward liberation from an oppressive system. Thus Freire discusses these four concepts as interrelated pairs. Reflection begets action and action creates reflection. Transformation begets liberation and liberation creates transformation. Reflection and action are at once signs of one's liberation and engage one further in the transformation of oppressive systems. Thus liberation is not only a destination, but a process. In fact, Freire frames reflection and action in terms of a dialectical process, the whole of which informs praxis. According to Freire, if one engages in a cycle of reflection, action, reflection, action, they are engaged in transformative processes that will lead to liberation. From my perspective this complex, dynamic system can best be represented through the metaphor of the Métis Sash Dance.

The Métis Sash Dance (like many other Métis jigs) is about movement and balance. To prepare for the dance, Métis jiggers place two Métis sashes across one another so that the sashes form a criss-cross symbol on the floor. Once the sashes are on the floor, the dancer moves her/his feet quickly over the sashes tapping her/his feet on the floor in the corners of floor space that are formed by the criss-crossed sashes (See Figure 1). The goal of the dance is to move rhythmically criss-crossing one's legs or side-stepping in time to the raucous fiddle music without actually touching the sashes. This dance, like many other things in the Métis world is fun, vibrant and full of life, but it also represents an important lesson about



one's life-journey. It illustrates the need for balance, coordination and care as one navigates the life-journey. In terms of Freire's understanding of liberation as praxis, as the relationship between ways of knowing and ways of being, the Sash Dance suggests the dynamic relationship between action and reflection, between liberation and transformation. Just as the sash dancer never stops to occupy only one of the corners divided by the arms of the sashes, those invested in liberation never stop to occupy only one of Freire's four concepts. Like the movement of the Sash Dance, Freire's concepts represent a dance, a constant movement, a constant coordination, a constant balancing as one moves to become fully liberated and fully connected with their history, culture, people and nation. For the Métis, this struggle (or maybe dance is a better term) for liberation means that each individual Métis person realizes their inherent responsibility to free themselves and to invest in the liberation of the wider Métis community. As the third chapter illustrates, this sense of responsibility to ensure the freedom of the Métis people from oppressive systems permeates, in true Métis fashion, the research participant's responses.

**Figure 1. The Métis People's Child Welfare Model– Stage 1**



Freire's articulation of liberation as a transformative process based in reflection also resonates with my own experience of liberation. As a Métis person the oppressive systems of government have weighed on me, though as a child I could not clearly articulate their presence. Now, as a Métis woman who has survived the post-secondary education system, who has worked as a social worker in the justice system, I can identify and name these oppressive systems and their attendant practices. However, while I am aware of oppression, Freire's understanding of liberation gives me hope that the forms of oppression can be transformed through the concerted efforts of the Métis people. In fact, the research participants' responses demonstrate that many Métis in the province of BC are aware that we are oppressed. As Freire (2006) notes, "the oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves" (p. 49). This shared awareness is an important step towards freeing ourselves from the systems, including the child and family welfare system that oppress us.

Furthermore, Freire's concepts are crucial to my understanding of "the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes and 'deferred' dreams that are part and parcel of living a borrowed and colonized cultural existence" (Macedo, "Introduction," 2006, p.11). Throughout my time as a student and, after that, a social worker, I have felt the oppression of foreign institutions. Not only have I felt the oppression of a foreign education system, I have witnessed the effects of the justice system and the child and family welfare system on Métis and First Nations children, women, families and communities. While I am addressing the child and family welfare system in BC, it is important to remember that colonization, that oppression, cuts across multiple sectors and insinuates itself in the day to day lives of oppressed people. For the Métis, these forms of oppression are so pervasive, so naturalized,

that our struggles toward liberation are fraught with this danger. As Freire (2006) notes, “In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (p. 44). Like Freire, I am using the principle of liberation to explain the Métis struggle against colonial governing structures. Furthermore, the Métis struggle shares common aspirations of self-determination with Indigenous peoples all over the world.

### **The Métis Commission and Transformative Change**

In BC, Métis communities and their non-political representative in matters of child and family welfare, the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC, often confronts resistance from MCFD staff when addressing the Ministry’s practices around removal and (mis)placement of Métis children (though we are finding more support from the higher levels of this Ministry). Métis people critique MCFD’s child apprehension practices because these practices often contradict our understandings of kinship and family. Furthermore, these culturally inappropriate MCFD practices contribute to the on-going need for removal of Métis children. An attempt to stop these practices via the insertion of Métis knowledge and values into the foster care system is an on-going challenge faced by the Métis communities and the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC (MCCF). In 2001, MCCF developed a position paper that outlined the creation of a specific Métis Child and Family Services Authority to deliver service to Métis children and their families. This paper noted the importance of rebuilding Métis family responsibility and creating a Métis family and child services delivery system that would develop the following supports:

Assistance to Métis parents to successfully remove barriers that impede their ability to provide safe and nurturing care for their children.

Child care practices that draw on the resources of extended family so that the extended family can assume responsibility for children when parents are unwilling or unable to care for their children. When it is necessary for Métis children to reside outside of the family home, to: Ensure that the child retains the strengths of their identity as Métis children. Ensure that the sense of family responsibility is passed on to those children. Ensure that those children grow up with a sense of belonging to the Métis Nation. Foster connections between those children and their extended families. Reunite those children with their families whenever it is safe to do so. (p.6)

If the Métis are to gain decision making control over the care and placement of Métis children involved in the child welfare system, specifically the foster care sector, then traditional values and knowledge must be inserted into all aspect of program and service delivery to Métis children and families. Transformative change must occur. It is the belief of the Métis community that in order for transformative change to occur within the mainstream system an equal, meaningful and collaborative partnership between the Métis Commission, Métis Service Providers, Métis political and community leaders, and MCFD must be established.

### **Conclusion**

The federal and provincial governments of Canada have acknowledged their active colonization of Métis, First Nations and Inuit peoples. These governments have begun to develop policies to counteract this active colonization. In fact as this introductory chapter illustrates, there are a number of policies that attempt to ensure “culturally appropriate” service delivery (foster care, child protection and adoption) for Métis, First Nations and Inuit people in BC. Unfortunately, there are few policies that address “culturally appropriate” services for BC Métis.

From my perspective as a seasoned Métis social work practitioner, in order for the Provincial Government of British Columbia – more specifically MCFD – to reconcile itself

to the Métis people this government must acknowledge the Métis as a people with a culture of our own. We are unique and distinct from First Nations, from Inuit and from other Canadians. We have our own set of values and ways of knowing. Such open acknowledgement from MCFD and more generally the provincial government would inform social work practices so that Ministry workers would accurately identify Métis children in the system *as Métis* instead of misidentifying them as merely “Aboriginal.” This recognition would signal the beginning of significant and transformative change within BC’s child and family welfare system. This recognition would help MCFD refine *The Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Services* (1999) according to the spirit of reconciliation in which this plan was developed. Most importantly, the Government of BC’s recognition of the Métis as a distinct people would be another foundational move towards our self-determination and the development of an independent Métis child and family welfare system that provides culturally appropriate services to the Métis people of British Columbia.

### **Thesis Structure: Chapter Summaries**

This dissertation moves from critique of colonial child and family welfare practices towards an affirmation of a Métis worldview. This worldview is foundational to any truly Métis Child and Family Service Delivery system. While this opening chapter leveled a critique of MCFD’s colonial practices, particularly in its use of the term “Aboriginal,” it also offered up a Métis specific theoretical framework that focuses on our liberation from these oppressive practices. “Chapter Two: Métis Storytelling” develops a Métis approach to qualitative research based in Métis storytelling protocols. Furthermore, this chapter describes how that research approach was applied with the Métis research participants involved in this study. “Chapter Three: Analysis and Findings” foregrounds the research participants’ s

responses to the current MCFD practices and policies. From these responses, I note major themes or areas of concern within the Métis community about the current child and family welfare system in BC. As participants note consistently there is no cultural safety for our children in care. Building on the participants' responses, "Chapter Four: MCFD and Barriers to Decolonization" offers a conceptual critique of the neoliberal underpinnings of the provincial child and family welfare system. From this conceptual critique, I examine the key legislative document, *The Child, Family and Community Services Act*, that governs MCFD as well as the policies and practices that this *Act* informs. This chapter notes with the participants that throughout the provincial government legislation and policies the term "Aboriginal" dismisses the unique concerns and identity of the Métis people. "Chapter Five: Transformative Practice" shifts from a critique of current government practices, policies and legislation to an affirmation of a Métis worldview. A Métis worldview is the foundation from which any truly Métis child and family service system must be developed. This worldview, as it is articulated through our stories, informs a framework for a Métis child and family system that is run by Métis people for Métis children and families. In order to articulate this worldview, throughout this dissertation I develop the theoretical framework, the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*, presented at the beginning of this introductory chapter, in three stages. The first stage, as noted earlier, links Freire's concepts of liberation, reflection, action and transformation with the Métis Sash Dance. The second stage of this development comes in the third chapter which links key themes from the research participants' responses with the crisscrossed sashes of the traditional Sash Dance. The third stage overlays the themes from the participants' responses onto my interpretation of Freire. This model, based as it is in the research participants' stories, is called the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology, Métis Storytelling**

Any culturally safe practices, and beyond that, any culturally appropriate service delivery framework for BC Métis must respect the voice of the people. Métis professionals, Elders and community members are experts in the realm of Métis child welfare, not the provincial government. And yet, as I have illustrated, the provincial government, not the Métis community, still holds the decision making power for our families who have children in foster care. As I noted earlier, MCFD's practice of placing Métis children outside of their cultural environment has received little academic or legal attention. Moreover, this issue, despite the efforts of Métis community members, has received little attention from MCFD. Because of the pressures of academic conventions, I began my research into the misplacement of Métis children by MCFD using a phenomenological approach. However, I quickly realized that the research participants were interacting with me from their understanding of Métis storytelling protocols. To my delight, I quickly discovered a connection between phenomenology's emphasis of lived experience and Métis stories, which also emphasize lived experience. I was reminded during this process that Métis storytelling protocols are appropriate to my research. This Métis approach to storytelling as qualitative research is based on my knowledge that the research participants' lived experiences are powerful foundations from which to build a Métis service delivery system that respects the diversity of the Métis people in BC. In order to share the voices of Métis people with the academic community, this chapter focuses on Métis storytelling protocols as an approach to qualitative research.



### **Métis Storytelling or a Phenomenological Research Approach?**

A few words about this approach are important from the start. Whereas qualitative analysts talk about interviews and focus groups, in the Métis way my research engaged me more in visits and less in interviews, more in sharing circles and less in focus groups. During this study, I shifted my research approach away from qualitative research methods such as phenomenology towards Métis storytelling protocols. In fact, I initially chose a phenomenological research methodology because I recognized some similarities between phenomenology and Métis storytelling protocols. For example in the Métis world, respectful listening means that a person listens until they have heard the full account of another person's experience. Similarly phenomenology requires that the researcher attend carefully to what research participants say. With classic phenomenology the researcher shuts off his or her assumptions regarding the phenomenon under exploration. In other words, the researcher attempts to understand the object of research in isolation from the world at large. In the Métis world, however, a person listens until they have heard the full account of another person's experience. In this listening process the researcher and storyteller are not isolated. They are mutually engaged in transforming the 'world' through their interactions.

### **An Indigenous Ethical Approach to Research**

My Métis research approach aligns with Lester Rigney's (2007) "Seven Effective Habits for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples"<sup>5</sup>. These principles resonate with Métis storytelling protocols and the principles informing these protocols. According to Rigney, "Principle One" requires the researcher's "involvement, consultation, negotiation and finally,

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<sup>5</sup> During the August 12, 2009 lecture for "Research Methodologies," in the Education Faculty at the University of British Columbia, Lester Rigney discussed the "Seven Habits." A handout of these Seven Habits supplemented his lecture.

free, informed consent” from the research participants and Indigenous community members. In practice, Rigney suggests these principles mean that “participants have a right to withdraw at anytime” and that as part of this right participants are “consulted” throughout the research process, and not just during an interview. Consultation and negotiation are thus a two-way process. Further to this process and, as will be evident shortly in my own research approach, “Elders, leaders and/or recognized community spokespersons should be consulted” before, during and after any interviews take place.

“Principle Two” focuses on open, honest and mutually respectful communication. In practice such respectful communication means that researchers are “open and honest about the requirements and the benefits” of their research. Furthermore, such respectful communication means that during their ongoing consultations with community members, researchers engage in “an honest exchange of information about their methods, aims and potential outcomes”. For Rigney respectful communication also means that research projects are developed as partnerships with the Indigenous community”. Again such a partnership is borne out in my own research which, once completed, will be jointly owned by myself and the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC. This ownership recognizes the leadership of the Métis Commissioners in matters of child and family welfare. This ownership also ensures that my research is readily available to the wider Métis community. My research partnership with the Métis Commission also ensures that, in the words of Rigney, “researcher’s language and communication style is appropriate.” For my own research it was very important to rely on Métis storytelling protocols and not other qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology because this is what the participants expected from me. These protocols were the basis of our interaction, not phenomenology.

According to Rigney, “Principle Three”, “Benefits, outcomes and agreement”, ensures that the research results are useful to the community. This usefulness develops from the community consultations and, in my understanding, is a continuation of the consultation process. Because my research belongs to the Métis Commission, the cultural property rights of the Métis people of BC are respected in accordance with Rigney’s third principle. Furthermore in practice, this principle recognizes that “Indigenous peoples feel strongly about their heritage”. The Métis storytelling protocols ensure that such feelings are respected. It was important for me to visit with research participants, instead of formally interviewing them, so that their stories directed the process and they were able to share Métis history as it related to their own experiences. “Principle Four” of Rigney’s “Seven Principles” identifies the “Recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of peoples as well as of individuals” as another underlying principle of ethical Indigenous research. Indeed my critique of the term “Aboriginal” follows this principle and is informed by my knowledge of the diversity of Métis, First Nations and Inuit people. Moreover my critique is borne out by my knowledge of the diversity of the people within the Métis Nation. Thus my research, informed as it is by Métis storytelling protocols, recognizes the diversity of the people, their stories and the experiences of the research participants. In this regard, by keeping to Métis storytelling protocols, I have also heeded Rigney’s advice “be careful not to generalize Indigenous communities or individuals.”

In “Principle Five,” Rigney reasserts the importance of conducting research that benefits the communities involved. “Benefit” in this case, however, is based on the researcher’s recognition that communities and community members often have limited resources. Research can place unnecessary strain on the limited resources of Indigenous

communities. In fact in some ways my research is, in part, about the lack of resources currently available to the Métis people in this province. My hope for this research is that MCFD will recognize that their role is to support the Métis communities in this province as we once again take on the complete care, custody and decision making for our children and families. In the meantime, I made sure that all expenses incurred by participants during the research process were covered because this respect is encoded in the Métis way. In the Métis way it is the right thing to do.

“Principle Six” requires that the researcher “understand the local Indigenous community [they] are seeking to research before embarking on the research.” As I have noted throughout this dissertation, I am Métis. My investment in this research, my commitment to the Métis people, comes from the traditional teachings of my father and the Métis people who shaped my worldview. In practice Rigney reminds the researcher to “be aware that Indigenous communities have their own governance structures, cultural protocols and customs.” As a Métis person, I live in the governance structures, cultural protocols and customs of the Métis people. As a Métis these governance structures, cultural protocols and customs are inextricably interwoven into anything I do inside or outside of academia, including research. I am Métis before I am an academic.

Rigney’s finally principle of ethical research, “Principle Seven”, asserts that a researcher must “Demonstrate enthusiasm for your research project” and in the pursuit of that research he reminds the researcher that “there is no substitute for enthusiasm. Do not be disheartened by the downs. Celebrate the highs”. As a Métis person it is impossible for me not to be enthusiastic about the liberation of our people. As I noted earlier I am not a

disengaged researcher, I am a Métis person invested in the struggle for transformation and liberation.

In Rigney's analysis research involves open, honest communication predicated on mutual respect between the study participants and the researcher. Rigney's research paradigm recognizes that consultation should not be considered as merely an opportunity for a researcher to tell individuals or groups what that researcher wants, but an opportunity for the researcher to recognize the participants as experts who can teach the researcher about their experiences. While I cannot and would not preface the participant responses the way my father prefaced his stories, I can treat participant responses in the traditional Métis way as an opportunity for me to learn.

These Métis storytelling protocols are grounded in shared Métis understandings of respect, self-determination, patience and responsibility, which are Métis principles that I will elaborate in more detail in "Chapter Five: Transformative Practice". In order to meet Métis protocols around story-sharing, I did not impose any time limits on my visits with research participants. This was out of respect and met my responsibility as a community member of the participants. They were willing to share their stories with me and I respected their stories by dispensing with western notions of time. After all who am I to put a limit, chronological or otherwise, on another person's story? Thus I asked participants open-ended questions. These open-ended questions let the participants share their stories as they saw fit. For example, as I note later in the description of the interview guide many of the research participants answered questions about their own experiences with MCFD by grounding their experiences in key moments in Métis history. They included these important moments from our shared history, yet I did not ask one single direct question about that history. While a

non-Métis interviewer may have interpreted these long answers as an evasion of the question, Métis storytelling traditions require a grounded answer, one that moves beyond the narrow understanding of western academia to connect participants' life experiences (life stories) with the larger story of the Métis people. In this province where the Métis are still ignored, ostracized, and "othered" the shared history of the Métis people becomes an important foundation for our threatened identity. Every articulation of that history becomes a way for research respondents to assert their "Métisness".

The lack of academic and governmental research about Métis people involved in the child and family welfare system indicates that the Métis experience is largely unknown outside of the Métis community. Outside of the Métis community there are few venues for Métis people to share our experiences with and concerns about the current child and family welfare system in BC. Yet, like First Nations and Inuit people in British Columbia, the Métis people share a common experience of marginalization within MCFD's system. In the Métis world there are several possible ways of knowing any given experience. In the Métis world, people share stories and by sharing those stories we reach a consensus. In the Métis world it is difficult to explain someone else's story, even if that story informs one's own life journey. In fact, in the Métis world to interpret another person's words is offensive. After all, that person owns that experience. In the words of my father, as Métis people we "don't poke in" – we do not intrude into someone else's matters. For this reason my hope is that, in the next chapter, "Analysis and Findings," I do not poke in to the experiences of the research participants. In other words, my hope is that their voices come through, not mine.

Métis storytelling was, and is, important among Métis both for education and entertainment. I recall that most stories told to me, both as a child and as an adult, always

contained some form of lesson. My father would begin by naming the person who told the story to him. For example he would say, “old auntie Kate” and then proceed to tell the story she had told him. I came to realize this was a way of teaching respect and accountability. It was a show of honest communication. As a Métis person, I incline towards the democratic processes of the Métis people around story sharing and consensus.

In all stages of the research study, participants conveyed a level of trust and comfort with me. I believe that this trust was based on my Métisness. I am a Métis person who shares culture, language and history with other Métis people. I am familiar with the Métis community and with Métis cultural protocols. I am also familiar with provincial and national governance structures of the Métis people. I am familiar with colonization. As qualitative research theorist John Creswell notes, “the hallmark of qualitative research today is the deep involvement in issues of gender, culture, and marginalization” (p. 19). My subject position, my “deep involvement,” encouraged trustful communication between the research participants and me. This trustful communication was based on a mutual understanding of the customary Métis community, family and governance systems. The significance of building and maintaining respectful relationships and confirming the researcher’s role as learner and faithful, accurate transcriber shaped my research journey. For this research project I share in the Métis experience of colonization even as I learn about other Métis people’s experiences. Thus, in keeping with Rigney’s seventh principle, my research is not a pseudo-scientific, objectivist account of the Métis experience: it is an act of solidarity. I stand with the Métis community as we strive for emancipation from a system that oppresses us through its willful dismissal of our requests, through its continuing delivery of culturally inappropriate programs and through its continuing misplacement of our children.

### **Research Design: Research as Transformative Action**

The aim of this research is to encourage transformative action on the part of MCFD administrators and workers, on the part of academics and social work students and on the part of the Métis community.

### **Consultation or Visiting**

During my discussion about the ethics of this research study, the Elder conveyed that in Métis culture it is the duty of the women to make life better for their family. As I noted in the introduction, family, in the Métis sense of the term, means the Métis community. The Elder stated further that,

one of the things I do always whenever I sit in a meeting with any kind of government people, I always make sure that they know that kinship ties, roots, Métis values are probably the most important commodities that they can put into their programs. I believe that the research study is an opportunity to press this point to the government. (Elder Interview, 2010)

I took the Elder's words as a sign that it was okay to conduct the research study and that, in the Elder's eyes; this study had the potential to contribute to transformative changes for the good of the Métis people.

After visiting with the Elder, I consulted a Métis leader. This Métis leader supported the study, but expressed some reservations about the transformative potential of this study because, over the years, the Métis community has had so many negative experiences with MCFD:

Over the years, due to the lack of knowledge by the Ministry [MCFD] on [about] Métis culture we were left off the scale. Maybe this research is what we need so that we can be in charge of caring for our children. (Leader Interview, 2010)

After getting the Elder's and the Métis leader's approval, and prior to any formal engagement in the research study, we (the Métis people) held several informal and customary



discussions in order to gain a general sense of the need or relevance of research about Métis people and MCFD. On top of these informal discussions, the research was discussed at a Métis Child and Family Service Agencies' Quarterly meeting and at a frontline practitioners' monthly meeting. Although the topic of this research study was not part of the meeting agendas, the meeting chairs presented it for discussion. In both meetings the response to this proposed study (then in its early-stages) was positive. The research study was also discussed more generally at different dinners and events such as the annual, November 16<sup>th</sup> Louis Riel Dinner. People suggested that throughout the research process I continue practicing proper protocol by giving tobacco to Elders, by feeding those who participate in the research and by taking time to listen and explain any queries about the research.

Through a mutual agreement between the Métis Elders, the Board of Directors for The Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC, the research study will be housed in the Métis Resource Library located at the Métis Commission for Children and Family offices in Kamloops, BC. As I noted earlier, when the study is finished copies will be available to Métis people and others upon request. The research findings will also be available at University of British Columbia libraries.

After informal discussions with Métis community members, an academic might call them consultations; I drafted an interview guide for potential research participants. Two Métis social workers at the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC (MCCF) reviewed a draft of the interview guide. Both of these social workers are experienced event coordinators within the Métis community and they are both experienced with social work practice. In fact on behalf of MCCF, both workers engage MCFD on matters of practice and policy. Moreover the social workers reviewed the draft interview questions before those

questions went to the academic research supervisor for approval. Along with the social workers, a Métis Elder and community leader reviewed the interview guide. Furthermore, because the research study involves the Métis community (or in the UBC ethics committee's terms an Aboriginal community), the UBC ethics committee required that I, the researcher, send a formal request to the president of MCCF for permission to conduct the research.<sup>6</sup> The University of British Columbia's Ethics Committee also approved the research study.

After this review process, 20 Métis people were recruited from across the province of BC. The participants were selected based on their Métis identity, their cultural knowledge and their experience with MCFD and its child and family welfare system. This selection process accords with Creswell's recommendation that participants of any research study are carefully selected based on their experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research participants for this study had to meet the following criteria: (1) Métis ancestry; (2) experience as a social worker, leader and/or elder; (3) an understanding of Métis cultural knowledge and practice as it pertains to the proper care of Métis children; (4) knowledge about the ways of the Métis people. Although none of the participants have direct involvement as clients of the child welfare system, they have witnessed and experienced problems either through their work and/or through extended family's or their community's involvement in the system. A collaborative research process was (and is) crucial to accurately presenting the participants' collective experience.

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<sup>6</sup> The UBC's research ethics committee requires that researchers who are doing research with an Aboriginal community get permission from the said community. As a Métis person I appreciated this requirement and take it as evidence of transformative change – perhaps the institutions of colonization can engage in different, even decolonizing, practices.

Because of my involvement in the Métis community and, in order to prevent any possibility of a sense of coercion on the part of potential research participants, the UBC research ethics committee determined that someone other than me should send the initial letter. This letter came from the manager at the White Buffalo Aboriginal Health Society. The manager of White Buffalo sent letters to 35 chartered Métis locals in BC, 1 unchartered Métis local in Vancouver, 5 Métis Child and Family Service Agencies, 1 each from Kamloops, Kelowna, Surrey, Victoria, Prince George, 1 Urban Aboriginal organization from Kamloops, and 1 provincial Métis organization from Kamloops. These Métis agencies have regional responsibilities across the 7 provincial regions which include the Region 1: Vancouver Island; Region 2 the Lower Mainland; Region 3 the Thompson-Okanagan; Region 4 the Kootenay; Region 5 the North Central; 6 the North West; and 7 North East. Despite a large Métis population in the North East Region, the 2006 census estimates about 7000, there are no Métis Service Providers, while the Thompson-Okanagan region has two. Of the Métis service providers, Surrey Métis Family Services is over twenty years old and is the oldest of all these Métis agencies. These agencies provide a full range of services, everything from case conferencing to parenting teachings to ECE to family support services all based on Métis culture. Each agency has its own board of directors. In any case, the service providers are required to cover a broad geographical area with a fraction of the resources afforded to MCFD workers.

Despite their lack of resources the Métis Agencies all responded though their responses arrived at different times, some within a few days of sending the letters out and others within a week, a month or more of receiving the letters. Métis chartered and unchartered locals generally did not respond to the letter of invitation, but as political bodies,

these locals are usually not involved in matters of child and family welfare. In fact these locals are still sorting out their place in the child welfare system. A president from the chartered local in the Thompson/Okanagan region called me directly to offer support for the study. The president of this local requested a copy of the research findings upon completion of this study. Letters to the Service Providers yielded 20 enthusiastic potential research participants.

### **Research Implementation**

Once potential participants confirmed their interest, I contacted them by phone to introduce the study, to explain its purpose and to explore why that person might be interested in participating. After this initial and follow-up contact, I sent each participant an electronic or hand-delivered packet which included: (1) research questions; (2) a focus group consent form; (3) individual interview consent form, and (4) a letter from the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC approving this research. The interview questions utilized in this study drew upon the study's major questions:

How can a Métis worldview, cultural knowledge and values improve the care of Métis children placed in British Columbia's foster care system, especially those placed in non-Métis homes?

How can MCFD's system incorporate Métis cultural knowledge in their policies and practices for Métis children in foster care?

How can social workers provide culturally appropriate, culturally safe care to Métis children and families?

From my discussions with Métis Elders and leaders, these following questions formed the Interview Guide:

Please tell me what is your current role with respect to Métis children placed in BC's foster care system? How long have you worked in this field?

For people who know very little or nothing about the Métis how would you describe the following: (a) Métis culture; (b) key Métis values?

How is Métis identity and self-esteem connected to Métis culture?

In what ways do Métis families practice their cultures today?

Have you tried to incorporate Métis culture and values into your work or role with Métis children in foster care? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Do you think that the insertion of Métis culture and values into foster care practices within the Ministry for Children and Family Development would improve outcomes for Métis children in foster care? If so how would they? How can it be done?

(a) When would it be appropriate to place a Métis child in the care of a non-Métis foster home? (b) Why do you think so many Métis children are placed in non-Métis foster homes?

How could the British Columbia child welfare system, the Ministry for Children and Family Development, incorporate Métis cultural knowledge into its policies and practices?

What kind of education and training should be given to Ministry for Children and Family Development to incorporate Métis cultural knowledge and practices?

Do you think educating Ministry staff about Métis culture and values should be compulsory? If so why?

How can the Métis community work with the Ministry social workers, team leaders and managers?

How can the Ministry work with the Métis community?

How can the Ministry for Children and Family Development and the Métis community work together for the betterment of Métis children placed into foster care? What challenges do they have to overcome?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that addresses the three main research questions?

While this interview guide meets the standard protocols of academic research, during the visits, the interview guide was simply that – a guide. As I noted earlier, the interviews became visits and the participants' answers to the interview questions were stories. True to Métis storytelling practices, there was not one answer per question, but rather each story addressed several of the questions. These storied responses were consistent through all of the interviews/visits.

The research study took place in two stages. One-on-one interviews, what I have identified as visits, were conducted with 9 individuals of these visits were conducted in Vancouver, 1 in Kelowna, 1 in Vernon and 2 in Kamloops. The second stage of the study, a sharing circle, consisting of 11 participants was held in Kamloops at the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC. I felt that two methods of data collection, individual sessions and a sharing circle, would help broaden my understanding of the complexity and subtle ways in which Métis people have been silenced. These two interview methods allowed me to observe the participants' responses in the individual sessions as well as in the sharing

circle/focus group. Individual interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the participant (most commonly their home, workplace or a public venue such as a restaurant).

The sharing circle took place at the MCCF office. The MCCF meeting room contains an abundance of historical materials, pictures, records and other Métis artifacts that demonstrate the proud history and life of the Métis people. This location was a warm, familiar and comfortable space for Métis people to gather. Prior to beginning the sharing circle, an Elder prayed and blessed the process. One study participant, a recognized Métis healer, conducted a smudge (cleansing). I provided a traditional lunch, consisting of rubaboo (stew) and li gallette (bannock) with a variety of fruit and tea, for the participants. The prayer, smudge and food are the traditional Métis ways of showing respect.

Prior to the interview session and the focus group, I travelled home to Manitoba and from that journey returned to BC with Manitoba sweetgrass. This sweetgrass was blessed by an Elder living in Manitoba. Sweetgrass is one of the four sacred medicines used by many Métis people. It is said that the sweetgrass helps one to focus and to pay attention to goodwill. After completing the individual interviews and after the focus group, research participants were gifted with sweetgrass braids, the gift of ‘Turtle Island.’ In the Métis culture, gift-giving and feasting are acts of appreciation to those recognized as having a good heart, a clear mind and a strong spirit. All of the research participants exhibit these valuable Métis attributes.

The participants in the individual interviews did not participate in the sharing circle, though the same questions were used for all the interview sessions including the sharing circle. The research participants ranged in age from 30 to 72 years old. Of the 20 research participants only 3 were men. The remaining 17 women reflect the important roles Métis

women play in the Métis community. The Métis community is matriarchal and, as with other community gatherings, this matriarchy is reflected in the number of women who responded to the invitation to participate in this research. As noted by Barkwell et al (2006), the matriarchs are the pillars of Métis culture.

The research participants consisted of Métis leaders, Métis Elders, and Métis social workers. Several of the research participants have various roles with different responsibilities within the Métis community. Due to these multiple roles, and to ensure that the participants are rightfully and respectfully acknowledged, these participants are identified in several ways within the research study: 1) Métis Elder/Leader/Social worker; 2) Métis Leader /Social; or 3) Métis Elder/Leader. Examples of a dual or triple recognition are provided in this way;

1) **Elder/Leader/Social Worker**. This participant lives in the Thompson/Okanagan region and is recognized as a trusted elder and a strong Métis community leader. She is noted as a highly effective political leader and has been instrumental in advancing the rights of Métis people in the province of BC. This participant has been involved in child welfare and service to her people for nearly 50 years. She is one of the original founders of the first Métis Governance Structure in British Columbia; she negotiated one of the first child welfare contracts with the provincial government all the while practicing front-line social work in Vancouver.

2) The next participant, a Métis **Leader/Social worker** resides in the Williams Lake area and has been involved in Métis politics for nearly 25 years. She is recognized provincially as a resilient leader and has gain the respect of the Métis people across the province of British Columbia. She is known for her cultural understanding and has been called upon to share Métis history, cultural knowledge and stories. Her human service



experiences include the provision of support and education services to Métis and First Nation children and families in the urban area.

3) This participant resides in Kamloops and although she does not deliver services or act in a service delivery capacity, her traditional knowledge is invaluable. She is a well-known **Métis Elder/Leader** and a knowledge holder of the old Metis ways of knowing and doing. During the data collection process her words of wisdom and understanding of the Metis ways of doing came to life in the words of the other research participants. When the others spoke about the importance that a sense of belonging brings, it was repeated again in the Métis Elder's/Leader's transferred knowledge when while spoke about maintaining kinship ties and a responsibility to the community. This Métis Elder/Leader continues to play a vital role in the development of child welfare services by addressing the need to ensure the transfer of cultural knowledge in service delivery. She is called upon to share her knowledge and to support the community in times of stress or struggle.

The majority of the research participants were social workers or front-line workers and all of them were Métis. One research participant held an influential position a high level/regional position in the Ministry for Children and Family Development. She reported that although this position was challenging in some instance it was also an opportunity to insert the Métis voice into MCFD process. Another participant is highly praised by the Métis people in her service delivery area (Kelowna) for the work she does and the support she provides to those in need. This participant is noted by the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC as an outstanding front-line worker and advocate that Métis children and families can count on. One research participant shared her experience as a front-line worker noting that she had 6 years of experience as a Roots Practitioner. She elaborated on the need

to ensure that Métis children in care or involved with MCFD have opportunities to maintain a connection to their family and community.

Other research participants held community leadership responsibilities in the form of an Executive Directors of Métis Child and Family Service Agencies. The Executive Directors are often seen by the communities as those with full knowledge and understanding of the child welfare system's flaws and strengths. This was proven when a research participant noted an in-depth understanding of the Child Welfare system. This was due to that participant having been involved in child and families services since 1997. This Executive Director noted the struggles and strategies to move Métis agenda forward in such a way as to ensure equality in service provision. Another research participant and Executive Director spoke about the drive to make sure that policy and practice standards were challenged as these standards are often out of line with the Métis ways of doing.

Overall, the general or collective voices of the research participants conveyed a very important message, which was that the strength of the Métis people is found in our history and culture. The research participants uniformly felt that Métis people, regardless of where they reside, are 'a family' and thereby share a responsibility to care for each. The need to maintain a connection to the community and to one another is foundational. One participant noted it in this way: "key words and values that I would say are very important in the life and family of a Métis person are: connection to community, connection to family, connection to the strong values of respect and dignity and knowing your place in the world and who you are. I am a strong Métis individual. It gives you the power to be strong and walk in that direction" (Métis social worker. 2010)

The significance of maintaining a connection to family, community, history is further noted when another research participant said that the mainstream child welfare system seems to neglect the importance of connecting a child to their history and that this has repercussion on a person's life when they are older. It was agreed that severing the connection to the community is detrimental to the well-being and pride of Métis children and people.

Although in a different way, one of the most passionate and persuasive accounts of maintaining community ties is noted by a Métis Elder/ leader/ social worker (2010). She shared a story about entering the school system and being afraid to identify herself as Métis while outside of the community. "I was afraid to bring the Métis culture outside because of the pain and hurt in my parent's eyes, my grandparent's eyes, as they told me "don't go there, people will laugh at you". For the Métis people maintaining culture and the responsibility to care for one another is often greater than one can envision. As a researcher and Métis person the participant's stories brought to me once again the feeling of being safely tucked in the circle of my people. Stories from the research participants run deep within the Métis people both inside and outside of the research study. For example, my father, Earl Canada, gave one constant message to his children "We are good people, strong people; we must take care of each other no matter what."

In the individual interviews, unlike the sharing circle, some individuals openly expressed grief and pain around the loss of cultural connections for themselves and their children. The individual sessions allowed for a more intimate revelation of participant's feelings than did the focus group. While I would not describe this as a challenge, it was heartbreaking to see the pain of our people. One person described the pain of not fitting in with the Métis community. This participant lamented all the things she had lost growing-up

not knowing she was Métis. This visit was also hopeful, however, because we could celebrate the participant's return to the Métis people. By the end of the discussion she recognized that she already belonged with the Métis people, that she was accepted by the Métis community simply because she was Métis. Like other late Métis, she was welcomed home. As a seasoned social worker I engaged as an active listener and engaged in a problem solving process with the participant and together we came up with a plan to resolve any lingering issues. At the end of the visit she was given the name of an Elder that she could contact for cultural guidance. Furthermore, contact for the Métis Association was provided so that she could continue her active role in the Métis community. Finally, I reminded her that she continue to contact the Métis Commission and, more specifically me, for further cultural support. This process is based in the old ways of doing, in our responsibility to care for one another.

During the sharing circle, comprised mostly of social workers, the participants took a resistant stance against MCFD in favour of reclaiming our lost culture. Because I approached the interviews as visits without time constraints, it is difficult for me to identify any challenges around the interview process. The "enthusiasm" (to borrow Rigney's term) of the Métis people shone through. In true Métis fashion we shared food, laughed and talked about the issues facing our communities. During the sharing circle there were no debates about right and wrong. We were there to share our stories, to address the needs of our children and to focus on the limitations of MCFD's approach. Despite the different settings and locations the overall answers of respondents (both individually and in the sharing circle) complemented one another.

## **Conclusion**

The following considerations informed my research questions and the interview guide: (1) a strong belief that the introduction of Métis knowledge and values in current child and family welfare practices and policies would improve those mainstream practices; (2) Métis people have an inalienable right to full decision making power over the care and custody of our children; (3) the Government of British Columbia has ignored the Métis people, a vibrant Nation with a strong culture; (4) child and family intervention, prevention and, if necessary, apprehension must be determined in consultation with the Métis community; (5) and the Métis community is best suited to provide education, training, guidance and support to MCFD, the Province of British Columbia and the Federal Government of Canada in regards to culturally-safe social work practices. However, I wish to reiterate that with all these considerations, my primary purpose for this research is to ensure that the Ministry and the Academy hear the voice of the Métis people. We are losing our children and it will take a concerted, collaborative effort to put an end to our loss. We need allies.

## Chapter Three: Analysis and Findings

A systematic issue is one that effects or relates to a system as a whole. A system is a combination of related elements organized into a complex whole. Exploring systematic issues means trying to understand the interconnectedness of things, and how people interact within groups, including families, organizations, and communities and between those groups. (Jane Morley, Child and Youth Officer of BC 2006. p.7)

In keeping with Morley's systems analysis, Métis people understand that "a system is a combination of related elements organized into a complex whole". For the Métis, this sense of wholeness is foundational to our family systems and kinship networks. However, the Ministry for Child and Family Development (as well as other government ministries) does not allow for alternative approaches to family systems. This chapter documents the plight of Métis people involved in the child welfare system and their struggle for emancipation from it. Their plight illustrates the complexity of living a colonized cultural existence. Their stories simultaneously describe the Métis struggle for emancipation from western colonial systems and embody their sense of freedom from those systems. These stories offer a collective message of transformative change in Freire's sense of the term, towards Métis self-determination. Despite either working within the child welfare system or, in some cases, having a loved one currently moving through that system, the research respondents indicate that the child welfare system in BC lacks mechanisms to protect Métis cultural identity and the identity of Métis children and families it is supposed to serve. The respondents maintain a strong sense of cultural pride. Métis people have the cultural resources to meet the needs of Métis children and families. In order to reverse the cultural erasure that is currently occurring within the provincial child welfare system through its application of the term "Aboriginal,"

the Ministry needs to recognize Métis people as a distinct group and support us as we develop a model that incorporates cultural safety into all aspects of service delivery.

In order to present the Métis participants' collective message of transformative change, this chapter organizes their responses around the three research questions:

How can a Métis worldview, cultural knowledge and values improve the care of Métis children placed in British Columbia's foster care system, especially those placed in non-Métis homes?

How can MCFD's system incorporate Métis cultural knowledge in their policies and practices for Métis children in foster care?

How can social workers provide culturally appropriate, culturally safe care to Métis children and families?

From these questions, the interview guide, and the participants' responses, this chapter concludes by incorporating the emergent themes into the Métis People's Child Welfare Model.

The analysis of participants' responses began with the implementation of a "hurricane thinking approach." According to Sandra Kirby, Lorraine Greaves and Colleen Reid (2006), the hurricane thinking approach is "One strategy for understanding links between categories," in this case the links between the different responses of the research participants (p. 235). As Greaves et al. note of this approach,

the research question is placed in the centre of a page. This is 'the eye of the hurricane.' Category names are moved about the page or screen until those that have the strongest ties remain closest to the research question and those with less obvious or weaker ties sit at more of a distance. (p. 235)

After placing the research questions in the centre of the page, I organized the participants' responses into clusters of themes. The clusters of themes were then referred

back to the original participants' descriptions in order to verify those descriptions and to ensure that there was no information in the original participants' responses that was not accounted for. At the same time, I recognize the dangers of editing or altering participants' responses through this hurricane thinking approach. This approach privileges certain parts of the participants' responses over other responses in order to search out points of consensus. In fact I use this approach because, just as in a community discussion we share stories in order to reach a consensus on a given topic, I wanted to see where the participants agreed about issues in the current child and family welfare system.

Nevertheless I also want to retain those individual points of view. For this reason, in this chapter I directly quote at length from the research participants. My use of the hurricane thinking approach and the individual responses attempts a balance between collective opinion and individual point of view. Throughout this process I maintain the significance of the participants' original descriptions. Yet I also recognize that this hurricane thinking approach altered the participants' words. For this reason (in keeping with Rigney's first principle of ethical research - consultation), I shared the reorganized responses with the participants so that they could validate or invalidate the way I had grouped their words. Together we arrived at a place where they felt the words were being honored, at least as much as this is possible because, in the end, I am telling their story. Despite my best efforts to be true to the participants' responses, I still remain uncomfortable with the research process. I will continue to wrestle with an approach to research that does fully honor the participants' true stories.

The main research questions guiding the thematic analysis inquired how Métis knowledge, values, and worldview could inform social work practice in planning for Métis



children in foster care. The thematic analysis identifies the following needs: 1) the need for transformative change in the provincial child welfare system in order to ensure Métis identity is respected; 2) the need for recognition by the provincial system of the importance of Métis values, culture and worldview; 3) the need for education to inform provincial social work practice so that this practice involves cultural planning with the Métis community for Métis children in foster care; 4) the need for strong relationships within the provincial Métis community; and 5) the need to insert cultural safety into mainstream policy and practice so that outcomes for Métis children in foster care improve.

The thematic analysis also reveals that these needs are not adequately addressed by MCFD's current services. When the research participants were asked how a Métis worldview, cultural knowledge and values could improve the care of Métis children placed in the BC foster care system, especially those placed in non-Métis homes, the participants instead noted the importance of Métis culture and identity, which are the sub-themes in Figure 2. They stated that Métis children in care need to feel a sense of belonging, need to be taught about their kinship ties, and need to know the importance of extended family. As one worker noted,

I think that Métis children need to be in Métis specific homes because of the loss of culture, extended family and history. I also think that since it's about culture foster parents can at least know something about Métis heritage. We have different worldviews because of our history. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

When asked how the Ministry of Children and Family Development might incorporate Métis cultural knowledge into their service delivery, the respondents suggested an alternative model of service delivery whereby MCFD would act as the governing body for Métis specific services. According to this model, the Ministry would respect the Métis

worldview, change its policies and practices, and support MCCF as it works with Métis Agencies to deliver culturally appropriate services. When the respondents were asked how this model of service delivery would be transformational in meeting the needs of Métis people, they responded with four key points. First, this model would stop cultural erasure. With a representative of the Métis community governing service delivery, Métis culture would be celebrated not disrespected. Secondly, this service delivery model would move the Métis to liberation from a system that often ignores the distinct identities of our children and families. Thirdly, this model would change the current rigid and oppressive system by providing Métis people an opportunity to develop family care policies grounded in Métis kinship structures. These policies would respect the Métis understanding of family. Finally, in practice, such a model would be a tacit acknowledgement by the Ministry of the wisdom of Métis care-giving traditions.

The interviews illustrate the emotional and mental resilience of the research participants as they critically examine the cultural invasion and oppression inherent in BC's current child welfare system. Moreover, their resilience and defiance is grounded in their pride in their history and culture. This chapter presents the lived experience of the Métis people who currently and historically encounter marginalization and cultural invasion by the provincial child welfare system. Although this dissertation focuses on the provincial child welfare system it must be noted that marginalization, cultural invasion and enforced colonial rule has roots in every provincial and national system within Canada and within child welfare systems globally. Colonial interference is certainly a consistent theme in Métis history.

Research participants provided a wealth of information concerning cultural safety, cultural invasion and the impact of both concepts on Métis child welfare. During the

interviews, respondents focused on finding better life-long outcomes for Métis children in foster care. In my understanding, for them this meant developing and implementing culturally safe services and programs. The most effective and efficient way to achieve this is to ensure that cultural safety is defined by Métis people. The insertion of Métis culture, worldview and values into the BC child welfare system means that the provincial government must take responsibility for their role in ensuring the cultural safety of Métis children. The Ministry's ignorance of diversity within the Métis Nation is another example of the ways Métis people are marginalized within the provincial child welfare system.

### **Cultural Diversity and Uniqueness**

As a researcher and a Métis person, I found it exhilarating to witness a critique of MCFD child welfare system and to see the participants' transformative actions, actions which move towards the liberation of the Métis people from colonial systems of control. Despite MCFD's claims to the contrary, when research participants were asked how the provincial child welfare system policies and practices support Métis culture all of the participants responded unanimously: in their varied experiences, the provincial welfare system does not support Métis culture. As one Elder noted of the current child welfare system in BC,

It is the furtherance of colonization that is at the root of putting Métis children in care in non-Métis homes, I still believe there are a lot of us old ones in the Métis community that feel this way. You are getting our kids and bringing them into mainstream in the hopes of stamping out all the Métis there is. (Métis Elder interview, 2010)

The Elder's statement suggests a very different account of the child welfare system than the one presented by the Province. Métis Elders note that the identification of Métis children and families as "Aboriginal" (not specifically Métis) is a contemporary form of

what Freire identifies as “cultural invasion.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than acknowledging Métis children and families as culturally distinct Métis people, the child welfare system places these children and families in the indistinct Aboriginal group. By using terms such as Aboriginal that ignore the uniqueness of the Métis people, the child welfare system dismisses Métis nationhood and identity. Instead that system attempts to control Métis expressions of “Métisness” by imposing outside colonial names, structures and worldviews (Freire, 2006, p.152).

Research participants verify that a sense of superiority permeates the mainstream child welfare system. As one Métis social worker states, “I have a problem with some of them [mainstream social workers] who view their positions as they are in authority; the ministry social workers say this is the way and that’s that” (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010). In order for the provincial child welfare system (invaders) to maintain control over Métis children and families, the welfare system must convince the Métis (invaded) of its intrinsic superiority and the Métis’s inferiority (Freire, 2006).

Despite these current struggles, the research respondents identified themselves as agents of change rather than mere survivors of colonial structures. In fact their survival informs their leadership. They are determined that the placement of Métis children outside Métis cultural environments will stop. Some of the respondents suggested education as a means of revolutionary transformation, noting that child welfare workers need to be educated in Métis culture, nationhood and identity. As one respondent stated, “When I look at Métis

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<sup>7</sup> According to Freire, cultural invasion is the process whereby “the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression” (2006, p. 152). In their use of the term “Aboriginal,” MCFD imposes their understanding of who the Métis are rendering us “Aboriginal” and not Métis. This imposition ignores and disrespects our unique history, culture, traditions, and language. It is an active, continuing form of cultural invasion and thus a form of oppression.

culture, I think the government needs to become more aware of what Métis culture means and help to develop their staff to understand that as well.” (Métis Educator/Social Worker Interview, 2010). Further it was noted that the Métis community needs to insist that MCFD accept the worldview of the Métis (Leader Interview, 2010).

The importance of Métis children knowing who they are and where they come from is paramount to their well-being. This knowledge, as Cathy Richardson (2009) points out, is also crucial to the well-being of the Métis people as a group: “Helping Métis people to recover what has been stolen in terms of their family stories, their cultural identity and their ancestral pride in the wake of white racism is an important aspect of Métis social work practice” (p. 120). Respondents continually remarked during interviews and sharing circles that a strong sense of cultural identity is essential to healthy development. Participants also noted that cultural awareness is crucial to a child’s sense of belonging.

I think it is known that a solid identity is a big part of a person’s self-esteem in that I think there is a strong connection between cultural esteem and self-esteem when you have a good understanding of your roots and your practices and where you come from, it helps to build a solid foundation to do the things we need to do as we go through our lives and to face the challenges that we inevitably face as human beings. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

The term “cultural esteem” is linked to self-esteem and these two conditions support and build, one upon the other. Cultural esteem is gained through the connection of cultural roots, family kinship ties, and a sense of belonging. Cultural awareness training opportunities for external care-givers is necessary in understanding Métis culture, values, and history. In “Métis Experiences of Social Work Practices,” Cathy Richardson (2009) formulates child welfare strategies for Métis safety, planning and assessment. Improving outcomes for a Métis child’s overall experience in the foster-care system is vital if they are to be healthy. Furthermore, not providing training opportunities to those charged with the care and custody

of Métis children is the tacit erasure of Métis identity. Such an erasure creates an environment where children become ashamed of themselves as Métis people, or perhaps even worse, unaware of their identity.

These findings also reveal that it is incumbent upon Métis people to make sure that the children within the MCFD system do not lose or become disconnected from Métis values and the culture. The mainstream concept of a safe environment is the provision of food, shelter, and clothing. The Métis notion of a safe environment recognizes the importance of these basic needs, but emphasizes the importance of these needs within a culturally safe environment. Cultural safety is necessary for several reasons, one of which is to ensure that a child's self-esteem is maintained or in some cases built while they are in care. As one Métis social worker states,

In order to have strong self-esteem you must have a strong self-concept. In order to have a strong self-concept you have to know who you are and where you come from. Even if you don't know a great deal about your own family history, you can know a good deal about Métis history in general and the families around you. (Métis Social Worker Interview. 2010)

A Métis Elder participating in the interviews succinctly describes the importance of Métis culture and history to one's sense of well-being:

I am Métis. I have a culture. I have things to do. It is gatherings like youth honoring ceremonies, Lac St. Anne celebrations, and like Festival la Voyageur. These things are an integral part of my soul. (Métis Elder Interview, 2010)

In order to create a culturally safe environment for Métis children in care and to ensure that things integral to those children's souls are included in the care they receive, Métis culture must be integrated into every aspect of that care. As one Métis social worker noted:

For Métis children to know who they are makes them whole. Children in foster care are already coming in a vulnerable state. If the child welfare system does not acknowledge their person, there will be something missing that cannot be replaced by skating lessons or trips or anything else the child welfare system provides. (Métis Service Provider Interview, 2010)

Through our lived experiences and through our shared history, Métis people have an intimate understanding of our culture. Métis people are the ones best suited to pass on Métis culture, values and worldview to their children. If, however, a Métis child is placed in the care of a non-Métis foster parent, that parent must work with the Métis community to ensure that the Métis child has opportunities to experience Métis culture. Such opportunities ensure that Métis children know who they are, where they come from, and to whom they belong. In the Métis worldview, one's connection to family and community is foundational to one's identity. When a Métis child is placed outside of their cultural environment the connection to their culture, people and community is lost. As the Métis Elder states, Métis culture is an "integral part of my soul. It tells me I am somebody" (Métis Elder interview. 2010). Métis children in care have a right to know that they too are somebody, that they are Métis.

These respondents remember Métis history and from that history they are focused on achieving self-determination in a contemporary context. During the interviews one participant noted,

we formed our own government of Canada and we are a part of this country. Five hundred years from now others will know who the Métis are and what Métis culture is. They will know that Métis culture is not being identified as 'aboriginal'. We must keep instilling the culture; we must be in control of our children's future. (Elder Interview, 2010)

Having dealt with colonization for centuries, Métis people are accustomed to developing strategies of resistance to colonial power structures. In the midst of colonial oppression, respondents esteem Métis culture.

The uniqueness of the Métis Nation is based on the diversity within it and on the Métis people's ability to adapt. Historically Métis people made alliances with First Nations who later became their relatives. Family connections between Métis and First Nations remain in many parts of Canada. When the research participants were asked where in Canada these family connections remained, they identified the prairie-provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and then Ontario. Manitoba is celebrated as the homeland of the Métis people, due to its large Métis population. It is the centre of traditional Métis culture.

Knowledge of the shared Métis history is important for identifying Métis children in the care of MCFD. The diversity and uniqueness of the Métis people and the connections they share with their First Nations and White relatives allow them to walk between two worlds, bringing balance and harmony to both worlds (Elder Interview, 2010). Because MCFD uses the term "Aboriginal" in its practice, its workers often misunderstand that Métis people are distinct from First Nations and Inuit peoples. As one Elder notes our identity is based in our heritage: "I would describe us as a unique people due to our heritage; we seem to be able to balance between the two worlds" (Elder Interview, 2010). The unique blending of the Métis with their First Nations and European relatives allow them to walk in both worlds or in other words enables them to have a meaningful understanding of their relatives and the capability to manage inside and outside the margins of both worldviews.

Métis history, culture, language and worldview are unique to the Métis people. This history, culture and worldview are found in Métis stories and these stories encode Métis practices, rituals, beliefs and myths. For example, during the interviews a Métis Elder (2010) shared a shortened version of the story of the Rougarou (werewolf). According to the Elder, it was said that the werewolf was a person that had in some way offended the Great Spirit



and had been possessed by evil spirits. The only way one could be saved from the ‘werewolf’ was by the ‘little people,’ Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak tiny human beings, who were the protectors of the Métis peoples. As the story unfolded and then concluded I realized that in its telling the ‘werewolf’ was like the evil hand of colonization and the ‘little people’ were the Métis youth of today, protectors, of the future and of the Métis Nation. This familiar story is linked to the past of the Métis people. It also identifies forms of colonization at work in the present. At the same time it is a hopeful story for our children, their future, and the future of the Métis people.

Métis stories emphasize the shared history of the Métis people. Although our history goes back hundreds of years, it is the foundation for our present and our future. Métis history is unchangeable, interconnected and inclusive of all Métis peoples. It stands as a testament to our resilience. The respondents’ critiques of the child welfare system are informed by that shared history. This history reveals Métis cultural values of respect, resiliency, responsibility and honesty. The values acknowledge the diversity amongst Métis people and their connection to that shared history. Historically the blending of First Nations peoples with the French, Scottish and the Irish, the Métis were known as the “Rainbow People” and are recognized as that today. A respondent affirmed this historical identification noting its contemporary relevance:

Yes, this is a very good way to describe us. I like the analogy because there are all those different elements that come together to produce this one beautiful rainbow. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

Although the Métis are one people with a shared history the difference in physical appearance such as in eye, hair, skin-color has been, at times, problematic especially if one present is less “native” and more “white” in physical appearance. However, like other

colonial obstacles thrown in our path, they celebrate their Métisness and continue to advance their aspirations to self-determination. The rainbow people acknowledge the Cree, Ojibwa, and Assiniboine peoples as their closest relatives. This acknowledgement accounts for the blended of practices and rituals of the Métis people. As an example, a custom of the Ojibwa people is to prepare an extra plate of food during different gatherings as a way to show respect for those who have gone before them. This custom was adopted and remains a part of the Métis cultural practices today. As noted by Barkwell et al. (2006) it was a Métis custom that during the large holiday meals an extra plate would always be set on the table with the best of everything – foods, cutlery and dinnerware. After the meal, the food was put into the fire for “those who went before us” (p.197). Intermarriages between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples such as the French and the Scottish, led to the formation of the Métis Nation. From these intermarriages the Métis Nation cultivated a distinct worldview. The essence of one’s Métisness comes from a shared history, lived experiences as a Métis person and worldview which is often misunderstood by the provincial system as it provides services to Métis children and families. Just as there are many different tribes identified as First Nations so with there are many different Métis peoples. Yet for the Métis we are one Nation. However, there is a continued disruption of our identity from the outside, such as the inability of the provincial child welfare system to correctly identify Métis children involved in the system. One significant instance of MCFD’s misunderstanding is its consistent use of the term “Aboriginal” for Métis people. In order to respect the Métis jurisdiction over our own children and families, MCFD and the Government of British Columbia more generally, must begin dealing with us as Métis, not merely as “Aboriginals”.

### **Moving from the “Aboriginal” Category to Métis Self-Determination**

During the interviews participants discussed the Ministry placement of Métis children and families into the “Aboriginal” category. Many participants noted that this categorization is an injustice that perpetuates the marginalization of Métis people in the provincial child welfare system. The outcry for cultural safety in child welfare for the Métis is unrealistic if Métis children and families continue to be identified as merely ‘Aboriginal’. The Diversity of the Métis people, which is a valid aspect of our history, is not accepted or respected in the system. Rather diversity of Métis people is seen as an option. Front-line mainstream social workers often fail to explore a Métis child’s heritage. Rather than seeking clarity from the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC, the workers identify Caucasian or First Nations homes for Métis children’s primary placements. After all, where else would one place an “Aboriginal” child?

Another unnerving aspect of this Ministry practice is the issue of negative stereotyping. A Métis social worker recalls how this misunderstanding affected her childhood. “When I was young, I can remember when I was first asked what kind of Indian are you; at that time I wasn’t sure how to tell them that I was Métis” (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010). Further examination revealed this workers underlying fear of punishment associated with claiming self-identify. This worker had internalized consistent attempts to crush any pride associated with her Métisness. The more brown skinned an individual is the more likely he or she is to be identified as Native. Participants indicated that this was a dangerous practice particularly in the placement of Métis children into foster care especially for those children who did not fit the stereotypical image of Métis. Light-skinned, blue-eyed Métis children are more often than not identified as Caucasian by mainstream social workers. Social workers who refuse to consult the Métis Commission when they are placing Métis

children in foster care are excluding the legislated representative body of the Métis people. This refusal is tantamount to the dismissal of the right of the Métis people to determine the care and custody of our children.

Participants thought that locking Métis children into foster care without any view to Métis culture erased those children's futures and an opportunity for them to develop a sense of belonging. I truly understood their sorrow. The participants and I share a collective perspective. We all grieve this treatment of our children. We view MCFD's current practices as an interruption to Métis culture and as an invasion of our culture that continues the provincial and federal governments' colonial dominance. Despite the governments' interruptions and attempts to overrun our culture, the Métis carry on. The movement towards transformative change is signaled by the participants' refusal to remain silent.

During the sharing circle participants used words and concepts such as independent, strong, free-thinkers and unique to describe the Métis.<sup>8</sup> Participants noted that, as Métis people, we have a powerful history. This history creates a close, tight-knit group. Sharing circle participants shared important Métis concepts such as collective responsibility versus individualistic interest. This collective responsibility is represented in the practice of traditional gift giving between community members. This collective responsibility extends beyond responsibility to other humans to a respect for Mother Earth and all living things. Participants noted that in the Métis community, people focus on everyone's survival and this collective focus is intimately connected to values of respect, acceptance and dignity.

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<sup>8</sup> Although the phrase "focus group" is standard for the academic community, the phrase "sharing circle" accords with the Métis practice of sharing stories to build consensus.

Participants in the sharing circle also asserted that, historically, Métis people were known to be transient. Our continual movement accounts for the current diversity and uniqueness within the Métis Nation. This diversity informs Métis practices across BC and Canada. The participants' stories identify the unique ability of the Métis to adapt and adjust to any climate as well as our ability to create comfortable living situations as we moved across the prairies. Among other things, the Métis were known as founders of the fur-trade and experts in the buffalo hunt. We also have a long history of participation in the legal, medical and educational professions, since many of our ancestors were formally educated through the encouragement of their European forefathers.

The participants frequently mentioned the uniqueness of Métis culture and the Métis worldview. The participants noted that Métis language, rituals, ceremonies, spirituality and folklore are mandatory to the proper care and custody of Métis children. Métis traditions guide a Métis person to recognize their relationships to extended family, including members of that person's community and beyond that community to the Métis Nation. The placement of Métis children and families into the "Aboriginal category" must stop. It is an oppressive and unacceptable act, which demonstrates a lack of respect and recognition of Métis people and their culture.

As an important preventative measure, many participants noted that traditional parenting knowledge would provide children and families with a sense of belonging and community connection. Such an education would help alienated Métis children and families internalize their Métisness. According to the participants, respecting diversity, understanding the importance of culture and the uniqueness of Métis history is a foundation from which to engage transformative practices that lead to our liberation.

We have developed our own unique culture and practices after generations of intertwining these two different cultures. I think one of the key things about Métis people is the diversity of Métis people. (Leader Interview, 2010)

This Métis leader also highlighted the idea that not only do Métis people need to explain to others what Métis culture and values are, but also what our values and culture are not. The participants felt that it was important for MCFD workers to understand the Métis on our terms. That such an understanding would help stop the myths and stereotypes of us that have developed over time. Many people think that simply mingling a First Nations person and a white person results in the birth of a Métis person. Being Métis is about understanding Métis nationhood. We have a definite culture, unique history, languages, identity, value system, kinship ties and roots. The government of British Columbia's general lack of understanding about Métis culture and diversity within the Métis Nation is a way to dismiss the Métis as a unique Nation of people.

Participants felt that the MCFD interpreted the variations in Métis cultural practices and languages within the Métis Nation as the Métis not knowing who we are. Instead we acknowledge the richness and diversity of Métis cultural practices, language and connections. Participants noted that this reductive interpretation of our identity is evidenced in the realm of social work practice:

In BC there is so much more misunderstanding; some social workers use the term 'aboriginal' as defining Métis. This is incorrect and it causes a lot of problems with child welfare and the Ministry. (Social Worker Interview, 2010)

As a solution to the general a lack of understanding among MCFD staff, the participants suggested that Métis culture and identity could be taught by knowledgeable Métis staff in Métis Child and Family Service Agencies across the province. Participants

noted that employees who work for Métis Agencies have excellent opportunities to teach MCFD staff about Métis culture through their numerous interactions:

Everyday, when we (Métis service providers) are here on the phone with the Ministry social workers, team leaders, and managers, within the system, we are discussing Métis culture as a way in which to work with a Métis family emphasizing that they must have a cultural plan in place. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

Individually and collectively the participant interviews and the focus group expressed that the insertion of Métis values into the provincial children welfare system was essential for cultural fulfillment and maintaining identity.

According to many of the participants, the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC is a ‘watch-dog’ and a leader in transformative change.

I think that the Métis Commission today and the work that is happening in terms of identifying the different resources that are available, holding Ministry social workers accountable to involving the Métis Service Providers is a critical step in the change process. It is not optional anymore. Being a consistent strong presence in child welfare is helping social workers improve their practice. (Leader Interview, 2010)

Ensuring cultural identity through the implementation of Métis values in foster care presented challenges to the Métis community. There is a shortage of Métis families “stepping up to the plate” to become foster parents. Although this shortage runs counter to the Métis values of responsibility to family and community, further exploration of this shortage revealed that many Métis people do not step forward for the following reasons: (1) they believe that any and all experiences with the Ministry for Children and Family Development are oppressive and bad; (2) their impression is informed by MCFD’s long, intrusive and often heart-breaking bureaucratic processes; (3) they are afraid of not understanding or being unable to conform to mainstream policies and practices; (4) and they are plagued by low self-

esteem based on the impact of cultural invasion and the persistent belief that someone else could parent better.

When participants were asked if it was ever appropriate to place Métis children in a non-Métis foster home the question received mixed responses. The words of the previously quoted Métis Elder are worth restating here,

It is the furtherance of colonization that is at the root of putting Métis children in care in non-Métis homes. I still believe that there are lots of us old ones in the Métis community that feel that way. You are getting our kids and bringing them into mainstream in hopes of stamping out all the Métis there is. (Elder Interview, 2010)

Other participants felt that such a foster care placement would be appropriate only if all other possibilities were exhausted and it was done on a case by case basis. Still others felt it that it was never appropriate, that placement outside of a cultural environment was an act of colonization. In any case, participants all agreed that a non-Métis family or caregiver could not instill a Métis worldview or share a Métis understanding of belonging because they could not claim a connection to the vibrant history of the Métis people. For this reason they could not fully understand one's Métisness.

Participants determined that the Ministry of Children and Family Development should not approach Métis families as potential foster families. Instead the members of the Métis community who know proper protocol should approach potential Métis foster families. This Métis directed foster parent recruitment would ensure a practice based on a shared Métis perspective. The Métis Commission for Children and Families BC's could support this process through its quality assurance framework. This framework identifies the Métis Child and Family Service agencies who deliver Métis specific services as the leading practitioners of culturally safe services. Furthermore, participants thought it extremely important that



when Métis children are placed in foster care MCFD should engage in a collaborative process between the Métis community to ensure that strong cultural plans are developed for that child and to ensure that foster parent(s) are provided with culturally relevant training that is specific to a Métis child coming into their home.

In light of the provincial child welfare system's consistent failure in meeting the child welfare needs of Métis people, participants saw Métis control of cultural training for social workers and foster parents as a positive step in the direction of total transformative change. Such a cultural training program, however, would depend on collaborative communication between MCFD and the Métis people. This collaborative communication process has the ability to empower Métis decision-making in the care and custody of Métis children in foster care, the capacity to welcome a reconciliation process that speaks to self-determination and the power to strengthen the Métis people. As one Métis social worker noted,

I think the Métis Community in each area knows who they are. They can identify potential Métis care givers that could be approached. The community knows who they are much more than the Ministry. I feel it goes back to social workers embracing those principles that are laid out in the reconciliation process. If they do this they will know that they need to go to the Métis community in order to understand how they can incorporate that into their practice. (Métis Social Worker MCFD, 2010)

In regards to the fundamental research question – how can a Métis worldview, cultural knowledge and values improve the care of Métis children placed in the BC foster care system as well as inform social work practice? – participants were unanimous: cultural identity is crucial to the growth of healthy children. In the words of one participant,

The first thing that comes to my mind is that Métis children need to know who they are. They need to know what it means to be Métis and I know I grew up not knowing what that meant and how that impacted my childhood even though it was very good. Métis people know what is right for their children; their worldview, culture and values are what is needed to guide the way of caring for children. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

The research participants consistently articulated a position that the literature review at the beginning of this dissertation supports – namely, that the notion of cultural identity is central in the healthy development of a child’s self-esteem and a child’s sense of belonging. Like the literature review, the participants noted that outside systems such as MCFD’s system must recognize the importance that Métis children and families retain a connection to their cultural identity. This connection is a natural part of healthy childhood development. Unlike the literature, which consistently articulates Aboriginal concerns, the participants voiced their critique of the current child and family welfare system in BC from a Métis perspective.

Several study participants felt that both the Ministry and the Métis community need to work together to make a better future for Métis children both inside and outside of provincial foster care. The participants indicated that the MCFD system has a role in planning, developing and reconciling practices that support a Métis child welfare system. Participants emphasized that MCFD’s role was not one of leadership, but one of support. As a community leader stated: “We are not going to be able to get to that new vision [Métis child and family welfare authority] alone. We will always need the current system until we get to where we want to be” (Leader Interview, 2010). Additionally, the participants suggested that the vision of a culturally appropriate, Métis directed child and family welfare system could be shared with MCFD.

Participants asserted that Métis Service Providers, MCCF and MCFD should work cooperatively to make sure Métis children who are in foster care have access to their culture and their community. Since provincial child welfare policies and practices have a direct impact on the care and custody of Métis children, the participants determined that changes

were needed in order for policy and practice to be culturally relevant and safe. Traditionally in the Métis community when a family is in crisis, the child (or children) is taken in by the grandparents or other family members such as an auntie and cared for until the parent/s can resume the responsibility. This community involvement illustrates the Métis value of responsibility noted earlier in this chapter. In fact, participants cited “responsibility” as a core value of Métis behavior. This value determines the high-level of a Métis individual’s accountability, commitment and connection to family, community and self. In terms of a Métis child and family welfare system, the participants saw this type of traditionally-based family intervention as the least disruptive to a Métis child’s way of life and sense of belonging. In light of these traditional practices, participants suggested that a review of mainstream policy and practice needed to be conducted in order to have culturally relevant and meaningful services and programs for Métis children and families involved in the child welfare system. In fact, many participants thought the provincial child and family welfare system was in shambles.

Participants listed the following core components lacking in the current MCFD system: cultural safety, competency, inclusion of family and connection to community (Sharing Circle, 2010). Given the limited understanding that the provincial child and family welfare system has about Métis culture, when Métis children are apprehended they are often placed outside their cultural environment with people they do not know. Furthermore, participants agreed that the placement of Métis children outside of their cultural environment was not in the best interests of those children. These placements, many noted, have a devastating effect on Métis children. As one participant indicated, instead of seeking placements outside of the Métis community,

The Ministry should be doing its best to seek placement in a Métis home whenever possible. When it can't the Métis has need to be involved in the placement for that child as they have the knowledge of what is in the best interests of that child. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

According to the participants, in cases where a MCFD worker and the Métis Agencies could not find a suitable Métis home, after they had exhausted all other avenues for the placement of a Métis child, then they should consult MCFD about the implementation of a cultural safety plan for that Métis child as that child is placed in a non-Métis home. This process of course would be a last step only after all other options to keep that child in the Métis community had come to naught. Regardless of where a Métis child is placed, in the eyes of the participants, unilateral decision making by MCFD staff about a Métis child is not an option.

Participants unanimously stated that the best place for Métis children was with their families and their communities. These children must be raised within their own cultural environment. A first step to ensuring cultural safety is the insertion of Métis values, knowledge and worldview into mainstream practice. Current mainstream policy and practice were seen as oppressive and marginalizing and did not speak to any form of cultural safety in the placement of Métis children in care. As alternatives to these unsafe practices, the participants suggested that MCFD could partner with Métis Elders, professionals and community members to develop a Métis model of service delivery. This model, which I articulate in the next chapter, ensures cultural safety for Métis children and families. Who better to channel the development of guidelines that incorporate cultural values, than the Métis people? Who better to champion Métis family members as potential caregivers for Métis children, than the Métis people? Who better to describe the practice of storytelling as a method of practice, than the Métis people?

## **Respect in Service Delivery**

Understanding the Métis family system is foundational to the delivery of respectful services. This family system is based in a Métis worldview. The decisions that flow from these foundations of a Métis family system and a Métis worldview can inform an appropriate Métis decision making process that transforms our present circumstances and liberates us from an oppressive system. The participants stated that Métis people should be the ones to deliver services to Métis people. After all, we understand the Métis family systems and worldview. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that Métis people understand their culture and if not that these Métis people have opportunities to learn Métis ways. As a Métis Leader noted,

I believe that there need to be more Métis people who understand Métis culture and have knowledge. There needs to be grandmothers and aunties who can mentor and support Métis workers. (Leader Interview, 2010)

It seems to me that participants recognize the importance of transformative action and that they desire liberation from the current mainstream system. The participants noted the need for respect in service delivery and suggested that all parties, including MCFD, work together in an equal and honest fashion with the leadership provided by Métis. Incorporation of Métis culture and values into service delivery was a way in which to promote and sustain a Métis child's identity. Proactive and collective efforts between the Métis people and the provincial child welfare system should be based on respectful communication in the development and delivery of service. Participants noted that the key to ensuring culturally safe and respectful out of care arrangements for Métis children is to follow the directive provided by the Métis community via the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC.

## **Building Partnerships**

According to the participants strong partnerships are a vital aspect of respectful service delivery. Realistically, the current situation of oppressive child and family welfare practice, one-sided decision-making, and the imbalance of power between the provincial child welfare system and the Métis people present many challenges. Although participants pointed out that the Métis people need to stop waiting for the Ministry to approach them, they also noted that this waiting occurs because of the lack of open and consistent communication from the Government of British Columbia.

Because of inconsistent communication from the provincial government, many participants thought it vital that the Métis start pushing their agenda and speaking out by insisting that provincial child welfare front-line workers, team leaders, managers and others in positions of power learn about Métis culture. Such an education, according to participants, should be predicated on respectful partnerships. Participants conveyed that the provincial system must be held accountable in order to make sure that culturally safe and respectful services are in place for Métis children and families. This accountability also applies to the placement of Métis children outside of their cultural environment. As a gesture to more accountable partnerships, participants suggested inviting provincial Ministry staff to Métis cultural days, celebrations or other social gatherings. They felt that these events would give Ministry staff a better understanding of Métis people and the Métis community. Another avenue to respectful relationships that the participants identified is the practice of housing mainstream social workers within a Métis agency, even if only for a year.<sup>9</sup> Participants felt

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<sup>9</sup> This practice would be different from collocation. This practice would be an opportunity for Ministry social workers to learn about Métis ways.

that this would increase their understanding of Métis values, ethics, morals, principles and the working of Métis family systems. In addition to this recommendation, one of the biggest barriers identified by the respondents was the inability to build trusting partnerships with the MCFD. To the participants it appeared as though it was the Métis community's responsibility to overcome mistrust of the system and those within it. Thus the biggest challenge to reconciliation between the Métis and MCFD is trust. The Ministry does not trust the Métis community any more than the Métis trust the Ministry. They have to start building a trustful relationship because, as the participants noted, the only way to move beyond the current system is through trustful relationships built on mutual respect.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter participants examined considerations, conditions, possibilities and challenges for informing social work practice with Métis values, culture and worldview. Participants noted several issues with government policy and practice. Ultimately they noted that MCFD needs to work with the Métis community to develop culturally-safe services. This respect starts with Ministry recognition of the Métis people not as merely Aboriginal, but as Métis. Furthermore the Métis Elders, leaders and community members need opportunities to educate MCFD staff. In particular they need the opportunity to illustrate to MCFD the negative impact of placing Métis children outside of a Métis cultural environment. Based on the participants' lived experiences of colonization from the mainstream child welfare system, the participants expressed that inserting a Métis worldview would definitely transform social work practice so that they would provide appropriate cultural planning for Métis children in foster care. They also felt that it would allow respectful service delivery to Métis children and families to ensure cultural safety for Métis

children in care and would be a practical solution to the problem of how the Ministry for Children and Families demonstrates appreciation for Métis knowledge and worldview.

When you think of a Métis worldview and the different knowledge that takes place those are huge. It is important in a child's life for them to know who they are and where they belong. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

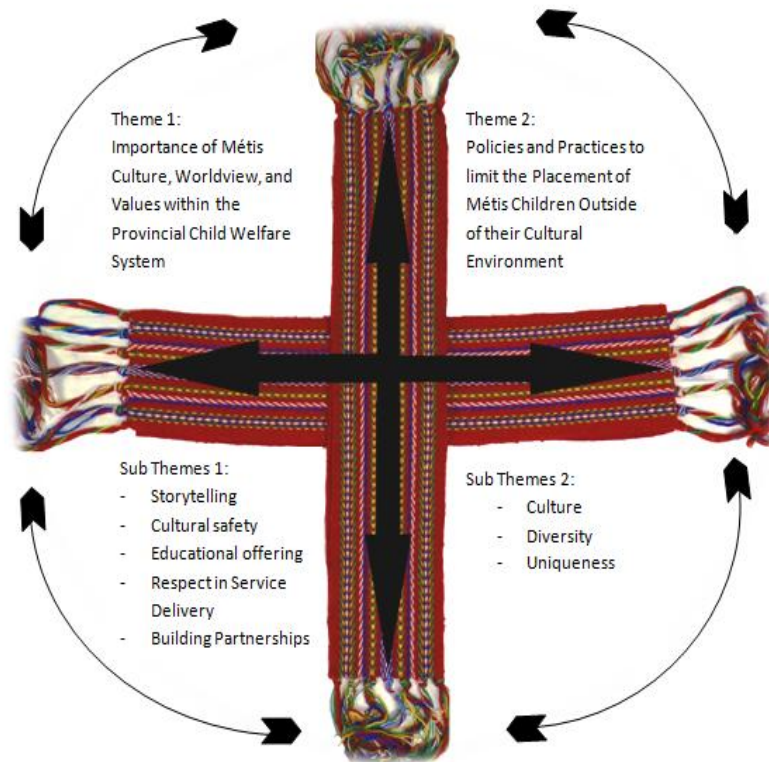
The study revealed Métis social workers, leaders and Elders' perspectives, experiences and explanations about the importance of including Métis culture in the provincial child welfare system. Without wavering, participants consistently defined the need to have Métis content and cultural approaches in child welfare. When the themes from the participants' responses are organized in terms of the Métis Sash Dance that I mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, the following model emerges. (See Figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> To be clear, these themes are my understanding of the participants' stories.



**Figure 2. The Métis People’s Child Welfare Model – Stage 2**



The participants' consistent identification of the need for culturally appropriate services to Métis children and families illustrates that they are engaged in Freire's (2006) reflective processes. More than this, however, the participants' consistent recollection of Métis history illustrates that they are aware of the sustained Métis struggle for liberation. The Métis goal of freedom from the oppression of foreign child and family welfare practices aligns with Freire's concept of liberation outlined in the "Introduction" to this dissertation. In this regard, Freire's description of oppression is apt to the current situation of the Métis in British Columbia. According to Freire, "the interest of the oppressors lies in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them, for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to the situation, the more easily they can be dominated" (p. 74). The strength of the Métis research participants, their determined assertion of Métis history and their assertion of the Métis struggle for freedom are borne out not only in their reflective practices, but in their actions. They maintain leadership in Métis communities. They have struggled against the oppression of poverty, racism and marginalization so that they can fight against oppression and make a difference for Métis children and families. In this regard, they have lived out Freire's understanding of liberation as praxis, as reflection and action that leads to transformative change. With strength they continue to move from reflection to action and back again. With strength they continue to remember their history even as they focus on a liberated future for the Métis people. With strength they dance the Métis Sash Dance, which, in my theoretical framework, is a dance of liberation. For the Métis people, regaining custody of our children currently in the provincial welfare system is a step towards our goal of freedom. Even though the Métis are a unique people, our struggle for jurisdiction over our own children is shared globally by other Indigenous peoples.

My commitment to the Métis people will continue. I will use these research findings to advance the Métis people in matters of child and family welfare as long as we are held captive by colonial systems. The next chapter offers a critique of the conceptual underpinnings MCFD's child and family welfare system. In light of this critique, I examine MCFD's policies and practices, as well as the legislation informing these policies and practices, to point out where MCFD creates a culturally unsafe environment for Métis children and families. This examination is an important step to transforming these culturally unsafe practices into culturally safe practices, based on the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*.

## Chapter Four: MCFD and Barriers to Decolonization

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life (Octavio Paz, 1985).

The previous chapter presented the research participants' concerns that Métis children in the care of MCFD are lost to the Métis people. To rephrase poet Octavio Paz's words in the postscript to this chapter, these lost Métis children are an example of the "diminish[ed] possibility of [Métis] life." Despite these troubling losses, research participants also noted that MCFD has occasionally gestured towards reconciliation with the Métis people of BC. While full reconciliation seems a long way off, these gestures, however small, are hopeful signs that MCFD, the Government of British Columbia and the Métis people of BC can in fact work together to provide culturally safe services for Métis children. Our children are our future. Thus while offering a critique of the neoliberal concepts informing current legislation and MCFD policies and practices, I write this chapter in the hope of full reconciliation.<sup>11</sup> That said, full reconciliation will not and cannot occur in this province until the provincial government ministries, especially MCFD, recognize that the Métis people of BC are a distinct Nation. To rephrase Octavio Paz's words again, we refuse to be diminished, mutilated, and impoverished into the sameness demanded by a neoliberal State.

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<sup>11</sup> As Kellner (1988) notes, critique is oppositional. Critique an important part of the struggle for social change and the unification of theory and practice. "Critique in this context, therefore involves criticism of oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society." (p.10). It is with this sense (the struggle for a better society) that I engage in a critique of MCFD.

Government recognition of Métis identity is hindered by the ubiquitous catch-all term, “Aboriginal.” This term, which reduces a diverse group of people to sameness, informs current provincial legislation, current MCFD policies and, most troubling, current MCFD practices. Those Métis children who do not match the implicit government profile of an “Aboriginal,” are misplaced in non-Métis, non-Aboriginal homes, while those Métis children who do fit the implicit profile of an “Aboriginal” are often misplaced in First Nations homes. The previous chapter acknowledged the possibility that Métis children in the care of a non-Métis family can receive adequate care if cultural supports are in place for those children. This possibility, however, does not exist if our children are misidentified. How can we, as Métis people, provide cultural support to our children in the system, when that system misidentifies them and says that they do not exist? What is more, how can the Métis people address the loss of our children when there is no way of measuring this loss?

The Government of British Columbia’s minimization and perhaps erasure of Métis identity as merely “Aboriginal” can no longer be dismissed.<sup>12</sup> Our labour towards liberation and self-determination continues both within and outside the provincial child welfare system. It is important for me to clarify that the Métis struggle for capacity, resources, independence, and sole decision-making is not with the First Nations; rather our struggle is with the provincial child welfare system. Through the provincial government’s neo-liberal practices the Métis and First Nations have been pitted against one another in our desperation to secure resources from the provincial government in order to support our children and families. We

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<sup>12</sup> Even as I write this critique in the spirit of reconciliation, I recognize that efforts by Métis people to be included in MCFD processes are often interpreted by government officials as a sign of hostility and aggression. Nevertheless, the life of our children, our future, is at stake. These issues must be addressed. These issues must be heard.

find ourselves in a position that, in keeping with neoliberal principles, creates separation and competition for resources and in some case for decision-making about each other's children and families. For example, this year, 2011, the Ministry for Children and Family allotted 5 million dollars to the Métis and First Nations on and off reserve peoples for Early Childhood Development. In the process, we were required to jointly make decisions about who should or should not be funded without knowing each another's communities or needs; further we were required to make decisions about funding amounts, and about who was or was not worthy to receive funding. This was all to be based on a limited amount of available funding.

Clearly this illustrates the government's neo-liberal practices which, based on a politics of scarcity, require that both Métis and First Nations struggle for resources. When we, the Métis, refused to carry on in the process, it was made clear that we would not be allowed to move outside of the process and receive funding for our own people. This was rationalized by a MCFD high-level bureaucrat and decision maker who said "if we let the Métis have their own funding then we'll have to let the on and off First Nation have separate funding as well". My response was "and why could this not happen"? Despite this, the Métis were directed to return to the table. If we wanted our own funding process then we were required to request this from the First Nations at the table. These are the same First Nations people who struggle to make sure that their communities have enough resource, struggle for the right to care and custody of their children, struggle to support families in dire need of support and resources, and struggle to implement policies that do not fit the community needs. Further, they are under immense pressure from the government to be accountable and responsible for safeguarding the "illusion of inclusiveness" by refusing the

Métis request for independence. It is not the First Nations, but the provincial government's policies and practices that deny the Métis request. As critics of neo-liberalism often note, once neo-liberal goals and priorities become embedded in a culture's way of thinking, institutions that do not regard themselves as neo-liberal will nevertheless engage in practices that mime and extend neo-liberal principles – such as privatization and “untrammelled competition” (Stanley Fish para.11). In this instance the First Nations and the Métis share a common struggle but we have been divided by the provincial government's neo-liberal worldview and colonizing actions. The only people that can adequately care for First Nation children and families are First Nations people; the only people that can adequately care for Métis children and families are Métis people.

It is no longer acceptable for the State to dismiss requests from the Métis for an active role in decisions that affect Métis children and families. In fact, I would like to acknowledge, once again, those champions within MCFD that recognize our concerns, our efforts and our fight as diligent acts of self-determination. However, until the conceptual underpinnings of MCFD's policies and practices change, any practical changes and any reconciliation attending those practical changes will be, at best, piecemeal. In this chapter I address the key neoliberal concepts underpinning provincial legislation, MCFD's policies and MCFD's practices before moving on to a critique of that legislation, those policies and those practices.

Reconciliation is an important step to realizing the strategies of liberation indicated in the Métis Sash Dance Model. True reconciliation means that MCFD and the Métis people understand and transform the government's neoliberal concepts. Thus I level this critique in the spirit of reconciliation and in the hope of a better future for our children, our families and

our Nation. The academic practice of critique, however, is outside my comfort zone. Critique in this sense is a step outside of Métis ways. As I illustrate in the previous chapter, indeed as the participants' stories illustrate, the Métis way addresses pressing issues through story sharing. This story sharing is respectful and honours those to whom the stories are addressed. Nevertheless my fear is that our stories will not be heard by the provincial government or the academic community unless these stories are accompanied by critique. This chapter ventures into that critique.

According to Pulkingham and Ternowetsky (1997), the government of a neoliberal political economy regulates human activity through the distribution of goods and services. The purpose of government in such a political economy is to promote economic growth, to respect the sanctity of private sector profits and to protect private property. Such growth, profit and property are taken as signs of an individual's hard-work, moral fortitude and general ability to generate wealth. Where growth, profit and property are absent such an absence is taken as a sign of an individual's laziness, immorality and lack of ability to generate wealth. Neoliberals assume that at the heart, all individuals are created equal and all individuals have the equal opportunity to acquire wealth. In other words, according to the tenets of neoliberalism, regardless of social and economic conditions, every individual, every group and every nation have the same opportunities to economic prosperity thanks to the laissez-faire approach of the government.

Such a principle of equal opportunity has led the Government of BC to, among other things, devolve child and family services. This devolution is often disguised in the language of independence, transformative action and even self-determination. For example, MCFD's *Strategic Shifts 2001*, a report directly following the provincial government's acknowledged



abuse during the sixties-scoop, identified six strategic shifts to guide the MCFD's operations for the three years following the report. One of the most notable shifts identified the need "to build capacity within Aboriginal communities to deliver a full range of services" (Strategic Shift #9). Yet despite this apparent non-interventionist principle, most neoliberal governments practice subtle, though intrusive, forms of social regulation. Such social regulation comes in the form of preferential treatment predicated on the neoliberal understanding of the "eligible," "less-eligible" and "not-eligible." In other words, in practice these neoliberal categories suggest that there are some who deserve, some who do not deserve, and still others whose eligibility is yet to be determined based on their performance of criteria established by the government. In BC, the Métis seem to fall somewhere in-between the second to last and the last categories. We are not quite performing up to the standards for "Aboriginal" identity set out by the Government of BC or MCFD.

A common practice within government circles, and one that extends to society at large, is to regard First Nations, Métis and Inuit people with the common identity 'Aboriginal.' Such a term suggests that we all share common characteristics and needs that are uniquely "Aboriginal" (Hammersmith & Sawatsky, 1995, p.65). In "Aboriginal Truth and White Media" (1990), Hodge notes, "The foundational premise of Aboriginalism is the construction of Aboriginals as 'primitive', in a binary opposition to 'civilized'." Hodge's concept and critique of the term Aboriginalism focuses on Australia, but it also applies to Canada. Hodge argues further that,

There are two forms of Aboriginalism which I will distinguish, since they have some distinctive ideological consequences that are relevant for the present article. (1) Aboriginality is a single global construct, participated in some mystical way by all Aboriginals from everywhere in Australia, at its extremes becoming a universal 'Savage Mind' which is a substratum of a universal history stored in an inaccessible but potent collective unconscious.

(2) Aboriginality is partitioned off into innumerable entities each as self-contained as Aboriginality itself. The first form elides the many differences that are important to Aboriginal people. The second rules out, *a priori*, the possibility that Aboriginals could ever constitute an authentic group with their own social culture and their own distinct interests. (p. 1)

The Government of BC's placement of Métis into the "Aboriginal" category is more than the dismissal of our culture and identity. It is a continuation of the process of assimilation and a known form of oppression.

In BC's welfare state, social policy changes are driven by neoliberal priorities. For example, "Aboriginal" organizations in BC that deliver child and family services compete against one another for provincial government contracts and grant funds in order to provide services for their people. Devolution was meant to offload the cost of human services from the government and place it squarely on the shoulders of individual organizations. In terms of a child and family welfare industry, this means that Aboriginal agencies compete one against the other for limited funding dollars. However, because the Government of BC only officially recognizes First Nations and "Aboriginal" and not the Métis in many of its policy and legislative documents, the needs of the Métis people are often lost in the transfer of funding dollars. Thus merging the Provincial Government of BC's neoliberal policies of devolving human services with its method of placing Métis in the "Aboriginal" category prohibits equality in the funding allocations. More importantly such practices impede the Métis drive to self-determination within the child and family welfare system. Yet, the niggling questions remain: what is "Aboriginal" culture? Who are "Aboriginal" people? According to the State definition First Nations, Métis and Inuit are but one group of people, perhaps two if you count the provincial government's spotty acknowledgement of First Nations. According to the Métis, we are Métis.

While the Government of BC's acknowledged intrusion into the lives of "Aboriginal" families suggests the beginning of new relationships between MCFD and, among other communities, the Métis people, Métis access to services and more fundamentally, Métis freedom of choice is lost within the current system for the following reasons: (1) if you take from the State, you are obliged to meet its terms;<sup>13</sup> (2) participation is a choice if you agree to redefine yourself to fit the desired stereotypes of the State; (3) challenging the State's conditions means that one is uncooperative and non-collaborative – such a challenge is met with reduced funding among other forms of punishment; and (4) the State exercises its power to divide or unite the people according to its own interests. Without the Province of BC's recognition that the Métis are a distinct people we are at the mercy of the Province. They hold the legislative, political, and practical power over Métis children who are in the care of MCFD.

### **A Systemic View of Colonization: Politics of Distraction**

The child and family welfare system is still a powerful tool of colonization. In the case of Métis people, it provides the ultimate method to contain and control our right to care for our children, families and communities. Colonization as it applies in this province to the Métis is at least a two-part process. The colonial practices of MCFD displace Métis children

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<sup>13</sup> Currently, Métis Service Providers must meet the requirements of *The Aboriginal Operational Practice Standards and Indicators* (AOPSI). This document groups the Métis and urban Aboriginals as if they are one and the same. As the newest version of AOPSI states, "The term 'First Nations' has been replaced by 'Aboriginal' to reflect the emergence of urban Aboriginal and Métis delegated Agencies. Differences in requirements for First Nations Agencies are identified when needed" (2009, p. 5). While AOPSI mentions First Nations consistently throughout the document to identify land-based child and family service providers – these land-based are partly accountable to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada - (now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development), specific issues affecting the Métis are not addressed. In fact, these standards and indicators are based on an accountability structure that requires the Métis to report to the First Nations Director of Child Welfare on their practice.

out of their culture by placing them into a mainstream, predominantly non-Métis system. However, the colonial activities of the child and family welfare system are so entrenched, so naturalized that many Métis people do not even recognize this systemic oppression. According to Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2010) in *The Indigenous Struggle for the Transformation of Education and Schooling*, “Hegemony... occurs when oppressed groups take on dominant group thinking and ideas uncritically and as 'common-sense', even though those ideas may in fact be contributing to forming their own oppression. It is the ultimate way to colonize a people; you have the colonized colonizing themselves” (p. 2). In the struggle to free ourselves, or rather to attain the illusion of freedom, the Métis, like many Indigenous people have taken on the belief that “white is right.” Furthermore, Smith notes that, in true hegemonic fashion, the colonial oppressors in Aotorea “has the colonized colonizing themselves” (p.2). This apt description of hegemony also readily applies to many Métis in BC. Often the belief becomes so ingrained within our consciousness that we are unable or unwilling to see the bonds of colonial thinking that oppress us. I believe that many Métis are uncertain about who they are as Métis people.

Smith identifies a form of internalized colonization, of hegemony, that he terms “the politics of distraction,” the process whereby colonized people battle amongst themselves over money and power that is not theirs.<sup>14</sup> The politics of distraction continue to plague the Métis in this province as we fight amongst ourselves and with First Nations organizations for adequate funding to support our children and families. These colonial processes keep us

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<sup>14</sup> In true neoliberal form, oppressed people, according to Graham Smith, accept increased responsibility for transforming their own condition and subsequently 'getting out from under the influence of the reproductive forces of dominant society.' Such an insidiously oppressive politics, Smith terms “the politics of distraction” (2).

busy. We are always on the 'back-foot', 'responding', 'engaging', 'accounting', 'following' and 'explaining' ourselves to the provincial and federal governments in this country. The “politics of distraction” as a tool of compliance for the Métis people occurs as the enforcement of “white” ways on us as we care for our children, as we articulate our political vision, as we live out our right to be Métis. It is worth remembering, as one research participant noted in the previous chapter, that there are generations of Métis families who have grown-up in the care of the provincial child and family welfare system. Those families who have managed to survive apart from the system are still subject to other forms of colonial oppression. This politics of distraction also comes in the form of the term “Aboriginal.” Our people forget Métis ways in order to live out the impossible calling of an Aboriginal life, or an Aboriginal practice.

This term, in practice creates notable dissension between Métis and Métis and between Métis and First Nations. The government’s pan-Aboriginal view supports an on-going process of political distraction whereby the Métis are entrenched in battles for survival and forget the importance of fighting for the right to self-determination. This term which can appear to be a form of decolonization, (i.e., as I noted earlier, there is ‘some’ progress), in fact becomes a secondary battle, even a distraction, for the Métis as we fight to retain our language, culture, history and identity in the Province of British Columbia. We are still not being recognized as a distinct culture because we are identified by the government as merely “Aboriginal.” The “logic,” notwithstanding that this practice is not even thought about - it is better described as a bad habit, seems to be that if the “Aboriginals,” “Natives,” “Indigene” (or whatever other generalized, ambiguous term the government wants to use) are kept busy with “trivial pursuits,” there will be little time left to complain, question or rebel against the

'status quo' (First Nation Schools, 2010). As I will illustrate in the next chapter, we have a distinct culture, worldview, customs and ways of knowing.

The mystification of Métis culture in a cloud of multiculturalism is dangerous and unacceptable. Although the term “Aboriginal” appears to be inclusive, even respectful, it erases individual and cultural uniqueness. This erasure is captured by Tuhwai Smith (1999) who states that, like the term “Aboriginal,” “the term ‘indigenous’ is problematic in that it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (p.6). Indeed in BC the use of the term “Aboriginal” in government documents has led to MCFD practices, which actively, though perhaps unwittingly, undermine Métis culture.

These undermining practices are compounded further by some of MCFD’s hiring practices. MCFD often hires Métis people. However, the challenge for the Métis community and the Métis Commission is that although some of the Provincial system’s employees share the history of Métis people and can demonstrate their kinship ties to the Métis community, these employees possess little or no cultural knowledge: these employees lack the sustained experience of Métisness and they lack a connection to the Métis community. More often than not they have lived outside of Métis life and therefore have very little understanding of the Métis struggle. They practice child and family welfare from a non-Métis worldview. This practice is reflected in the lack of respect given to the voice of Métis children and families involved in the system. These Métis professionals are identified as ‘late Métis.’ Suffice it to say, hiring ‘late Métis’ creates a knot that is hard to untangle. The provincial system claims that they are facilitating service delivery by Métis people for Métis people. Yet without cultural knowledge, without knowing who they are, these late Métis engage in practices

devoid of an understanding of Métis family systems or the Métis struggle for liberation. They engage in practices devoid of cultural safety. As one research participant noted, “Explaining about how important Métis culture and values are to someone who knows nothing about what being Métis is about or who the Métis people are can be very difficult and defeating when it come to service delivery” (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010). Hiring ‘late Métis’ who have a limited understanding of Métis ways of doing, then presenting these Métis as if they are representatives of the wider Métis community is an oppressive action, the sole purpose of which is to conquer, divide and ultimately control the Métis people. This practice serves the interests of MCFD, while creating the illusion that the interests of the Métis people are being served through affirmative action. These hiring practices cancel any claims to respectful, culturally appropriate service delivery. The more isolated the Métis become in this process the weaker they are and the larger the rifts between us grow. It is only in the interest of the oppressor to weaken the oppressed and this is done by various means, from repressive methods of government bureaucracy to the forms of cultural action through which they manipulate the people by giving them the impression that they are being helped (Freire, 2006. p. 141). This is precisely what happens when MCFD employs ‘late Métis’ to provide culturally safe, relevant and respectful services to Métis child and families.

Currently, service delivery by the Ministry is deficient of culturally safe or culturally relevant programs and services for Métis children and families because these services lack input from Métis professionals who are armed with cultural knowledge and expertise. A potential solution to correct the injustice of employing ‘late Métis’ and to halt the system strategy of conquer and divide is to employ, with pay equal to their position, these Métis teachers, leaders and Elders to teach Ministry staff, to teach the late Métis about our history,

our culture and our identity. In order to implement respectful services it is imperative that these professionals are meaningfully involved with MCFD in every step of the development and delivery process. These Métis are our teachers, leaders and our Elders. It is imperative that these Métis mentors cultivate the late Métis' connection to the Métis community. These mentors can facilitate the late Métis' acceptance into the community and build late Métis' cultural knowledge of Métis family systems. Where no opportunities for such mentoring exist then it is important that these opportunities are developed and implemented. After all, the late Métis are Métis. They are part of the Métis family and they should come home. At some point the 'late Métis' must be confirmed as brother/sisters and as allies who join the Métis struggle by enacting transformative practices for the sake of our liberation. Until such time, we are subject to the politics of distraction and will continue to fight against one another as a sign of our internalized colonization.

Because of our treatment at the hands of the colonizers and, in keeping with the spirit of neoliberal individualism, many Métis people unwittingly internalize their oppression and assume responsibility for past and present colonial abuses. They force themselves to trust from a place of mistrust. Yet this mistrust is historically based on the oppressive practices of government agencies. It seems that these Métis are prepared to take responsibility for being unable to trust a system that has oppressed them. As a Métis researcher I hope that underlying the issue of mistrust lurks a revolutionary desire to transform the provincial child welfare structure so that the needs of Métis children and families are met, cultural safety is implemented and decision making is owned by the Métis. If true partnerships are to be formed then revolutionary praxis must stand in opposition to the oppressive praxis of the dominant society (Freire, 2006). In order for this transformation to prevail it is absolutely



essential that the Métis participate in a revolutionary process with an increased awareness of their role as leaders of transformation. Such leadership means joining in a critique of oppressive systems so that we can build a better society.

The practice of “Aboriginalism” not only has an impact on cultural identity, it wreaks havoc on Métis children placed in the provincial foster care system as “Aboriginals,” instead of as Métis. A major concern connected with this generalized “Aboriginal” approach is that when Métis children involved in the child welfare system are placed outside of their cultural environment, the core of their value system begins to disintegrate. When these children are taken into care they undergo a dual adjustment: they transition to a completely new material environment and they transition to an environment that is culturally unfamiliar. “Culture is a determinant of how we learn and discover things and when Aboriginal children are taken from the shelter of their home and/or community and enter a non-Aboriginal environment they become emotionally weakened” (Hammersmith & Sawatsky, 1995, p.5). As stated by the Métis Council of Port Alberni, “Methods of removing children from their families have created a lot of sorrow in communities, sorrows which will take generations to mend” (*Liberating Our Children*, 1992, p. 21). As the research participants noted in the previous chapter, placing Métis children outside of their home or communities has devastating effects on them, Métis families, Métis communities and, ultimately, the Métis Nation.

In *Walking this Path Together* (2006) Susan Strega and Jeannine Carriere note that assimilationist approaches to social work practice have far-reaching negative consequences for people from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds. From an assimilationist perspective, diversity is a problem. With such a perspective social work practices remain racist with no

efforts to correct inequities in society. Strega and Carriere rightly point out that social work practice often assumes a cultural deficit, whereby it was believed that certain cultures were both inferior and underdeveloped; thus, their values and behavior were “abnormal” compared to those of people from European backgrounds (p. 64-65).

The act of grouping Métis children into the “Aboriginal” category dismisses the uniqueness of their “Métisness” and their connection to the Métis people. MCFD’s dismissal of Métis identity through its child and family welfare policy and practices can be viewed as an abuse of our human rights. It is an act of ethnocide. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines ethnocide (i.e., genocide) as those conditions in which an ethnic group is denied the right to enjoy, develop and transmit its own culture and its own language, whether collectively or individually. This involves an extreme violation of human rights and, in particular, the right of ethnic groups to have respect from other groups. This right to respect is established by numerous declarations, covenants and agreements of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, as well as various regional intergovernmental bodies and numerous non-governmental organizations (Northwest Centre for Holocaust, Genocide, and Ethnocide Education, 2010). Despite these internationally recognized declarations, covenants and agreements, MCFD still retains their legal power over Métis children and families. They refuse to recognize us as Métis people and they engage in their child welfare practices based on the reductive, disrespectful title, “Aboriginal.”

### **MCFD Legislation, Policies and Practice**

Recognition of the need for changes to the child and family service system is not a new request or concept. The child welfare system unilaterally identifies Métis children and

families as “Aboriginal” and uses this identification to provide services that they claim are inclusive of Métis people.

No matter how services are supported and delivered, policy and practice in child and family development services must reflect traditional ways of practice if they are to be truly effective in Aboriginal communities and with Aboriginal children and youth. Aboriginal children in care need continued support to maintain or rebuild connections to their culture and home communities. (*Strong, Safe and Supported*, 2009, p. 25)

Currently, the responsibility of the child welfare system is set out in provincial legislation: *The Child, Family, and Community Services Act (CFCSA)* (2006). The *CFCSA* presents this following guiding principle to legislators, judges, social workers and administrators: “this act must be interpreted and administered so that the safety and well-being of children are the paramount consideration” (p. 2). The *CFCSA*’s top priority is “the safety and well-being of children,” yet for the Métis its sections do not accurately reflect the concerns of the people it is designed to serve. Understood in relation to other provincial government documents such as *Strong, Safe and Supported*, one would expect that the *CFCSA* would help preserve the cultural identity of Métis children under the title “Aboriginal” (p.6). Yet, in the hands of government ministries, the very term that was meant to protect us – ‘Aboriginal’ – actively diminishes us. This term becomes a way for the Government of British Columbia and for MCFD to dismiss the identity of Métis children and families.

As the governing *Act* for MCFD’s system, the *CFCSA* notes that ‘Aboriginal’ people should be involved in the planning and delivery of services to ‘Aboriginal’ families and their children (p.7). According to the *CFCSA*, the best interests of an ‘Aboriginal child,’ namely the importance of preserving the child’s identity, must be considered in determining the child’s best interest (p.7). Yet, for Métis children in care there is no protection. Because there

have been few opportunities for the Métis people to educate MCFD staff on Métis identity, MCFD staff misidentify Métis children and ship these children to homes without any thought to cultural safety for those children. In order to begin reversing this disturbing trend, the Provincial Government of BC will need to amend the *CFSCA* to further enshrine the Métis Commission for Children and Families as the legislated authority for Métis children and families in the current child welfare system.<sup>15</sup> The *CFSCA* will also need to align with the different duties of the Métis Child and Family Service Agencies and the duties of the Métis Nation of BC.

The imposition of western legislation has had a profound impact on Métis child welfare in the Province of British Columbia. The clash of cultures and worldviews has huge implications on Métis culture and identity. Métis people continue to be identified as “Aboriginal” within provincial legislation, which is a clear dismissal of our culture and our identity as a Nation of people with a distinctive worldview. Today, the violence against Métis identity is framed differently than those more overt forms of racial discrimination such as the sixties scoop and residential schools. However, as Freire (2006) observes, whether “urbane or harsh,” cultural invasion is always an act of violence against the persons of the invaded culture, who lose their originality or face the threat of losing it (p.152).

Hammersmith and Sawatsky note that the failure to acknowledge cultural difference also has a disastrous impact upon countless children in their feeling of self worth (p.34). The provincial legislation identifies Métis children as “Aboriginal.” The legislated erasure of Métis identity translates into the most subtle form of violence. The trauma associated with

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<sup>15</sup> Under the current *CFSCA*, workers who take Métis children into care must notify MCCF.

the loss of belonging and cultural support takes away the ability for Métis children to become rooted with a strong sense of self-worth.

Yvon Dumont (2008), President of the Manitoba Métis Federation, states that “Métis people are particularly aware of the lack of Métis specific cultural institutions and agencies in most urban centers; they speak bitterly of attempts to minimize their uniqueness or to group them into a melting-pot of Aboriginal cultures” (p. 8). When Métis people do not fit the stereotypical image of having brown skin and practicing First Nation’s cultural traditions, they are often as seen as illegitimate. This misperception leads workers to incorrectly identify Métis children taken into their care. This misidentification is tantamount to a dismissal of the Métis. Children in these circumstances are often ‘left behind’ in the level of service they receive (*Nakatamwak* – left behind). To be left behind is to become irrelevant or insignificant, to become, in other words, nothing. Right now the MCFD system has left us and our children behind. When our children enter the system they are often misidentified. When they are misidentified they are left behind. Despite the best efforts of champions within the system, the system is not working for our people because the system does not recognize Métis, only “Aboriginal.”

### **Can the System Work?**

In order for the BC child and family welfare system to work with and for the Métis, it requires a shift in the government’s thinking about the need for cultural safety for Métis children and families in British Columbia. MCFD and the provincial government must recognize and accept our jurisdiction over our children and families. Healthy developmental outcomes for Métis children in care can be improved through a strong and ongoing connection to their culture and traditions (MCFD, *2010- 2113 Service Plan*. p. 15).

If the state were to initiate a process to re-route the identification of Métis people out of the “Aboriginal” category and into a Métis category it would result in the development and implementation of a Métis child welfare best practice framework built upon self-determination, self-reliance and cultural safety. Performance indicators would then demonstrate the start of effective social work practices for Métis children and families. In fact, in an effort to initiate transformative change in 2006, the Ministry for Children and Families Development (MCFD) embarked on a transformative process designed to improve the child and family service delivery system. In 2008 MCFD developed an action plan which emphasized the need for an integrated approach to supporting healthy outcomes for children and families. The intent of these proceedings was to provide an opportunity for collaboration. *Child and Family Support Assessment, Planning, and Practice* (2010) notes, similar to Freire, that transformation is not a linear process or a specific event – it is a comprehensive, incremental process that builds on existing good practice (p.5). *Child and Family Support Assessment* states that there must be recognition and respect for all cultures and traditions:

Culture and Language: Aboriginal child and family development policy practice, and approaches are most effective when they reflect and reinforce the intrinsic and distinct aspects of Aboriginal cultures, customs, and languages. (p.9)

MCFD’s attempt to recognize and respect diverse cultures remains contradictory if it continues to place Métis and First Nations into the catch-all “Aboriginal” category. The irony of this category is that MCFD continues to maintain the importance of culturally appropriate child and family service practices. MCFD (2010) argues that child and family development policies and practices are most effective when “they reflect and reinforce the intrinsic and distinct aspects of Indigenous cultures, customs, and language” (2010/11-2012/13 MCFD Service Plan, p.16). Yet, like the term “Aboriginal,” the term “Indigenous”

impedes MCFD's ability to officially recognize the distinct cultures in BC. In terms of best practice and quality assurance, MCFD's own performance measures clearly indicate the absence of cultural safety. MCFD attempts to reconcile its relationship with the Métis lacks the critical component of cultural recognition that is necessary for providing appropriate prevention and support services to improve outcomes for Métis children. Without MCFD's recognition and respect for cultural diversity any of its attempts at reconciliation will be incomplete. Transformative change, in such cases, will remain incomplete because it is one sided. MCFD's use of "Aboriginal" renders the term "reconciliation" an empty moniker.

The absence of provincial government recognition of Métis culture influences service levels inside and outside the child welfare system. In this system a double barrier exists for Métis children and families who are seeking cultural services: (1) placement into the Aboriginal category; and (2) the impact of colonization on Métis. While I have explored the impact of the term "Aboriginal," the impact of other forms of colonization on the Métis in the area of child welfare is long reaching. The Métis' aspiration for self-determination within the provincial child welfare is a two-prong struggle. The first struggle is to exercise the right of self-determination in the dominant society; the second struggle is to overcome our internalized oppression experienced. Many Métis have unwittingly adopted the unsafe practices which MCFD prescribes for them. This process, serves the interests of MCFD and, more generally, the Government of British Columbia. It is important to restate Freire's caution that the interest of the oppressors lies in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to the situation, the more easily they can be dominated" (2006, p.74). In their

adaptation of foreign child and family welfare practices many Métis inherit the pathologies of a dehumanizing social order.

If “Aboriginal” must be used at all, such a blanket term should be cautiously defined by Métis, Inuit and First Nations peoples and not by the State. While the term ‘Aboriginal’ may have a place for mobilizing partnerships between First Nations, Inuit and Métis it is not up to any colonial government to determine its use. The development of traditional Métis models of service delivery in child and family welfare falls short if the system and its government is not responsible enough to undertake a comprehensive plan that specifically distinguishes between Métis, First Nations and Inuit by refining the term ‘Aboriginal’ in its legislation, policy and procedures. For better or worse, we need support from the Government of BC. This support would mean that MCFD, and more generally the Provincial Government of BC, recognize the distinction between Métis, First Nations and Inuit peoples and cultures. Such recognition would mean that government reporting mechanisms, such as statistics for children in care, would identify the number of Métis children apart from the number First Nations children and the number of Inuit children in care. These numbers would provide the Métis Commission with baseline data and information fundamental to establishing a quality assurance framework focused on decreasing the number of Métis children removed from their families.

## **Conclusion**

If respectful relationships continue to grow between MCFD and the Métis community, it is not unrealistic to believe in the potential for fully developed, culturally relevant practices for Métis children. Respectful relationships and true reconciliation will lay the foundation for a Métis child and family welfare system. The framework for this system,

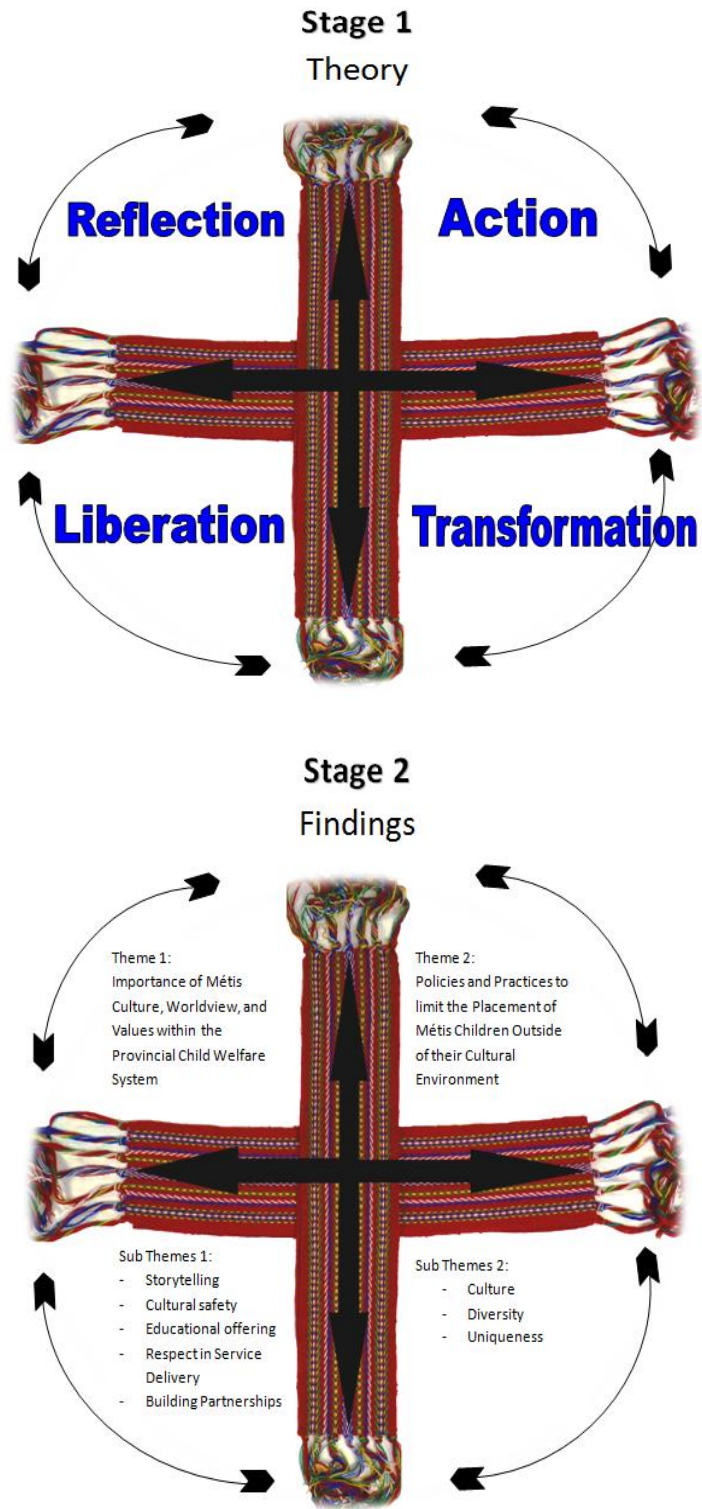


what I am calling the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*, is developed further in the next chapter. For now it is enough to note that respectful relationships and culturally appropriate care would represent the beginning of transformative change for Métis children in the MCFD system. This transformative change would signal the end to the marginalization of Métis children and families. However, MCFD must provide more opportunities (i.e., through consultations, etc.) to Métis people to develop culturally relevant support services that maintain families, extended families and the community. Such opportunities would come from a long-term, holistic approach to child and family welfare. These opportunities would focus on preventions, rather than merely crisis interventions, to avoid the need for removals. Although MCFD has taken some steps towards recognizing the inherent right of Métis people to look after their children and families, there is a long way to go before the kinship networks and family ties of the Métis people in BC are fully restored. The next chapter focuses on a Métis worldview as the foundation of transformative change within the current child and family welfare system. This worldview, encoded as it is in our stories, is the ground for our liberation.

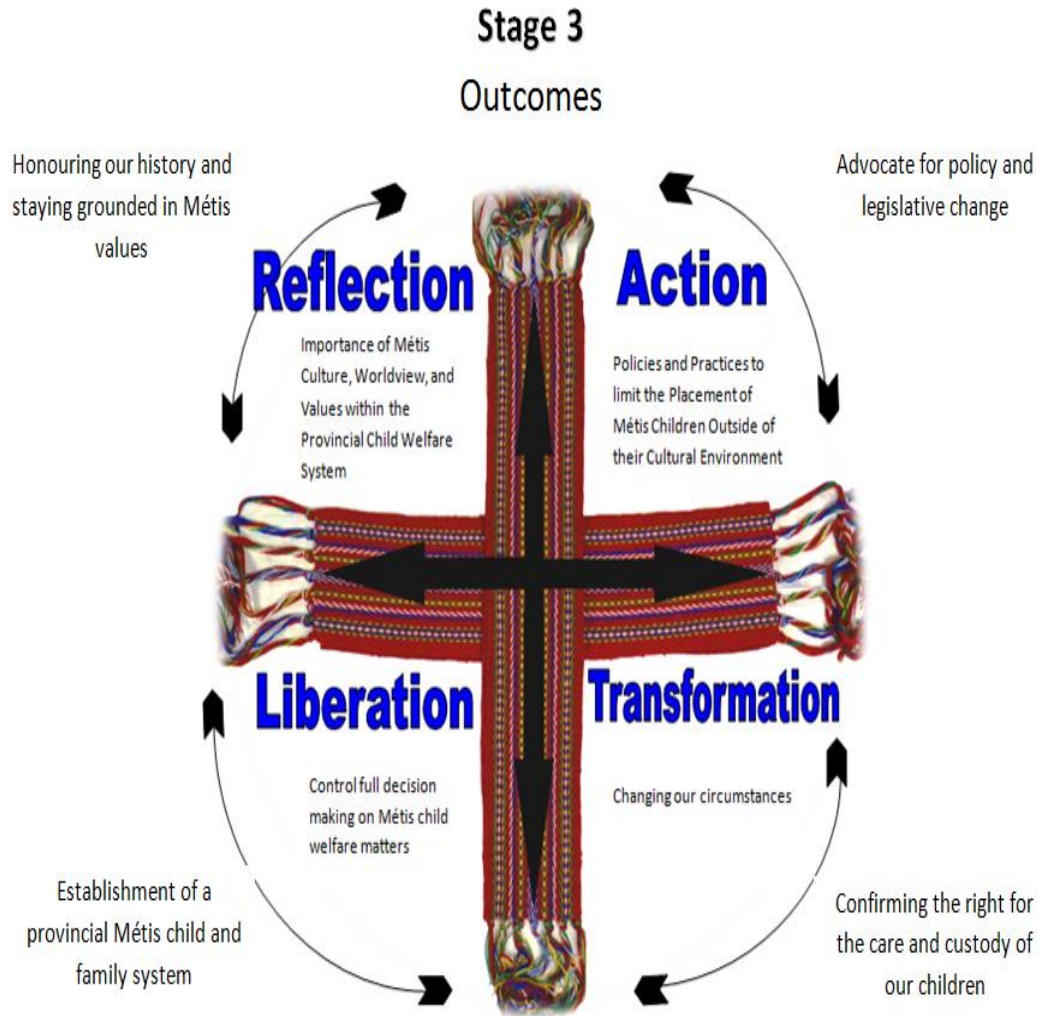
## Chapter Five: Transformative Practice – A Métis Perspective

In the introduction to this dissertation I described a theoretical framework for critiquing the Ministry's lack of culturally appropriate services to Métis people. This critique was based on Freire's understanding of oppression and the struggle of oppressed people for liberation. During this discussion, I linked Freire's dialectical understanding of liberation, the movement of the oppressed from reflection to action and back again, to the Métis Sash Dance. This dance as a theoretical framework becomes, for me, the dance of liberation. I see our leaders and our people engaged in this dance and it heartens me. In keeping with the participants' responses and in keeping with the theoretical framework laid out in the introduction, I develop a model that acknowledges the dialectic between reflection and action, theory and practice. This model can inform culturally safe praxis for the Métis people because it comes from the people and is for this reason the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. The *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* is based in the voices of the Métis participants – the leaders, Elders, and social workers – who participated in this study. The figure that follows (See Figure 3 below) represents an image of this model. In the Métis way our children and families are at the centre. Furthermore, in this model Métis children occupy their rightful place in the Métis community.

Figure 3. The Métis People’s Child Welfare Model – Revisiting Stages 1 and 2



**Figure 4. The Métis People’s Child Welfare Model – Stage 3**



This model is comprised of four corners with Métis children and families at the centre. The corners are divided by two sashes, in a fashion similar to the traditional way a Métis sash dancer would lay the sashes before starting the dance mentioned above. In the upper right-hand corner is reflection. In the upper left-hand corner is action. The lower right-hand corner has transformation, while the lower left-hand corner has liberation. When this theoretical framework is placed under the themes gathered from the research participants' responses, the following relationships develop. The participants identified the importance of Métis culture, values and worldview in child welfare. This theme – the importance of our culture, values and worldview – underlies reflection. Reflection for the Métis is a time for us to prepare for action. We, as Métis people, live under a foreign system of government. This foreign system often misunderstands us. Reflection time means that we are able to think through the foreign systems which insinuate themselves into our lives and thought processes. When we reflect, we are able to ground ourselves in Métis values. Reflection gives us the opportunity to honour our history, our Métis grandmothers and grandfathers and to process our thinking so that we can assume a Métis orientation to the foreign systems that surround us. Reflection time informs our actions as we seek to change our current circumstances under the Government of British Columbia and the Federal Government of Canada.

As we move from the reflection corner into the action corner we engage in advocacy. The participants noted that MCFD needs to change its policies, practices and legislation. When we move from reflection to action, we move strategically to bring about policy, legislative and practice changes by actively critiquing, for example, the government's use of the term "Aboriginal." By conducting research, by writing and speaking about the deadly

impact that such dismissals of our culture have on Métis children; the loss of our children means the loss of our future, we engage, concertedly, in practices that transform our circumstances. This transformation, the third corner, will be evidenced in policy, practices and legislation that honors our cultures, respects our diversity and recognizes our unique identity. These transformations would signal the government's acknowledgment of the inherent rights of the Métis people to the care and custody of our children. Such transformations will lead to a Métis system fully liberated from the provincial government's control. Despite these oppressive systems, the Métis spirit remains liberated because we know our history, because we have stories, and because we know who we are. In fact these stories are the heart of our liberation. These stories allow us to move from reflection to action and back again. These stories inform our Métis worldview.

The *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* develops in three stages. The first stage is the theoretical framework, which I described in chapter 1. The second stage is the research findings found in chapter 3. The third stage, found in this chapter, when combined with the previous two stages completes the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. During the research, Métis worldview emerged as an important theme for any culturally safe model of Métis child welfare. During the research storytelling emerged as an important sub-theme, and as a way for Métis people to share their worldview. In this chapter I focus on further developing the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* in terms of Métis storytelling. I argue that storytelling is an important way to educate MCFD workers in culturally safe practices and to ensure accountability within a Métis child welfare system.

### **A Métis Worldview**

The inclusion of cultural relevance in any child and family welfare system is of primary importance for the Métis. Many Métis people believe that the Great Spirit, Manito, gave gifts to children such as honesty, wisdom, humility, compassion and love that they can use for the benefit of all their relations. Métis people know that these gifts are connected to the teachings received in the home and that everyone connected to a child has an inherent responsibility to nurture that child so that the child's spirit is free to develop. Métis traditions guide a Métis person to recognize their relationships to extended family, including members of that person's community and beyond that community to the Métis nation.

### **Métis Ways and Matriarchal Culture**

As noted by Barkwell, et al. (2006), Métis culture revolves around the matriarchs. Métis women were and are powerful individuals in their own right. Not only did, and still do, Métis women play prominent economic roles both inside and outside the domestic realm, but they were, and are, also active as educators, proselytizers, healers, and midwives. Women as partners and mothers also undertook to support children, husbands, and relatives in diverse and extended roles (p.57).

When I was a child my grandmother, Annie Lillie, told me a story about her crossing the prairies on a wagon train as a small child. During this journey she saw many of the Métis women using the sash, the symbol of the Métis Nation, to carry their babies on their sides as they scoured the bushes for berries or moved across the prairies. This image of Métis mothers carrying their babies wrapped safely in the folds of the sash as they gathered nourishment for their families informs this chapter, and more broadly this dissertation. To the Métis people, the sash is a colorful and distinguishable part of our apparel. Sashes were finger-woven at one time and through the individualized processes of finger-weaving,

families and communities would develop their own patterns and colors. A person could identify a stranger's home community by the color and pattern of his or her sash.

Traditionally sashes served functional uses such as emergency bridals, as tumplines for carrying packs or as ropes to haul canoes (*Métis Legacy*, 2006, p. 82). As my grandmother's story indicates, the sash also served a functional use as a protective cradle for Métis babies.

### **Historical Account of Links between Métis and First Nations**

While Métis culture shares this matriarchal emphasis with many First Nations communities, a brief historical account will elucidate the further links between Métis and First Nations peoples. This history also accounts for the diversity within the Métis Nation and the difference between Métis people and our First Nations relatives. Historically, the Métis and First Nations people lived together in respect and harmony. With the advancement of colonization and oppression from the Government of Canada, the government was able to separate the people by placing them into separate racial categories according to European understandings of race and ethnicity. Despite the government's interference, in 1820, the Cree, Assiniboine, Chippewa, Ojibwa/Salteaux, and Métis came together in a place called Buffalo Lodge Lake, which is in what is now called northwest North Dakota. During that time, Buffalo Lodge Lake was collectively shared by these diverse peoples for buffalo harvesting. This shared resource resulted in the formation of one of the most significant alliances in this continent's history. These peoples developed new ways of working together. They built new alliances that became critical for the survival of the many individual groups on the plains. Common interests and shared heritage created the strongest bonds. The Cree, Assiniboine, and Chippewa were intermarried and the Métis shared varying forms of kinship with each of them. (*Métis Legacy*, 2008, p. 187).



Though the Métis have strong kinship ties with many First Nations of the plains, we also have a distinct history from those First Nations. The Métis like the First Nations participated in the fur-trade. Often Métis traders were hired by the Hudson's Bay Company or the North-West Trading Company as map-makers, explorers and voyageurs. This was the beginning of our unique culture and language. As the Surrey Métis Family Services' website states, the history of our independence as a people and a nation culminates in Louis Riel's government.

Under the leadership of Louis Riel, the Métis of western Canada established a provisional government in 1869, which negotiated Manitoba's entry into confederation on terms originally designed to protect the political, cultural and economic rights of the Métis. (paragraph 11)

Riel's ability to negotiate for Manitoba's entrance into confederation was based on the Métis people's sense of themselves as a unique people. Furthermore, our distinct identity is grounded not only in our history, but in the language, Michif, often a combination of Cree or Ojibway and French, which developed from the intermarriage of traders and our First Nations ancestors.

The competing definitions of Métis identity are themselves signs of colonization. Growing up in Manitoba, I never questioned, nor was I questioned, about my Métis identity. I belonged through kinship to the people around me who were and are all connected to the Red River. Nevertheless the need to define "Métis" still persists outside the prairie provinces and in academic and government settings. As Joe Sawchuk notes:

The traditional origins of the Métis have usually been characterized by Canadian historians as centering around the Red River colony during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – that is, separate groups of French, Scottish, and English mixed-blood populations that evolved from marriages between European fur traders and aboriginal women and the Red-River basin of southern Manitoba. (p.74)

However, Sawchuk also notes that, “many other Métis groups – with distinct characteristics and separate local histories – have existed, such as the one found in the Grande Cache area of Northern Alberta, in areas south of the Great Lakes, and in northern Ontario” (p.74). There are diverse groups of people calling themselves Métis, not because of history, not because of friendship ties, but perhaps because the French origins of the term Métis suggests simply mixed-bloods

Our ways of relating through family connections never required us to identify who we were, at least not by the racial terms of the colonizers. We just knew. However, under these colonial conditions we are often forced to formally identify who is and who is not authentically Métis. Why is the onus on us as Métis people to prove our authentically Métis identities? Nevertheless there seems to be a penchant for clear definitions of who is and is not Métis. While the term Métis is often used to identify any person of mixed First Nations/European ancestry,<sup>16</sup> the Métis National Council’s criteria illustrate the important connection of Métis people to our homeland and our kinship ties. Indeed the Métis National Council, as with the Métis provincial political organizations, anchors Métis identity in our historic homeland. Thus the Métis National Council notes:

The Métis emerged as a distinct people or nation in the historic Northwest during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. This area is known as the “historic Métis Nation Homeland,” which includes the 3 Prairie Provinces and extends into Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the northern United States. This historic Métis Nation had recognized Aboriginal title, which the Government of Canada attempted to extinguish through the

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<sup>16</sup> For example the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers a broad and inaccurate definition of Métis: “a person of mixed blood; *especially often capitalized*: the offspring of an American Indian and a person of European ancestry” (online). This definition ignores the unique language of the Métis people, Michif. It also ignores our important connection to the homeland, our history and kinship ties.

issuance of “scrip” and land grants in the late 19th and 20th centuries. (Métis National Council, 2002, “Citizenship”)

Based on our connections to the homeland and our kinship ties, the Métis National Council identifies Métis people with the following criteria: “‘Métis’ means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation”. These connections inform our unique Métis culture and distinguish us from mixed-blood people.

### **Difference between Métis, Mixed-bloods, and First Nations**

Although both mixed-blood and Métis people have First Nations relatives their cultures, languages, and histories are different. For example, mixing an Okanagan person and white person creates a person of mixed blood. However, this mixed-blood does not constitute a Métis person. The history of an Okanagan mixed-blood person is outside of Métis history, lived experience and worldview and more specifically outside of Métis culture, languages, protocols, and practices. Mixed-blood people often share the language, customs, and cultures of their First Nations relatives. The history, lived experience, transfer of knowledge, and culture of Métis people places them apart from mixed-blood people. While these distinctions are important to Métis identity, in terms of child welfare and service delivery a person’s self-identification is accepted as grounds for Métis specific services. In other words, mixed-blood people are included if they so desire services from a Métis Agency. Criteria for Métis identity are left for the Métis political bodies to decide. The Métis Agencies and the Métis Commission BC carry out the business of support to children and families.

### **The Importance of Storytelling in the Métis Community**

Storytelling is one of the basic ways Métis people teach their children cultural norms and worldview. For example, many times around the supper table my father would tell us

stories that filled the room with laughter. Although I did not realize it at the time the stories contained his beliefs and values about right and wrong, good and bad, respect and disrespect. These stories were the way he viewed the world. He often spoke of the importance of making the best of every situation and of finding something valuable within each and every experience no matter how trying or frustrating. His lessons are similar to Elder Ellen White's teaching: "If you fall down, you get up, you go. What did you learn: Nothing. You smart, you fall down and you lay there. You touch, feel, smell, taste, eat it, and then you try and look" (White and Archibald, 1992, p. 151). In fact, one of my father's favorite stories is about "la Rousse," an old half-breed woman whom he described as having only three hairs left on her head. He explained that the loss of hair was due to hard work and old age. Imitating la Rousse's voice and copying her likeness he told of her struggle to find food for her family. He described the perils she encountered and the hardships she endured, while he admiringly noted her determination, strong will and ability to overcome challenges. In la Rousse's voice each obstacle she encounters turns into an opportunity for gain. For example, la Rousse slips on a wet rock while crossing a stream, but she takes this as an opportunity to sit down and rest while having a cool drink. The story ends with la Rousse's victory in finding food for her family and her achievement as a "hunter and gather" praised. This story, like many other Métis stories endorses the values of self-sufficiency and self-determination.

Through stories such as these, my father, a proud Métis man, taught his children to walk carefully and slowly through the world. These teachings prepared his children to walk through the world properly armed. His commitment to family and community was paramount in the pursuit of changing the Métis conditions of the oppressive State under which our people lived. This unity was maintained at all costs. Though unrecognized by

academia, my father was a Métis theorist. In fact he saw long before Freire that true commitment to our people meant transforming the conditions under which we are oppressed. My father recognized that the Métis people needed to reflect and to act in order to transform these conditions (Freire, 2006, p.126). Occasionally he would gently remind us that moving too quickly could result in a missed lesson or worse someone being left behind. He modeled a way of being that respected responsibility to self, family and community. He was vigorous in his beliefs about self-sufficiency and independence. Because of my father's teachings, as I was growing up I did not think much about how I made life decisions or why I behaved as I did or why I responded to people and situations in a certain way. I did not question my feelings of loyalty, compassion, competency or my sense of justice, responsibility and determination. Although I had times of uncertainty and fear, I overcame these feelings because my father instilled in me a strong sense of pride and a strong sense of belonging. The teachings from Elders, grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles always stayed in my heart and echoed in my head. Along with the teachings of my father, my mother taught me not to be afraid to strive. My father showed me how to strive in a good and respectful way.

Métis stories teach that good behavior is based on respect for those older than you. Our children are taught not to walk between older people when they are engaged in a discussion and to never interrupt an Elder, when the Elder is speaking. At a very early age children are taught about responsibility to family, community and to one's self. If parents are unable to care for a child it is customary that grandparents, other family members or the community acknowledge their responsibility to ensure the child's safe care and custody. In traditional Métis communities these kinds of adoptive practices were a commonplace. Today, with our communities dispersed across the province and the country, we need to rethink what

came so naturally to us. We need to re-establish such adoptive practices again. Honesty and truth-telling are values central to the Métis social order. A family's reputation is very important. Dishonesty brings shame to the family and so it is avoided at all costs. Self-reliance is one of the first teachings given to a child. This self-reliance creates a good sense of self-worth, serves as the foundation for a balanced life-journey and provides the tools to live a self-determined life. This self-reliance is associated with leadership and survival. In Métis culture self-reliance means "you cannot wait for someone to rescue you" (*Métis Legacy*, 2006, p. 59). With these foundational teachings Métis children fully understand who they are as Métis. They understand the expectations and responsibilities associated with their identity. The Métis use storytelling to teach important lessons about how to conduct oneself in a good and ethical way during the life journey, about the proud history of the Métis people, about settling disagreements or arguments and even about dispute resolution. Storytelling is used to strengthen identity and a sense of belonging, and often provides entertainment and education. According to Barkwell et al. (2006), Michif /Métis storytelling is intergenerational. Elders and parents told stories to the young in order to reinforce their identity and prepare them for adulthood. Storytelling was the basis of traditional education for most young Métis people. Telling stories was a means to teach youth about the history of their families and communities (p.9).

Métis teachings determine that each person has a life-long obligation to help others and to give to the people. In order to be recognized as a good person, one must demonstrate their commitment to the family and community. As Barkwell et al. (2006) note, "The first recommendation to be counted as a family member is the ability to contribute from one's talents to the good of the whole family unit, clan or the community at large" (p. 58). In the

traditional Métis way, cultural practices determined that family and/or extended family assumed the responsibility for the care and custody of children when parents were unable to do so. This practice of traditional child care usually began with the maternal grandparents; “if one set of grandparents could not take care of all the children involved, they did so; if not, then the grandparents would divide the responsibility but would take great care to keep the children in touch with each other” (Barkwell et al. 2006, p. 56).

One of the oldest Métis ‘ways of doing’ was to choose a child who would be trained by the ‘old people.’ This child was responsible for passing on the teachings and ways of knowing. In my family, my son Aaron and his cousin Carla were chosen. Both were trained by the old people/grandparents in areas of proper protocols, acts of responsibilities and self-reliance. This was – and is – how traditional knowledge/ways of knowing were passed down from generation to generation. As Barkewell et al note,

There is a long standing tradition in Aboriginal communities that a selected grandchild is raised by the “Old Ones” sometimes a grandmother and grandfather or great grandparents. Traditional knowledge is not necessarily passed on the every child in the family. Often traditional knowledge was kept for the ‘grandparents’ child’ or ‘favored child”. (*Métis Legacy II*, 2006, p.88).

For Aaron and Carla, as with those Métis children who came before them, this learning experience instilled a positive self-image and sense of confidence.

In Métis families, storytelling also had several variations, some stories convey lessons through the use of humor and kindness and used to convey caution and to provide guidance. Some stories are sacred and only shared with certain people, while others may be myths about scary people, beasts or trickster spirits and some belong to certain families and must not be repeated without permission. Storytelling in my analysis stage cited a process of transformational change that offered lessons filled with caution, humor and guidance in

regard to the importance of cultural safety, identity and nationhood for children in foster care; and overall for Métis families involved with the provincial child welfare system. During data collection for this research project, storytelling became a communication tool for giving the gift of lessons to individuals working within the provincial child welfare system with the objective transformative change.

Michif stories told in the language of the Métis people are taken from French Canadian, Cree and Ojibwa sources. These stories can be sacred, profane and/or humorous.<sup>17</sup> They are meant to encourage people to keep their obligations to the Creator, to transmit beliefs and values to children and to pass on information about the environment and to teach valuable life-lessons. Traditional Métis storytelling was told at wakes, during work times, in the evening around campfires, at various social gatherings, while berry-picking and at home (*Métis Legacy II*, 2006, p.8). Like the threads of the Métis sash, which were used to bundle and secure Métis children and keep them safe and warm in the care of the family, Métis stories provide a safe space for our children to explore life lessons from a Métis perspective. These stories – our stories – bundle our children safely in the arms of our community. Like the threads of the sash, our voices weave together to share the importance of protecting Métis culture in all aspects of service delivery, program implementation and in the care and custody of our children. As noted by Hammersmith and Sawatsky’s (1998) “If children are to learn responsibility, then they must be approached with maturity, dignity, respect and consideration” (p.79). It is vital that protocols and practices based on Métis expressions of

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<sup>17</sup> Métis storytelling traditions share an affinity with what Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald notes as one of the functions in the Coast Salish storytelling traditions, namely that of healing. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Archibald’s support and encouragement in developing my own articulation of Métis storytelling traditions.



respect, honesty, responsibility and self-reliance are transferred when planning for the care and custody of Métis children involved in the provincial child welfare system. In Métis culture the expression of patience is a prized virtue for those involved with children. Lessons of good behavior are modeled, rather than explicitly taught in the western sense of teaching, so that children know how to act in a respectful way.

### **Storytelling and Cultural Safety**

Traditionally, stories were the primary medium used to convey Métis knowledge. Stories entertained even as they informed listeners about models of behavior and even as they offered sound warnings (Castellano, 2007, p. 31). Métis storytelling transfers knowledge as a gift, the gift of life-lessons. I believe that Métis storytelling practices can be a way to respectfully engage the provincial child welfare employees in our cultural learning processes. Opportunities to share our stories with social workers would improve outcomes for Métis children. These opportunities to share would transfer our cultural knowledge about the care and custody of Métis children while in foster-care and Métis children and families involved in the provincial child welfare system. For example, the transfer of cultural knowledge could contain parenting practices, approaches to discipline, guides to behavior and to proper conduct. These stories would teach mainstream social workers Métis understandings of responsibility, resiliency and self-determination. Included in the transfer of knowledge is the meaning of cultural safety and how it could be implemented in mainstream social work practice. Storytelling, the foundation of lessons, can be used to resolve issues between the Métis community and the mainstream child welfare system educate the Ministry staff so that they have a better understanding of Métis families and communities. Storytelling emphasizes the importance of Métis identity and cultural safety within the child welfare system.

## **Storytelling and Accountability**

Accountability and responsibility are core teachings within the Métis culture and instrumental in defining behaviour and decision-making. Transferring knowledge stories is a foundation to strengthen individual character. Teaching accountability and responsibility is cultivated in two ways: the first is by example; the second is by telling of stories that demonstrates acts of accountability and responsibility. In order to ensure cultural safety and accountability to Métis children in care and to the Métis community, storytelling is the premise in which non-threatening, honest, and transparent learning could occur. Storytelling can provide training essential to understanding Métis culture and a rationale for it is necessary to incorporate Métis values into practice and policy and enhance and strengthen relationships between the Métis and MCFD. As necessary as accountability and responsibility are another lesson from Métis stories is that of consistency. Like accountability and responsibility, consistency contributes to our understanding of the importance of good relationships, culturally safe services and programs, and culturally relevant policies and practices. All of these important components of a service delivery model can be developed by the Métis community's respectful interaction with MCFD. Such interaction needs to be different than the current unilateral approaches of MCFD.

Being consistent in our messaging and holding people accountable would help social workers incorporate Métis culture into their practice. The stronger the presence the Métis community has in child welfare the more services will increase. (Social Worker Interview, 2010) The care and custody of Métis children through the implementation of culturally safe programs and services is an absolute must.

## **Storytelling as Policy and Practice**

As I mentioned previously, current processes used to develop policy and enact practice are often done outside Métis cultural knowledge and without Métis participation. In this process, the injustice of placing Métis children into MCFD's system without input from the Métis community is outrageous. Cultural safety must be imparted into every level of service for Métis peoples. As one Social Worker noted,

I think that when the Ministry is looking at developing policy and revising practice, at that time they need to ask the opinion of the Métis community. Don't use the Métis community as review, use it when you are writing your policy; don't write everything first and then later ask if it's okay. Let it come from the Métis. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

Métis child welfare experts within the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC and its counterparts are assets to be utilized by the Ministry of Children and Families in the policy and practice work they do with Métis children and families. The lessons taught through storytelling will guide policy development thus ensure cultural safety and relevance. As a commonplace practice the Ministry must become more proactive in seeking direction from the Métis community via the Métis Commission for Children and Families as a natural part of social work/child welfare practice. Having a teller and a listener in the storytelling process allow the transfer of lessons about cultural identity, which means that this type of storytelling interaction is equal to the provision of shelter, food, and clothing. Adopting this notion in the truest sense is the "best interests of a child." "Social work practice [mainstream] will need to involve the Métis community in their practice which will improve Ministry practices because they will reflect Métis knowledge" (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010).

## **The Transference of Métis Identity and Values**

Métis ways of knowing and ways of doing could be easily transferred to social work practices that would support Métis children and families. Métis ways of knowing and ways

of doing can inform mainstream social service workers who do not understand the ways of the Métis. Thompson (2009) provides the following insight “We believe that if helpers thought critically everyday about their way of living, then we would be a step closer towards committing to anti-oppressive living and a step closer to keeping our children in our communities and out of the child welfare system” (p. 37). In support of Thompson’s argument, I readily agree that practice must reflect our way of life. According to Lee Brown (2006), “a healthy and accurate sense of self-determination is foundational to volitional values that provide the learning energy to develop the competencies of the will towards volitional ideals and vision” (p.12). For the Métis, our values inform our ideals, our vision and our actions towards a liberated Métis child and family welfare system. The transference of Métis values such as respect, generosity, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, honesty, justice, harmony and humility are essential in becoming and maintaining one’s Métisness. According to Castellano (2004), Canadians need to recognize that Métis cultures are vibrant and distinct today even as they were in their beginning (p. 102). Basic standards of Métis behavior are defined by how Métis treat one another and others and how they view the world. Although the celebration of Métis knowledge and Métis-being is constantly threatened and challenged by western values and systems our celebration continues.

### **Cultural Safety Revisited**

The issue of cultural safety is prominent in my research study and within Métis nation/communities. A cohesive response to the differences between a MCFD worldview and a Métis worldview, as it pertains to services and programs and to the placement of Métis children outside their culture, was provided. The negative impact of outside placement identified the loss of culture experienced by young ones growing up in care of MCFD and

not within their culture. The insertion of Métis culture and values into foster care is needed so that the child has an understanding of their history, a sense of belonging and the right to exercise a choice. “The child welfare system seems to neglect to do that [ensuring culture] and that has had repercussions on a person’s life when they age out of care” (Métis Social Worker MCFD Interview, 2010). Given this understanding it is becoming vital that Métis values and worldview are inserted into every area of service delivery and program development. This can only occur when MCFD provides equal opportunity for the Métis people to share in the development of mainstream policy and practice, as well as in education.

Although both MCFD and the Métis people understand safety as an environment where a child’s physical well-being is paramount, the Métis understanding of safety also recognizes the importance of meeting a child’s cultural needs. From a Métis worldview, safety for our children in care means that those children retain a sense of belonging, kinship ties and community connections. Right now under according to the practice points of the *Child, Family and Community Services Act*, a worker taking a Métis child into care must abide by the following authority structures. These structures place the Aboriginal Director, not Métis people or community, in a position of authority over our children and families. The practice points (2007) follow:

With respect to foster care, the Director has a duty to try to place an Aboriginal child with extended family or within the Aboriginal community. Section 71 of the CFCSA reads in part:

Out-of-home living arrangements

71(3) If the child is an aboriginal child, the director must give priority to placing the child as follows:

(a) with the child's extended family or within the child's aboriginal cultural community;

(b) with another aboriginal family, if the child cannot be safely placed under paragraph (a);

(c) in accordance with subsection (2), if the child cannot be safely placed under paragraph (a) or (b) of this subsection.

In many instances, the Director will place an Aboriginal child with non-Aboriginal foster parents as there is a shortage of Aboriginal foster parents. (Aboriginal Practice Points, *Aboriginal Families and the Child, family and Community service Act 7*)

Not only does the Director retain authority over Métis children, but, despite the apparent requirement for placing the child with “the child’s extended family”, there is nothing to ensure that this is in fact a priority. While at first glance this practice point suggests a responsible process for ensuring cultural safety for the child, the reality is that there are no protocols governing what “priority” looks like in practice. What steps must a social worker take to correctly identify a Métis child? What, in other words, does “priority” look like in this instance? The difficulty is that, along with the term Aboriginal, the child is already inadequately or even misidentified by the system, there is no way of ensuring that social workers maintain the best interests of that Métis child and search out that child’s family connections. If the child is misidentified to begin with, how in the world can they be placed with other family members or within their community? The approach taken by the provincial child welfare system is the placement of a child on a temporary basis into what is called an emergency short-term placement. From there the child is then put into a more permanent environment, neither of which usually facilitates the Métis definition of safety, ensuring a cultural connection or environment.

In order to achieve this cultural safety, I offer the following recommendations based on the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. First and foremost, the government needs to recognize that Métis, First Nations and Inuit are separate and distinct people in the *CFCSA*. As Métis we must have a hand in bringing about this recognition. From the perspective of the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* this means that we must advocate together for policy and legislation change. Secondly, delegated Métis agencies, although a good start, are not enough. These agencies are still under the *CFCSA*. One meaningful way to transform the *Act* and the system it supports would be to recognize full decision-making power which would result in legislative change. Such a transformation would mean that the Métis were no longer under the *CFCSA*, but that we, being liberated from this oppressive system, had the legal authority to develop our own Métis legislation. If an issue around child protection arises in the Métis family, Métis legislation would support either the extended family or community as they stepped in to support the child and parent. This approach means that cultural safety is intact as kinship ties, community connection, and familiar ways of doing and knowing remain whole. In the practice of safety, the provincial child welfare system provides structurally safe housing, clothing, food, shelter, and doctor care. Only the Métis can provide the type of nourishment, the strong sense of self, which comes from being with the extended Métis family.

### **Educational Offerings**

It is of particular importance that on a provincial, regional and local basis, mainstream social work practitioners utilize existing opportunities that are offered by the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC and their counterparts throughout the province as a way in which to learn about and to access Métis cultural knowledge. Currently,

the Métis Commission offers monthly practitioner meeting regarding Métis practice from a cultural perspective, staff includes experts in the area of policy development and traditional knowledge. Initiatives to assist in identifying potential Métis care givers is underway but a slow process due to the rigors involved in the accreditation of Métis homes since this process is outside Métis decision making and inside provincial legislation and policy. Educational initiatives for training foster parents also occur outside Métis decision-making and expertise. Most, if not all, curriculum development and implementation is based on “Aboriginal” values that are alien to Métis. However, the offer of having Métis knowledge experts at the table is an on-going offer and sanctioned by the Elders.

Educational initiatives in social work practice with Métis peoples must have the support and approval from mainstream powers such as child welfare executive directors, managers and team leaders. Their front-line staff needs to be given the time and encouragement to participate so that they have an understanding of the importance of placing Métis children in Métis homes, working collaboratively in the development of Métis homes, and respecting the expertise of Métis Elders and professionals. Mainstream practitioners must inquire who the Métis knowledge keepers and Métis child welfare experts are in their local area. Engaging the Elders and child welfare experts would make the educational process much easier and give mainstream social workers an opportunity to collectively provide information to the foster families of Métis children. Cultural identity of a child must be on the list of ‘givens’ upon removal and placement outside of their cultural environment and the safe guard to knowing that this can only come from the Métis people.

The provincial child welfare system must make sure that a foster parent of a Métis child has Métis lullabies and music that the child could absorb. This is a small example. What I am trying to say is that the provincial child welfare



system needs to recognize the Métis person in the child. (Elder Interview, 2010)

The importance of having Métis social workers dealing with Métis families is a matter of cultural sustainability. There is a mix of education among Métis social work practitioners. Some workers employed by Métis child welfare agencies have social work degrees while others do not. Métis practitioners not in the possession of a formal degree are invaluable in terms of cultural knowledge and worldview sharing the lived experience of colonization with the clientele. They are usually well versed in social work processes such as goal setting, advocacy and basic support measures. They also are utilized to ensure that cultural representation is present when mainstream social workers are serving Métis families. Métis practitioners with various level of formal degree are often as insightful as their counterparts about the struggle of their people to achieve liberation and emancipation from the provincial child welfare system. They offer an understanding of the rigors of formal education in social work and share the knowledge as a way to increase capacity in Métis agencies. Both emphasize the importance of inclusive practice rather than simply consultation with them. The best solution is one that sees the mainstream social workers in positions of support and Métis social workers as leads. However, the hand of colonization has a long and powerful reach, which is rooted deep within the minds of the people. This becomes evident in the words of one respondent who noted that Métis social workers in support positions only have a secondary role, yet when it comes to Métis children these workers should have as much of a voice as the Ministry social workers (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010). Suffice it to say, like many oppressors the Ministry assumes that Métis requests for inclusion are indications of our submission to their control. However, these requests are not acts of submission, they are invitations to more equal relationships. To

paraphrase Freire, we are not interested in oppressing the oppressors. The struggle against oppression comes in many forms, one of which is education. That is why the respondents were ever eager that Ministry workers become educated by the Métis people in our Métis ways of doing.

Education to non-Métis social workers must contain an understanding of Métis culture, diversity and recognition of Métis experts. Implementation of Métis languages, spirituality, stories, foods, practices and most importantly understanding the Métis family system is a must. It is not simply an educational offering. Social workers need to take initiative and find out how Métis child welfare system operates in the province of British Columbia. In order to do so they must contact the Métis Commission for Children and Families BC. As well an exploration of where the Métis Child and Family Service Agencies across the province are located and their front line staff would increase their educational capacity and understanding of cultural safety. Most, if any at all, have very little understanding of the political structure of the Métis Nation and the role of politics in child welfare. This understanding in itself is vital to the well-being of Métis children and families. Without this understanding it is unrealistic to believe that the devolution of service from the Ministry for Children and Family Development to the Métis will occur. Overall, the need for education in many forms is vital in all process that impact Métis children and families. One research participant noted that,

Everybody working within the Ministry needs to go through the ‘*Touchstones of Hope*’ curriculum and training. They need to understand why the Métis community needs to take the lead with MCFD. It goes back to understanding what reconciliation means and why it is needed. Training should be given to Ministry social workers, team leaders, managers, and administrators in order to provide them with an understanding of Métis families and Métis culture. (Métis Social Worker Interview, 2010)

I am suggesting, however, that the training should be controlled by the Métis. Schools of social work are important sites for implementing Métis specific education and training. Métis curriculum based on Métis identity, history, customs, roots, political aspirations and the Métis family systems should be mandatory for social workers who engage with Métis children and families. Transference of cultural knowledge is the key to culturally safe and relevant service delivery to Métis children in foster care and to Métis children and families involved in different levels with the BC provincial child welfare systems for with Métis control of social worker education it is likely that MCFD can begin to work with the Métis community to meet the needs of Métis children and families.

### **The Role of the Métis Commission for Children and Families of BC**

The Métis Commission for Children and Families B.C. is the only ‘Aboriginal’ community that deals with the entire province as a whole, not just a specific land base such as a reserve. The Métis Commission was established in 1998 to advise the Métis Nation of British Columbia and the provincial and federal governments with regard to services for Métis children and families in British Columbia. It is responsible for the preservation of cultural identities for Métis children involved in the child welfare system, to develop policies and operational standards for the delivery of services to Métis children and families and to provide recommendations concerning the readiness of Métis communities to deliver services. The Métis Commission is also identified within provincial legislation as the designated ‘community’ for Métis children and families throughout British Columbia. Through this legislation, the Ministry of Children and Family Development has a legal obligation to notify the Métis Commission when a Métis child is taken into care.

Leading up to the establishment of the Métis Children Commission there were other significant documents that addressed cultural preservation and the right of decision making. The Family and Children's Law Commission (FCLC) was appointed in 1973 under the leadership of Justice Thomas Berger. Over a period of nineteen months this Commission produced thirteen reports, a draft on children's statute, and a unified family court project. The Tenth Report of the FCL Commission, Native Families and the law, (1974 B.C.), was the result of eight conferences held throughout the province with 260 Aboriginal representatives. This report proposed forty-one wide ranging recommendations encompassing three themes: (1) the increase in cultural awareness of non-Aboriginal professionals, (2) the increase in participation and representation of Aboriginal persons in human service decision making, and (3) the increased preservation of Aboriginal child's cultural heritage (Walmsley, 2005, p. 23).

On May 10, 2002, The Métis Provincial Council of B.C., acting on behalf of itself, The Métis Commission for Children and Family Services; La Societe de les Enfants Michif, Interior Métis Child and Family Services, Okanagan Métis Children and Family Services, Nechako Fraser Junction Métis Association, Island Métis Family and Community Services Society and the Vancouver Island Métis Child and Family Services Committee, presented a position paper to the Minister for Child and Family Development outlining the desire for meaningful involvement of Métis service delivery structures, as part of the Ministry's service delivery shifts.

Suffice it to say, transformative action is a top priority on the Métis agenda and the Métis position paper was a preliminary step. The Métis are armed and ready to take responsibility for transforming their own situation in order to release themselves from the

influence of a dominant culture. This is a critical moment in Métis history. It is understood that taking steps towards transitional action has the potential to impact the State's transformative change agenda thus the provincial child welfare system's policies and practice. Informing social work practice in cultural planning for Métis children within the British Columbia Child Welfare system alone provides the impetus for the movement. Engaging the Ministry for Children and Family Development in this process presents an opportunity to educate them about a Métis worldview, values, practices, and cultural knowledge. The exchange will provide the system with comprehensive tools and an understanding that is necessary when serving and supporting Métis children and families.

### **Conclusion**

From the outset I have discussed Freire's concept of liberation and linked it to the Métis Sash Dance by interpreting the Sash Dance as a dance of liberation. In this regard the sash is a metaphor for action, reflection, transformation and liberation. However, in this chapter, I also noted the traditional use of the sash as a wrap in which Métis mothers safely bundled their children to them. With this use in mind the sash also becomes a metaphor for cultural safety. These metaphors have been inspired and informed by the research participants' stories, which I noted often began with their retelling of important events from Métis history. These retellings are transformative acts in and of themselves. Together these transformative acts, these stories, are the foundation for our liberation. The research participants' stories inspire me. The stories embody reflective and active practices that result in transformative change for the liberation of the Métis people. In this regard, I see the research participants' lives, their work and their actions, in terms of Freire's understanding of liberation. In keeping with Freire's approach to liberation, and, in keeping with the research

participants' stories, I presented a Métis model for child and family welfare that joins reflection and action, theory and practice together, by placing the main themes and sub-themes from the participants' responses within the theoretical framework identified at the beginning of this work. This model develops the participants' responses in terms of my theoretical framework, which I am calling the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. The only way our children will be fully safe and culturally competent is if our children are brought up in the Métis way. The *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* provides a way for our children in MCFD's care to be (re)connected with the Métis people so that these children can know Métis values, history, Elders and culture.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

This chapter summarizes the dissertation research, findings, and understandings that I gained. I also discuss the contribution and significance of the research, its strengths and limitations, suggestions for future research. I end the dissertation with some personal and professional reflections. The main research question guiding this study follows: what is the importance of inserting a Métis worldview, cultural knowledge and values into the current child and family welfare system in BC? In response to this question, the research participants identified their desire for transformative change beyond simple insertion of Métis values in the MCFD system towards a fully liberated service delivery system that is run by the Métis people for the Métis people. The research participants illustrate that, when it comes to our children, they are the leaders, the Ministry should follow. They did not see themselves as victims of an oppressive system. They see themselves as agents of change. For this reason I identify them as the Métis liberation dancers. They want the Ministry, and more generally the Provincial Government of BC, to acknowledge that they are the experts in Métis child rearing practices; they are the experts in cultural safety for our children.

As evident in our history and in the research participants' responses, the Métis are a resilient people. We have survived years of colonization. I have seen our people incarcerated, separated, divided, colonized and yet these people, our people, are strong despite any barriers. This strength comes from our teachings, our sense of responsibility, and our stories. We cannot be pinned down. We are born free, yet we recognize we are interdependent. We will continue to fight for our children and the right to look after our children. We are the road-allowance people. We are the rainbow people. Métis values such as self-determination, honesty, inclusiveness and respect are shattered by colonial practices and these practices leave waves of frustration, anger and distress that must be voiced. Regrettably, mainstream

systems are so conditioned by the experience of oppressing others any discussion of change, such as speaking up is seen as a restriction or an assault (Freire, 2006, p. 57).

Colonial systems safeguarded by mainstream policies and legislation have proven to be ineffective and irrelevant to Métis life. The Métis encounter on-going resistance and complications in our attempts to function within a system devoid of cultural safety. The system does not know who we are as a cultural group. The system does not know how we view the world, nor does it understand how we deal with issues of right and wrong or good and bad. This lack of knowledge bars uninformed workers from participating in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways with the Métis people. Provincial legislative policy shifts are slow in coming. The Métis' determination for justice in child welfare, is yet to be a MCFD priority. This Ministry and other government ministries need to understand the cultural differences between the Métis and First Nations peoples. Like the Métis, First Nations peoples have distinct and beautiful cultures, but we are not the same people nor are our cultures the same. Until such recognition, MCFD will continue in their oppressive practices. Furthermore, as I noted in the "Literature Review" at the beginning of this dissertation, many academics seem to follow the Provincial and Federal governments' lead in the use of the term "Aboriginal." This reductive rendering of not only Métis identity, but of First Nations and Inuit identities needs to change.

In "Chapter One: Introduction" of this dissertation I articulated how this colonial system, for many Métis people, is a direct assault on our identity, values, and self-worth. Governmental dismissal of our words and our concerns can be, and often are, interpreted by Métis people as the complete dismissal of our vision of community and our family systems. Freire's concept of liberation, transformation, reflection and action identify these dismissals



as a colonial tactic. When read in terms of the Métis Sash Dance, Freire's concepts identify the constant dance that we, as Métis people, engage to navigate the maze of colonial practices. By reading Freire's concepts of reflection, action, transformation and liberation in terms of the Métis Sash Dance, I developed stage 1 of the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*.

In order to further address MCFD's dismissal of the Métis, "Chapter Two" of this dissertation developed a Métis research storytelling methodology that foregrounds the voice of the 20 Métis research participants by asserting the importance of Métis storytelling protocols. "Chapter Three" implemented this research methodology and presented the collective and historical story of the Métis participants while maintaining their individual points of view. As I have mentioned before, this research approach has been informed by my recognition of the importance of respecting participants' stories. In the Métis way, part of this respect means that I know these are their stories, not mine. It has been my hope that I have accurately conveyed their stories as they told those stories. It has been my hope that I have accurately conveyed their experiences as they told those experiences. My need to respect these stories, however, has been challenged at times by the demands of academia, which require me to make meaning, to interpret and to infer, from these stories. Where I have done this, I try to be clear that the interpretation is my understanding. From these findings, I developed stage 2 of the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*, which noted the important themes of a Métis cultural worldview and values within the provincial child welfare system and policies and practices to limit the placement of Métis children outside of their cultural environment. Further to these themes, the participants noted the importance of storytelling,

cultural safety, respect in service delivery as the means of achieving a system that respects our uniqueness, diversity and culture.

“Chapter Four” developed a systematic critique of the conceptual foundation of the provincial child and family welfare system as well as the legislation, policies and practices informed by that conceptual foundation. “Chapter Five,” moved from this critique to an affirmation of Métis ways and a Métis worldview. This worldview, as I have maintained throughout the dissertation, is crucial to any truly Métis child and family welfare system. Thus a Métis worldview is embedded in the *Métis People’s Child Welfare Model*. Stage 3 of this model noted Métis storytelling grounds us in our values, honours our history so that we, as Métis people, can advocate for policy change, enact the right to care for our children, and establish our own system for child welfare within the province.

### **Contribution and Significance of Dissertation**

This dissertation represents a shift away from those oppressive practices towards a culturally safe model for Métis children and families. This *Métis People’s Child Welfare Model* is based in the research participants’ stories. These participants are leaders and professionals with extensive experience in child welfare. They have clearly stated Métis values, culture, worldview and identity must be acknowledged and respected by the Government of British Columbia. This dissertation established a Métis methodology for qualitative research that is directed by Métis storytelling protocols. From these protocols and the research participant’s responses, this dissertation developed the *Métis People’s Child Welfare Model*. This is a uniquely Métis model for service delivery which currently does not exist within the Province of BC and, to my knowledge, anywhere else in Canada. Within the child and family welfare system, this model can be used as a case management tool, a quality

assurance framework, and a structure for clinical supervision. This model may be a useful tool for other peoples who, like the Métis, are oppressed by foreign systems of governance.

### **Strength and Limitations**

This research is only a beginning. There are no other Métis specific models from which one can develop a comparative analysis. Moreover, as I have noted throughout this dissertation, there are still huge gaps in delivering culturally safe services to our children and families. At the level of MCFD's policies and practices, these gaps are created by their consistent use of the term "Aboriginal". Despite these unsafe practices and the authoritative structures that perpetuate them, as I mentioned earlier there are five Métis Child and Family Service Agencies in this province that have been delivering services and programs, in culturally safe ways, for our children for decades. Some of my interviews focused on Métis social workers from these organizations. However, because there are only five Métis Child and Family Service Agencies but seven regions within the Province of British Columbia, my interviews did not cover all seven regions. Region 7: the northeast region and Region 4: the Kootneys were not represented. For the Métis, especially in this province, the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* will assist in the future development of culturally safe and accountable services based on our self-determination and liberation. One of the limitations of this research is that the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* is still in its early development and implementation stages. Another limitation of this research is that the participant criteria did not involve Métis political leaders or political organizations because in the BC Métis community there is an important separation between the political bodies and the child welfare bodies.

Only time will tell how successful it is in liberating MCFD and more generally the provincial and federal governments, from their oppressive practices. Only time will tell if this model will help them adjust their vision and understanding of the Métis people. Another limitation of this research project is that, due to ethical and time constraints, no Métis children or youth in foster care were interviewed. Yet another limitation of this research study is that, while there are over 60,000 Métis in the Province of British Columbia, this in-depth study allowed for only 20 participants to share their experience of colonization and their hope for a better future for Métis people. Yet many Métis in the Province of British Columbia experience the effects of colonization both inside and outside of MCFD's system. One final limitation of this research project was the lack of literature relevant to a Métis specific child and family welfare issues in British Columbia. Therefore most of the literature was taken from Manitoba.

### **Future Research Topics**

The *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* calls for further research that identifies processes to transform policies and practices - for example a full exploration of the legal ramifications of developing a Métis authority in terms of the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. Another potential project would focus on the development of policy from a Métis perspective. Such future research needs to be grounded in detailed quantitative research and further qualitative research that identifies the outcomes of placing Métis people under the "Aboriginal" category. Throughout this dissertation, the research participants and I have maintained that when our children are taken into the care of the MCFD many of these children are lost to the Métis people. As I also noted in the introduction to this dissertation, there is currently no way to measure this loss. Based on the research participants' responses

and, as an extension of the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*, MCCF will undertake quantitative as well as qualitative research projects to develop and populate a database that is able to track the number of Métis children in care. This work will also contribute to the sparse body of academic literature on Métis specific issues in child and family welfare. The *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*, will support the development of a social work manual written in collaboration with other Métis scholars for students in college and university social work programs. This social work manual will inform the development of a culturally safe curriculum, based on Métis culture, values and worldview, for universities and college social work programs.

This dissertation and any future research projects I undertake will be guided by Freire's concepts of liberation and transformation as these concepts are housed within the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model*. In other words, the values instilled in me by my father and the commitment that I made at the beginning of this dissertation to be of service to my people informs this research and any other research I conduct. I am a servant of my people. Any research I engage in now or in the future comes from my sense of "Métisness": who I am as a Métis person and who we are as Métis people. For this reason, I will continue my work as part of the on-going movement of the Métis people for the realization of our inherent right to care for our children and families.

Our struggle for liberation from the colonial child and family welfare systems has been dismissed by government officials. Our emotional outbreaks, cries of injustice and pleas for equal rights to ensure Métis children and families have a voice in the child welfare system are taken as acts of rebellion. So be it. Our demand for culturally safe services is often seen as irrational, irresponsible and disruptive. So be it. The passionate outbreaks are

re-named as “overly aggressive,” forceful, problematic and uncooperative.<sup>18</sup> So be it. Our response is justified.

### **Personal and Professional Reflection**

If I take the provincial government and the federal government at their word, they share a similar vision with me: namely a better social order, a better life for children and families in need of support. In other words, I share with these governments the belief that the safety of children is paramount. This vision also includes making a better life for Métis children, families and communities. Among other things, this dissertation is an invitation to the governments and the academic community to share in this vision with the Métis people. My hope is that they hear the stories of the Métis research participants, that they hear their concerns and mine. Our children are being lost to us because provincial government ministries do not know who we are. Yet our life, our ways, and our worldview are unique – even as we share in the life of our First Nations relatives. We are not merely aboriginal, no more than a Cree or Mohawk or Okanagan is merely aboriginal. We are Métis. This dissertation is addressed to those children who will become our leaders, Elders, and teachers. It is also a guide to MCFD social workers who are struggling to understand Métis ways.

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<sup>18</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Lee Brown for helping me recognize the government’s tactics of dismissing our emotional investment in the well-being of our children. Dr. Lee Brown discusses at length in his work the idea of “emotional competency” in regards to students in the educational system. This phrase (“emotional competency”) recognizes how emotional competency can be developed through literature and the arts. Students in the classroom can read and begin to identify through literature with a variety of characters. Through these character’s stories students are able to develop empathy to different situations and experiences. Dr. Brown’s articulation of emotional competency helped me recognize the reverse possibility as well. While educational institutions can help students develop emotional competency, these institutions and other institutions such as the child and family welfare system can also diminish that competency. How inhumane can be the practices of a bureaucracy where issues of children and families are concerned. I cannot imagine a person who would not be moved to anger, fear, sadness or grief at the removal of their children. What is odd to me is that such a reaction would be belittled, ignored or chastised by representatives of the system. This, to me, represents emotional incompetency. For more information on emotional competency see Dr. Lee Brown’s (2005) *Making the Classroom a Healthy Place: The Development of Affective Competency in Aboriginal Pedagogy*.

Finally, it is a call to the academic community to engage in culturally safe research that moves beyond the reductive uses of the term *Aboriginal*. Thus it offers the *Métis People's Child Welfare Model* for engaging in these culturally safe practices. Grounded as it is in our history, our stories, this model asserts the strength of the sash, the strength of our ways.

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