



Restorative Aboriginal Child Welfare in Diverse Urban Spaces

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Abstract

This paper shares a model for restorative Urban Aboriginal child welfare that has emerged at Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS). Through a discussion of VACFSS' journey in decolonization, Indigenization, and anti-colonial practice, we present our restorative model and discuss the theoretical orientation and practice implications for systemic change within the child welfare system. At its core, restorative practice represents an important source of wisdom in supporting complex individual and collective human healing processes. VACFSS has created a living model of restorative Aboriginal practice through the restructuring of mainstream program models, policy revision, and use of supportive and least intrusive measures identified in British Columbia's Child, Family and Community Services Act. The most significant effort that has led to the development of the Restorative model of child welfare practice is community-based policy development, program development and research. In this paper we highlight a particular research study titled Strengthening Our Practice. The findings of this study highlight culture as a protective factor, and a methodology for moving towards the design and implementation of restorative practice. Practice implications underscore the need for more research addressing better alignment of social policy with the unique situation of Aboriginal children and families experiencing distress in complex urban environments. Continued applied research is needed on emergent practice areas such as collaborative practice, strengthening families, least intrusive measures, and Inclusive Foster Care. Increased, meaningful involvement of client families and children involved in both the research process and application of the research findings to practice processes will be a crucial part of the next stage of the journey. We close with some implications of our model for restorative approaches to social work with Indigenous Peoples internationally.





Introduction

On the heels of the historic release of the 94 recommendations made by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is clear that a great deal of work remains to be done in addressing the legacy of residential schooling- and the transition of these institutions into provincial and territorial systems of child welfare across Canada. For generations, Aboriginal children have been removed from their families as part of a larger colonial project aiming at what Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin recently labeled "cultural genocide." The assault on Aboriginal languages and culture, the appropriation of Aboriginal lands and territory, the disruption of Aboriginal international relations and economy, and the fracturing of Aboriginal families have all contributed to the stereotypes and statistics that Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission seeks to address. Perhaps the most remarkable part of this history is the Aboriginal diversity that remains. Despite centuries of targeted oppression, the Aboriginal population of Canada is the nation's youngest, fastest growing and most rapidly urbanizing demographic (Environics 2010).

Over recent decades Aboriginal agencies have emerged in response to the continued removal of Aboriginal children from their families by provincial and territorial systems of child welfare. The critique has largely been that these organizations are rooted in the discourse, stereotypes and practice traditions of the settler-colonial Canadian tradition that developed residential schools and the reserve and band systems (Blackstock 2003; Blackstock et al 2007). As is noted in the Touchstones of Hope:

"[F]or thousands of years, Indigenous communities successfully used traditional systems of care to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. Instead of affirming these Indigenous systems of care, the child welfare systems disregarded them and imposed a new way of ensuring child safety for Indigenous children and youth, which has not been successful. Indigenous children and youth continue to be removed from their families and communities at disproportionate rates, and the alternate care provided by child welfare systems has not had positive results." (Blackstock et al 2006:6)

Though this was written 10 years ago, the statistics are much the same today. The recent move towards restorative practice is a call to reframe child welfare targeting Aboriginal families in ways that disable and remove the systems of thought, practice, and structure that keep Aboriginal families stuck in the system across generations. Research by Indigenous scholars, the work of Aboriginal practitioners, and the lived experience of Aboriginal Peoples tells us that the most effective way to achieve this is by grounding the practice and approach of child welfare in the history, lived experience and world view of the people being served. An





important caveat here is the acknowledgement of Indigenous diversity in Canada. As the idea of a homogenous “Aboriginal culture” in nothing more than a vestige of convenience proposed and encoded in Canadian popular culture by the *Indian Act*. Restorative practice requires reframing child welfare systems in ways that respond to both the wider colonial history of Canada as a nation and the specific culture and history of the diverse Aboriginal families receiving services. Within the context of a specific Aboriginal culture, this work is complicated by theorizing and practice around measures of cultural disconnection and authenticity. Within the context of urban spaces, this work is complicated by the realities of agencies attempting to develop policies and practices responsive to and restorative for a diverse, shifting and rapidly growing set of Aboriginal families. Regardless of the setting, restorative practice involves a process of decolonization and Indigenization, grounded in the anticolonial perspective advanced by Hart and others (Sinclair, Hart and Bruyere 2009), reframing colonial systems of child welfare inherited by Aboriginal organizations. As Bernadette Spence, VACFSS CEO, explains:

“Indigenization must demonstrate our commitment to situating our policy, practice and dilemmas within the context of Aboriginal worldview, customs and protocols. It is not about incorporating cultural customs at the end of a case management process or reserving the beginning of the process for an Elder’s prayer, but about reframing our entire approach to child welfare within our own worldview and lived experience...Indigenizing child welfare practice requires a comprehensive review of the current outcomes for children and families utilizing quantitative and qualitative research based on our data and our own processes. We must be prepared to restructure programs, to reframe policy, and to redefine practice that targets the patterns that keep individuals and families stuck [in the system.]” - Bernadette Spence, 2011 (quoted in author 2014)

The quotation from Spence above highlights the complexities involved in processes of Indigenization that give rise to innovations in restorative practice in the context of Aboriginal child welfare. A model for restorative practice has emerged at VACFSS through the development of policy and procedures grounded in Aboriginal theories of human development and healing. This model honours both the local territory and protocols, while also making space for the flexible inclusion of ceremony and practices from the diverse Aboriginal Peoples involved in a given intervention. Drawing from the findings of research conducted internally at VACFSS, we define a program or policy as restorative if: 1) it is grounded in intergenerational Aboriginal knowledge systems, worldview, and the culture of the family being served; 2) it is framed within an awareness of and engagement with colonial history; 3) it departs from the punitive approaches of mainstream social work in favour of concrete strength-based,





graduated, and supportive client engagement; and 4) it results in measurable positive change for the families served. Successful and sustainable restorative practice requires mutual understanding of and collaboration in these four elements by the full circle of support involved in the child welfare process.

This paper will provide brief outline of the history and contemporary context of Aboriginal child welfare in Canada. This background will form the backdrop of our presentation of a research study, titled *Strengthening Our Practice*, which VACFSS conducted in partnership with the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD). *Strengthening Our Practice* (SOP) explored the emergence of a restorative paradigm and associated policies and practices at VACFSS. The results of this study demonstrate that processes of decolonization and Indigenization grounded in the four aspects of restorative practice outlined above lead to better outcomes for children and families in the context of Aboriginal child welfare. In summarizing the contributions VACFSS has made to the development of restorative policy and practice, we share a methodology that we believe to be scalable and/or transferable to social work practice with Indigenous Peoples internationally. We close with some considerations around continuing to move this work forward, both in Canada and internationally.

Background: Reframing Aboriginal Child Welfare in a Restorative Paradigm

The history of colonization and residential schooling in Canada (RCAP 1996; Milloy 1999; Steckley and Cummins 2008), the intergenerational impacts of this history on contemporary Aboriginal Peoples (Fournier and Crey 1997; Sinclair 2007; Garydon 2008), and the connection between these systems and their associated practices and beliefs within current provincial and territory systems of child welfare in Canada have been well documented (Hick 2006; Blackstock et al. 2006; Blackstock et al. 2007; Blackstock 2003, 2009). Child welfare is regulated and administered at the Provincial or Territorial level across Canada, and these systems vary significantly across the country (Gough et al. 2009; Sinha and Kozlowski 2013). British Columbia's model is one of the most complex and includes a system for delegating Aboriginal child welfare organizations to conduct the work of child welfare on behalf of the Ministry of Child and Family Development. Within the scope of this delegation model, delegated Aboriginal agencies (DAAs) must practice in compliance with provincial legislation, but may, within this context, develop their own policies and practices grounded in Aboriginal culture, practice and worldview. This is a delicate balance within a complex system and has been described and discussed in detail within the literature (Gough 2007; Kozlowski et al. 2011).





There is consensus within the literature that many of the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by Aboriginal children and families coming into the child welfare system today are a direct result of Canada's colonial history, most specifically, the Indian Residential School System (IRSS), the Reserve and Band systems, the Sixties Scoop, and the continued involvement of the state in supporting policies and structures that contribute to the reproduction of poverty, underemployment, substance misuse, incarceration, suicide and dependency of Aboriginal Peoples (Fournier and Crey 1997; Helin 2006; Hick 2006; Steckley and Cummins 2008). This historical underpinning is evident in the current class-action lawsuit being led by Chief Marcia Brown Martel against the Ontario government for the devastating loss of cultural identity suffered by victims of the Sixties Scoop in Ontario. It is within this context that we recognize the true magnitude of resilience at work and ground our model for restorative urban Aboriginal child welfare practice.

The four aspects of restorative practice outlined in the introduction above have been defined within response to this history of colonization, in recognition of the continued presence and impact of colonial practices and approaches in Canada, and in congruence with literature on decolonization (Smith 1999; Emberley 2007), Indigenization (Alatas 2005; Sinclair, Hart and Bruyere 2009; author 2014), and critical Indigenous studies (Alfred 1999; Howard and Proulx 2011).

A hallmark feature of residential schooling, and the era in which these institutions flourished in Canada, was government and church prohibition of Aboriginal language, cultural practices, and spirituality. As the Aboriginal cultures of Canada were exclusively oral at the time of contact, these colonial prohibitions disrupted ancestral systems for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and worldview by means of story and other practices (Hick 2006; Steckley and Cummins 2008). This means that knowledge of food and medicine procurement, processing and storage, family genealogies explaining the relationships between Aboriginal cultures, creation myths underpinning worldview and cultural perspectives, knowledge of the seasonal rhythm or particular territories and other similar information passed down and refined across millennia was destabilized, reduced, and in some cases lost forever. An essential part of reframing child welfare in Canada within a restorative paradigm therefore involves grounding practice in the intergenerational Aboriginal knowledge systems and worldview of the culture(s) of the family being served. This typically requires including Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the design and development of policy and practice, as they have retained much of this information for their people.

Understanding the importance of placing intergenerational knowledge and worldview at the centre of Aboriginal child welfare practice requires practices and approaches that are framed





within an awareness of and engagement with colonial history. As one example, without understanding of how colonization impacted Aboriginal cultures and societies, it is easy to fall into a deficit model that characterizes Aboriginal parents as lacking basic parenting skills and pathologizes them as “in need” of Euro-North American models of risk assessment, protective factors, and behavioural intervention models in favor of culturally grounded models that recognize intergenerational trauma (Turcotte and author, 2014), government manufactured poverty and neglect, and the potential of cultural practices and connections and strength based and culturally restorative protective factors.

Along the same lines, restorative practices depart from the punitive approaches’ characteristic of mainstream social work in favour of concrete strength-based, graduated, and supportive client engagement, such as collaborative practice. Aside from an established literature demonstrating the ineffectiveness of punitive approaches, there is a growing literature base demonstrating that practices such as therapeutic jurisprudence achieve better outcomes in both the correctional and child welfare systems. Finally, there is a need to ensure that restorative practice not only achieves anecdotal successes, but measurable results of positive change for the families served. This is required to continue to build evidence-based rationales supporting changes in the broader legislation and audited practice standards and information systems that ultimately constrain the degree of freedom and autonomy that delegated Aboriginal agencies (and their counterparts elsewhere in the world) have to continue to design, develop and refine systems of restorative practice.

The Aboriginal population in Canada is relatively young, rapidly growing, and increasingly moving into urban areas. The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study, published by the Environics Institute in 2010, examined trends within Aboriginal populations in 11 urban centres across Canada, including: Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Ottawa. The report indicates that, as of 2006 (the most recent national census data available at the time), “there [were] 615 First Nations communities [across Canada], which represent more than 50 Nations or cultural groups and 50 Aboriginal languages” (Environics Main Report 2010: 23). Aboriginal Peoples remain overrepresented within both the correctional and child welfare systems in Canada. There is a need to reframe child welfare practice within a restorative paradigm to disrupt historical cycles that keep Aboriginal families disproportionately represented within the system.

Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS)

An open land claims process, urban reserves, and a wealth of Indigenous diversity all make Vancouver one of the most unique places in the Indigenous world. With the 3rd largest Aboriginal population in Canada, and four First Nations in close proximity, the Greater





Vancouver Regional District is home to more than 40,000 diverse Aboriginal Peoples. Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Service Society (VACFSS) was incorporated in 1992 and the society signed its first delegation enabling agreement in 2001 advancing through the stages of the province's delegation model between 2001 and 2008. Over the last decade, VACFSS has experienced unprecedented growth, at the same time grounding its development in the lived and intergenerational experiences of the Aboriginal children and families it serves and establishing protocols with both First Nations and key community partners. The Society continues to establish itself as a Canadian leader in the development and implementation of strength-based practices and approaches grounded in the history, knowledge systems, practices and worldview of the people being served.

At present, Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS) serves a unique aggregate of some 500 families from more than 30 distinct Aboriginal cultures from across Canada. As a vulnerable subset of the urban Aboriginal population in the Lower Mainland, these families are often disconnected from their ancestral communities and live with multiple challenges, including racism, poverty, complex intergenerational trauma, substance use, and violence against women, all of which are a legacy of the history of colonization and in particular the impact of the Government of Canada's residential school system (RCAP, 1996). Engagement with this diverse and complex client base has given rise to a unique model of restorative urban Aboriginal child welfare practice at VACFSS, developed in relationship with a great many partners connected to the Society's work.

This emerging model has become clear through consistent elements present in programming and policy across VACFSS that is having a restorative impact on children and families. In 2012, as VACFSS approached 20 years of service in the community, the leadership launched the *Strengthening Our Practice* (SOP) special project. *Strengthening Our Practice* (SOP) was designed to engage VACFSS staff, caregivers, community partners and client families in a reflective exploration of emerging restorative practices across the society.

Strengthening Our Practice: An Inquiry into Restorative Aboriginal Child Welfare Practice at VACFSS

The *Strengthening Our Practice* (SOP) special project was launched by VACFSS in 2012 to: 1) identify whether the notion of the emergence of a restorative framework at VACFSS was grounded in an evidence base; 2) to elucidate that framework and help define a restorative paradigm, should it be present; 3) to provide clear recommendations for the continued development of restorative policy and practice that is congruent with the unique aggregate of Aboriginal families in Vancouver; and 4) to ensure the consistent delivery of these practices





and approaches across the four practice programs at VACFSS (Child Protection, Family Preservation and Reunification, Resources, and Guardianship).

It was important to have an independent third party assist in facilitating this type of internal critical and reflective engagement and research. The International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) was contracted to assist in SOP, and was supported by the VACFSS special projects officer, also working in collaboration with the leadership, Elders and practice Knowledge Keepers¹, and other staff at VACFSS. A steering committee was convened, and the project team submitted an application to conduct formal research to the VACFSS Board of Directors' Research Committee. Once approved, the SOP team began with circle discussions with Elders and practice Knowledge Keepers at VACFSS, and then moved on to conduct semi-structured interviews, focus circles, and a variety of other engagements with staff, youth in care and contracted caregivers. During the yearlong study that was conducted, more than half of the 158 staff at VACFSS participated in the project, with participant representation from all programs and all staffing levels across the Society. It should be noted that while there was program evidence to suggest that VACFSS practices were grounded in the four elements of restorative practice discussed above, this was not assumed in the research design, and the initial phase of the study involved an exploration into whether practices were in fact restorative (as defined), followed by an inquiry into the impacts and outcomes of the restorative practices confirmed and identified for all involved.

The results of this study demonstrate that processes of decolonization and Indigenization grounded in the four aspects of restorative practice outlined above lead to better outcomes for children and families and provide important opportunities for change in Aboriginal child welfare at a systems level. This was revealed through a critical examination of the development of programs, policy, and practice over the last decade. The programs and practices highlighted in the SOP study, and their associated restorative qualities, impacts and outcomes are discussed below.

In 2005, the Guardianship Program at Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society made an intentional shift towards the paradigm of Inclusive Foster Care (IFC). The central premise of inclusive fostering is that while children may have to be removed from their family to address risk factors (identified in section 13 of *the Child, Family and Community Services*

¹ In the context of *Strengthening Our Practice*, "Practice Knowledge Keeper" was defined as an individual who had seven consecutive years, or more, working in Aboriginal child welfare





Act in British Columbia), it is still almost always in their best interest to have regular contact with their biological family. Through this approach, IFC aims to create a circle of support around a child or youth that includes the family accessing services (including extended family and community), social workers, contracted caregivers (foster caregivers), and a variety of other professionals and community partners providing additional support and services. From an Aboriginal perspective, this approach acknowledges the damage that was done to Aboriginal Peoples, families, and cultures by removing children from their families during the residential school system. It recognizes that certain risk factors require child removal, at the same time departing from mainstream punitive approaches that would disconnect the “offending parents” from their children, and instead takes a strength-based approach, viewing families from a holistic perspective, and working to support youth trajectories throughout the foster care in ways that privilege both professional services and family and cultural connections.

In 2007, VACFSS received a song for the agency from a Knowledge Keeper from the Musqueam First Nation and established a drum group composed of staff. This demonstrates the Society’s commitment to honouring the local territory, and the song functions as an important teaching tool for staff and community partners. Over subsequent years, the Society engaged in a number of developments aimed at promoting wellness, communicating Aboriginal worldviews, and supporting staff to develop the tools and competencies necessary to implement restorative child welfare practice. That same year, the Society designated ceremonial spaces at each of the three offices where people could smudge, pray, and conduct other ceremonial practices. A clinical Elder was also hired to move between these medicine rooms, as they have been termed, to be available for staff for ceremony, guidance around protocols and cultural practice, and other advice. These developments highlight some of the complexities involved in the development of restorative practice within diverse urban areas. Grounding practice in the intergenerational knowledge, cultural practice, and worldview of the 30 distinct Aboriginal cultures served by VACFSS can seem like a daunting task. When this diversity is reframed from a challenge to gift, however, there is both motivation and room for innovative practice that respects local territory and protocol, honours the diversity present, and supports a network of Elders and practice Knowledge Keepers to connect with social workers and other professionals to ensure that they are supported with the information they need to engage families in culturally restorative ways.

Within the context of Inclusive Foster Care, the Guardianship Program has made a number of innovations in restorative practice reflective of embracing the diversity present. In 2007, VACFSS designed the *Honouring the Journey of Our Youth* ceremony and the *Touching the Lands of Our Relations* policy. *Honouring The Journey of Our Youth* was developed with the support and guidance of a hereditary chief from the Squamish First Nation. This ceremony





recognizes the milestone of achievement for youth in “aging out” of agency guardianship care system, and publicly acknowledges their continued connection to VACFSS, the Aboriginal community in Vancouver, and their ancestral community. During any given year, the youth participating in this ceremony may represent upwards of a dozen Aboriginal cultures. The ceremony has been designed so that the general structure draws from Coast Salish protocol and practice, and also includes particular points within it to provide opportunities to honour and include the diverse cultures represented. This may include the participation of Elders or Knowledge Keepers from the cultures represented singing particular songs or sharing stories and teachings for the youth of their culture present, and all of those gathered as witnesses and participants.

While *Honouring the Journey of Our Youth* provides an opportunity to mark the rite of passage out of the child welfare system in ways inclusive of the urban diversity present, the *Touching the Lands of Our Relations* policy asserts the importance of connecting youth to their particular cultural traditions prior to this point. Through this policy, the Guardianship Program at VACFSS has committed to taking each youth in care home to connect with their ancestral community at least once during their time in care. These trips are made as frequently as possible, depending on how far the child or youths home community is from Vancouver, as well as the types of connections the Society is able to make with that community. Whenever possible, these visits coincide with visiting extended families, engaging in cultural activities, and naming ceremonies and other seasonal and cultural practices. This policy provides guardianship social workers with important opportunities to engage children and youth in practices of their specific Aboriginal culture. This process is restorative for the children or youth and their families, and also enhances the capacity of social workers to provide restorative services by increasing their experience with diverse Aboriginal knowledge systems, cultural practices and worldviews. This was followed by the creation of the Lifelong Connections Coordinator position in 2008, to research, develop, and support the connections between youth in care and their ancestral communities. In 2007, the Society began offering the *Strengthening Families* program. This program was originally developed by Kumpfer in the mid-1980s and has subsequently been adapted by diverse organizations and practitioners for the linguistic and cultural contexts of 26 countries (strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org). This program was adapted by VACFSS to include Elders leads and cultural content specific to the unique aggregate of Aboriginal families accessing the child welfare system in Vancouver. Located within the Family Preservation Program, this adapted version of the program has played a central role in supporting families of the verge of entry into the child protection system. Over recent years the programs outcomes demonstrate that working to support families in restorative ways can lead to concrete outcomes in the order of reducing the number of child removals through cultural interventions- highlighting culture as a protective factor.





In 2008, VACFSS became fully delegated and assumed a mandate for child protection. The Society, which had been offering homecoming and reunification ceremonies since 2005, then began to offer them more systematically through family service teams in the context of the new VACFSS Child Protection Program. These ceremonies are intended to mark the rite of passage that occurs when a child removed by the child welfare system is returned to their family. In 2009, there was a homecoming and reunification protocol signing, and a policy was developed along with a set of procedures to support social workers in organizing and implementing these ceremonies. These ceremonies have emerged as one of the most effective practices for restorative practice at VACFSS (author 2014). While there is a framework in place for the general purpose and format of these ceremonies, a structure was developed to support social workers in connecting to Elders and practice Knowledge Keepers internally, and then working with the family receiving the ceremony to develop a ceremony reflective of and restorative for that particular family. This often involves including Elders and Knowledge Keepers connected to that family, and sometimes providing the resources necessary to bring Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and extended family from their community to Vancouver to participate in the ceremony.

Inclusive Foster Care has continued to emerge as a central paradigm for restorative practice in both the Resources and Guardianship Programs and has been elaborated through the creation of an annual *Caregiver Appreciation Dinner* and a *Caregiver Cultural Camp* (developed in 2009). The *Caregiver Cultural Camp* allows VACFSS to support caregivers (the majority of whom are non-Aboriginal) to engage in and learn from cultural practice enabling them to better respond to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of Aboriginal children and youth in culturally grounded and restorative ways. In 2009, VACFSS established an annual sage harvesting trip, a cultural immersion camp for staff, and a Cultural Committee to further provide these same opportunities internally to staff across the Society. These developments have played key roles in the Society's capacity to ensure that both staff and contracted caregivers have an awareness of their role and practice that is framed within an awareness of and engagement with colonial history.

In 2010, the VACFSS Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) was founded, one of the first advisory groups of urban Aboriginal youth in care in Canada. YAC is composed of roughly a dozen youth between the ages of 16 and 24 and brings the voices of Aboriginal youth in care to those in the agency creating policy and programming. Through a recognition of Aboriginal knowledge systems that value youth as having their own wisdom, and being capable producers of knowledge and process, YAC brings youth voice, perspective and direction into the design and development of restorative policy and practice. This is accomplished through regular monthly meetings, speaking engagements and special events, and an annual youth conference for Aboriginal youth in care in an urban setting.





The development of restorative practice between 2005 and 2010 brought an awareness of the impact of this type of work on staff involved in these complicated and dynamic processes. The type of Indigenization and decolonization work involved in the development of restorative practice can be triggering and adds extra levels of complexity to the daily practice of social work that can contribute to staff burn out if it is not balanced with restorative practices for self-care and staff wellness. In response to this recognition, the Society developed the Living a Healthy Aboriginal Lifestyle (LAHAL) program in 2011. This program introduced a variety of wellness activities including yoga, chair massage, walking, and healthy eating and nutrition to support staff wellness and encourage relationship building between staff focused on wellness and self-care.

That same year, VACFSS instituted an Elders Forum series. This series brought groups of Elders and Knowledge Keepers from the various Nations represented by client families to present to and engage with staff across the Society. During the first year of this series, four Elders Forums were held representing Musqueam, Sto:lo, Cree, and Lakota cultures. These forums consisted of a group of 3-5 Elders and Knowledge Keepers from a particular culture and included 30-60 staff. Members from community partner organizations and the wider community were also invited to attend. During the morning, the presenters would share information about the history, practices, and worldview of their culture, with particular attention paid to information and dynamics they thought would be particularly important for social workers to be aware of to practice in restorative ways. During the afternoon, staff could then ask specific questions and engage with the Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Two of these forums also involved a second day in which the staff had the opportunity to participate in ceremonies to learn by doing in congruence with Aboriginal pedagogy and practice. One of these involved a Lakota yuwipi ceremony, and the other, a Cree sweat lodge ceremony. Upwards of three quarters of the 158 staff at VACFSS participated in at least one of these Elders Forums, and the feedback was unanimous in communicating the transformative impacts derived from direct engagement with Elders and Knowledge Keepers through discussion, story, and ceremony. In 2011, the Society also made the decision to host PhD candidate to study Indigenization across the Society. The dissertation produced discusses many of the examples of restorative practice outlined above, including the Elders Forum series, in further detail (author 2014).

Between 2010 and 2012, the VACFSS Research and Policy Analyst began a process of reframing the policy that the Society had inherited from the Ministry of Child and Family Development through the Delegation Enabling Agreement to meet congruence with the paradigm of restorative practice. These developments enabled the Society to take a more reflective approach to decolonization and Indigenization across the agency. Much of this work,





and the processes it entailed, is also discussed in further detail in the dissertation referenced above (author 2014).

This practice history, and the associated restorative impacts and outcomes associated with these developments, was captured during the first year of *Strengthening Our Practice*. This research was conducted over the full calendar year of 2012. Simultaneous to the *Strengthening Our Practice* research, VACFSS led a community partnership team and founded the Culturally Relevant Urban Wellness (CRUW) program. CRUW began as a core program bringing Aboriginal youth in foster care at VACFSS together with new immigrant youth at the University of British Columbia Farm for wellness, skill development and cultural exchange. The UBC Farm program focuses on honouring diversity, emotional and cultural competence, sustainable urban wellness and mentorship. These foci are implemented over the course of a 16-session eight-month program that involves gardening, guest workshops and group work. Between 2012 and 2015 CRUW expanded to include four programming streams, including: the UBC Farm program, a *Life Skills and Leadership* program, and Cottonwood Community Garden alumni drop-in program, and a youth mentor committee. Together these programs provide a multi-year trajectory of service to over 100 youth annually working to support positive identity development, cultural connections and healthy relationships, and concrete skill development to support the transition out of care. In 2014 the Society partnered with the Indigenous Research Partnership and the University of British Columbia and began conducting evidence-based research on restorative practice within the UBC Farm program. The findings of this research are currently being analyzed in preparation for publication.

Based on the success of the *Strengthening Families* program, the Society launched a *Strengthening Fathers* program in 2012 to work with fathers who, until quite recently, received little attention throughout the child welfare system. VACFSS is currently in the process of developing a third program, *Strengthening Relatives*, to support extended family members who are caring for children and youth through kith and kin agreements under the *Child, Family and Community Services Act* (British Columbia 1996). The second year of *Strengthening Our Practice* was conducted over the 2013 calendar year. Based in part on the findings of SOP regarding the restorative impact of Elders, VACFSS created family support positions for Elders in 2013 to work with families around spiritual wellness and personal and family progress and growth. The use of innovative collaborative practice such as Elder support services, mediation, family group conferencing, and family group decision-making have become established as key tools for achieving restorative practice at VACFSS.

The development of policy, practice and programs outlined above was also accompanied by significant changes in organizational space and culture. As VACFSS moved through successive





stages of the delegation process the Society inherited physical spaces (office buildings) and seconded staff with their own organizational appearance and culture. Part of decolonization and Indigenization at VACFSS involved a process of transforming institutional spaces with drab colours and plexiglass dividing clients from reception staff into welcoming and safe environments. This transformation brought the voices and perspectives of community members, community partners and client families into the physical space of the office through exhibiting art, poetry and murals created by these groups. Intentional effort to reduce the space between clients and administration staff, achieving a benchmark of 51% staff in all programs and departments, and developing an organizational culture where clients are greeted warmly and offered something to drink upon entering the office has contributed to a sense of community and belonging for many of the families who access services at VACFSS. The findings of SOP also highlighted the central role of Aboriginal administrative staff in creating this sense of belonging, while also supporting social workers and other staff on a daily basis by means of modeling culturally restorative strength-based practice.

The SOP findings also indicated that the process of transforming VACFSS offices into culturally safe spaces both coincided with and contributed to a shift in organizational culture grounded in the Society's values of respect, humility, integrity, respect, and strength-based practice. This organizational culture was present in a focus on the sacredness of children, intergenerational trauma and healing, and the capacity of restorative practice to build trust by creating safe physical and emotional spaces, especially using circle dialogue and nurturing relationships; being open to learning from families through a collaborative learning process starting where families are at; a focus on well-being while ensuring immediate safety, being honest and balancing accountability with support, healing and a sense of belonging; an ability to focus and build on strengths/assets, wanting to keep kids with their families and in their community and connected to their culture, celebrating milestones of success throughout the case management process; and the use of ceremony to remove shame blame and better understand the healing cycle in supporting vulnerable families

Restorative Practice: Implications for Social Work with Indigenous Peoples

The findings generated through the *Strengthening Our Practice* study have contributed to defining and further understanding restorative practice, and have important implications for social work practice, policy development and program development with Indigenous Peoples. The project findings were thematically organized within the final project report under the headings of culture, organization, and practice. These findings have been synthesized and are outlined below with particular attention to the implications of restorative practice for social work with diverse Indigenous Peoples.





Central to the restorative paradigm is the core premise that restorative practice must be grounded in the intergenerational knowledge, cultural practices and worldview of the target demographic participating or otherwise being engaged by that practice (the target audience or demographic). Achieving this within the context of social work practice, and in a diverse urban setting, requires not only an understanding of the diverse cultures represented within a client group, but the capacity and intention to support staff with the information and resources necessary to navigate cultural complexity with clear pathways of decision-making and procedures to enable restorative practice. Key cultural strengths identified through the SOP process address the implications of restorative practice regarding both staff development/support and client engagement/intervention.

The allocation of specific resources to strengthen and embed cultural knowledge, worldview and practice within the case management framework plays a significant role in supporting staff to recognize the potential of restorative practice and to adopt it in their daily practice. Creating a clinical Elder position specifically to support staff, investing in a staff culture camp, and providing opportunities for discussion and engagement through the Elders Forum series all contributed to supporting staff to embed cultural knowledge and practices into their daily practice. These investments shifted the perspective of many workers who previously conceived of cultural practice as an “add-on” to precede and follow a mainstream case management process. For example, workers who might open an engagement with an acknowledgement of territory, conduct a mainstream intervention, and then close with a prayer by an Elder are not conducting restorative practice. They are simply dressing up mainstream social work practice with a veneer of beads and feathers - a process that lends itself more towards appropriation than the achievement of restorative change. The SOP study demonstrates that allocation of resources towards restorative staff development has large implications in terms of supporting frontline staff to build working definitions of decolonization, Indigenization, and restorative practice in ways that lead to concrete and measurable changes in practice- with clearly associated impacts and outcomes for the client families involved.

The SOP findings further demonstrate that simply providing meaningful teachable moments and engagements to support social workers in building a working definition of restorative practice, alongside a willingness to mobilize these practices, is simply not enough. Clear pathways of decisions making, and trajectories of practice and procedure are required to support staff in making space for this change within the fast-paced and often crisis driven context of social work practice. As one example, this was achieved at VACFSS through the creation of particular ceremonies clearly outlined in organizational policy- such as the Honouring the Journey and Homecoming and Reunification ceremonies. The policies for each of these ceremonies provide workers with a flexible framework in which to mobilize the knowledge and teachings they have received through the training and engagements discussed





above. In-house Elders, practice Knowledge Keepers, and a strong network on community partners then provides staff with the relationships necessary to organize and implement this knowledge in the form of practices that are restorative for the diverse families on their case load. In this way, no two Homecoming and Reunification Ceremonies are ever the same, but each of them is restorative for the family who receives them. In response to these findings the SOP team used information generated during the research to generate practice case studies using Prezi software. These case studies map successful decision pathways of restorative practice within each program area- linking decision-making, restorative policy and procedure, and the relationships and resources necessary for implementation to support practitioners at VACFSS, alongside their community partners.

The study found that restorative staff development paired with restorative policy and practice development was associated with a shift from the characteristically punitive approach of mainstream social work towards the type of concrete, strength-based and graduated approach characteristic of restorative client engagement. Said another way, pairing strategies to support social workers to frame their awareness in colonial history and ground their practice in the knowledge, cultural practices, and worldview of their client families with restoratives policy and practice standards has huge implications for achieving expansive and consistent delivery of restorative practice. This coordinated strategy supports social work practice that prioritizes engaging families from a perspective informed by intergenerational trauma that acknowledges that families are on intergenerational journeys through the child welfare system in complicated and cyclical ways. From this restorative perspective we also understand that the relationships, legal structures, and concrete circumstances that perpetuate these cyclical relationships have their genesis within the colonial history of Canada, while also being perpetuated by contemporary systems, structures and legislation of the state. The implications of this awareness involve a recognizing that the pace of intervention must balance legislative timeframes and the level of client service engagement with the requirements of restorative practice throughout the full trajectory of client service work. A restorative system allows for a relationship to develop over two to five years, over which concrete support is provided, and the nature of the service is gradually introduced despite timeframes in the legislation. Likewise, such a system supports the creativity and innovation necessary to facilitate identifying legislative and policy options that keep children connected to family or to stay with their parents while under supervision, including advocating for new timelines for temporary care. The implications of such an approach are that of using services offered in the community to mitigate risk and strengthen capacity. By means of this process organizations and staff may apply strength-based interventions that seek out and build on unique Aboriginal child and family assets to enhance individual and collective resilience.





As one concrete example, a significant increase in the use of collaborative practice (family group conferencing, family group decision making, and mediation) within child protection at VACFSS was correlated with the Society's investment in providing the knowledge, resources, and blueprints for action necessary for staff to understand, incorporate and engage in restorative practice. The frequency of collaborative practice achieved and currently sustained at VACFSS far supersedes the use of these practices at the Ministry of Child and Family Development, where the same type of restorative opportunities are not available. The result was a shift across programs towards a strategy and practice of client engagement that involved modeling and support of intergenerational Aboriginal knowledge, practice and worldview by staff, Elders and practice Knowledge Keepers, resulting in restorative client engagement with clear associated impacts and outcomes.

The outcomes associated with restorative practice are not elusive though hard to quantify. This is because they are not best measured in terms of descriptive statistics such as the number of youth entering the system, the length of foster care placements, or the number of children returned to their family (though they do also impact these statistics). The outcomes are evident, rather, in a decolonization and Indigenization of child welfare at a systemic level through restorative practice. Child welfare in Canada is something that has historically been done for Aboriginal Peoples rather than with Aboriginal Peoples. Restorative practice within child protection, such as family group decision-making and family group conferencing, brings Aboriginal voice into the case management process. It acknowledges that Aboriginal families and communities know what is best for their children, and restores the relationships of care, support and development that were broken throughout colonization. This same focus is maintained within the context of guardianship and residential resources through practices of Inclusive Foster Care - where cultural connections to family and community are prioritized, and the voice of Aboriginal communities and Nations is incorporated into practice through signed protocols, community visits, and ongoing collaboration and consultation. Likewise, it is sustained within the Family Preservation program through the Strengthening Families and Strengthening Fathers programs. The creation of ceremonies written into policy recognizes the full breadth of culture as a protective factor in the lives of children, families, and communities. It dislocates the discussion of risk, protection, wellness and intervention from the colonial mainstream social work tradition, and roots it, firmly, within intergenerational systems of Aboriginal knowledge, language, cultural practice, and worldview- thereby seeking to restore Aboriginal culture, society, knowledge and spirituality within the contemporary context.

Conclusion

In many ways restorative practice has required the creative reproduction of culture drawing on ancestral practices for responding to grief, loss, anger, loss of cultural identity and parental roles, and adapting these processes to contemporary challenges of navigating a highly





charged, litigious 21st century child welfare social policy environment. At VACFSS the implications of restorative practice are framed within a multilayered context that ranges from responding to political climate to reframing the client/social worker interface. Aboriginal child welfare structures are highly regulated by the political will of the day. This determines the degree of autonomy and innovation that an agency may apply. Innovation in this case is augmenting Ministry policy and practice. Given that authority always rests outside of the delegated agency, in the context of British Columbia partnership with the Ministry is key to ensuring that restorative innovation is achieved, transparent and supported.

Whether in British Columbia, or elsewhere in the World, legislation must be accountable to the goals of the system, and it must provide authority and accountability for those who are responsible for services. In VACFSS' view the BC legislation supports least intrusive measures within the case management process. It is VACFSS' role and responsibility to identify these paths of decision-making for social workers with their legal counsel. Protocols are in place to ensure that the system is accountable to the communities of the Aboriginal person served as well as the various institutions that are established to ensure the well-being of vulnerable children and families.

The resources that are available must support the implementation of the least intrusive legislative provisions within the scope of each intervention. Because the factors that contribute to child vulnerability are pervasive in Aboriginal communities the approach, in order to be restorative, requires partnerships with the broader community and access to all service lines that are available to every other citizen. VACFSS has redefined and restructured its program and deployment of resources in a way that defines the philosophy of service, and an understanding of human development within the context of the persons served.

Practice reflects adherence to the pathways and implementation of a restorative urban Aboriginal child welfare approach. Families are engaged within a service path that is trauma informed, often starting by addressing concrete and safety requirements, recognizing system induced challenges in individual and family responsibilities, supported through a healing journey and engaged within the wider community.

The restorative paradigm also prioritizes research that builds knowledge specific to the population served, and within the context of a focused restorative system, as opposed to the representation of aggregate data on outcomes that have not occurred within a restorative child welfare context. This gives rise to a theoretical foundation emerging out of a fully





established restorative system. This theory is drawn from the lived experience of Elders and practice Knowledge Keepers who work within a restorative child welfare system.

At its core, restorative practice represents an important source of wisdom on managing complex individual and collective human healing processes. VACFSS has created a living model of restorative Aboriginal practice through ongoing programing, policy revision, and research partnerships such as *Strengthening Our Practice*. This experience has been gleaned from a respectful learning process with clients and deep listening and engagement with practice Knowledge Keepers, steeped in front line experience. This process and model are scalable, transferable, and directly applicable to social work practice with Indigenous Peoples internationally. This paper is intended to start a conversation and collaboration around the development and application of restorative social work practice with rather than for Indigenous Peoples internationally. Practice implications underscore the need for more research addressing the need for better alignment of social policy with the unique situation of Aboriginal children and families experiencing distress in complex urban environments. Continued applied research is needed on emergent practice areas such as collaborative practice, Elder facilitated cultural intervention services within strengthening families, least intrusive measures, and Inclusive Foster Care. Increased, meaningful involvement of client families and children involved in both the research process and application of the research findings to practice processes will be a crucial part of the next stage of the journey.





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