BRINGING CHILDREN HOME:
A QUEST FOR FIRST NATION ADOPTIVE HOMES
AND SOCIAL WORK LEADERSHIP

by

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the views of Northern British Columbia (BC) First Nation participants on the adoption of First Nation children currently in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). This research intertwines social work leadership and its potential to contribute to positive adoption changes. The Lax Kw’alaam Circle group participants discussed their current traditional adoption practices, and had several suggestions to improve adoption practice with MCFD including improving the structure of adoption process and social worker capacity to be more culturally sensitive. This leadership opportunity benefits social workers and First Nation people seeking means to adopt First Nation children back into their communities. The research parallels the MCFD’s objective to honor Aboriginal culture within regional practice. In the conduct of this action research study, considerable attention was given to the Lax Kw’alaam community’s standards and the ethics process.
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Marial Ann Zuurbier. My mother grew up a "tomboy," knowing more about cars, building, and climbing trees than some guys did. Mom fell in love with the West through Zane Grey and a road trip when she was 16 years old. She left her home alone to finish growing up in Calgary, Alberta, at 19. Mom made friendships with a neighborhood family of a different faith, even though that was unpopular at the time. She was keen to discuss the merits of dealing with people of different cultures, especially the Aboriginal people. When she became a single parent, Mom took five of us kids for a two-month car-camping trip through several provinces and then returned home to continue working full time.

Mom and the kids moved to BC when she was 42 years old and she completed her Social Service diploma at the age of 51. She has been supportive of her children in their career goals and was eager for me to begin my master’s degree program.

Mom has traveled to England, the Mediterranean, Scotland, Israel, Jordan, Medjigory, Mexico and the USA.

At 69 years old, my mother has traveled to Terrace several times and made meals so that I could write, read through my thesis, prayed over the project’s progress, and been an assertive advocate for First Nation children who are being adopted into First Nation homes. “You have to tell people what you are doing and how important it is!” she reminds me. “And don’t spend time socializing. You have your thesis to do!” My mother continues to visit her “children” and their children and to help out in countless ways. For all of your hard work and for investing in my life, I dedicate this work to you, Mom.
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CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS AND FRAMING

With this project and my research, I seek to increase the recruitment of Aboriginal adoptive parents for Aboriginal children who are permanently in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) by reviewing how social worker leadership can assist in the recruitment process.

According to the MCFD’s (2008c) *Child and Family Services Reports* for February 2008, a total of 9,233 children were in foster homes in British Columbia (BC). Even with extensive planning to keep children and their families intact, children from BC continue to enter the “system” because of neglect; emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; or a combination and the potential threat of these factors (Queen’s Printer, 1996b, Sec. 13). A child is permanently in the care of MCFD when the provincial court judge grants a child a Continuing Custody Order. The child’s social worker must then consider lifelong planning, specifically adoption. When a social worker decides to seek a permanent adoptive home for a child, I become involved in the process.

My actions as an adoption worker are directed by one key guiding principle: the best interest of the child (Queen’s Printer, 1996a, Sec. 3; Queen’s Printer, 1996b, Sec. 4). This guiding principle directs all aspects of adoption planning, and the child’s needs and views are pivotal. Aboriginal children must be given special attention in planning to maintain their cultural identity and heritage (Queen’s Printer, 1996a, Sec. 4; MCFD, 2001, p. 1:7). The need for social worker leadership is precisely in this area of cultural prioritizing.

To ensure that children whose life experiences have been shaped by unfortunate life events are adopted into homes that have the capacity for lifelong commitment,
adoption workers examine numerous areas of the prospective adoptive parents (PAPs). The first step is to screen PAPs for the skills and attitudes required for special-needs children who are available for adoption within MCFD. From the initial telephone inquiry, to receiving the adoption application and documents, to an investigative home study and the Adoption Education Program, the parents’ capacity is examined. Although the length of this procedure has led some to become discouraged, which is thus a barrier to recruitment (Capello, 2006), providing emotional support, clear guidelines, and information and taking time to listen to adopting parents has proven to keep many prospective parents engaged (Katz, 2005).

The second stage in adoption is to match an approved PAP with a child. The focus is always on how the adopting parent can meet the child’s needs, not the other way around. One matching tool is BC’s own Adoption Management System (AMS), a software program that allows social workers who are seeking a home for a child to view critical information on approved parents. The AMS also includes specific cultural information.

When a potential match has been found, rigorous communication and planning between social workers, foster parents, other professionals, and the PAPs begin. Ideally, PAPs visit the child who joins their home, are monitored for six months, and sign the last of the court papers, which are then prepared for the Supreme Court judge.

The third stage is to manage Post Adoption Assistance (PAA) agreements. PAA funds can continue until the child’s 19th birthday and be modified, as approved, to assist with the child’s special needs. Emotional support is often an ongoing aspect of the adoption process.
As an MCFD adoption social worker in the North Region, I am responsible for a geographical area that covers over 450 miles, including five MCFD offices and various Aboriginal communities. My job requires that I conduct meetings with Aboriginal people on their territory. I travel to numerous isolated Aboriginal communities; some islands are accessible only by boat or float plane. Opportunely, this unique work experience has sensitized me to understand the needs of Aboriginal families and their culture.

During five years of adoption work, I have reflected on the current adoption recruitment structure. I noted that few Aboriginal people apply to adopt, even in the North Region, which is surrounded by Aboriginal communities and villages. I became interested in pursuing this project as I repeatedly witnessed how quickly and naturally Aboriginal children connected to Aboriginal adoptive parents. Their cultural connection appears distinct. I began to wonder why so few Aboriginal people applied to adopt when the adoptive parents with whom I worked impressed me with their skill. I was interested in undertaking a major project to inquire into improving the opportunities for Aboriginal people to adopt Aboriginal children. Following extensive contemplation, my research question became, What do you believe Northern First Nation people need in order to adopt First Nation children who are presently in the care of MCFD? The sub questions include the following: (a) What do you see as a metaphor for the adoption process from an Aboriginal or First Nation’s perspective? (b) What are your experiences with adoption? (c) From your view, how has the MCFD adoption process worked? (d) From your understanding of MCFD’s adoption process, what does MCFD need to do so more Aboriginal people will adopt through MCFD? (e) How can the cultural needs of potential
Aboriginal adoptive parents be listened to better? and (f) What would encourage you to adoption with MCFD?

In the remainder of this chapter I will explore the research opportunity and its significance for Aboriginal adoption practice within the northwest, a systems analysis of the opportunity, and the related organizational context. Interwoven in this chapter is the significance of social work leadership in the context of current thinking, all of which have direct implications for my social work practice.

The Opportunity and Its Significance

Approximately 84 per cent of the children in the care of MCFD are Aboriginal in the north (MCFD, 2008c). MCFD has proactive policies to guard a child’s Aboriginal heritage; however, many Aboriginal children are not living in culturally compatible homes. Ideally located within several Aboriginal communities, the Northern adoption team has access to a wide Aboriginal cultural base that is unavailable to other regional teams. Within these Aboriginal communities exists abundant feedback opportunities to increase the recruitment of Aboriginal adopting parents.

In MCFD’s (1999) Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Services, the action plan priorities include developing organizational awareness and sensitivity to Aboriginal child and family service issues, undertaking regional reconciliation discussions with Aboriginal communities, and developing resources to support isolated communities (p. 6). The MCFD Leadership statement, in Appendix A, directs management and supervisors towards a challenging goal. Since BC’s regionalization in 2000, the MCFD, North Region (2007a) issued its own strategic plan, Vision 2010, to manage regional child welfare complexities. Stringer (1999) cautioned that “centralized policies and programs generated
by ‘experts’ have limited success in resolving problems” (p. 2). The devolution of authority continues the ministry’s shift to community and regional engagement “by moving towards community and client-centered service delivery” (MCFD, 2008b).

During my adoption work, Aboriginal people have enlightened me about residential school experiences, racism, oppression, and the extent to which adoption barriers, both real and perceived, have hindered them from entering into adoption with MCFD. With this project I sought to “reveal unexamined assumptions and the ways in which people may be accepting explanations of the dominant cultural group who serve to oppress those without power” (Glesne, 2006, p. 16). Understandably, many Aboriginal people who are considering the adoption process might feel guarded when this process involves working with a White MCFD adoption social worker. Social workers may interpret their caution in various ways; however, our most precious source of information, the Aboriginal people themselves, have been relatively unexplored. As a result, assumptions remain unsubstantiated.

This project connects the adoption legislative requirement with MCFD policy and procedures in two ways. First, it validates the significance of Aboriginal children by maintaining their Aboriginal culture through adoption. Positive exploration in this area has the potential to encourage more Aboriginal people to consider their abilities, commitment, and capacity to adopt children who need Aboriginal homes. By listening to Aboriginal people discuss adoption, social workers will demonstrate leadership, explore new possibilities, and gain a clearer perspective on adoption recruitment. Implementing the recommendations of Aboriginal people may advance their ownership and
empowerment in the adoption process. The impact can result in Aboriginal children's adoption back into an Aboriginal culture now and in the future.

Second, this project advances legislation that places focusing on the child's best interest next to maintaining the child's cultural identity (Queen's Printer, 1996a, sec. 4; United Nations General Assembly, 2006). This change opportunity can enhance the child's lifelong cultural connection and align the northern adoption process more carefully with legislation. By allowing Aboriginal adoptive parents to voice their perceptions of adoption, MCFD is in the advantageous situation of being able to improve its perspectives based on direct feedback.

According to the Dave Thomas Foundation survey in 2004 (Ipsos-Reid, 2004), adoption is on the minds of many Aboriginal people. Twice as many Aboriginal people as non-Aboriginal consider adoption (p. 3); therefore there is a great deal of hope that Aboriginal children will move into culturally compatible adoptive families. Little research has been done on what motivates Aboriginal people to consider adoption and what factors, when in place, would invite Aboriginal people into the adoption process.

This project will benefit MCFD and its stakeholders by providing critical information through inquiry. If the current situation continues, social workers may feel that the best that can be done for Aboriginal children is to continue to adopt them to non-Aboriginal families based solely on the lack of Aboriginal homes. This leaves Aboriginal children at risk of cultural alienation.

Sinclair (2007) revealed that 85 per cent of Aboriginal children adopted into non-Aboriginal homes have breakdowns when the child reaches adolescence (p. 65). With no traditional family to whom they can return, any rejection from their non-Aboriginal home
leaves children once again unsafe in their attempt to survive. Unfortunately, non-Aboriginal adoptive parents are ill equipped to guide their adopted child through systemic racism and “the denigration of Aboriginal culture [that] may provide impossible socio-cultural contexts for adoptees” (p. 71). The most effective people to understand the dichotomy of living in a colonized society, while also having an emotional disposition to an Aboriginal approach, are Aboriginal parents. Aboriginal people are able to offer pride in their heritage and culture, which serves as a role model for Aboriginal children in the dance of complex issues.

If this situation continues and time and energy are not invested in research, barriers will continue to hinder Aboriginal people from adopting. The system will continue to work against unknown issues, social workers will continue to make assumptions without accurate information, and Aboriginal children will continue to live in a cultural void. Through omission, cultural neglect will continue. I look forward to being a part of a leadership opportunity with internal and external stakeholders in “pursuing the child’s cultural identity” (Queen’s Printer, 1996a, Sec. 4 [1]).

Project processes must be systematic, emergent, and participatory (Kahane, 2004, p. 32), and the project must assist in gaining understanding, which in turn fosters greater respect (G. Sam, personal communication, September 25, 2007). This project presents a leadership opportunity for adoptions in the northwest because it provides adoption information from within one distinct Aboriginal culture that may directly benefit local Aboriginal communities. If even a few children can return to their Aboriginal cultures, then the opportunity to meet people within the Aboriginal community will be a valuable experience for all parties (A. Clayton, personal communication, September 27, 2007).
Systems Analysis of the Opportunity

Many Canadians are unaware that more Aboriginal children are in the care of the government today then at any time in Canadian history; that, as of March 2006, approximately 57 per cent of all BC children in care (CICs) are Aboriginal; and that it has been confirmed that time spent in child welfare yields disastrous lifelong results (National Council of Welfare, 2007, pp. 83, 86). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was unanimously signed in the BC Legislator in 1991, included the areas of children’s right to cultural participation and an examination of the best interest of the child, which are to be addressed (Representative for Children and Youth, 2007a). This is an opportunity “to provide fresh leadership” (p. 29) within MCFD to address the recommendations and improve outcomes for Aboriginal CICs (Representative for Children and Youth, 2007b, p. 20).

In recognizing the need to recruit culturally compatible adoptive homes for Aboriginal children in the Ministry’s care, MCFD (2007b) “supports the desire of First Nation and Aboriginal communities to ensure Aboriginal CICs are raised with Aboriginal families whenever possible, keeping them connected with their extended family and community” (¶ 1). In practice, however, the adoption complexities are numerous (Ryburn, 1991). With few Aboriginal homes available, rationalization leads social workers to pursue the adoption of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal homes. Because the identified average number of different foster placements for a child in care who reaches adulthood is 16 (National Council of Welfare, 2007), some social workers believe that placement in a permanent non-Aboriginal home is healthier than forcing an Aboriginal child to wait for an Aboriginal adoptive home. The result is an adoption
practice that diminishes the ability of Aboriginal families to care for their children (Carriere, 2007, p. 48) and leaves Aboriginal people feeling negative about adoption in general (Brubacher, 2006). As Haldane, Leighton, and McDames (2003) demonstrated in their thesis, Aboriginal people in the northwest can find cultural solutions that are uniquely theirs.

External to MCFD are two main adoption services. The Adoptive Families Association of BC (AFABC)—funded by MCFD, membership, and donations—is a key adoption support service for adoptions. AFABC provides guidance during the adoption process and offers information sessions on the adoption process, a commitment to teen programs, inter-country adoptions, and Wendy’s Wonderful Kids, which features children who are waiting for adoptive homes. The second adoption service, which accepts adoption applications, screens applicants, completes home studies, and monitors placements, is offered through six licensed adoption agencies located in four areas in BC.

MCFD adoption workers are delegated by the Director of Adoption, have social work education, and, as social work professionals, adhere to the social worker’s code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1999). The BC Government and Service Employee’s Union agreement defines the work parameters. Adoption workers are under the jurisdiction of the Adoption Act (Queen’s Printer, 1996a), which includes in its definition of the child’s best interests the preservation of the cultural identity of Aboriginal children. This act made provisions for the adopting parents and significant people in the child’s life to mutually agree upon ongoing contact, or openness (ongoing contact with the child who is being adopted; Part 5).
Organizational Context

Throughout the province of BC, the ministry has jurisdiction over the five regions and provincial service delivery. The provincial regions are the North, Interior, Fraser, Vancouver Coastal, and Vancouver Island. The MCFD is responsible for family development, early childhood development, services for children and youth with special needs and their families, child care, child protection, residential and foster care, adoption for children and youth permanently in care, community child care and youth mental health, programs for at-risk or sexually exploited youth and community youth justice services. In addition the Ministry is responsible for a number of provincial services, such as youth custody, youth forensic psychiatric services, services to the deaf and hard of hearing children and youth, and the Maples treatment Center. (MCFD, 2008b, p. 9)

The North Region, which encompasses more than one half of the province’s landmass, is the largest geographic area of BC; and although the population is relatively small, approximately 51 Aboriginal bands reside in the north (MCFD, 2007c). The North Region managers are cognizant of cultural needs (MCFD, 2007b). In the north, 76 per cent of children in the care of MCFD are Aboriginal (Representative of Children and Youth, 2007b, p. 21). MCFD adoption social workers have a responsibility provincially and regionally to serve children and families. The central office is in Victoria, where Adoption Services oversees 37 different offices and 108 adoption workers (MCFD, 2006).

Mission, Values, and Vision

MCFD “promotes and develops the capacity of families and communities to care for and protect vulnerable children and youth, and supports healthy child and family development to maximize the potential of every child in British Columbia” (MCFD, 2008b, p. 9). The ministry supports the government’s Five Great Goals and emphasizes
the first three in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. The ministry specifically supports the government’s Great Goal 3—to build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, those with special needs, children at risk, and seniors—and seeks to accomplish this through three ministry goals: (a) Goal 1: to identify and strengthen, or develop, effective child, youth, and family development services in BC, within a strengths-based, developmental approach; (b) Goal 2: to support Aboriginal peoples to achieve their vision and goals with regard to delivery of services to their children, youth, families, and communities; and (c) Goal 3: to transform MCFD as an organization to support Goals 1 and 2. The goals reflect the ministry’s priority and commitment to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families by reviewing and, where needed, changing to a more community-driven service delivery system that is culturally relevant and effective based on international and local good practice (pp. 12-13).

In the 2007 Progress Report on the Implementation of the Recommendations of the BC Children and Youth Review, the Representative for Children and Youth (2007b) criticized MCFD leadership for the “lack of sustained action on the agenda that Mr. Hughes provided, which had a clear linkage to the ‘Five Great Goals of British Columbia’ established by the government” (p. 3). “One of the first things we need to establish is whether the standards set for social workers fully reflect evolving changes in practice or, in other words, whether they remain current” (Turpel-Lafond, 2008, p. 11).

Primary Strategies

The first goal includes objective 1.1: an effective child and family development system built on research-based good practices (MCFD, 2008b). The fifth related
performance measure with regard to children with adoption plans who have been placed states, “This measure reflects the Ministry’s commitment to ensuring children have permanent family homes and its efforts to reduce the time it takes to identify possible adoption matches and place children with prospective adoptive parents” (p. 18).

However, the 2008 service plan omits a key strategy identified in the strategic plan for 2007 (MCFD, 2007a), which commits to “supporting recruitment and educational events for families to support and strengthen their ability to care for adoptive children” (p. 24). This particular strategy was a priority.

The management of adoption in Canada is demanding as a result of province-by-province administration with little federal support:

Without federal oversight, most provinces have devoted child welfare budgets to the work of child protection and foster care. Until recently, adoption work has been a low priority within provinces, and nearly non-existent between provinces. Canada is also home to many different aboriginal peoples (including First Nation, Métis, and Inuit) who have varying degrees of involvement with child welfare services for their people. The diversity of policies and processes between peoples and provinces make cooperation between them especially challenging. (Riggs, 2003, p. 2)

The second goal is preempted by the acknowledgment of a high proportion of Aboriginal children and youth in the ministry’s care and the need to build and sustain relationships with Aboriginal communities (MCFD, 1999). The need for increased access to culturally appropriate prevention and support services will be addressed by key strategies to support comprehensive, integrated, responsive, sensitive, and sustainable community-based services and to continue to improve access to services for children and youth with special needs within Aboriginal communities (MCFD, 2008b, p. 19).
In the process of devolution, as Aboriginal people are given more authority to meet their unique cultural needs, some non-Aboriginal professionals are left feeling uneasy about the changes in the child welfare system. Historical context and other factors that affect the child welfare system require examination to appreciate the position of Aboriginal people.

In personal conversations some Aboriginal social workers have indicated an objection to being fit into a Western framework through the culture of MCFD. The offence surrounds the belief that MCFD’s White structure is a continuance of colonization (Tuhiwai Smith, 2006). Some Aboriginal social workers consider racism a factor that restrains the working relationship between themselves and MCFD staff. However, non-Aboriginal MCFD social workers who enter into a working relationship with Aboriginal staff also feel reluctant. Some have told me that they have little need to “buy into” a new relationship with Aboriginal people when the old ways appear to be working well. Some MCFD social workers have reported that they use control constructively and are disinterested in change.

The third goal includes two objectives: to support greater decision-making authority and resources for communities and to provide regional service delivery to produce effective policy and program development (MCFD, 2008b, p. 21). The Hughes Review (Representative for Children and Youth, 2007b) supports community-level service delivery and regional governance and states that decentralization is “a complex, multi-year project; the current model has been underway since the government’s core services review in 2001” (p. 25). According to MCFD, North Region’s (2007a) Strategic Plan: Vision 2010, under the guiding principle of Aboriginal self-determination, “our
work with Aboriginal peoples will be based upon their inherent right to care for their children, youth, families and communities” (p. 4).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A literature review compiles relevant academic knowledge in the area under study. This literature review examines past and present knowledge and presents this researched information throughout the four topic areas. All topics explore the knowledge of Aboriginal people and adoption, with a particular focus on the interplay between Aboriginal people and social workers and the concept of leadership within the social work profession. The topic areas evolved from extensive research and have changed from my original vision. The first topic is lengthy and includes a review of the child welfare system, the effect of colonization, a chronological discussion of historical components of Aboriginal adoptions, Aboriginal transracial adoptions, and court-related decisions that seek the best interest of the child. The second topic reviews the aspect of cultural considerations relevant to Aboriginal culture and social work, including cultural identity and competency. The third topic reviews leadership, the social work profession, and the education system. Finally, the fourth topic focuses on recruitment research for adoptions outside the Western framework.

Child Welfare, Adoption, and Aboriginal People

The child welfare system is governmental and aims to protect children from abuse or harm, and therefore directly affects the fate of children. Child welfare organizations are complex bureaucratic agencies that challenge both leadership and effective service delivery (Popa, 2005). The complexities involved in child welfare decisions cannot be underestimated. Determining “under what circumstances children should or should not be removed from their culture of birth is an extraordinarily difficult question” (Snow & Covell, 2006, p. 115). When Western child welfare values are imposed on Aboriginal
people, they often result in views of Aboriginal people and their culture in a negative light (Adams, 2002; Bennett, 2004; IPHRC, 2004; Timpson, 1995). Has the situational complexity of Aboriginal people been an excuse for neglecting key issues in child welfare change (Snow & Covell, 2006, p. 116)?

Critique of the Child Welfare System

The child welfare system, like other large systems, seeks a stable state (Senge, 2006) and typically rejects views outside its own. When the system becomes unbalanced (e.g., the advocacy of Aboriginal people with regard to adoption decisions for Aboriginal children), it can be susceptible to change (Ward, 1995). How the child welfare system has worked with Aboriginal people has received much attention.

The child welfare system is described in several ways: as a system that has created or exacerbated problems for Aboriginal people (Freundlich, 2000, p. 59); as “an excellent example of where Canada continues to fail Aboriginal people” through cultural genocide that perpetuates the “new Western colonization disease” (Crichlow, 2003, pp. 89, 92); as historically being “racist and insensitive” (Kline, 1992; Sinclair, Bala, Lilles, & Blackstock, 2004, p. 199; Timpson, 1995); as a mirror of societal norms that can be seen in adoption changes over the years (Triseliotis, 1998b, p. 11); and as having a devastating and tragic impact on Aboriginal people, hindering them from extending their culture through generations, and threatening the survival of First Nations people (Kline, 1992, p. 377).

Although Aboriginal people have extensively lobbied the child welfare system for change, they have simultaneously denied social workers’ quick solutions. Some social workers, in wanting to find adoptive homes for waiting Aboriginal children, have labeled
Aboriginal people as uninterested and uncooperative (Daly & Sobol, 1993). As a result of this tension, many social workers have ignored the reasons behind the resistance. One view is that it is not only culturally sanctioned (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005), but also embedded in Aboriginal values. Could this reaction of Aboriginal people result from the persistent dominance of the child welfare system that has subjected them to colonialism by imposing Western culture as the exclusively valid culture (Timpson, 1995, p. 4)?

Neglect, consequential to poor socioeconomic conditions, vigilant social workers with cultural biases, and the colonial operations within the child welfare system itself have resulted in children being placed outside of their cultural homes (Kline, 1992, p. 379). In her thesis, completed in the northwest, Lewis (2006) concluded that social workers’ values are the driving force in child welfare decisions. Adoption and the lack of professional social work leadership have not escaped inspection. “Each era saw a new reason to take Aboriginal children away from home, placing them in residential schools, foster care or non-Aboriginal adoptive families” (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 17).

*Aboriginal Traditional Adoption*

Examining the historical context reveals the stand that many Aboriginal people have taken against non-Aboriginal adoptions with more lucidity. The question that begs to be asked is, what has resulted in so many Aboriginal children being placed in culturally alien settings? (Hill, 1998, p. 34). Traditionally, Aboriginal people recruited Aboriginal adoptive parents for their children when needed. Adoption decisions carried the belief that sharing children promotes community caring, strength, and bonding (Crichlow, 2003; Keewatin, 2004, p. 26). The practice of sharing children with those who wanted them and could best care for them was an acceptable practice (Keewatin, 2004). Although these
children became members of that family, birth parents were acknowledged and often included, which was in direct contrast to Western secrecy in such family arrangements (Giesbrecht, 2004, p. 156). The First Nations languages had no word for adoption (Bennett, Blackstock, & DeLaRonde, 2005, p. 24; L. Wells, personal communication, August 31, 2007). The values of Aboriginal adoption are evident in the thesis of an Aboriginal adoptive parent, Keewatin (2004), with regard to his adoption experience:

Adoption is not about possession. We . . . have only borrowed her from the Creator. She chose us and we are responsible for giving her love and kindness and teaching her. If we are true in our hearts and our minds then she will choose to have a strong bond with us. We don’t earn that bond just because we call ourselves her parents. . . . Adopted children hold a special place within Native society. Adoption is part of the balance that is strived for and maintained within Native communities. (pp. 74-87)

*Western Values in Adoption*

The Western history of adoption holds an oppositional view to the Aboriginal experience. Greeks and Romans commonly adopted a male child when hierarchal couples required a family to inherit status (Kirk & McDaniel, 1982). In the Western world, adoption documentation traced back to 1739 specifically addresses the concern of children born outside of marriage. From researched sources, there is no formal adoption record prior to 1802 (Triseliotis, 1998a, p. 57). The United States (US) legally created adoption in 1851 through a Massachusetts statute (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 39), and Canada’s first adoption legislation was enacted in New Brunswick in 1873 (Giesbrecht, 2004). In contrast to the Aboriginal practice, Western adoption involved a “complete and irrevocable transfer of legal parentage” (Lowe et al., 2002, p. 5) that terminated the legal birth parent’s and family’s relationships with the child (Giesbrecht, 2004, p. 155).
Colonization began with the deliberate campaigns of the French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese military and explorers (Churchill, 1994). Aboriginal people welcomed explorers and adventurers as visitors: "The Indians shared the bounties of the land and the rivers, for they believed nature provided enough for all in the good times, and they were ready to help each other in times of want" (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1980, p. 4). However, values of acquisition, explorer's greed, and benign neglect of Aboriginal deaths have imprinted Western history (Crichlow, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 2006). European-Canadian ideals have undermined Aboriginal culture and assimilated Aboriginal children into European-Canadian culture (Snow & Covell, 2006).

**History of Adoption with Aboriginal People**

Halverson, Puig, and Byers (2002) reported that, historically, the Aboriginal child-family-community bond within the Aboriginal culture was viewed as the "Indian problem" (p. 324; Brubacher, 2006; Graveline, 1998; Olsen, 2005). Residential schools were established to destabilize community strength, and children were forced to abandon their heritage and culture (Crichlow, 2003; Snow & Covell, 2006). In 1847 government and church, deeply concerned with what they believed to be the uncivilized Aboriginal people who "were inferior and unable to adequately care for their children" (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 21), began to establish residential schools in Canada for children from 5 to 16 years of age.

Eighty Canadian residential schools emerged, and the financial burden drove the government to seek assistance from religious bodies to care for Aboriginal children (Keewatin, 2004). Not only were residential schools known for physical, sexual, and
emotional abuse and using children for labor, but the schools also neglected and deprived the children's essential attachment needs (Neckoway, Brownlee, & Castellan, 2007, p. 71; Olsen, 2001). These 'students' were raised outside of the "loving, caring, sharing, and nurturing atmosphere of their families; as a result they did not have these skills to pass on to their children" (Keewatin, 2004, p. 2; Söchting, Corrado, Cohen, Ley, & Brasfield, 2007).

Nowhere in Canada was the instrument of the residential school used more brutally and thoroughly than in British Columbia, . . . where the schools endured longer than anywhere else . . . Clerics mounted a concerted assault on the spiritual and cultural practices of the First Nations by taking away their most vulnerable and precious resource, their children. (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 50)

In the 1940s and 1950s adoptions began to shift slowly. The church administered private adoptions in exchange for pay—a government initiative whose goal was suspected to be reduced expenses (Rushton, 2003). In 1955 Caucasian couples were finding a slight decline in the number of Caucasian babies available (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 7).

From the 1950s to the 1970s, collaborative government agreements between the US and Canada took place during the period known as the "Indian Adoption Era," and 25 per cent to 35 per cent of Canadian Aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in non-Aboriginal homes (Halverson et al., 2002, p. 323). In Canada many private, religious-focused adoption agencies performed minimal screening of adopting parents and accepted a service fee from US adoption agencies that ranged from $5,000 to $10,000 per Canadian child; however, there was no record of this money reaching the families who relinquished their child (Bennett et al., 2005). Allegedly, some social workers threatened to withhold welfare funds from Aboriginal parents if they refused adoption consents, missionaries encouraged Aboriginal parents to accept adoption as a
means of rescuing their children from life on reserve, and others were given financial benefits for adoption (Freundlich, 2000, p. 61).

In 1961, amidst the polemic exposure of residential schools, the ‘60’s scoop’ began (Snow & Covell, 2006, p. 101). At this time one Aboriginal child in six became a “ward or child of the state” (Richards, 2006, p. 17). The 60’s scoop is a term used to describe the provincial social worker practice of removed, or scooped, children off reserves because of mostly poverty-related issues to “save” them (Timpson, 1995, p. 4). Patrick Johnson began to use the term in 1983 with the recognition of the “mass redirection” (Richardson & Nelson, 2007, p. 76) of Aboriginal children into European-Canadian residences and communities as well as into adoptive homes abroad. In her doctoral dissertation Carriere (2005) stated that “history can be described as colonial child welfare and adoption practices and policies for First Nation children during and after the ‘sixties scoop.’ Adoption policies have had an impact on the traditional First Nation family structure and relationships therein” (p. 9).

From 1960 to 1970 the number of Aboriginal children adopted is nearly the loss of a generation (Nuttgens, 2004, p. 10). Although the exact number of Aboriginal children adopted is unknown, the recorded number in Canada was reported as 30 Aboriginal CICs in 1961, which jumped to 150 in 1964; and, finally, 1,128 were adopted into White homes in 1967, many of them in the US (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 29; Snow & Covell, 2006, p. 101). Statistically, only 1 per cent of all CICs were Aboriginal in 1959, but by the end of the 1960s, 30 per cent to 40 per cent of all legal wards were Aboriginal children, even though they formed less than 4 per cent of the national population (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 83).
In the 1960s social workers and their adoption practices were affected by the pressures of widespread Aboriginal adoptions. Documentation revealed that at this time nine social workers held a caseload of 179,000 reservation residents (Crichlow, 2003, p. 93). For example, in the 1960s two Canadian adoption social workers reportedly arranged for over 200 adoptions of Aboriginal children to the US, and this “effectiveness” was hoped to increase (Ward, 1995).

Once the provinces were in charge and payment was guaranteed for each Aboriginal child apprehended, the number of First Nation children made legal wards of the state quickly ballooned (Crichlow, 2003, p. 91). Contact between social workers and Aboriginal people intensified in 1966 with the landmark Canada Assistance? Plan (p. 91), which allowed government service agents to enter reservations:

For the first time in Canada, provincial social workers were exercising the jurisdiction given to them by the federal government to go into Indian homes on and off reserve and make judgments about what constituted proper care, according to non-native, middle-class values. (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 30)

Whereas Caucasian families could potentially receive the support services of homemakers, preventive family counseling, funded child care, or respite, they were rarely granted to Aboriginal families living on social assistance. The child welfare solution to meet the needs of Aboriginal families was to rely heavily on adopting Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal families (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004, p. 579).

As the number of children available for adoption decreased, the concern of Caucasian couples who were seeking adoption intensified (Freundlich, 2000). From the 1960s to the 1970s, 19 per cent of Caucasian infants were available to childless Caucasian couples, which fell to 1.75 per cent in the early 1990s (p. 22). With changes in
abortion, societal attitudes, and support services for single mothers, as well as delayed pregnancy for career advancement and higher numbers of married middle-class women who were unable to conceive, the pressures for Aboriginal adoptions increased (Giesbrecht, 2004, p. 156; Kirk, 1964). Aboriginal children were commonly placed with Caucasian families without wrestling with a process that would secure Aboriginal adoptive homes for Aboriginal children.

Then, in the 1970s, another adoption shift began (Triseliotis, 1998a). In the early 1970s "space opened up for questioning the efficacy of adoption practices within the child protection discourse" (Turnell, Elliott, & Hogg, 2007, p. 108). First Nations communities across Canada had demanded a moratorium on the adoption of Aboriginal children out of province and country, but responsive action from the provinces was slow to materialize (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 21). In the early 1970s the child welfare system in Canada was, at times, utilizing aggressive recruitment programs (Ward, 1984) for Caucasian couples to adopt large numbers of Aboriginal children. From 1976 to 1977, 1.4 per cent of Canadian children were in care, and 3.5 per cent of these children were status Indians (Timpson, 1995, p. 3). The outcome meant that adoptions of Aboriginal children into Caucasian families was rare from 1972 until new legislation was passed in the 1990s (Baden, 2002, p. 168).

The contribution of academics was silence. Limited research demonstrates the lack of child welfare focus on the complexities and diversity of Aboriginal issues (Halverson et al., 2002, p. 333). The Social Worker Journal published only two articles on Aboriginal matters in the 1970s (Timpson, 1995, p. 2), and Simon and Altstein (2002) noted the scarce professional literature since the early 1970s (p. 31).
Also in the 1970s, the attitudes of Canadian people to their actions with Aboriginal people changed, and, in essence, Caucasian people sought forgiveness (Turnell et al., 2007). Suffused with agonizing stories of the Aboriginal adoption experience, the public began to experience a phenomenon known as White guilt (Richards, 2006). Canadians' witnessing of the lack of honesty of Caucasian adoptive parents towards maintaining the child’s Aboriginal culture in a positive manner successfully challenged Western adoption ideologies (Hill, 1998, p. 30). The shift meant that the needs of waiting adoptive parents were invariably placed second to the needs of adoptive children (Bagley, 1993a).

Residential schools were abolished in 1982 (Crichlow, 2003).

Mostly as a result of the change in Canadian social factors, many of the children adopted during the 60's Scoop were now demonstrating the repercussions of identity issues related to the lack of birth-parent contact and a cultural deficit (Bennett et al., 2005). As Canada watched the “graduates” of residential schools in the 1980s, academics were moved to assess child maltreatment in Native communities (Timpson, 1995). In 1980 one study stated that status Indian children were placed in care at 4.5 times the rate of other children (Crichlow, 2003, p. 91). In 1981 statistics revealed that as many as 55 per cent of the Aboriginal CICs in Manitoba were moved out of the province for adoption. Furthermore, none of the adoption agencies that placed these children monitored the placements or kept records that allowed adoptees to retrace their families. Manitoba lost the most children of all provinces to out-of-province and out-of-country adoptions in the US and elsewhere (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 21). In 1980, 4.6 per cent of status Indian children were in care (Timpson, 1995).
There was also conflicting information on how Aboriginal children adjusted in non-Aboriginal homes. In 1988 the North American Council of Adoptable Children (NACAC) received data that showed that the average rate of adoption breakdowns was about 15 per cent and that race was not a factor in these disruptions (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 26).

Between 1960 and 1990, approximately 11,132 known status Indian children were adopted into non-Aboriginal homes (Crichlow, 2003; Kline, 1992; Trocmé et al., 2004, p. 579). In 1990 the number of Aboriginal children who were being adopted represented 19.7 per cent of all domestic adoptions (Daly & Sobol, 1993, p. 38). Fogg-Davis (2002) explained that “the necessary corrective for centuries of racism is not colorblindness but a strong commitment to nondiscrimination as a moral principle that extends beyond equal-protection law into the realm of private racial choices” (p. 9).

With Aboriginal children facing decades of distress, social work researchers were needed to provide both leadership and professional insight. Within the last few years, however, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (as cited in Bennett, 2004) has met that need by publishing an average of 700 pages of new research material annually on Aboriginal child welfare. Today a disproportionate number of Aboriginal children remain in the custody of child welfare as a direct result of colonized conditions (Crichlow, 2003, p. 91; Representative for Children and Youth, 2007b).

**Aboriginal Transracial Adoption**

Transracial adoption is typically a term used in reference to the adoption of Black children into non-Black homes (Bunting, 2004, p. 142). Historically, the first biblically recorded adoptee to struggle over his identity and leave his affluent adoptive parents from
the dominant culture was Moses (Bagley, 1993a; Carriere, 2005). Later, Moses was an advocate for the people within his birth family, which illustrates how extensively the issue of race and adoption has endured.

In this thesis I define *Aboriginal transracial adoption* as the adoption of an Aboriginal child into a non-Aboriginal home, which can be seen as parents who are waiting for a child meeting a practical need by adopting children who need a home (Hemstad-Leete, 2007). Aboriginal transracial adoption has also been classified as special-needs adoption, which affects the adoption’s success (Goodhue, 2004). Once children are in care, race and ethnicity predict placement outcomes according to almost all studies (Potter & Klein-Rothschild, 2002, p. 125). Locating an Aboriginal adoptive home for an Aboriginal youth can be viewed as less imperative by social workers because the children are considered to be in a safe foster placement (Ferguson, 2004, p. 18; Wright & Flynn, 2005). General studies have shown that transracially adopted children identify more with the adoptive family’s Caucasian race than with their own; however, the more contact that a child has with his or her culture and race, the better the adjustment to adoption will be in the long term (Frasch & Brooks, 2003, p. 208). Carriere (2005) charged that Aboriginal transracial adoption is a contradiction: It “is not about race, color or national origin; it is about the preservation of First Nation self-determination within a continuing colonial context” (p. 24; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007).

Cuthbert (2001), who wrote about a case example that reveals how aboriginality can impact non-aboriginality, described the anguish of a Caucasian mother whose pseudonym was Faye. With her Caucasian husband, Faye adopted Michael, their only child, in 1972. The adoption took place at the hospital. Social workers did not tell the
couple about Michael's Aboriginal roots because they believed that the Caucasian couple would provide "greater opportunities than his single Aboriginal mother was thought capable of providing" (p. 152). Three days after delivery, the birth mother awoke from heavy sedation and was informed that her son, whom she had not yet seen, had died.

The lifestyle of Faye and her family is isolated from Aboriginal culture; in fact, although they may have connected to a nearby Aboriginal community, they stayed distant. After Michael began to seek his birth family, Faye was informed that Michael is Aboriginal. With the realization that he is part of a cultural group whom Faye did not accept and that his birth family could offer more financial advantages than she and her husband could, Faye went into a deep depression and required extensive therapy. His birth parents and siblings, "far from fringe-dwelling... are socially mobile, middle class professionals" (Cuthbert, 2001, p. 152). This discovery contrasted with the reality of Faye's low-income family, who had exchanged Michael's educational opportunities for his financial contributions to the family.

The courts vary in their approach to maintaining the Aboriginal culture of a child. In Winnipeg (Child and Family Services) v. M.S.N., adoption was being considered for a three-and-a-half-year-old Aboriginal child. The agency searched for the biological family and found the paternal grandparents, who clearly stated that they were practicing Christians and only occasionally attended Aboriginal cultural events. The judge remarked that even though the grandparents had "assimilated many aspects of 'white' urban culture" (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 209) and did not practice their Aboriginal heritage, they agreed to teach the child her heritage and were awarded the child in this situation the Aboriginal cultural needs were considered secondary to familial connections.
Fairness heuristic theory (van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997) states that a major determinant of fairness is whether or not a person or group perceives a situation as fair. Two factors affect fairness determination: the degree to which those in authority are perceived to have acted with fairness and whether the elements that comprise fair treatment in the eyes of these same people have been met (p. 1035). The questions that Houston (2006) raised are, who ultimately decides what is fair, and what values are used in the decision-making process?

Some view children separately from their race or cultural connections because we live in a pluralistic society, and, as a result, many cultures and races and not exclusively Aboriginal people are involved; however, “not distinguishing First Nation people from other racialized groups in Canada is extremely problematic in that it fails to contextualize the experiences of First Nations” (Crichlow, 2003, p. 98). One question has arisen as the Aboriginal community works through extensive difficulties: Is transracial Aboriginal adoption a means of “rescuing children from the harsh effects of colonialism without tackling the basic social and economic conditions” (Hill, 1998, p. 34)?

In a study entitled “Far From the Reservation,” Fanshel (1972; as cited in Nuttgen, 2004) examined 98 adopting Caucasian families and found that Aboriginal children’s adjustment to adoption up to age five was successful. This study was heralded as evidence that Aboriginal children can be adopted with minimal repercussions into non-Aboriginal homes. Later, it was determined that the children studied were too young to comprehend the meaning of transracial adoption and had not reached a developmental level at which adoption had begun to impact their lives. Unfortunately, Fanshel received his adoption information from parents and did not meet with the children themselves.
Another consideration in transracial adoption is the racial preference of most non-Aboriginal couples, who do not seek an Aboriginal child as their first choice. Kirk (1964) reported that three quarters of the 1,500 surveyed participants stated that matching by race was "very important" (p. 60) and that approximately half of the men and women wanted to adopt a child of the same racial background. Years later, a study by Freundlich (2000) confirmed these findings in his study of Caucasian PAPs. The question that he asked the searching parents, who had begun to accept that their first-choice Caucasian adoptive child was not readily available, was how this racial choice later impacted their second-choice adopted child. Freundlich found that the attitude of the adopting parents in entering into the adoption—specifically, their attitude to the race of their adopted child—has a definite impact on adoption success. Freundlich asked; Does the "scarcity of white infants" (p. 23) give Caucasian PAPs the right to adopt a child of a different race?

In the early 1990s child welfare and adoption agencies were strongly committed to the idea of recruiting minority adoptive parents for minority children. As Simon and Altstein (2002) asserted, "In all likelihood, these agencies would abandon support for transracial adoptions were there a sufficient number of racially similar parents to accommodate waiting non-white children" (p. 33). This was confirmed in Kemp and Bondonyi's (2002) study and in Lowe et al.'s (2002) case example of the practice of a social worker who believed that placing a child interracially results in difficulties even if the Caucasian adopters are racially aware. Lowe et al. stated that cultural connection "was not sufficient to address the issues around racial and ethnic identity" (p. 51). Regrettably, with few available Aboriginal adoptive homes, many Aboriginal children in this worker's caseload remained in long-term, non-Aboriginal foster homes (p. 51).
At the same time, divergent research began to prompt Aboriginal transracial adoptions again to be seen as successful options to Aboriginal children’s family deprivation. Research has demonstrated “the reversibility of early psychological trauma which came through separations and deprivations” (Triscliotis, 1998b, p. 14). Triscliotis found that within a three- to five-year period following placement, approximately 8 out of 10 children with special needs began to stabilize in their behaviors, even at a high cost to family dynamics (p. 15). In confirming research reports, Silvermann and Feigelman (1990) suggested that

transracial adoption is a viable means of providing stable homes for waiting children. The process of transracial adoption seems to produce children whose self-esteem is at least as high as that of the non-adopted children and whose adjustment appears more than satisfactory. (p. 199)

The most salient of any research findings, however, resulted after Aboriginal children grew up, which revealed different findings on Aboriginal transracial adoptions. Many Aboriginal children raised in non-Aboriginal homes, cut off from their culture, experienced “a profound sense of loss; . . . parents and communities suffered immense loss” (Bunting, 2004, p. 144); and a majority of these Aboriginal youth became involved with the justice system. A piercing example of cultural loss is the well-known situation of a 17-year-old Alberta Métis, Richard Cardinal, who committed suicide in 1984 after being placed in 16 different foster homes in 13 years. Cultural insensitivity within the child welfare system, social workers’ inability to offer support services to Richard’s family prior to placement, and the negation of extended family were the explanations for the tragedy (Bagley, 2000).
Kreisher (2002) depicted an Aboriginal adoptee, Sandy White Hawk, who reported that her Caucasian adoptive mother had told her that she had been “saved” from a “savage and horrible place” (p. 10). After learning about the living conditions of her birth community, Sandy agreed that some children in her birth community might have died from sickness as a result of adverse conditions. Rather than adopting an attitude of compassion, her adoptive mother assumed a racist attitude and worried that Sandy would become “a-good-for-nothing Indian” (p. 10). Sandy began to drink at 14 years of age. Even though she has identified positive aspects of her adoptive home, she has struggled with the separation from her Aboriginal culture (p. 10).

Some Aboriginal transracial adoptive parents feel guilty about taking Aboriginal children away from their culture. Indeed, some Caucasian adopting parents have told me that they agonize over the response from the child’s Aboriginal community, whom they see as applying reverse racism. These Caucasian adopting parents feel that the Aboriginal community should embrace them as loving parents of Aboriginal children rather than focusing on their Caucasian heritage and thus denying them children.

In BC the Exceptions Committee in Victoria must approve the adoption of children in the permanent care of MCFD by non-Aboriginal families. This request involves seeking communication with the child’s Aboriginal family, extended family, and community and then searching for an Aboriginal family within the province prior to considering a non-Aboriginal adoptive parent. The request includes a plan to maintain a cultural connection with the Aboriginal band. However, the location of the adoptive family close to the Aboriginal community should not be assumed as automatically resulting in a cultural connection; non-Aboriginal families with adoptive children who
were placed away from the child’s Aboriginal community are the least likely to be
referred for support service in any area (Trocmé et al., 2004, p. 581). As Daly and Sobol
(1993) stated:

The fact that Native children remain in the country provides no guarantee that they
will not be estranged from Native culture. Whether Native children will be placed
in homes with at least one Native parent depends on the province . . . and the
Native group to which the child belongs. (pp. 40-41)

The child welfare system has a limited capacity to support Aboriginal transracial
adoptions. In de Haymes and Simon’s (2003) study, transracial adoptive parents revealed
the complications:

They did not feel adequately supported in their decision to adopt transracially by
the child welfare or adoption workers they had encountered. . . . A number
indicated that these social workers made it more difficult for them or gave them
only minimal assistance in their efforts to adopt. Others described a more subtle
form of resistance on the part of social workers. (p. 265)

The US dealt with transracial adoption requests by enacting legislation.
Specifically, by 1985 each American state had enacted a transracial statute (Simon &
Provisions, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) were all designed to decrease
the lengthy wait for adoption that children of color experience and to prevent placement
discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or culture (Frasch & Brooks, 2003, p. 201).
President Clinton took a definite stand to address the deficit within the child welfare
system with his action to implement the Adoption 2002 Initiative. Unlike in the US,
Aboriginal issues in Canadian provinces are decided under general child welfare laws.
This practice has been questioned, and the matter of the Aboriginal child’s best interest
has been specifically targeted as withholding a critical cultural component (Lazarus, 1997, p. 256; Richard, 2007).

*The Courts and the Child’s Best Interest*

European-Canadian adoption embedded itself in the Elizabethan legal system, which, from its early beginnings, viewed caring for children as a charitable function (Keewatin, 2004, p. 1). *Parens patriae* is a Latin phrase that means protector or father of the country, who provides for those who cannot provide for themselves (Daly & Sobol, 1993, p. 73). This same concept of protector was ideally the intent of social workers and judges in adoption decisions. An inherited tradition of judicial precedent evolved from common law and enabled the highest courts to enact laws to determine the best interest of the child (p. 73). Historically, most Caucasian adoptions were negotiated between attorneys for potential adoptive parents and orphanages or private physicians who had patients with children that they felt unable to keep (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 1). The best interest of the child distinguished itself from a common law that treated children as property belonging to their parents, and especially their fathers (Daly & Sobol, 1993, p. 71).

Court judges who were ill equipped to craft adoption decisions befitting of family situations leaned on social workers’ recommendations (Lazarus, 1997; Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 39) and the child welfare process (Kline, 1992). Because the first issue for the Supreme Court of Canada is to interpret and define adoption law, it viewed the best interest of the child in the context of jurisprudence (Giesbrecht, 2004, p. 158). Canada’s adoption practices with regard to Aboriginal people include the biggest challenge of
judicial standards of best interest, and these standards often conflict with the Aboriginal view of a child as a tribal and extended family member (Carriere, 2005, p. 22).

In the 1950s the best interest of the child hinged on matching the child with prospective parents according to religious similarities (Gerstenzang & Freundlich, 2006, p. 8). Lazarus (1997) called this process “Anglo cultural conception of a child’s best interest” (p. 264). In the US at the same time, children who were not Caucasian were placed in one category. This practice led to the consideration of Aboriginal children as similar to Oriental children, and Aboriginal children matched with Caucasian parents became more common than African American children matched with Caucasian parents (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 2). In the late 1950s the purpose of adoption matching was to provide children with an opportunity for religious or spiritual and ethical development (Simon & Altstein, 2002).

In Canada legal decisions determined that the child’s “genetic connections” such as culture were “irrelevant and dispensable” (Carriere, 2005, p. 19) in adoption decisions. Many courts use the term best-interest test, which allows them broad discretion in deciding the welfare of children. Researchers have found that the “definition of best interest . . . was not consistent with the Aboriginal belief that the best interests of the child are those of the child’s community” (Snow & Covell, 2006, p. 114). Does the interpretation of best interest as serving as “a tool for regulation” (Crichlow, 2003, pp. 96-99) negate the importance of Aboriginal culture and identity?

Kline (1992) considered that “best interest ideology is infused with the basic tenets of liberal legality—individualism, abstraction, universalism, and impartiality”
(p. 382) and is reflected in judicial reasoning. As Kline reported, the best interest of the child

directed judges to focus on the child as an individual abstracted out of her community and cultural contexts, and it has rendered judicial decisions impartial and objective and, thereby, unassailable. . . . The best interest standard has served to constrain judicial decision making so as to minimize, and even negate in some instances, the relevance and importance of maintaining a child’s First Nation identity and culture. (pp. 391-393)

Kline described the best interest of the child as individualistic and abstract, and it claims to be impartial and universal in that all individuals are treated the same without regard to their different social conditions (pp. 389-390). The best interest ideology, from Kline’s perspective, has the potential to transcend its regulatory Western culture framework and develop “something real” for Aboriginal children.

In the 1960s the Canadian Western best interest ideology, which led to the placement of Aboriginal children in culturally different homes, shifted, and judges were instructed to “pay particular attention to the cultural and psychological needs of Aboriginal children, the integrity of families, and the survival of communities” (Bunting, 2004, p. 143).

Not only is the best interest a quandary which needs to be defined within the court, but the application is problematic. Applying the best interest concept to Aboriginal children often involves jostling between provincial and federal governments; and the “application of culturally biased values in evaluating the ability of First Nation families to take care of their children” needs to be reasserted consistently on a national level. (Lazarus, 1997, p. 266)

Is it in the best interest of every child to be adopted? The empirical reality that underpins the goal of ensuring that children have a permanent home is found in research that has shown that children who have no birth family to which to return, but who have
secured relative permanence with foster or adoptive homes, have "fared infinitely better in adult life, compared to those who left the care system with no such base" (Triseliotis, 1998b, p. 13). Some have advocated moving away from adoption as the primary position: "If we are serious about children's best interests, then concepts of permanence have to start with permanency in the family of origin" (p. 18). Although it is agreed that placing an Aboriginal child with extended family or the community is preferred, the degree of weight placed on the child's Aboriginal heritage has yet to be determined (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 233).

In some cases the attachment to a non-Aboriginal caregiver is considered more important than the cultural connection, as in the 1983 case of Racine v. Woods. Crichlow (2003) reported Madame Justice Wilson's statements regarding the child's best interest: "The closer the bond that develops with the prospective adoptive parents, the less important the racial element becomes" (p. 98). Madame Justice chose attachment to a caregiver above racial connection.

Best interest is often void of family and cultural context, which "de-contextualiz[es] children" (Crichlow, 2003, p. 97) by rejecting the cultural bonding that extended Aboriginal families offer and accepting the psychological bonding that non-Aboriginal nuclear family caregivers who have easy access to health and education offer. "When exploring collective or community identity, the best interests of the [Aboriginal] child are layered with, and connected to, the best interests of the [Aboriginal] community" (Bunting, 2004, p. 144). When Aboriginal children are separated from their families, communities, and culture, consideration of their best interests changes to "racial oppression" (Lazarus, 1997, p. 287).
An example of a judicial ruling is found in the 1994 case of Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto v. M. (C.). An Aboriginal child was removed from the Aboriginal birth mother’s care when her infant was one month of age. The birth mother fought for the return of her child for seven years. As the years passed, the non-Aboriginal foster parents developed an attachment to the Aboriginal child. Rather than returning the child to the birth mother, the judge stated that the child would become a permanent ward of the state, which enabled the foster parents to continue their adoption plans based on their attachment to the child (Giesbrecht, 2004, p. 159).

In the case of D.H. v. H. M. in 1999, an Aboriginal birth mother who had been adopted herself, was unable to care for her son and turned him over to the non-Aboriginal adoptive grandparents. When the child was eight months old, the birth mother took her son to BC, and MCFD removed him. While in BC, the child lived with his Aboriginal grandfather for about eight months before the trial judge ruled in favor of the financially affluent adoptive grandparents. The BC Court of Appeal overturned the trial decision and granted custody to the biological grandparent, charging that too much emphasis had been placed on the economic advantages of the adoptive grandparents. The Supreme Court of Appeal quickly overturned the appeal decision once more. The boy, who at this time was four years old, had lived in an Aboriginal community with his Aboriginal grandfather for three years; however, the court awarded the child to the adoptive non-Aboriginal grandparents. In this situation neither the bonding that had taken place with the grandfather nor his Aboriginal heritage warranted the child’s remaining in his Aboriginal culture (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 237).
The best interest of the child is interpreted and balanced directly to reflect the "cultural context of the decision makers" (Snow & Covell, 2006, p.115). The courts are charged with deciding cases based on cultural misunderstandings, using broad discretion in an ad hoc fashion under the general child welfare law, and having child welfare workers, judges, and lawyers who lack knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal cultures making crucial decisions (Lazarus, 1997, pp. 262, 284).

Bunting (2004) argued that although race is a critical factor, when race is essentialized, judges may miss seeing children as individuals within complex and multiple identities, including, but not limited to, their cultural and racial identity. Ontario's law is the most explicit in connecting the best interest of the child with the importance of preserving the child's heritage and cultural identity. If an adoption order involves an Aboriginal child, decision makers must consider the importance of the "recognition of the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture, heritage, and preserving the child's cultural identity" (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 235).

Need for National Changes

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child raised a concern about the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child welfare (National Council on Welfare, 2007) and requested that Canada take action to reduce discrimination (Trocmé et al., 2004, p. 578). More children are placed in out-of-home care today than took place during the residential-school era, and this continues to rise (p. 579). In Canada in 2004, fewer than 5 per cent of all children were Aboriginal, and yet in some provinces Aboriginal children comprised 80 per cent of the total number of CICs (Trocmé et al.,
2004, p. 578). In BC, 50 per cent of all CICs are Aboriginal (National Council on Welfare, 2007).

In Native Families and the Law, the BC Royal Commission on Family and Children’s Law presented 41 recommendations (Lazarus, 1997). The BC Children’s Commissioners’ 1998 annual report reviewed the case plans of Aboriginal children and discovered that 2.5 per cent were placed in race-matched homes. “Canada lags so far behind that we still debate when it comes to ensuring the growth of Native-run adoption agencies, even though it’s long been known they find Indian adoptive families sooner than do mainstream agencies” (Webber, 1998, p. 176). “Such children may be small in number, but the time and effort required to work constructively with all parties in order to identify and sustain appropriate placements is remarkable” (Smith, 1998, p. 54).

Lack of social justice and the affecting oppression of poverty that are woven into Aboriginal transracial adoption decisions needs to be acknowledged (Bagley, Young, & Scully, 1993). Recommendations have been made on the systemic inequity in dealing with Aboriginal people, and the need for legislation changes has been raised, which leaves the question, What are the child’s best interests?

The unique place of Native people in our history and the magnitude of their problems resulting from cultural dislocation warrant special treatment. . . . In all this one can only hope that reasonable and common sense views will prevail. The trend is not for community interest to completely supplant everything else but rather for community interest to be heavily weighted in a best interest test. (Daly & Sobol, 1993, p. 97)

Cultural Considerations

I will examine the second topic, cultural considerations, within the context of Western and Aboriginal culture and the interplay with child welfare and adoptions. This
topic is divided into three sections: The initial section reviews the value of culture, the second section discusses cultural identity and the impact of identity losses, and the third section considers the theme of cultural competence.

Culture consists of the ideals, beliefs, tools, skills, customs, languages, and institutions into which the individual was born (Baden & Steward, 2000, p. 324). It is knowledge passed on from generation to generation through rituals, patterns of behavior, and cultural norms that explain the world (Loppie, 2007, p. 278). Culture is a complex experience surrounded by historical events (Bunting, 2004, p. 139). The extent of cultural similarities and differences within a culture is constantly fluctuating depending on social contexts, and is of subsequent consideration (Freundlich, 2000). Culture is maintained, represented, and transmitted in the context of community; as Steinberg and Hall (2000) described it, it is “only in the sum of each individual’s practice and experience that the group culture and identity emerges” (p. 368).

In her research with Aboriginal Elders, Loppie (2007) discovered “a uniquely human construction [that] endows the world of cultural participants with symbolic meaning” (p. 278). Houston (2006), an Aboriginal researcher, explained that culture makes it possible to improve the life and spirit of his Aboriginal people (p. 206). “Aboriginal people have always framed our future in terms of difference—Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal values, Aboriginal spirit, Aboriginal community control, and Aboriginal self-determination” (p. 209).

The immense diversity of Aboriginal traditions and cultures in North America cannot be understated, and the composition of numerous and unique Aboriginal cultures is frequently overlooked (Crichlow, 2003, p. 97). Aboriginal people and their
communities are not homogeneous (Daly & Sobol, 1993). Canada’s 600 Aboriginal communities include 52 different languages (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 218). Over 500 distinct American Indian Nations lived in the US in 1990 (Steinberg & Hall, 2000, p. 350). According to Baden and Steward (2000), “The salience of ethnic identity differs among ethnic groups and individuals” (p. 319). Throughout generations of interaction with mainstream culture, “Aboriginal cultures have undergone significant changes; [however,] Aboriginal people continue to have distinct cultures that are fundamental to their identities” (Sinclair, Bala, Lilles & Blackstock, 2004, p. 208).

Traditionally, Aboriginal children were raised within a culturally organic context that emphasized the participation of the entire community in day-to-day childrearing responsibilities; reinforced the concept that children are sacred and highly valued by birth parents and tribal members; maximized socialization, nurturance, and teaching; and fostered an understanding of the meaning of related, which is “imbedded within a complex and dynamic set of relations” (Halverson et al., 2002, p. 322; Crichlow, 2003; Slaughter, 2000; Snow & Covell, 2006). Children are still seen as a means of transmitting and maintaining culture, however, assimilation greatly increased the vulnerability of Aboriginal children and resulted in the loss of their personal and community history (Crichlow, 2003, p. 88).

Taylor (2005), who writes and produces plays that celebrate Aboriginal culture in humorous ways, has contended that “pigment-challenged audiences didn’t quite know how to react to a Native comedy” (p. 22). He has encouraged Caucasian people to view Aboriginal people as those who have a “sense of humour and joy for life” (p. 25) and to
begin healing by relaxing with the differences of a culture other than their own (pp. 22, 25).

Another Aboriginal author, Churchill (1994), after witnessing non-Aboriginal people’s manipulation and commercialization of Aboriginal culture, encouraged those who genuinely care about Aboriginal culture to protect what is sacred:

Therefore, we urge all supporters of American Indian people to join us in calling for an immediate end to the cynical, sacrilegious spectacle of non-Indian ‘wannabes,’ would-be gurus of the ‘New Age,’ and ‘plastic medicine men’ shamelessly exploiting and mocking our sacred traditions by performing bastardized imitations of our ceremonies. . . . We must raise a united voice of protest against those who would steal our spiritual traditions: YOU CANNOT HAVE THEM. NOT TODAY. NOT TOMORROW. NEVER. (p. 281)

Small (1998) viewed the importance of cultural assimilation for societal peace as necessary for a harmonious, multiracial society. Each culture should work on achieving a balance, with a goal of plurality maintenance above all else. Because we all share a human identity, “racial and ethnic identity is incidental and marginal” (p. 192). This vantage point allows only certain unique cultural features to be expressed, but never at the expense of another culture. Those who support Aboriginal children’s adoption into non-Aboriginal homes argue that their right to live within their cultural environment diminishes other rights such as having a permanent home (Snow & Covell, 2006, p. 115).

Western and Aboriginal cultures have distinct approaches to dealing with children. The mainstream social and legal culture focuses on more scientific and evidence-based knowledge. Western culture considers realities or truth as arising primarily from scientific or observable evidence (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001, p. 113). Family structure is based on exclusive parent-child relationships, individual rights, the rights of the nuclear family, and individualism (Freundlich, 2000, p. 65).
Aboriginal culture focuses on truth as derived from constructs of nature, oral stories, and relationships. Family encompasses extended family and other tribal adults, and community is foundational. Aboriginal culture not only relegates significant responsibilities to children, such as being groomed for leadership roles within their community, but also grants greater liberalism to children (p. 59).

A critical evaluation of how Western social workers silence the cultural voice of Aboriginal people is needed in Western thinking (Gray et al., 2007). Although there have been incidents in which Western social work has had a positive impact, the overall culturally sensitive intervention with Aboriginal people has been minimal (Katz, 2005; Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005, p. 107). “At both conscious and unconscious levels, modern nation-states have blithely endorsed the cultural practices of dominant groups, with little attention to how these practices have undermined the cohesion and stability of competing cultural groups” (Hearst, 2002, p. 495). Social workers educated solely within Western views were either unfamiliar with or “hostile to an unfamiliar Indian culture. . . . [They] did not take into account cultural differences” (Freundlich, 2000, p. 59).

The lack of cultural understanding is evident not only in how social workers relate to Aboriginal people and their culture, but also in how they assist adoptive parents in Aboriginal transracial adoptions. They often neglect to support Caucasian parents who adopt Aboriginal children. Ideally, an adoptive parent is connected to the culture of the Aboriginal child prior to adoption. As de Haymes and Simon (2003) stated, transracial Aboriginal adopting parents require pre- and post adoptive cultural resources to continually facilitate cultural competence (p. 271). Bagley et al. (1993) commented that, although adoption is often in the child’s best interest, the adoption process, including
selecting adoptive parents who demonstrate cultural sensitivity, should be essential prior to considering an Aboriginal child for adoption (p. 75). In England, placing Black children in Caucasian homes slowed considerably for three reasons: (a) Social workers used more culturally sensitive, appropriate models; (b) minority families were supported in stressful situations to slow the removal of children from their families; and (c) social agencies became determined and focused on finding Black homes for Black children (Bagley, 1993b, p. 286).

Acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal culture is now ‘politically correct’, and yet unrest remains when Western professionals plan adoptions into non-Aboriginal homes. Some social workers who acknowledge that historical factors affect current adoptions and feel the burdens of this grief are unsure of how to work sensitively within the Aboriginal culture (Gray et al., 2007).

What are the implications of treating Aboriginal cultural rights in the same manner as civil and political rights (Dennis & Stewart, 2004)? For many reasons, cultural rights are “defined primarily as aspirational goals to be achieved progressively” (p. 465). “Legal decision-makers need to interrogate their own cultural attitudes and identities as well as those of the children whose lives they have the power to affect” (Bunting, 2004, p. 148). In the 1999 case of Isaac v. Lavoie (Crichlow, 2003), the Honorable Justice Barakett made several racist remarks: that, except where there is contact with the outside world, life on reserve is not part of the real world; that hereditary rituals are childlike myths; and that the plaintiff, Mrs. Isaac, indoctrinated and brainwashed her children with Aboriginal traditional teachings. It is noteworthy that the family court judge did not instruct Mrs. Isaac regarding her right to legal counsel (p. 96).
In the *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples*, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1996) extensively investigated the impact of national Western practices on Aboriginal people; it is comprised of 5,000 pages and six volumes. Perhaps the most poignant plea is the need to address cultural considerations by building relationships between Canadian citizens and Aboriginal people. Frideres and Gadacz (2004) explained that

Canada systematically denied Indians their nation status, violated most agreements made with Indians, and suppressed their culture and institutions. In short, the report claims that Canadians built a great liberal democracy, in part through the dispossession of Aboriginal people. As a result, Aboriginals exist in conditions of poverty and social upheaval. A key approach is not to allocate more money but to address the fractured historical relationship between Aboriginals and Canada. (p. 379).

*Cultural Identity*

Some believe that Aboriginal identity lies at the heart of the Aboriginal existence. Maintaining Aboriginal identity is “an essential and self-validating pursuit for Aboriginal peoples everywhere” (Crichlow, 2003, p. 103), and maintaining cultural identity is critical in providing a child with healthy self-esteem and self-efficacy (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005, p. 35). “The racial and cultural identity formation processes for [Aboriginal] children are different than for children raised in racially and culturally homogenous families” (Baden & Steward, 2000, p. 310). Steinberg and Hall (2000) described the feeling of being separated from those who comprise part of one’s Aboriginal identity as “a loss of major proportions” (p. 11). Denying a child’s cultural heritage and that of the Aboriginal community results in “highly destructive psychological effects on the child” (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 210).
Even with the best of intentions, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1980) cautioned that Aboriginal identity cannot be understood through Western means: “Aboriginal children growing up today face choices different from those which their parents faced at the same age. They will walk with more pride and more confidence. . . . They will regain their proud heritage” (p. 8). This lack of understanding has heightened as non-Aboriginal people have seen fewer Aboriginal people living on reserve and their struggle to speak traditional languages, which leads non-Aboriginal people to “erroneously believe that the traditions, values, and beliefs of Indian cultures have completely disappeared” (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 208).

Bagley et al. (1993) reported that children of ethnic minority need more attention to develop a healthy identity (p. 73). However, even when their cultural identity is viewed as a “determinative factor” (Bunting, 2004, p. 141), identity cannot be prescribed; it is a “very personal and, at the same time, a very collective matter” (p. 145) that depends on the child’s age, demographics, peer group, siblings, and exposure to cultural activities (pp. 141-145).

Although Aboriginal communities have maintained portions of their culture against all odds, many Aboriginal people are experiencing an identity crisis and are “only beginning to have a clear vision of their own ‘heritage’ culture, as distinguished from that of the ‘mainstream’ society” (Frideres & Gadacz, 2004, p. 17).

The confusion and identity crises that are often experienced by Aboriginal children and adolescents . . . is now highly documented. Aboriginal children in care of non-Aboriginal caregivers often grow up in a state of dislocation in terms of their culture, family and community, lacking a clear sense of their identity. (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 211)
Bagley et al. (1993) studied 93 adoptive families and found that whereas the Oriental and Black children adopted into Caucasian homes appeared successful, Aboriginal children adopted by Caucasian parents suffered problems. This finding was consistent with regard to Caucasian adopting parents who ignored the child’s Aboriginal identity and for those who tried to give their Aboriginal adopted child a positive sense of identity (p. 237). Bagley et al. also found that a fifth of Native adoptees had, by the age of 15, separated from their adoptive parents. . . . A follow-up of these adoptees two years later indicated that nearly half of the Native adoptees, and none of the inter-country adopted group had separated from parents because of behavioral or emotional problems, or parent-child conflict. . . . Overall, the Native adoptees had significantly poorer self-esteem, and were also more than three times as likely than any other group to have problems of serious suicidal ideas or acts of deliberate self-harm in the previous six months. (p. 225)

The exact reasons for identity crisis are unknown; however, there is some evidence that placing Aboriginal children in Aboriginal homes “tends to promote the development of a positive self-identity and emotional well-being” (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 212). Without the anchor of healthy, fulfilled Aboriginal members and communities, Aboriginal youth are “forced to operate within the proverbial safety net, their feelings [lead] to depression, substance abuse, delinquency and suicide” (Crichlow, 2003, p. 92).

*Cultural Competence*

Cultural competence involves learning history, sharing the characteristics of different groups, and using this knowledge to create bridges to increase understandings with individual clients and families (Dean, 2001, p. 625). “Only with a nuanced and open-minded assessment of the diversity of cultural experience” (Bunting, 2004, p. 148) can results be achieved to ensure that children have the best chance of secure, fully
realized lives. Dean proposed that because of the continually changing nature of culture, competence involves awareness in areas where one lacks competence (p. 624). Demonstrating competence that involves the client as expert and the clinician as the person seeking to understand life from the client’s perspective allows the practitioner to enter into a respectful, nonjudgmental process through the use of deeply integrated questioning and the exchange of beliefs to invoke trust (p. 628). Cultural competence requires understanding rather than knowing a set formula of actions:

If we are guided by principles of social justice and a belief in a common fate—that there by the grace of God go I—and if we see our lack of competence as the problem and not the client’s culture, then there is more of a chance of coming together from our separate centers. (p. 629)

The hope is that, by being culturally competent, “transracial adoptees, . . . psychologists, social workers, adoption workers, and others in the helping professions will be better prepared to address the adjustment, identity, and esteem problems that have been of such concern to opponents and proponents of transracial adoption alike” (Baden & Steward, 2000, p. 335).

The First Nation Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (as cited in Blackstock, 2006) reported that the First Nation child and family service agencies have been advocating for 30 years for improved services for First Nation children. In 2005 many researchers completed a report for the First Nation Child and Family Services National Advisory Committee, sponsored by the First Nation Child and Family Caring Society of Canada. Along with a lengthy list of recommendations, the report affirmed that best practice in child welfare demands “evidence of ingenuity and efficacy of culturally based services (p. 2).
To avoid severe disservice to Aboriginal people, social workers need to determine how their cultural competence can support Aboriginal families rather than undermining these families’ welfare through their lack of cultural skill (Bagley, 2000, p. 13). Unfortunately, social workers continue to assist in an exclusive, excessively narrow scope within the adoption process (Bagley, 2000). The result of adoption workers’ screening PAPs based on conventional White, middle-class values and seeking applicants with ample financial resources is that Aboriginal adoptive parents are frequently not approved for Aboriginal children (Bagley et al., 1993, p. 10).

Social workers employed ethnocentric models of practice, ignoring both the economic factors which oppress Native people, and the cultural patterns of Native families in finding alternative ways to care for children. In particular, social workers have ignored the strengths of the extended family in which care is shared between biological parents and aunts, grandparents and other relatives. (Bagley, 2000, p. 221)

Non-Aboriginal social worker professionals direly need to have a competent understanding of Aboriginal culture to be effective in recruiting Aboriginal adoptive parents. Social workers have the ability to lead in this area through better training and sensitivity to enable them to distinguish “the culture, heritage and values of Canada’s Aboriginal people, and to recognize their unique strengths and challenges” (Sinclair et al., 2004, p. 243).

Although the literature has focused on the cultural competence required within the social work profession, it “is rarely extended to include the cultural competence of foster and adoptive parents, who are part of the child welfare team” (de Haymes & Simon, 2003, p. 270). de Haymes and Simon asked Aboriginal transracial adoptive parents about “the importance they placed on transmitting their child’s cultural heritage, developing and
maintaining contact with their child’s racial and ethnic community, and fostering a strong racial identity” (p. 264). Below are quotations from two Caucasian adoptive parents of Aboriginal children on their views on promoting Aboriginal culture:

If at all possible, you should move into an integrated neighborhood and send the kids to an integrated school. You should have friends of the same race as your children. You should have house decorations that honor their heritage and celebrate their ethnic heritage. Knowledge of their ethnic heritage is what gives them the armor they need. (p. 264)

People say, “Stay in touch with his racial heritage.” I don’t even know what that is. What is his racial heritage? Some people say we are “denying him his culture,” but from what I can see, if we hadn’t come along, he would be dead. He was malnourished. He was neglected. What really is his culture? (p. 264)

Promoting the positive aspects of a culture other than one’s own creates tension, especially when it can serve to further remind adopting parents that the child they have claimed as theirs has roots outside of the family unit (Kirk, 1985).

Baden and Steward (2000) studied the cultural identity development of transracial adoptees and found that the cultural attitudes of the adoptive parents impacted the adjustment of the children (p. 312). Whether explicitly or unintentionally, actively or passively, the attitudes of the adopting parents “lead to an affirming or discounting environment [that] affect the child’s identity and psychological adjustment” (p. 333). The following factors impact adopting parents’ attitudes: (a) the racial group to which the child belongs, (b) the parents’ attitude to the child’s racial group, (c) the parents’ reasons for adopting, (d) the nurturing qualities and responsiveness of the parents, (e) the immediate and extended family’s attitudes, and (f) the racial and cultural composition of the community and schools (p. 329). The culturally related actions of adopting parents, including, for example, the introduction, or lack, of healthy role models into the family
from the child’s racial group, are closely linked to whether the adoptive parents affirm or
discount their own racial membership, the adoptee’s racial group’s culture, and the racial
group with whom the adoptee is associated (p. 331).

The importance of children’s placement in culturally compatible adoptive homes
was explored many years ago during the extensive examination of adoption practice in
Manitoba (Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements, 1985). In
a court-like setting, local Aboriginal leaders, community members, and government
workers gave their testimonies. Judge Kimelman presided over the Review Committee,
and in the proceedings, Dr. Blue, a psychologist and Professor of Native Studies at
Brandon University, stated:

If in fact you are making recommendation to continue cross-cultural placements,
the best cross-cultural placement is into a home which is very stable within your
own culture. ... I would suggest to you we have no excuse any longer for not
building those culturally rural home and placements for that child. At one time we
did. (p. 133)

Leadership in Social Work

The topic of leadership in the social work profession has only recently been
researched. Whereas other professions have embraced leadership, social workers, in
general, have been reluctant to do so (Lawler, 2007; Fisher, 2005, Wimpfheimer, 2004).
Those who have utilized leadership principles in their social work have commented on
the improvement in service delivery. This section reviews leadership and the child
welfare system, discusses the examples of two social workers and their leadership in the
area of Aboriginal adoptions, examines academics as leaders, and considers leadership as
a subject to be taught within the social work education system. The probable advantage of
leadership in social work to Aboriginal children without culturally compatible adoptive homes is currently a vision.

_The Many Aspects of Leadership_

The conceptualization of leadership is diverse. Leadership influences a person’s personal and work life simultaneously (Maxwell, 1998). It can empower employees in all positions to work collectively to profit the organization, develop self-improvement techniques, and contribute equally to company decision making. Leaders prioritize, confront tough realities, are knowledgeable about systems, encourage discipline, and understand the change process (Collins, 2001). Leadership embodies vision, character, team development, conflict management, and spiritual development (Barna, 2002). Leaders can maneuver through the frameworks of organizational structures, human resources, politics, and symbolism (Bolman & Deal, 2003). They understand the systems within which they operate and overcome fear, “not because they [are] totally fearless, but because they [overcome] whatever fears they [have] to act and speak strongly and decisively” (Woolfe, 2002, p. 159). Leaders motivate people by accessing their passions, specifically when higher level skills are needed (Taylor & LaBarre, 2006). Many look to leadership in times of organizational change, when the transformation mindsets, assumptions, and thinking orientations are involved (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001). Leadership is evident in role-model behaviors, the demonstration of which is extremely important to peer professionals (Cohen & Rhodes, 1984, p. 121); is displayed as a person who shapes the future (Hiebert & Klatt, 2001, p. 51); is evident in emotional intelligence and produces “climates in which information sharing, trust, healthy risk-
taking, and learning flourish” (Goleman, 2001, p. 42). Goleman (2004) conducted extensive research in the area of leadership and concluded that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won’t make a great leader. (p. 82)

Overall, leadership is the process whereby “intentional influence is exerted by one person over the other to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships” (Yukl, 2006, p. 3).

Leadership versus Management

Not only do frontline social workers desire everyday leadership, but also attention must be paid to leadership style and the preparation of those possibly interested in supervision. Experienced social workers do not necessarily have leadership skills; they have to be learned and developed (Cohen & Rhodes, 1984, p. 120). Leadership skills, in addition to strong social work skills, can provide professionals with broad experience and competencies in “substantive knowledge, managerial ability, strategic vision, and experience at operating across cultures”; unfortunately, many environments lack this leadership opportunity (Treverton, 2005, p. 289).

Although some are concerned that leadership can overlap management, the leadership literature has accepted them as two different phenomena: Management focuses on efficiency and regulation, leadership focuses on change and motivation, and both are needed for systems to be effective (Lawler, 2007, p. 126). Leaders are concerned with what is meaningful to people and clearly distinguish themselves from managers, who focus on how people get things done (Yukl, 2006). Leadership counterbalances managerialism by promoting social work values and effective practice (Lawler, 2007).
The realization of managerial limitations may motivate social workers to look to leadership ideologies for guidance (pp. 128-129).

The decisions of managers are performed differently than most expect. Manager decisions, according to Bolman and Deal (2003), are based largely on intuition, and because of busy schedules, managers "spend little time thinking or reading; they get most of their information orally, in meetings or over the phone. . . . They want to solve problems and make decisions. But problems are ill defined and options murky" (p. 305). Many managers lack the skill base to move from a preoccupation with procedures to "increased emphasis on enabling, leading, and resource development functions" (Cohen & Rhodes, 1984, p. 119). Managers will continue to be valuable within organizations, and leaders can be the ideal partners.

Managers will lose impending leaders if they do not recognize the potential for leadership within current workers. In this century some of the specific leadership skills required to handle the rapid pace of change are "managing environmental relationships" (Rank & Hutchison, 2000, p. 488), which includes representing and positioning a department effectively, networking, negotiating hostile environments, and dealing with a large variety of customer and stakeholder groups. Recognizing that most of the government's managers in the future will come from within, the primary challenges are to identify potential leaders early in their career, nurture their talents, gain and retain internal support for new leaders, fund training and professional development, subsidize opportunities for graduate education, and, in effect, ensure that effective leadership is prioritized (Bradley, Schlesinger, Webster, Baker, & Inouye, 2004, p. 1881; Klitsgaard & Light, 2005, p. 40; Perlmutter, 2006).
Frontline workers are not the only ones who feel limited leadership support in prospective work environments. Frontline workers can stall managers who may attempt to enact leadership. At times, when management has attempted to lead by articulating a new vision, mission, and goals and providing resources to assist workers in change, the workers have responded by mistrusting management and even their worker peers; at their worst, workers can sabotage, resist change, and become “the enemy within” (Globerman, White, Blacker, MacKenzie, & MacKenzie Davies, 2005, p. 113). Is the lack of overall leadership emphasis within a profession a factor in such distress?

Leadership and Social Work

Leadership inside the social work profession is receiving a call for greater attention (Lawler, 2007, p. 123), especially as social workers continue to play a crucial role in transforming the child welfare state (Crichlow, 2003). Leadership in social work can involve being in a clinical role while fostering the development and participation of an interdisciplinary team, planning interventions, and reviewing ongoing progress of a program (Bradley et al., 2004, p. 1879). The newness of the concept of leadership within the social work profession raises several questions: Is leadership a necessary skill required in social work practice? Does the social work profession need leadership when it already emphasizes teamwork, interdisciplinary relationships, group work, humanistic values and ethics, empowerment, effective communication, the understanding that different tasks require different expertise, and consistent completion of daily work functions (Fisher, 2005, p. 41; Lawler, 2007)? Are social workers taking for granted the leadership skills that they use in their daily practice (Lawler, 2007, pp. 129-131)? NASW’s (1999) code of ethics has scarcely given voice to the Aboriginal view, so how
does this affect the social worker’s culturally considerate mindset in leadership functions (Maidment, 2006, p. 117)? If leadership skills are advantageous to the social worker, why are so few on-the-job opportunities available?

In government, social works falls within the milieu of the civil service. To meet the demands of this system, workers have, at times, hindered their personal development and creativity to finesse the maze of rules, regulations, and outdated operations; they perform these skills within a government system that lags behind the knowledge-based, technological economy that demands an accelerated response and a quick pace of change (Klitgaard & Light, 2005, pp. 12-13). With the complexity of these demands and limited resources, at times social workers are unable to maintain mandated services. In addition, they are often impacted by anxiety; being “spread thin and hoping to avoid a human disaster” (Ward, 1995, p. 619), they end up believing that their best efforts are insufficient. The discrepancy between limited resources and high demand has left employees frustrated, fatigued, and concerned about performing their assigned jobs. When internal systematic change is needed, social workers can effectively be their own best advocates (Klitgaard & Light, 2005, p. 27). In such times when they experience constant stress, managers can lead by reminding their social workers of the importance of coping strategies such as maintaining a sense of humor, being open, maintaining transparent lines of communication, collaborating, and building relationships through networking and peer support (Globerman et al., 2005, p. 117).

In Rank and Hutchison’s (2000) study, most of the 150 social work participants described social work leadership as requiring proaction, values and ethics, empowerment, vision, and communication (p. 492). In addition, 77 per cent of the participants
considered leadership within social work unique from other professions, which was
evident in the themes of commitment to the NASW’s (1999) code of ethics, a systematic
perspective, a participatory leadership style, altruism, and concern for professional public
image (Rank & Hutchison, 2000, p. 493).

If leadership becomes the focal point, will social workers feel undermined in
environments where they are already overworked and are engaged in complex power
struggles? In these dynamic situations, can social workers exercise leadership with
creativity, sensitivity, and viable energy for new discoveries?

If we accept that social workers are the most appropriate managers [or leaders] for
social service agencies because of their interpersonal skills, their understanding of
the ecological systems approach, their focus on the needs of the clients, and their
understanding of social practice, then we must conclude that good social work
managers must first be social workers. (Nesoff, 2007, p. 284)

Adoption Social Work and Leadership

One of the stressful situations that Caucasian social workers face with adoptions
is being held responsible for historic Aboriginal events that ignored the structural aspects
of poverty, its impact on child welfare decisions, and the causative relationship to the
assimilation of Aboriginal people (Halverson et al., 2002). With these pressures, social
workers can perceive Aboriginal families who advocate for themselves as demanding
precious time and attention, which ultimately takes time from dealing with children’s
issues (Ward, 1995). In communities with a high Aboriginal population, the disinterest in
provincial adoption funding is yet another factor that has left social workers with large
caseloads and unacknowledged difficulties in recruiting Aboriginal adoptive homes for
Aboriginal children (Timpson, 1995, p. 5). These pressures can convince social workers
to close adoption files quicker and steer away from follow-up and additional support (Bagley et al., 1993, p. 134).

How can social workers who labor within a Western-based system support rather than undermine Aboriginal families (Bagley et al., 1993)? In Adoption: Where Does It Lead?—a video directed by Dubois (1983)—the presenter, Henry spoke to the First Nation people in Saskatchewan. He clearly summarized his professional experience as a social worker who had worked extensively with adopted Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal families. Henry is an example of a social work leader who developed within the profession and was able to address complex adoption issues. He described his Aboriginal adopted clients, some of whom committed suicide, some of whom were sexually abused by their non-Aboriginal adoptive parents, and many of whom experienced emotional distress, all stemming from disconnection from their Aboriginal cultural and hereditary roots. “We have a system that destroys—not a system that works. Why do we have to hurt people so much?” (Dubois, 1983, video). Henry spoke clearly about systemic adoption issues, gained the trust of many Aboriginal people, and proposed familiar adoption rather than the current system of adopting an Aboriginal child into a Western family.

Many years later another social worker, Keewatin (2004), resonated leadership in the area of adoption. In his master’s thesis, Keewatin described his personal experience of being an Aboriginal child adopted into an Aboriginal family filled with strength, language, culture, and ceremonies. As a professional who worked with Aboriginal adolescences, he concluded that “they were no longer accepted by society and their questions of identity could not be answered by their non-Native families” (p. 31). As a
result, he spoke of his professional aspirations: “I wanted to become an [Aboriginal] social worker to change the system. I was hoping that I would not become part of the systemic racism that existed” (p. 82).

Rank and Hutchison (2000) found examples of social workers who discovered their leadership abilities, but, in general, found they often undervalued their leadership potential, are ill-prepared for leadership roles, and, although they may feel a professional responsibility to be a leader, they feel untrained to do so. Overall, Rank and Hutchison (2000) found that leadership opportunities are deficient in the social work profession. Because of the lack of leadership skills of social workers in supervisor or management positions, Rank and Hutchison suggested that leadership should be an expectation for social work students (p. 500). Changing the social work education system may help social workers to gain confidence in their leadership abilities.

Role of Academia in Social Work Leadership

Government employees are expected to have requisite skills, knowledge, and abilities before being selected for a job (Robert, 2005, pp. 273, 275), and, as a result, there may be a reluctance to further invest in employees. This expectation can create guilt if social workers require additional skills and knowledge. Internal tensions coupled with professional demands can cause social workers to suspect that leadership training is just another tactic to manipulate them to produce yet more work (Lawler, 2007, pp. 135-136). Is it possible for social work practitioners to connect with those within the education system to initiate change to infuse respective systems with leadership (Perlmutter, 2006)?

Although leadership is “an ill-defined quality” (Reamer, 1993, ¶ 3) that is difficult to teach and just as difficult to develop, it nevertheless needs to be “grown” within the
social work profession, and the education system needs a leadership infusion:

"Traditionally, [leadership] was not academically respectable. . . . Yet if leaders, like entrepreneurs (not to mention scholars), are partly born, they are also partly made.

Leadership skills can be learned and developed" (Treverton, 2005, p. 295).

In Rank and Hutchison's (2000) survey, 98 per cent of those studied believed there should be leadership development content in the graduate curriculum (pp. 498, 497) and that this is essential at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level, most particularly in related research. Empirical studies have yielded few insights because research is still lacking in many areas of social work practice (Triseliotis, 1998b, p. 12).

Cohen and Rhodes (1984) described social work leadership, training, and education as "imperative" (p. 119), but academia cannot bear the entire burden (Wertheimer, Beck, Brooks & Wolk, 2004). Government and higher social education leaders need to come together to intertwine a broader intellectual formation with real-world experience (Cohen & Rhodes, 1984; Treverton, 2005, p. 282). Gergen and Kellerman (2003) called for congruency within academia. "In the leadership field, scholars keep in mind a trinity: the close connection between context, followers, and leaders" (p. 15).

Many universities proclaim that one of their most important missions is to train young men and women to be the leaders of the next generation. If they are serious about that proposition, they must be serious about the study of leadership and leadership development. . . . But responsibility for strengthening leadership studies does not fall solely upon university administrators; if anything, it falls more heavily upon scholars and practitioners in the field, for they must build and solidify the intellectual foundations. (p. 25)

Wimpfheimer (2004) identified her choice leaders as social work professionals who are infused with a high regard for servicing people, appreciate the need for research, reflect
on their practice, and are genuinely concerned about those who deliver services to clients. In her leadership role, Wimpfheimer (2004) asked social workers to reflect on their practice delivery, raise difficult questions, seek analytical and objective answers, and take research courses in an academic setting—all of which have been found to advance standards for social work practice: “Not only does expertise in working with patients, families and collaborative staff increase, but ways of viewing situations, ability to teach, question, and come to answers, advanced as well” (p. 33).

Behavioral flexibility is the ability and willingness to vary one’s behavior to accommodate situational requirements. A leader with high behavioral flexibility knows how to use a variety of different behavior and is able to evaluate is or her behavior and modify it as needed. High behavioral flexibility implies a mental model with fine distinctions...Behavioral flexibility is facilitated by self-monitoring, because leaders who are high on self-monitoring are more aware of their own behavior and how it affects others. Whether social intelligence is used primarily to achieve collective rather than personal objectives probably depends on the leader’s emotional maturity and socialized power motivation. (Yukl, 2006, p. 76).

“As in all fields, along with weak and ineffectual leaders, there are a number of remarkably talented, bright, inspired, and inspirational leaders in social work education” (Reamer, 1993, ¶ 3). Can the social work profession trust academics to exemplify leadership not only for professional demands, but also within academic institutions? Only when social work academics esteem leadership will they find the means to teach and model its concepts. For learners to move into change, university staff must also be
supported as change agents and assist in the translation of research into innovative programs (Bradley et al., 2004, p. 1881).

Several ideas have been introduced in an effort to introduce a leadership component into social work education. One idea is a two-week graduate-level curriculum that encompasses supervision concepts that are identified through program evaluations, university staff training on leadership, and general organizational renewal tested through activities that allow for the practice of leadership skills, theory, and research information (Cohen & Rhodes, 1984, p. 128). Another idea that has gained recognition in the US is the Multicultural Experience in Leadership Development program, which demands a year’s commitment from a variety of leadership seekers to develop more substantial cultural understanding (Rosegrant Alvarez & Cabbil, 2001). Yet another graduate social work program encourages supervisor potential through the basic premises of andragogy, emphasis on learning opportunities to practice skills, and observation of the appropriate modeling of supervisory skills (Cohen & Rhodes, 1984, p. 121).

*Leadership and Aboriginal Research*

Today, not only do Aboriginal people need to have their voices heard within the dominant social work system (Gray et al., 2007, p. 55), but research also needs to be translated into effective clinical practice to effect substantial organizational change (Bradley et al., 2004, p. 1881). Aboriginal people seek interconnectedness in a culturally appropriate research process and emphasize the way that interrelated connections flow together, which contrasts with Western science, which separates the process into distinct steps (Loppie, 2007, p. 277).
One such change could involve working in partnership with Aboriginal people to support them in their research goals. Research integrated with culturally considerate adoption social work practice could benefit many Aboriginal families and examine the underlying factors of the “overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system” (Trocmé et al., 2004, p. 581). The social work community could seek solutions to address the stark reality that “there are more First Nation children in child welfare care today than there was at the height of the residential school operations in the 1940’s” (Blackstock, 2006, ¶ 1).

Currently, “adoption research resembles trying to spear a moving target” (Rushton, 2003, p. 34) and is scarcely available to guide social workers:

Good quality adoption research has potentially very significant implications for children who cannot remain with their birth parents. The more that practice is underpinned by secure research-based knowledge, the more risk of disruption and unstable placements should be reduced, and the need should be diminished for continuing health and social care services for adopted children and adoptive families. (p. 38)

Not only can related research be conducted province wide, but it can also involve the Aboriginal people of Canada. Couzos, Lee, Murray, and Culbong (2005) advised that “undisputed leadership is a necessary requirement to coordinate research on a national scale” (p. 98).

“The more you try to do in life, the more you will find that leadership makes the difference. Any endeavor you can undertake that involves other people will live or die depending on leadership” (Maxwell, 1998, p. 235). Leadership is a new consideration within the social work profession, has the potential to be used in conjunction with management practices, is needed within the restrictions of current bureaucracy, is sought
by professionals within social work education systems, and can be directed towards complex issues of Aboriginal adoptions for Aboriginal children in the care of MCFD.

"Remember that the obstacles faced by . . . leaders [are] large-scale and never-ending. . . . Take away courage from a leader and you are left with a mere manager, or worse, a functionary who uninspiringly enforces the rules of the bureaucracy" (Woolfe, 2002, p. 155). It is this same view of leadership that social workers can follow to address the most perplexing issue of recruiting Aboriginal parents for Aboriginal children in the care of MCFD.

Recruiting Aboriginal Adoptive Parents

This section focuses on research and ideas and recommendations from the literature on recruiting Aboriginal adoptive parents. I attempt to explore research from the Aboriginal perspective with the goal of exploring new adoption recruitment approaches and prescriptions for Aboriginal recruitment. I hope in this discussion is that the research findings will assist the MCFD Aboriginal adoption recruitment process in northern BC.

"The successful recruitment of new adoptive parents can be considered the sine qua non [essential condition] of adoption policy" (Rushton, 2003, p. 7).

Considerations in Adoption Recruiting

In 1972 the US hoped to resolve the difficulty of attracting non-Caucasian adoptive parents by using mass-media recruitment advertising extensively on ethnic radio stations, on television, and in the newspapers; unfortunately, this yielded few non-White applicants, and word of mouth was the most effective recruitment method (Simon & Altstein, 2002, p. 10). Another factor that impacted the recruitment of non-Caucasian adoptive parents was the social worker bias reflected in the "widespread use of white
middle-class criteria for selection” (p. 16), which quickly disqualified potential applicants. In 1984, according to Simon and Altstein, one study found that between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of Black families would consider adoption (p. 17). The same year another study revealed that only 2 out of the 800 Black adoptive applicants who applied were approved (Simon & Altstein, 2002). The results of Simon and Altstein’s study left researchers asking, Is racism within adoption a means of maintaining control? (p. 17).

When social workers exercise cultural competency, the impact is remarkable. Their strong working relationship with adoptive applicants helps the adopting parents through the adoption process, even when they find it difficult (Potter & Klein-Rothschild, 2002). In addition, the education level of social workers who are doing adoption work has an impact on the results. In a comparison of the quality of adoption work between social workers with no social work education and those with social work degrees, it is evident that education “increase[s] the odds of good [adoption] placement outcomes” (p. 127).

McDonald, Press, Billings, and Moore (2007) identified social worker attitudes as a factor in adoption (p. 9), but another perspective is the struggle of social workers with the finality of adoption and the lifelong consequences of children’s needs for their adopting families. Social workers, as a result, favor maintaining current foster parent relationships rather than working towards recruiting culturally compatible adoptive homes. Lowe et al. (2002) studied social workers in England and concluded that most children had a suitable relative who could possibly become an adoptive parent. In an examination of case-planning decisions, social worker files, and personal interviews Lowe et al. found that “children with emotional and behavioural problems were more likely to be subject to plans for long-term fostering than for adoption” (p. 51).
Another factor that affects decision making is the dialogue with the waiting child. Social workers are concerned about children who are told that adoption is planned for them and then feel rejected when they have to wait years for acceptable adoptive homes. Social workers are more likely to defer to long-term fostering because of difficulties in identifying adoptive parents who are capable of meeting the child's needs, workers' concern about disruption, and their belief that foster parents are more knowledgeable and have easier access to services than adopters do (Lowe et al., 2002, p. 53). "The lack of information hampers the drive to engage all the enquirers who show a serious interest and to find adopters who could potentially meet the needs of the children" (Rushton, 2003, p. 7). Howe (1998) explained that "the role of the adopter has become more important, more demanding and more difficult. The emotional balancing act that many adopters now have to perform requires parenting of a high order and people of rare motivation" (p. 109).

Triseliotis (1998b) reported that social workers are reluctant to enter into adoptions with parents because of the lack of available adoptive homes, the long waitlist for adoption-home studies, and the limited number of adoption staff to support the adoption process. "Social workers are not only facing the emotional challenge of finding families for children with special needs, but also families that can accept [birth family] contact and openness" (p. 21). Suggestions to recruit adoptive parents include financial support for adoption, program flexibility when adopting parents have to change locations and regions, and increased child welfare support throughout the entire adoption process, which has the potential to "encourage families to be more outward looking and more inclusive of outsiders" (p. 61). Smith (1998) confirmed the finding that recruitment is
affected by minimal post adoption support, which currently depends on location and is available to a limited degree (p. 54):

Many agencies are currently experiencing a severe crisis in recruitment, particularly of foster careers but also of adopters for children with severe emotional difficulties. Speculation on why this is so might well include economic, social and financial factors but it is also true that social work agencies are asking more of alternative carers than ever before. Competency-based training may also have lessons for adoption preparation, which remains fragmented and ad hoc. (p. 52)

Webber (1998) also considered the systemic issues related to adoption recruitment. As a freelance writer and adopter of a child within the government system, Webber witnessed contradictions in the recruitment process and the treatment of different types of adopting parents: “Some social workers ward off those they consider weirdos; that is, would-be adopters who don’t satisfy the antiquated criteria for normalcy” (p. 14). Other social workers expressed the opinion that children deserve a better life that a variety of adopting parents can offer, which places children’s self-esteem and potential for a lifelong family first. Webber commented on the child welfare system:

Far from having any beef with this adoption facilitator or that one, I am a fan of anyone with the gumption to unglue kids from dangerous parents and a deadly child welfare system, and seal them into competent homes of any configuration (p. 14). . . . Yet, ironically, some of the most virulent anti-adoption sentiment originates in the house. . . . In the protection/ adoption office, which is chock-full of contradictions. (p. 19)

Outside the workings of child welfare is the matter of how the public receives positive adoption information. Adoption within the education system is another factor that impacts recruitment. Daly and Sobol (1993) found that of those who applied to adopt an infant, half of the women and men typically had a college education, 98 per cent were married and had never adopted, 95 per cent were Caucasian, and 5 per cent were
Aboriginal (p. 52). Daly and Sobol suggested that providing adoption information in high school could introduce the positive aspects of adoption to future adopting and relinquishing parents. However, high school students are not the only group in need of adoption education.

Many social work professionals need education on the positive aspects of adoption. Some social workers perceive adoption as abandoning a child and admitting parental failure, both of which affect social workers’ attitudes toward adoption (Daly & Sobol, 1993, p. 51). Daly and Sobol reported the most common reasons that waiting parents’ adoption applications are denied: the PAPs’ unrealistic expectations of a child, their inability to tolerate the complexity of adoption, unfavorable personal histories, marital instability, and the applicants’ lack of flexibility in the adoption process (p. 55). If those who screen adoptive applicants have an extensive understanding of adoption, will their views of potential applicants change?

_Recruitment Lessons from Non-Western Cultures_

Capello (2006) examined a culturally sensitive recruitment approach to meet the adoption needs of the fast-growing population of Hispanic people in the US. The recruitment strategy involved identifying largely populated Hispanic communities; developing materials in their language; promoting adoption in areas where families naturally gather; publishing recruitment stories in the Hispanic language; airing public service, radio, and TV announcements in their cultural language; providing most of the information through face-to-face interactions; and enlisting the support of licensed Hispanic foster parents (p. 532). The recruitment strengths-based model was founded on the following premises: The Hispanic community is committed to and interested in
providing loving and stable homes for Hispanic children, Hispanic families need information and services in their own language and culture, and Hispanic families in churches, schools, and community-based organizations would respond positively to adopting Hispanic children (p. 531). To ensure a high level of cultural connection, all adoption staff were highly developed in their cultural awareness, had good engagement and assessment skills, had a sound knowledge of the cultural community, knew cultural parenting styles, were aware of family-community support systems, had child-protection experience, and were willing to work nights and weekends when potential applicants most needed them (p. 532).

Erera (1997) examined the perception of adoption in Israel, in a society that more readily accepts a child’s being cared for outside the family home than in Western culture. Typically, foster parents are recruited through newspaper ads and the encouragement of current foster parents (Erera, 1997). After a successful one-to-one interview, potential foster parents participate in a 10- to 12-week training program that both adults in the home attend. Two social workers who must have either a bachelor’s or a master’s degree facilitate the program. The results show that one third of prospective foster parents are enlisted (p. 513). Over 60 per cent care for only one child, and the care is often the same as it is for an adopted child in Western society.

Bausch and Serpe (1999) examined the responses of 591 Mexican Americans with regard to various strategies to recruit prospective Mexican adoptive parents. Approximately one third of the sample reported an interest in adoption, but many perceived that both structural and cultural obstacles to adoption would be deterrents (p. 693): “It is the authors’ position that racially/ethnically congruent adoptive placements
are preferred, all else being equal, and that greater efforts must be made to identify and recruit families from minority communities” (p. 694).

Bausch and Serpe (1999) identified two issues linked to scarce recruitment: the inability of recruitment efforts to reach potential Mexican adoptive parents, and the stringent eligibility requirements that were perceived to eliminate even the most interested adoptive parents (p. 694). Their recommendations focused on modifying social work approaches to PAPs from minority communities and increasing the cultural understanding of social workers. The Mexican participants reported that their interest in adoption would increase if they were made aware of Mexican children who need homes and that they would consider adoption if three strategies were used: more information was available, support groups were provided, and financial help was offered (pp. 699-705). Change is needed to diversify recruitment strategies for minority adoptive families.

Recruitment Changes for Aboriginal Applicants

In 1982 Manitoba’s Aboriginal community opposed the practice of adopting Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal families within Canada and the US. Chief Judge E. C. Kimelman responded to the minister’s request to examine the problems associated with adoption and fostering placements, to present recommendations to enable the entire child welfare system to recognize “the special cultural needs” (Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements, 1985, (p. 10) of Aboriginal children, and to propose ways that Aboriginal homes can be offered to Aboriginal children. Mr. Beaulieu, Chairman of the Dakota Ojibway Family Service, which was established for one year, stated:
Child care is not a threatening thing with Indian people. The kind of standards you talk about, and many of the people that deal with Indian children are very different from the way most of us were brought up as Indian children... I think we have enough adoptive parents. Nobody ever asked us to adopt a child until the Indian organization came into being and we at no time had applications from the reserves to adopt Indian children. (p. 17)

Mr. Maloney, a lawyer for the Aboriginal community, also inquired about the adoption practice: “I am just trying to determine from the agency why... [Aboriginal children] didn’t go back to their home communities” (p. 111). The question of recruiting Aboriginal adoptive parents for Aboriginal children remains unanswered today.

Halverson et al.’s (2002) research unveiled reluctance on the part of Aboriginal adoption applicants who felt discriminated against and encountered negativity because they were considered poor and problematic Aboriginal families. The lack of authentic support from government workers was the primary reason that these Aboriginal people did not want to become adoptive parents. They identified the barriers as the failure of government social workers to acknowledge (a) Aboriginal people’s responsibility for conveying the uniqueness of their cultural values, customs, and traditions to the next generation; (b) the difficulties within the child welfare system that result from the kinship of Aboriginal people and their unique family relations; and (c) the impact of historical issues (pp. 321-331). The Aboriginal people believed that these areas could be improved and healing initiated if social workers would listen to them. In addition, if social workers addressed these areas with more consideration, the Aboriginal participants stated that they would be more motivated to participate in governmental adoption procedures. Overall, Halverson et al. found that the child welfare system was inattentive to the “cultural traditions and values” (p. 332) of Aboriginal adoptive parents and that recruitment and
retention increased when social workers focused on “a Western view of social and economic standards” (p. 325). Displaying an authentic, respectful, less prejudicial manner in conducting the adoption process would help social workers to recruit Aboriginal adoptive parents (Halverson et al., 2002).

In her brief yet poignant writing, Goodluck (1983) reviewed 23 recruitment ideas for social workers’ consideration: “There are numerous Indian people in each community. The resources are available for you to work with and for. The attitude you have as a worker can and will determine the success of your efforts in locating the parents” (p. 3). Goodluck began by reminding social workers of the importance of their thoughtful, warm, and energetic approach to potential adoptive parents. She then identified ways to recruit Aboriginal adoptive parents—by attending cultural and tribal events; making positive contact with First Nation people, including contact with Aboriginal churches—with the idea of setting the timeframes for completion in partnership with the Aboriginal people. “Family studies must be done with sensitive planning to lessen red tape and cost” (p. 5). With advance planning and appropriate outreach, Aboriginal adoptive parents need not be discouraged. Ideas on adoption need to be set in a supple framework that can be adjusted to suit the needs of Aboriginal people and culture. Goodluck recommended that social workers involve the extended family, tribe, or clan, who have a long-term commitment to the child; consider the fact that Aboriginal children may have one to three significant people in their lives; understand that mobility within extended family is normal, culturally appropriate behavior; recognize that the time limits and expectations of permanency planning must bend to meet needs and family cultural dynamics; redefine professional language within cultural perspectives; and, finally, recognize that “value
clarification and attitude may cause barriers which need attention prior to planning with tribes and states” (p. 8).

Even with the most culturally sensitive recruitment process, adoption remains complex. “Adoption is no panacea; . . . perhaps developing a more skilled and focused approach to recruitment and preparation [would recognize] the different challenges and rewards of caring for youngsters” (Smith, 1998, p. 53). Meeting the needs of children who have lived in difficult situations and drawing on healthy adopting families can at times create tension. The need for more adoptive parents “has required new, active approaches to recruitment and flexibility about who can be acceptable as adopters” (Hill, 1998, p. 34).

Today, research on Aboriginal recruitment is required to determine which recruitment methods can best reach Aboriginal people, how different Aboriginal communities perceive adoption, and what factors encourage adoption placements. Considering the history of Aboriginal adoption, understanding the importance of cultural consideration, the benefits of social work leadership, and general ideas on adoption recruitment will help recruitment to morph into a process that can further the cultural heritage of Aboriginal people. Halverson et al. (2002) stressed that

all the child welfare professionals should ask is why there is a continued shortage of Indian foster families. Oftentimes, Indian children continue to be placed with non-Indian families because public child welfare agencies fail to recruit and retain native foster and adoptive homes. (p. 320)
CHAPTER THREE: CONDUCT OF THE RESEARCH

This chapter describes the research approach that I used in conducting this project. I examine the key aspects of qualitative action research; describe the project participants, the research methods and tools, the study conduct, and the data analysis; and conclude with a review of the ethical issues involved. In this project I used a new approach of information sharing, interwoven with a leadership philosophy of social work practice.

Throughout the conduct of this study, participants from both groups challenged my initial use of the term Aboriginal. We decided to use the term First Nation throughout the remainder of the discussions when referencing the participants and their community. This change is reflected in the remaining chapters.

Research Approach

Using Stringer's (1999) action research model, I sought to develop a research approach to (a) facilitate a research project in which I could empower northern First Nation people, (b) listen to northern First Nation people describe what they needed from the MCFD adoption process, and (c) open an exchange of adoption information between myself and the people of Lax Kw’alaam and between the people of Lax Kw’alaam and the MCFD adoption unit. I met these objectives by using a research approach that addressed the research question: What do northern First Nation people say they need to adopt First Nation children who are currently in the care of MCFD?

The primary focus of this research project was on creating an inclusive, culturally relevant process for the participants by incorporating First Nation traditional roles and values (Dickson & Green, 2001, p. 479). To ensure that the approach was flexible and adaptable, I acknowledged the need to adhere to the “principles of inclusion and equality,
[which can] shift the balance of power, allowing communities to be in control of the research into their lives that affects their lives” (Minore, Boone, Katt, Kinch, & Birch, 2004, p. 365). In this regard, the significance of a positive relationship with the Lax Kw’alaam people cannot be understated. Indeed, the success of the research project can be ascribed primarily to the background work and support of key Lax Kw’alaam members.

The secondary research focus involved openly listening to the recommendations of the First Nation participants. MCFD personnel attributed cultural differences to ongoing barriers, which in turn affect communication exchange: “In a majority of cases, the reason the other person is not listening to you is not because they are stubborn; [it is] because they don’t feel heard” (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2000, p. 166). However, Kahane (2004) asserted, “Open listening is the basis for all creativity” (p. 77).

The third research focus was on contributing to MCFD strategic goals and the professional social work knowledge base to recruit First Nation adoptive parents. This project will give MCFD social workers critical knowledge that can aid in their professional practice. The research methods walked carefully between the cultural complexities of MCFD and northern First Nation people.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

I considered a qualitative action research approach to the project advantageous. The two main paradigms of research are (a) quantitative, in which, to study people effectively, researchers approach them with an objective reality that involves identifiable variables and measured relationships, as well as a mathematical framework in which the researchers are detached and objective (Glesne, 2006); and (b) qualitative, in which
researchers most effectively study people in context with an approach that involves the participants and the researcher (Palys, 2003). Qualitative research is more inclined toward normal human activities such as looking, listening, speaking, and reading (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some reduction in measurement precision may be a limitation of the qualitative approach, but in this project my overarching need was to take advantage of the benefits of empowering and engaging First Nation people to collect ideas (Berg, 2007, p. 231).

Action Research

The approach of action research reduces the social and power disparity among people of different cultures, which is contrary to the enshrined, popular bureaucratic practices today (Stringer, 1999). Action research allowed me the capacity to explore the strength of First Nation families and the cultural preferences of First Nation participants and stakeholders (Bennett, 2004; McShane & Hastings, 2004); stimulate a variety of change agents and assist a group, community, or organization in defining an issue; and develop an increased understanding and involve them in taking action (Stringer, 1999). Action research also helped me to make inroads by means of a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems and to acknowledge that the ideas that we discussed might not necessarily result in ultimate answers, but that real-world information might inform the answers (Palys, 2003, p. 51).

Not only does action research provide flexibility, but this approach also has the capacity to enhance trust building, integrity, and interdependence through open, inclusive, and respectful dialogue that honors the oral traditions of First Nation people—all of
which are critical considerations for those who have experienced exploitation (Couzos et al., 2005, p. 101). The implications of these cycles can help both researcher and participants to understand the research process, and thus assist the researcher in implementing a plan that significantly meets the needs of both.

The cyclical nature of action research is woven throughout the project in diverse yet continual stages. Stringer’s (1999) action research model involves “look, think, act” stages and is expanded with the use of descriptive questions to guide the researcher.

Figure 1 is a review of my ideas on the concepts of the action research approach that I used as a guide.

![Diagram of action research cycle](image)

*Figure 1. “Look, think, act” cycle (Stringer, 1999) framework.*

In practice, action research can be a complex process. Stringer (1999) suggested that researchers work through each of the major stages in the cycle “through the constant
process of observation, reflection, and action. At the completion of each set of activities, they will review (look again), reflect (re-analyze), and re-act (modify their actions)” (p. 19). Figure 2 further explains the intricacies of the “look, think, act” cycle (Stinger, 1999) and the continuously revolving nature of the stages. It represents my ideas on the implications of continuous application in additional stages of the project.

![Diagram of the look, think, act cycle]

**Figure 2.** Continuous application of the “look, think, act” cycle (Stringer, 1999).

The philosophical approach of action research encompasses the “history, culture, interactive activities and emotional lives” (Berg, 2007, p. 224) of the participants. Stringer (1999) stated that only First Nation people can be the cultural experts on their communities, and emphasizes collegial organizational structures, rather than those based
on hierarchy, to facilitate and support people, rather than direct and control them (pp 8-31). The action researcher engaged in a culturally considerate process can act as a catalyst to stimulate First Nation people to consider change and to enable them to explore their own analysis of the issues. For these reasons, action research promotes a positive regard for cultural, communication, and socialization for First Nation communities (McShane & Hastings, 2004) and is a supportive research approach to study First Nation community members in their living context (Adams, 2002).

*Cultural Consideration and the Research Approach*

The majority of research is derived almost exclusively from Western ideology (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004), which leaves a void in research approaches that honor First Nation ideology. Other research methods often fail to reflect the values of consensus, participation, and systematic inquiry, which together formulate powerful views and have the potential to motivate planning with stakeholders (Glesne, 2006).

Rather than strictly focusing on academic requirements, Bennett (2004) recommended using a culturally considerate research approach, which, she argued, is more open to a First Nation worldview and thus is more relevant to the project's outcome. The input of the team at NIFCS, and specifically the First Nation facilitator, guarded against "the exploitative and colonizing potential of... research [and the] dynamics of power and subjugation that are inherent in the production of knowledge" (Stringer, 1999, p. 20). Foster, William, Campbell, Davis, and Pepperill (2006)—First Nation people who conducted research with First Nation participants—affirmed the need for First Nation people to direct research that involves them: "We have resources that other researchers do not have. We have language skills, the knowledge and understanding of our culture;
we... can communicate back in our language to our people” (p. 214). “A hallmark of participatory research is the employment of local people, creating an environment for reciprocal learning that transfers skills to community members and enhances the accuracy of data interpretation” (Minore et al., 2004, p. 366).

In a master’s thesis, three northern First Nation professionals, Haldane et al. (2003), wrote, “It is our belief that our world view is circular” (p. 18). In addition to uniquely articulating their research from a northwest BC perspective, they used stories to illustrate how First Nation people can be empowered to move forward to address issues of concern. The use of stories brings understanding to culture-specific behaviors, customs, values, and traditions from a First Nation perspective (McShane & Hastings, 2004, p. 41). The use of stories to deliver messages was prevalent in the Circle groups’ discussions of their views of adoption.

I called the action research groups Circle groups to signify that the participants were a northern cultural group and designed and implemented the circles with extensive input from northern First Nation people rather than adopting a Western framework. The Circle group concept developed through listening. Graveline (1998) outlined the level of respect of First Nation people for listening, which is often different from Western views:

The Aboriginal Talking Circle reminds us of the relationship between who speaks and who listens. We are taught that we require silence ‘respectfully listening’ to accompany voice ‘heartfully speaking.’ Aboriginal people are taught to respect silence as a pedagogical tool. In Circle, we listen ‘as witness,’ respectfully, to the experience of others. (p. 145)

Project Participants

The project involved several constituencies: voluntary participants in two Circle groups, the action research team, the First Nation facilitator, and the supervisory
committee. In this section I describe these individuals and explain the rationale for their contribution to the project. My discussion of the consideration and selection of participants begins the “look” (Stringer, 1999) cycle of the project.

The first Circle group participants consisted of people who were once residents of the northern First Nation community of Lax Kw’alaam, also known as Port Simpson, and who now live in the small city of Terrace. The participants consisted of three males, four females (N=7), the Aboriginal facilitator, and myself as the researcher. We held the first Circle group in the home of two of the participants.

The second Circle group consisted of participants who resided in the community of Lax Kw’alaam; it consisted of six participants (N=6), the Aboriginal facilitator, and myself. The participants were all female, and we held the Circle group in a Lax Kw’alaam community meeting room.

The people of Lax Kw’alaam recruited voluntary participants who met the following criteria: (a) free of any association with MCFD adoption as a past applicant; (b) a First Nation person who resided, or had resided, in the village of Lax Kw’alaam; (c) at least 19 years of age; (d) able to express personal views in English in a small group; (e) identified by the Band worker as being curious about adoption; and (f) believed to be free of a serious mental illness. I encouraged the people of Lax Kw’alaam to select both males and females.

The MCFD provided funds to allow me to offer the participants a light meal and a small gift. Authorized by the Lax Kw’alaam Council member in accordance with the Indigenous People’s Health Research Center’s ([IPHRC] 2004) *Ethics of Research Involving Indigenous Peoples*, members of the Lax Kw’alaam community selected and
invited all of the First Nation participants, and the same First Nation facilitator led both Circle groups. Krueger and King (1998) recommended recruiting more participants than are actually needed for a group because of unpredictable cultural duties that require the participants to immediately change their plans.

The Lax Kw’alaam community and the local First Nation agency, Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society (NIFCS), also sanctioned the First Nation facilitator, who maintained an atmosphere of rapport and listening and respectfully guided the participants through the Circle group process. LeBarron (2004) worked with First Nation participants and commented:

Facilitators are constantly making microjudgments about what is relevant, productive, and appropriate in a process. As these judgments are made from a cultural frame of reference, . . . it is incumbent on third parties to examine their cultural assumptions and work, where possible, in intercultural teams. (p. 22)

Loppie (2007) suggested that a First Nation facilitator’s knowledge of the cultural norms and intricacies of First Nation participants increases their comfort level and the reliability of the information (p. 279). The First Nation facilitator has a master’s degree in social work from the University of Victoria, is well versed in northwest First Nation cultures, and is skilled in leading a discussion in a fluid yet focused manner.

The action research team was comprised of the First Nation facilitator, a First Nation community member, and myself as the researcher. The team afforded me an opportunity to discuss the details of each Circle group and to understand and learn appropriate cultural conduct within these groups.

Paralleling the support of the action research team, the supervisory committee offered methodological, academic, and contextual assistance throughout the research
project. The committee was comprised of the thesis supervisor, Bruce Bidgood, PhD, a social work professor at the northwest UNBC, and the sponsor, Ann Clayton, manager of the Adoptions Unit in Victoria, who represented the interests and views of MCFD Adoption Services. Dr. Bidgood was the committee chair and acted on behalf of the director of the School of Leadership Studies at Royal Roads University (Royal Roads University, 2006, pp. 13-18). The supervisory committee reviewed the research process at each stage and recommended changes to the project as necessary.

Research Method and Tools

In this section I describe the inquiry tools and procedures that I used in the cyclical process of the research project. The research method and tools were continually guided by cultural relevance, attentive listening, and the development of professional knowledge within MCFD.

Tools

The research involved several tools, each of which I used with the goal of reaching a higher level of synthesis and consensus in the hermeneutic dialectic process of the “look, think, act” cycle (Stringer, 1999). I sent the participant invitation form (Appendix C) and the consent form (Appendix D) to the Band worker, the Council member, and the First Nation facilitator prior to the Circle group’s meeting and then gave them to the Circle group participants. In consultation with the First Nation facilitator, research questions were reviewed and revised prior to being used for Circle groups (Appendix F). The Circle group questions were as follows: (a) What do you see as a metaphor for the adoption process from an First Nation’s perspective? (b) What are your experiences with adoption? (c) From your view, how has the MCFD adoption process
worked? (d) From your understanding of MCFD’s adoption process, what does MCFD need to do so more First Nation people will adopt through MCFD? (e) How can the cultural needs of potential First Nation adoptive parents be listened to better? (f) What would encourage you to adoption with MCFD? and (g) What do you believe Northern First Nation people need in order to adopt First Nation children who are presently in the care of MCFD? The research questions were derived from discussions, over several months, with MCFD social workers and First Nation community members.

The two Circle group agendas (Appendix E) were the same. The First Nation facilitator wrote the agenda for each group to view and verbally reviewed it with each Circle group prior to beginning.

The First Nation facilitator was used to guard against researcher bias by recording summaries on flipchart paper for both Circle groups. I then used these summaries to begin the data-collection process. In this way the data collection process was anchored in the concepts and interpretations from a First Nation perspective.

I used an audio recorder and a cassette recorder as a backup to record the participants’ discussion of the research questions. I turned them on after I had received the participants’ consent to record the sessions. A Lax Kw’alaam community member approved a contracted transcriptionist, who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix G).

The learner log was a tool that I used to record impressions of the group immediately after each Circle group ended.

The First Nation facilitator advised me on the types of gifts that would be appropriate, and I ensured that the symbolism of each gift was consistent for both groups.
We considered small gifts more appropriate than honorariums, which I had originally planned. The First Nation facilitator coached me on presenting small gifts to the participants in an acceptable manner; I did so at the conclusion of each group.

The First Nation facilitator also advised me on the type of snacks that the participants might appreciate the most. Providing a light snack is a recognized and well-established First Nation tradition and is critical in many aspects of First Nation life (Graveline, 1998).

The tools that I used reflected my commitment to link “theory and data” (Palys, 2003, p. 68), which was evident in the organizational awareness that occurred during the action research process. For example, the project sponsor, Ann Clayton, noticed the positive relationships possible with the Aboriginal community and their reception to discussing adoption, and she began to acknowledge new possibilities for adoption. The community of Lax Kw’alaam began to recognize MCFD’s desire to develop a respectful relationship and, through the Circle group discussions, saw the potential for new possibilities for adoption.

*Study Conduct*

In this section I examine the steps that I took in conducting the action research project. To ensure that the action research project would be culturally considerate of First Nation stakeholders, I discussed it with a Lax Kw’alaam community member over a nine-month period prior to initiating the project. As Berg (2007) stated, “Whenever you can demonstrate corroboration of information you have obtained, you are on solid ground” (p. 162). This preparation provided me with an insight into the community’s needs and gave me time to explore my leadership development within MCFD.
I discussed the research proposal with my sponsor, Ann Clayton, who provided guidance from the perspective of the MCFD. She had experience with MCFD confidentiality and privacy issues and advised me to exclude all MCFD client information and connecting sources within MCFD to expedite the research application process.

As part of a continual process, my thesis supervisor, Dr. Bruce Bidgood, reviewed the proposal details and the research format to further my understanding of research dynamics and broaden my appreciation for sharing knowledge with social work professionals. Dr. Bidgood and Ann Clayton approved the proposal, and I submitted it to Royal Roads University.

The culturally sensitive group of participants and continuous discussion with a Lax Kw’alaam community member provided the framework for the Circle group concept. Given the nature of group work, Berg (2007) recommended 8 to 10 participants as the most productive.

I submitted my Royal Roads ethics application on August 24, 2007, and the ethics approval process became a significant part of the study conduct. At the recommendation of the Royal Roads Aboriginal coordinator and the Lax Kw’alaam’s contact person, I planned to remain in the community two days prior to the Circle group sessions and to conduct a member check-in the following day. My rationale as a researcher was to be available to answer any questions that the residents might have prior to participating in the groups, to be present in the community and possibly participate in events when appropriate, and to ensure that the Circle group discussions would not distress the participants. Community members observed social workers’ coming to their community, providing interventions with their children or families, and then quickly leaving rather
than attempting to build a more positive relationship. As a result, they considered my investment of time respectful.

My initial plan was to have a Circle group with two voluntary participants from each of the eight northern First Nation communities. I discussed my project ideas with Jeannie Leighton, NIFCS Executive Director, who suggested that I focus on two First Nation communities, one of which was Lax Kw’alaam. NIFCS’s support was vital to the success of this project.

Following this recommendation, I began to initiate communication with the Band workers from two First Nation communities and provided all relevant documentation. After approximately a month I had contacted both Band workers, who gave their approval for me to approach the community leadership.

Finding an appropriate First Nation facilitator was also a significant step in the project. The facilitator would need to understand the dynamics of a White researcher’s inquiring about a historically sensitive issue and would need to travel by ferry or plane to the community of Lax Kw’alaam. The implication of her residency in a community 170 kilometers away from mine was another consideration. Initially, I began to seek a facilitator who could work with two distinct First Nation groups, and this again was a unique challenge. After some inquiry I was referred to Sherrie Haldane, who agreed to facilitate the two Circle groups.

After approximately another month of attempting contact, I felt the colossal size of the northern First Nation culture. I asked both Band workers whether I could meet with them in person to explain the project; they did not accept my request. Unfortunately, the other Band did not participate in the project. When I explained my efforts to the Lax
Kw’alaam contact person, he assisted by advocating for the project with the community leadership. One phone call from him and four hours later, I received a phone call from the Lax Kw’alaam Council member, who granted approval for the Circle group. The First Nation leadership charged the facilitator with selecting volunteer participants.

After receiving approval from the Lax Kw’alaam leadership, I was then able to begin MCFD’s research application. I was concerned that several Lax Kw’alaam participants, who hoped to participate in the Circle group much earlier, had been waiting. I thought that I would be required to send a written invitation to the Circle group participants; however, the process led to invitations being extended verbally by the First Nation facilitator.

After MCFD approved the research application and I had received Royal Roads University ethics approval on January 15, 2007, I began to organize the first Circle group and finalized it by January 17, 2007. Originally, I had planned to ask a small pilot group of First Nation participants to review the Circle group process and evaluate its activities. Instead, the project spiraled quickly through the action research stages (Stringer, 1999) in another way. Because of travel considerations, Sherrie Haldane and I met the same day that we were to conduct the Circle group, and Sherrie composed a draft agenda on her own in my presence. She later reviewed the research questions, reworded some of them, and changed the order in a manner that she considered more appropriate for the participants. Sherrie then wrote the group agenda (Appendix E) and research questions (Appendix F) on flipchart paper in advance of each Circle group.

The participants in the first Circle group, conducted in Terrace, were Lax Kw’alaam community members who now lived off-reserve, and the First Nation
facilitator and another Lax Kw’alaam contact member contacted and invited them to participate. We conducted the second Circle group in the community of Lax Kw’alaam with participants who resided in the community. I drove for two hours on northern winter roads and then flew by float plane to reach the isolated community in advance of the group, and two days later the facilitator took a ferry and drove along an icy road to the community.

Inviting participants from two diverse living environments connected to one traditional First Nation community enhanced the reliability of the research (Bernard, 2000, p. 210; Krueger & King, 1998, p. 52), and the consistent use of Aboriginal people throughout all dimensions of the research established its validity.

Haldane arranged the location and time of the Circle groups and informed me on what worked best for the group. We verbally communicated information on the Circle group to ensure that the participants met the criteria and felt comfortable with being involved. I scheduled approximately three hours for each Circle group. In their study of Aboriginal Elders, Dickson and Green (2001) acknowledged that “timelines became elastic” (p. 479). The first Circle group took three-and-a-half hours and the second, five hours.

The first Circle group began with a welcome from the First Nation facilitator, we reviewed the agenda, the facilitator introduced me, and we explained the purpose of the Circle group, which included a review of the seven research questions. We also discussed the audio recorder and its purpose. We made the consent and invitation forms available to the participants, reviewed them orally, and answered any questions. To demonstrate free and informed consent, we recorded the participants’ oral consent, which was required for
them to continue in the Circle group. The facilitator then asked a group volunteer to begin with a customary opening prayer, after which the facilitator directed me to begin.

I reviewed MCFD’s adoption screening process, which included an explanation of criminal record checks, references, physician reports, prior contact checks, the home-study process, SAFE questionnaires, and PAA. In the first Circle group I handed out a brief review of the MCFD adoption application process and orally reviewed the contents in the second group.

Each Circle group took snack breaks at different times. We encouraged the participants to enjoy a light snack after I explained the adoption process or whenever they wished. The facilitator then called the Circle group back to order. At this point I began the role of resource person and observed and listened carefully to the participants’ responses.

The facilitator asked the group to create a metaphor for the adoption process, which was one of the research questions, and the group reviewed the definition of metaphor (as seen in Appendix F). After the First Nation facilitator had asked all of the questions, she summarized the group’s contributions on the flipchart paper, thus guarding against researcher bias in transmitting the group summaries. The group members informally evaluated the process in their closing remarks, and the facilitator requested a volunteer to say a closing prayer. I then presented the Circle group participants with gifts in the manner that the facilitator had recommended.

I conducted the member debriefing by phoning the members of the first Circle group and in person and by phoning the Lax Kw’alaam participants. It was an opportunity
to discuss how each person felt after the Circle group, to provide referrals for emotional support if they needed it, and to discuss related matters in person.

Following the data analysis, I conducted a member check in several stages (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The First Nation facilitator reviewed the research results and conclusions, and each Circle group decided on a different member check format. The first Circle group selected a participant to review the recommendations on behalf of the group, and the second group asked that the First Nation facilitator and I perform the member check. The group agreed to meet again, and we spent six hours reviewing the recommendations and quotations. In their participatory action research with First Nation people, Dickson and Green (2001) reported that they gave their clustered data to the First Nation participants for the purpose of “critical reflection on those findings for deeper political understandings of the [First Nation] participant’s reality” (p. 476). It is therefore essential that First Nation people actively participate in the critical analysis, not only to co-construct knowledge, but also to empower their communities (p. 473). Finally, I presented the referring First Nation leader and each participant with a thank-you gift.

Table 1 correlates my research activities with Stringer’s (1999) cycles to explain how the “look, think, act” cycle functioned in the research procedures involved in the project.
Table 1

*Project Stages of Incorporation of the “Look, Think, Act” Cycle (Stringer, 1999)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stringer’s approach</th>
<th>First cycle</th>
<th>Second cycle</th>
<th>Third cycle</th>
<th>Fourth cycle</th>
<th>Fifth cycle</th>
<th>Sixth cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look (listen)</td>
<td>Contact Nation Band worker and review project and documents</td>
<td>Reflect on project goals in preparation &amp; confer with thesis supervisor</td>
<td>Debrief Circle groups with F/N facilitator</td>
<td>Review data analysis plan with thesis supervisor</td>
<td>Review new data info with thesis supervisor</td>
<td>Reflect on project process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think</td>
<td>Contact community leadership, review project for approval</td>
<td>Discuss project with F/N facilitator &amp; pilot</td>
<td>Review group process with participants, check-in</td>
<td>Discuss findings with F/N facilitator &amp; plan member check</td>
<td>Revise study findings</td>
<td>Meet with facilitator; compile lessons learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Contact F/N facilitator and discuss project, documents, etc.</td>
<td>Conduct both Circle groups</td>
<td>Transcribe audio recordings</td>
<td>Conduct member check meeting; record changes</td>
<td>Send final results to thesis supervisor &amp; sponsor</td>
<td>Send thank-you letters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Within each research paradigm, complex decisions about data collection, analysis, and interpretation entail choices about what the researcher views as useful, all of which impact the results (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This section reviews the data analysis process of the project. Strauss and Corbin (1998) cautioned researchers to remember, the idea behind varying methods is to carry out the most parsimonious and advantageous means for arriving at theory. Such a task calls for sensitivity to the nuances in data, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility in design, and a large dose of creativity. (p. 34)
Glesne (2006) explained that research validity is addressed in several ways throughout the data-analysis process. I triangulated the data by using the notes that I took immediately after the Circle groups and the flipchart recordings that only the Aboriginal facilitator had written. A person who was not present during the group sessions then transcribed the audio recordings. The First Nation facilitator reviewed the data to determine whether any researcher bias was present, I involved any group members who expressed an interest in the member checking, and the supervisory committee conducted an external audit of the analytics process.

The facilitator's flipchart summaries of the answers to each research question served as a pivotal analytical instrument to organize the data into more tangible concepts or categories. We reviewed the flipchart summaries from both Circle groups collectively, which was a precursor to description, conceptual ordering, and theorizing (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The audio recordings were transcribed, and I analyzed the transcript for each group according to each research question by using a line-by-line analysis, which involves

close examination of data, phrase by phrase and sometimes word by word. . . . Doing a line-by-line coding is especially important in the beginning of a study because it enables the analyst to generate categories quickly and to develop those categories through further sampling along dimensions of a category's general properties. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 119)

I then compared concepts and categories to each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and analyzed the data first by deciphering word clusters, themes, and patterns from the flipchart recordings and then comparing them to the line-by-line analysis of the audio transcriptions in the same manner.
Identifying, sifting through, and sorting through all the possible factors showing
the nature of the relationships does not result in a simple ‘if . . . then’ statement.
The result is much more likely to be a discussion that takes readers along a
complex path of interrelationships, each in its own patterned way, that explains
what is going on. (p. 130)

The thesis supervisor reviewed the process for academic content and offered his
research expertise. I again reviewed the central themes, collapsed the supporting ideas
into themes, and inserted illustrative quotations to further describe the themes. The
Aboriginal facilitator reviewed all central categories and ensured that the categories and
descriptions accurately portrayed the intended meaning.

The member checks included sharing with the participants the central themes and
analytical thoughts and reviewing the overall findings to ensure that the ideas and
information accurately conveyed their meaning (Glesne, 2006, p. 38), and I revised the
information as required.

Organizational interventions with MCFD and the First Nation leaders began as I
completed the ethics requirements. Communication with key MCFD personnel and First
 Nation leaders invited a more informal and practical review of the information from the
study. I mailed the participants a copy of the Circle group recommendations; gave the
project sponsor, the northern adoption team leader, and the First Nation community
leader clear and concise recommendations; and agreed to provide a copy of the major
project thesis if requested. I presented the recommendations in a manner from which First
 Nation people in remote locations could benefit and engaged in continued leadership
development by sharing the findings with the MCFD Adoption Unit in Victoria as
requested.
Ethical Issues

I vigilantly followed Royal Roads University’s (2007) research ethics policy by ensuring that I adhered to the eight principles of the Interagency Secretariat on Research Ethics’ (2005) *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS)* to respect the "distinctive perspectives and understanding embodied" (p. 6.2) within the First Nation culture. In addition, I incorporated the IPHRC’s (2004) Ethics of *Research Involving Indigenous Peoples* by providing “ethical space” (p. 19), negotiating the research with First Nation community leaders prior to conducting the research, and focusing on the benefits of research as a central focus for the project. I acknowledged that my research was susceptible to the commonly held perceptions of many First Nation people and that research is “something done to them for the benefit of outsiders, and from which they themselves receive no gain” (Dickson & Green, 2001, p. 472; Ermine et al., 2004). Throughout all stages of this project, the energy and time that I dedicated to honoring an ethical approach that respects First Nation people cannot be understated.

Researcher bias was a key consideration throughout the project. As a Caucasian social worker employed with MCFD Adoptions, I provide a service to the First Nation people of BC’s northwest. I am aware of my Western ideologies and that “unequal power relationships and the issues of knowledge contexts” (IPHRC, 2004, p. 16) are foundational ethical problems. I do not have biological children, I have not adopted children, nor do I have family members who are First Nation people. To guard against research recruitment bias (Bogolub, 2006), members of the Lax Kw’alaam community selected the participants.
The First Nation facilitator designed the Circle group agenda, coached me in related cultural activities, and organized the participants for each Circle group.

Respect for human dignity was evident in the research project design, review, and implementation, and I demonstrated it particularly in continually seeking input from Lax Kw’alaam First Nation people in each area of the project and implemented suggestions to protect what I call *cultural dignity*. Glesne (2006) suggested that in working specifically with different cultures, it is important to “show respect for people; present yourself to people face to face; look, listen, speak; share and host people, be generous; be cautious; do not trample over the manna of people; and don’t flaunt your knowledge” (p. 145).

Listening to the stories and experiences of the participants rather than strictly soliciting information meant that I restrained myself from taking notes during the Circle groups and, to the greatest extent possible, remained open to their suggestions and advice.

I received free and informed consent from Lax Kw’alaam community leaders and participants through the use of a written consent form, a verbal explanation and discussion of the consent forms, and oral agreement that the participants freely gave prior to each Circle group. My emphasis on oral communication gave me an opportunity to answer questions before I audio-recorded the oral consent to participate in the project. Foster et al. (2006) explained that

many [Aboriginal] people do not like signing anything, and . . . simply obtaining a signature on a piece of paper was not obtaining informed consent; so researchers signed a form confirming that the explanation had been given and that consent had been received. (p. 216)

In this way, I followed Couzos et al.’s (2005) recommendation that consent for First Nation people involve the use of plain language and explanations of the reasons for the
study, the research method, the design of the follow-up, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the freedom to withdraw (pp. 103-104). In addition, as the IPHRC (2004) recommended, I continually sought consent by involving the First Nation facilitator and submitted regular updates to the Royal Roads University Ethics Committee. In accordance with the TCPS (Interagency Secretariat on Research Ethics, 2005), I ensured that I informed the First Nation people and leaders of the limitations to a guarantee of anonymity.

To ensure respect for vulnerable persons, I respected the Lax Kw’alaam culture and the First Nation community by spending two days in Lax Kw’alaam prior to the Circle group and one day following the Circle group to meet with the participants in person if they agreed. The time that I spent organizing the Circle group and the permission that I sought to conduct the Circle group on Lax Kw’alaam territory showed respect for the Lax Kw’alaam people. As is common in many First Nation transactions, I allowed time in each group for participants to express their views and for discussion. Freundlich (2000) stated:

It is only through such discussion that consensus can be reached on the appropriate role of race, culture, and national origin in adoption—and the ethical obligations of adoption professionals . . . to the racially and culturally diverse children and families served through adoption. (p. 125)

Respect for privacy and confidentiality included careful security of audio recordings by the transcriptionist and only the researcher and the thesis supervisor were permitted to access the information during data analysis. The second Circle group discussed my use of a transcriptionist at length. The participants were identified by a code that I used on all participant-related data. In addition, I stored the data on a non-
networked computer and protected it with a file password. I have ensured that the participants cannot be identified in the direct quotations in this report. I asked them to keep confidential any personal information that the participants revealed. However, it should be noted that any informal discussions that might have taken place were beyond my control.

I addressed respect for justice and the inclusiveness of the First Nation people primarily through a process that acknowledged that the research activities had to meet the approval and criteria of the First Nation communities, not just my standards as a researcher. I sought to honor and give credit to the people of Lax Kw’alaam for their gift to me of their knowledge. For this project I initiated the discussion of the MCFD adoption process in person with Lax Kw’alaam community members and provided a summary of their recommendations to the provincial MCFD Adoptions unit.

I balanced harms and benefits through ongoing consultation with the people of Lax Kw’alaam on the design and subsequent details of the project, which involved Lax Kw’alaam participants and leaders. We discussed issues of possible concern or difficulty and made decisions based on the advice of the Lax Kw’alaam people. This is particularly necessary considering that the thesis is a public document and I will present it to the Lax Kw’alaam leaders and MCFD personnel.

To minimize harm, I informed the participants of the purpose of the Circle group, how I would use the information that the participants shared, and the effort that I would make to communicate their recommendations to MCFD personnel—although this did not guarantee changes in adoption practice. Prior to beginning the ethics process, I completed the online Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics’ introductory tutorial for the
TCPS (Interagency Secretariat on Research Ethics, 2005) on July 7, 2007, and submitted the certificate to my thesis supervisor at his request. This concurs with Palys’s (2003) recommendation: “The researcher should be both clear and realistic about what is being offered, making neither grandiose claims about the prospective utility of the research nor any promises that he or she is not prepared to keep” (p. 88).

The benefit of this project, in addition to building critically needed relationships between the local MCFD social workers and Lax Kw’alaam First Nation people, was the discussion of adoption in general and the overview of adoption application information that resulted, which means that more First Nation children will potentially be able to move back to First Nation homes. I clearly informed the participants that I hope that more First Nation people will apply to MCFD, thereby increasing First Nation adoptions for First Nation children.

Ethical conduct, according to Bonhoeffer (1949), is determined by the value of relationships between people, rather than a prescribed structure. I ensured that I met humanistic and scientific ethical obligations within the project’s structure and conduct. The project’s delivery has meant laboring to “reconcile a scientific based knowledge that defines much of the Western world with an epistemology based on participatory consciousness and personal experiences with human, natural, and supernatural relationships found in Indigenous learning traditions” (IPHRC, 2004, p. 44).
CHAPTER FOUR: ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter reviews the action research project results from two Circle groups that consisted of 15 participants and a combined total of 8.5 hours of group discussion. The First Nation facilitator, in my presence, asked seven questions of the participants in each Circle group. The final one was the research question, What do you believe the Northern First Nation people need to adopt Aboriginal children who are currently in the care of MCFD? The section is organized according to central themes for each research question: (a) Metaphor for adoption, (b) Adoption experiences, (c) What has worked in the adoption process? (d) What does MCFD need to do? (e) Meeting cultural needs, (f) What would encourage you to adopt? and (g) What do First Nation people need to be able to adopt?

The study findings were initially derived from my analysis of the summaries that the First Nation facilitator wrote on flipchart paper during the Circle groups. The summaries provided the thematic framework for the data analysis, which followed line-by-line analysis of the corresponding transcriptions of the audio recordings to further explicate the themes and illustrate the concepts with descriptive narratives derived from participants’ stories. The thesis supervisor, who served as an external auditor, reviewed the data analysis plan, techniques, and preliminary results—a strategy designed to enhance the trustworthiness of the results, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). I conducted a member check of the project’s results and conclusions. I reviewed the results in person with the Lax Kw’alaam Circle group members, with the First Nation facilitator present. The participants from the Terrace Circle group had agreed that one of the
participants, who was a Matriarch, would act as the designated person for a member check. I then submitted the project results and conclusions to the First Nation facilitator for her feedback. In accordance with Royal Roads University’s (2007) ethics process and to ensure accurate representation of the information, I sought approval for the study findings from both Circle groups.

Discussions within the Circle groups were not confined exclusively to the aforementioned questions and frequently involved generalized discussion about MCFD and historical government adoption practices. I attempted to relate this substantive material to the most relevant research question; however, some contributions were outside the scope of this project. This chapter presents the conclusions, scope, and limitations of the project.

Study Findings

The focus of this chapter is on giving a voice to the thoughts, feelings, opinions, and views of the participants in the two Circle groups to examine adoption issues within MCFD. I present the study findings in a relatively sequential and question-specific fashion that reflects a Western empirical framework for reporting study findings. The responses to each question involved discussions of several diverse topics in a nonlinear, mutually reinforcing fashion, which was a distinct challenge in accurately portraying the responses and the tenor of the research process.

Metaphor for Adoption

The first action research question was, “What do you see as a metaphor for the adoption process from an Aboriginal or First Nation perspective?” The facilitator defined metaphor in each Circle group and asked the participants to consider the ideal First
Nation adoption within this concept. The participants found the question challenging. The most prevalent and repeated theme was the idea of a mini-feast, which they described positively. Feasts are traditionally an acknowledgement of the family and a demonstration of the community’s traditional practices. One participant said that it was a “joy” for her to see the community coming together and families working together, eating together, and serving each other. Another participant added that feasts demonstrate community pride in their children’s “being raised well.” Another aspect of this theme was an acknowledgement of the strength that children bring to the community. One participant stated that new baby announcements are remembered by informal family historians during feasts, which serves as a means to publicly declare family or community information.

As one participant noted, the sense of belonging is critical to the identity of the child. The participants reported that children are given an Indian name at a feast and that their traditional name goes with them when they leave the community. This name is also held for children who leave and is known by the community when the child returns. As one participant stated,

Identity, talking about identity, when our kids see how we’re having feast here, and they’re given Indian names, and these kids who are apprehended and leave here with those names. So if they get adopted out, they . . . come back home when they’re older, and somebody remembers their name. (Circle group participant)

The participants described the mini-adoption feast as similar to the Lax Kw’alaam community’s traditional “baby welcoming” feast. Several participants spoke of the well-known phrase typically spoken in the Sm’alayx language that, translated, means, “You
are ours.” The participants reported that the Baby’s Feast announces the new child to community members and is traditionally the responsibility of the grandparents.

Another participant spoke of the idea that a mini-feast could serve to reintroduce children who had previously lived in foster homes back into the community:

If you hang onto that thought and you wanted to bring the children back to their community and reintroduce them to their family, friends, the place where they’re comfortable, . . . have a gathering like that. We tried it. . . . Had a mini-feast, and we came together, and the foster kids that they brought in, they were just so happy to have a taste of their seafood. . . . We have a dance group, and we went in there and performed along with a couple of other groups, . . . and there were a number of kids that really connected to that and weren’t afraid to say so. (Circle group participant)

Adoption Experiences

The second question that the facilitator asked each Circle group was, “What are your experiences with adoption?” The first immediate and pervasive theme, which was consistent in both Circle groups, was the strong negative feelings associated with adoptions and MCFD. The participants directly related their views of adoption to their experiences with MCFD child protection. In contrast, both Circle groups identified the positive traditional adoption practices that have been, and continue to be, performed within the community. The participants described their adoption practice as “different” and felt that they benefited both the child and the family; in addition, they considered their adoption practice “much easier” than an MCFD adoption. The difference between the two reactions seems to revolve around decision making for the child and the maintenance of family and community contact with the child.

“They took him completely away from his family” (Circle group participant). The participants’ feelings and views of MCFD interventions included the following themes:
the view of social workers as authoritative, social workers’ removal of children rather than offering support to families, the children’s lack of contact with the community or their families, and the resulting community grief.

One participant described the experience of the present adoption process: “A person in authority, like the RCMP or Indian agent, comes, takes the children forcibly from the parents, and puts them in a residential school. . . . The parents and family have no say.” Another participant summarized her experience of adoption: “In our family they were forced by MCFD. . . . We need to emphasize that if they were placed with non-Native families, [those] are the ones we heard didn’t work.”

Another participant described MCFD’s removal of children from their family and community and the subsequent lack of contact between the children and their family and community:

There are a couple of cases . . . where they [social workers] came in, grabbed three children out of the school, flew them in a plane, and then nobody, nobody—including the teachers or no one—contacted the parents to let them know what’s happened. It happened twice. (Circle group participant)

I lived in Vancouver, and I was working and I was taking care of my child. I was taking him to the hospital. I phoned Social Services and asked if there was respite to help me because I was so tired all the time. They said the only thing they could do is take my son away from me. . . . Ridiculous! . . . I just needed a bit of sleep. . . . Prevention—. . . . I think that would be the biggest part of the service [that] could be provided to the family. (Circle group participant)

The participants further explained the lack of contact through stories about children who were searching for family information. One participant equated the lack of family information with her residential school experience in which family information was unavailable to her. Another participant described his sadness when Lax Kw’alaam children from around the world contact the Lax Kw’alaam Band in an attempt to
reconnect with family; unfortunately, their information is sometimes so limited that their family connections are unknown. Yet another participant expressed her sadness when foster children lose family connection “because they are in the [MCFD] system too long.” Another participant spoke about a foster child who wanted to meet her biological parents, but the process took so long that her parents both passed away before she could make contact. The same participant talked about a child who had visited and asked about family connections to community members the child did not know, and through dialogue, the child discovered his or her family background.

*Adoption is “part of our culture” (Circle group participant).* The secondary theme was unexpectedly a positive evaluation of adoptions within First Nation communities practiced for generations. This positive, strong reaction seemed to stem from family and community power in decision making. The concept of First Nation people being “willing to share” their children is part of the “traditional law, community standards, values, and beliefs” (First Nation facilitator). Traditionally, children are shared with those who do not have children or have lost a child through illness. The participants described traditional adoptions as involving tribal agreements and custom adoptions as involving family adoption agreements, and, collectively, The Circle group participants summarized both methods of adoption as “Indian adoptions.” They described an Indian adoption as a highly honored act of generosity from one family to another. Within this process the child is also honored, and soon, one participant reported, the community accepts the new family situation, with no stigma attached to the child or the adopting parents in the community. The participants described the child as belonging to the adopting family, yet knowing his or her biological family.
The participants told stories about families who presented their children to a couple who could not have children and to another family whose young child had passed away. One participant shared a story involving her mother:

She was given as a gift to her uncle and his wife when she was a baby because they could not have children and was raised as their daughter. . . . She always had contact throughout her life with her natural parents. (Circle group participant)

Another participant spoke of traditional adoption in her family:

She was pregnant, and she felt sorry for her brother, so she said, “When my baby is born, you can have the baby.” So when she went into labor, both the brother and his wife were there. So when the baby was born, she [the baby] . . . turns out to be my mom. This is Indian adoption. . . . She went by the name of [adoptive parents’ name] but biologically [had a different name]. She preferred [adoptive parents’ name] because they were the ones that raised her up. But she never forgot her family. (Circle group participant)

Yet another participant shared her family’s experience with custom adoption:

That’s how it is. . . . My mom, she took on the responsibility of my sister’s daughter. Really, she’s suppose to be my niece, but [she is] twenty-four now. . . . Never went through the [adoption] process, paperwork and everything—. . . . Indian adoption. (Circle group participant)

One participant described her feelings when she embraced a child who was new to the community and reported that the attachment grew to such an extent that she no longer remembered that the child was adopted; instead, the child had become part of the family and the community. One participant explained:

It kind of goes with attachment theory, . . . the feeling of belonging and that is where I come from; this is my identity; this is who I am, who I belong to. You know, getting attached in your thinking because you’re loved so much . . . that we want to welcome you into our lives, even through you aren’t biologically [related]. (Circle group participant)
What Has Worked in the Adoption Process?

The third question that the First Nation facilitator asked the Circle group participants was, “From your view, how has the MCFD adoption process worked?” The response from both Circle group participants was the lack of positive stories about MCFD adoptions. The common responses were, for example, “We don’t know” and “We have not heard of any that have worked.” The majority of the participants had heard of and observed adoptions that had not worked out and concurred in their responses.

From the little information that the participants knew, they described the adoption process as involving “red tape,” “lots of paperwork,” and “so much work involved.” One participant described the MCFD adoption process as “interrogative.” However, another knew of a “positive” experience with a government adoption.

I will discuss three themes within this question: (a) the participants’ general negative feelings toward foster care with unknown caregivers, (b) the denial of family and cultural connections that results, and (c) the expressed need for relationship building with social workers.

Stranger-paid care. The primary theme that the participants in both groups discussed was their concern of the quality and duration of care for Lax Kw’alaam children by strangers who received payment to look after them, and this was being reinforced by negative media coverage. Several participants described the quality of stranger “paid care” as questionable compared to “family care.” One participant stated, “You can’t expect somebody that’s being paid to have the child to get the compassion and love for a child that the natural family would have.” Directly related to this theme was the participants’ concern that social workers would “forget” about their children, particularly
those who live in non–First Nation foster homes. One participant stated, “Hopefully, somewhere along the line, no matter where a child is adopted out, they will still maintain their cultural identity, because when they come to that aging-out category, that’s the hard part.”

The participants’ concerns about the care that their children receive has been exemplified through media coverage and TV documentaries of neglectful foster home environments. One participant spoke about a television program that she saw several years ago on the homes of non–First Nation caregivers:

In the homes of non-Natives . . . you had this [cat] litter box right beside the fridge, and it was filled with mess, waste. It was awful, and then it made me wonder. . . . Imagine how the parents who had their kids in care are thinking the same thoughts I had at the moment. . . . [Were] my kids . . . apprehended and placed in a home like that? Ugh! Disgusting! (Circle group participant)

Another participant immediately wondered after she saw a documentary on a child in a foster home how the birth families in the community felt about the care that their own children were receiving in foster care:

When I think of children in care, I think of that story [on TV] just before Christmas about these people who strapped this little girl to her crib, and I see images like that. . . . Then I feel helpless because they’ve taken them away from us, so we don’t know that we can go and get them. (Circle group participant)

However, the participants did not discredit all foster care situations. One participant made positive remarks about the foster parent with whom she had contact:

The lady that was looking after them, it was apparent that [the child] loved her very much because she was the kind of woman, she just loved kids. . . . And then I contacted the foster home myself: “Is it OK to come?” And we stayed as long as we wanted to . . . [then had] telephone contact. (Circle group participant)
"Unresolved cravings" (Circle group participant). Both Circle groups were concerned about non-First Nation foster or adoptive parents’ denying First Nation children cultural experiences and family contact. The participants specifically identified this theme of cultural and family longings as “unresolved cravings” and compared them to the craving for a favorite traditional food. It begins with prenatal connections and extends to adulthood: “One example was, the traditional food consumed during pregnancy predisposes the child to traditional tastes. When the child is later denied these foods by non–First Nation adopting and foster parents, the child is left with an unresolved craving” (Circle group participant).

One participant spoke about the right of CICs to attend traditional events that they were being denied. Another reported, “A child has been adopted into a non-Native home, and the non-Natives tried to protect that child from learning the child’s history, the history of our traditions.” A third participant had observed cultural resistance from a non–First Nation caregiver who denied a CIC the experience of First Nation traditional foods:

These people were non-Native, and they had one of our own kids from here. The dancers had a BBQ with salmon, fried bread, and our own traditional foods. . . . That kid wanted to see, but they said no, no, no; everything was no—especially to the fried bread: “You can have fries, but you can’t have fried bread,” or “You can’t have salmon.” . . . Yet that’s how, while in the mother’s womb, it is consumed. . . . When they are born, they become accustomed to that taste, so they know that taste. And that’s a craving that they want, and they’re going to find it somewhere. . . . I seen a little boy cry; he wanted fried bread. (Circle group participant)

One participant spoke of a foster child who had visited the community for a family burial. The participant asked the foster child to help with the turkey dinner and was surprised when the foster child explained that he “was never allowed in the kitchen.”
The participant explained that the kitchen is a traditional place for First Nation people to share; it is where “everybody lives; . . . everybody was always in the kitchen.”

The participants described the concern for unresolved cravings that extend to the broader milieu of the birth family and the strong ties within the Lax Kw’alaam community. Because of current MCFD adoption practice, according to the First Nation facilitator, children have “a craving to belong and a craving for family.” Without ongoing contact or communication with the child, the birth family, grandparents, and community members feel the loss of the connection.

Another participant was concerned about a child’s sadness during an MCFD-sponsored visit:

I’ve seen some foster kids too, they tend to shy away because they’re living in a different place, and they only know they’re going to be here for a little while, and then they go back to their foster homes. Some are kind of sad because they . . . have a taste of what they want to be, . . . who they want to be with. . . . It’s just a brief visit. But if they, I think, had more involvement in something like that, they [could] connect to their roots. (Circle group participant)

In addition, the participants reported that this unresolved craving continues in the child’s life. Another discussion that they mentioned involved a baby adopted from her community who, when she became an adolescent, wanted to contact her First Nation birth parent:

Now a teenager and expressed a desire to meet her biological mom, knowing that she was adopted. And loved her adopted family, with all her heart, but has this deep desire inside her to have a conversation with her mother, and knowing the mom is not in the picture any more. And those things don’t get resolved, so how was it that adoption worked for her as a child? It worked good in a sense that she was given stability and had security, but she still had unresolved . . . cravings. (Circle group participant)
This participant said that the community has “unresolved cravings” and long for contact with children who hold a special place in the community.

*Relationship building.* The third central theme was relationship building. The participants spoke of their desire for social workers to initiate an effective working relationship in their contact with First Nation people. One participant expressed her desire to interact with social workers in more than “a crisis relationship.” Another wanted “openness, mutual understanding” and wished that social workers could “relax” when they meet with them. “Don’t be bashful,” she recommended. Another participant considered it important to “take away the fear and authority that social workers have, . . . the feeling that people have that social workers have all this control.” As one participant explained, “We need to connect and feel comfortable with the people you’re dealing with too, not one way; we are quite accustomed to dealing with anybody and everybody.” The participants connected their relationship with child protection social workers to their view of MCFD adoption.

*What Does MCFD Need to Do?*

The fourth question that the facilitator asked in the Circle group was, “From your understanding of MCFD’s adoption process, what does MCFD need to do so that more First Nation people will adopt through MCFD?” The three central themes included: (a) the need for adoption-related information in the community, (b) support services to assist with adoption-related needs, and (c) the need for children’s views to be heard.

*“It’s not public knowledge” (Circle group participant).* Several participants described the need for more public information for First Nation people. The participants suggested that community adoption information workshops, TV ads, and access to
positive promotional books would assist the community in considering adoption. Both Circle groups identified the theme of the need for informal community workshops on adoption. They thought that these groups would be most successful if they are led by a First Nation person, include role plays, and explain how community members could perceive themselves as PAPs. One participant stated, “You need to communicate—not just some brochures sitting in the health unit, but . . . a personal representative coming and talk[ing] to the people in the community about the need for people to step forward.” Another participant recommended “a conscious, daily effort” to deliver adoption information for workshops to be successful.

The participants identified several workshop content areas that they considered essential for First Nation people. They recommended that adoption information groups provide information to help community members to clearly understand the MCFD adoption process, explain the meaning of adoption, assist people in “weigh[ing] the choice of adoption” with other options, describe the benefits of adoption, and explain the legal rights of adopting parents. The participants also wanted adoption information on how single-parent applicants could be approved by MCFD, medical information for adoptive parents before the child is placed in the adopting home, the impact on work benefits, the most successful age combinations for children who are placed in families, and family adjustment considerations. The participants suggested that the information workshop include methods of bringing children home, community announcements, and how to address negative media coverage of adoption. One participant stated:

I would like more info sessions, and through the info sessions they would probably get a good feel of where they would need to start. . . . Tailor-make their process . . . to address different aspects of life, . . . and then, of course, they would
know what they are getting into. . . . And when you hear the facts of how many of our children are in care out there and you hear a story like that, you'll get people coming forward and saying, "Well, can you research to find out if I have a family [member]?" Then you'll get families stepping forward. (Circle group participant)

Another participant commented:

Especially for small communities is hosting workshops and doing up promotion workshops in the community to talk about, What does it mean to adopt or bring home your children? What does it mean? How can I bring my children home? (Circle group participant)

The participants also recommended that adoption-information workshops give community members critical information to help them to understand and make adoption-related decisions with MCFD. One participant explained that some community members are frustrated because they are expected to understand the adoption process and make related decisions without adequate information.

Support, support. The theme of adoption support was common in both Circle groups. The participants spoke about the need for support from social workers during the adoption process and after completion, especially to deal with the issue of securing the necessary resources to meet children's special needs. They require assistance with the paperwork, more planning and more accurate assessments of a child's special needs, information on how to tell a child that he or she has been adopted through MCFD, workshops on how to work with special-needs children, extensive pre-adoption visits, coordination of existing services to give the adoptive parent more effective access to services, assistance in dealing with negative adoption reactions, family conferences to deal with complex issues that arise from adoption, and assistance for birth families with how to deal with their grief and loss. One participant commented, "You just need that support behind you, and it's not just support services. . . . How do you define support? By
someone being there, somebody talking to you” (Circle group participant). Another
stated:

“One big thing you’re asking what you can do for adoptive parents—just be there
for them. You know, if they need help, just be there. . . . If you say you’re going to
be there, be there. (Circle group participant)

Another suggestion was to use a First Nation adoptive parent buddy system to
give PAPs emotional support. Several participants agreed that this system would improve
First Nation people’s adoption experiences and thereby reduce the feeling that First
Nation applicants are alone in the process. The participants spoke about the buddy system
as an informal way of sharing information between First Nation people:

[With] the buddy system . . . you can say, “Well, how did the adoption go for you?
I’ve been thinking about it.” I think . . . if you have the opportunity to connect
prospective parents with others that have already been through it, . . . they would
be willing to do that. (Circle group participant)

The participants discussed financial support and information on PAA; in
particular, the need to have funds immediately when the child arrives in the home so that
the families do not experience financial burden:

I have a big complaint. . . . The Ministry will put these children in care, but it will
take four months to get any kind of financial assistance for this child. I have heard
that over and over. It’s a quick fix, out of sight, out of mind, and yet this family is
supposed to take the child in whether they can afford it or not, and yet again give
up, not just the space, but the finances, . . . and then fight the Ministry.

Children’s views. The participants spoke about the need for an adoption process
with a First Nation focus on children. The participants spoke positively about cultural
camps, the current practice of MCFD in which CICs travel, usually with foster parents, to
visit their First Nation communities. Cultural camps help to introduce children to
relatives, some of whom might not have not seen the children since MCFD removed them.

The participants discussed the need to consider the views of children to a greater extent in the adoption process:

That was my recommendation to MCFD when we had meetings with them: Has anybody ever asked the child what they’d like to have or where can the child go? Or is there someone that you can trust that you can go with for the time being? And their answer is no. No one ever asked the child anything. And that’s why I really don’t like the ministry’s phrase “the best interest of the child.” They’re not looking at the best interest of the child, not in our culture. (Circle group participant)

The participants spoke about the need for MCFD to provide more adoption information in an acceptable format, to provide adoption-related support, and to attend to the needs of children to a greater extent.

Meeting Cultural Needs

This section addresses the responses to question 5: “How can the cultural needs of potential Aboriginal adoptive parents be listened to better?” The major theme derived from these responses was the need for social workers to learn about First Nation culture, which includes (a) participating in traditional events, (b) understanding how First Nation people identify their family and tribal connections, and (c) understanding the traditional roles of grandparents and First Nation leadership. As the participants explained, the Lax Kw’alaam culture includes an understanding that the people will learn about other cultures in other territories to conduct themselves properly and avoid embarrassment. The participants expressed frustration with social work professionals’ lack of cultural understanding.
"So they can see that you want to learn about the people" (Circle group participant). The participants spoke about the need for social workers to understand various aspects of First Nation culture by understanding what is and is not considered a cultural activity, how hands-on learning can assist the social worker, and the need for social workers to have formal cultural education as part of the social work program.

The participants spoke openly about Aboriginal days and what this event meant to them. Aboriginal days are typically a summer community celebration of Aboriginal people. The participants did not describe Aboriginal days as a cultural event specific to the First Nation people. As one participant commented, "It got me thinking. . . . We have Aboriginal days, and . . . I always thought it was all about Natives until one day Mom pointed out it’s about every nationality in the world, everyone." Another participant stated her view of Aboriginal days: "It started that way, but we celebrate the nationalities of all people, because where I work, they come out. Well, they’re celebrating you too; you’re an Aboriginal unto your own, not First Nations."

One participant was frustrated when she heard a non-First Nation person use his or her association with a First Nation acquaintance to demonstrate cultural understanding. The participant often felt "stereotyped" by the views of non-First Nation people. This participant reported a conversation with social workers. When she was on a break, a colleague asked her about an event that the workers felt could hold some special meaning and asked her to interpret it. The participant spoke about her "dead-crow story":

We were sitting outside, with the smokers talking about the dead crow that was on the road. . . . They were talking about what it meant, and they looked at me because they see me as someone who’s different, . . . like there’s something behind this. (Circle group participant)
She told the workers that there is no special meaning and that she was irritated with their assumption because a dead crow is a dead crow.

Another example of social workers’ lack of cultural understanding is their limited understanding of how to identify vital children’s information:

The other thing is, you have workers who don’t know what is your name, what is your clan, what is your tribe. That child’s culture is its clan, its tribe, its community. A lot of people who associate with that [misinformation] don’t know or don’t want to know. . . . I’m this tribe; this is my crest. There’s a lot of protocol that they need to know. (Circle group participant)

Several participants believed that culture is best understood through direct experience; as a result, social workers need to be involved in feasts and gatherings, which First Nation people would view as positive. As the participants explained, their feasts are a means of sharing their community traditions with others, and everyone is welcome to attend a feast that takes place in the community. They explained that community leadership involves a format that family members know and teach that honors and maintains traditional roles. Guests should be open to learning about appropriate conduct and need to know that they would be encouraged to “help out” as is customary during a feast. One participant advised social workers to “just go and offer help or just pitch in,” which is customary at feasts. Several participants reported that each individual and family practices its culture differently.

The participants specifically extended the concept of sharing traditions to foster parents. In speaking about a community feast, one participant stated that it is “good for foster parents too. . . . Some of them actually enjoy that, hearing new things.” This participant added that she enjoyed seeing people make an effort to participate in their cultural events. Another described involvement in cultural events as “respectful.”
Several participants spoke about the need for social workers to learn about First Nation culture through formal education programs at the college or local university. They saw a need for cultural education led by a First Nation facilitator to reduce embarrassing situations for social workers in their work. Social workers’ supervisors would need to support them in training and grant them permission to attend, even in light of their busy schedules. The participants discussed their frustrations, and one participant said, “I like the changes. I want to see more!”

*Traditional roles.* The Circle group participants discussed the theme of traditional roles, including the importance of the Band Council in protecting community members, the importance of having a mutual and collaborative decision-making process, and the component of cultural considerations in many community processes.

The participants identified the need for an adoption recruitment process that is sensitive to culturally maintained traditional roles and that can assist MCFD in recruiting First Nation PAPs. The adoption process that they would like to see includes a First Nation community, Elders, and informal community contacts who would be consulted to identify possible adoptive parents for First Nation children who are currently with MCFD. The participants felt that the current adoption process ignores the importance of First Nation leaders and Band workers.

One participant said that social workers who understand First Nation traditions must know that they can be “grilled” or challenged at times and that this can be part of the decision-making process. Although it may be uncomfortable for the social worker, community members are also involved in this process.
The participants considered the process of working together with community members as beneficial in adoption planning:

You work with the Elders, . . . people in the village. . . . There are certain people in there who are not leaders, but they assume the role. . . . Touch base with them. You can talk with one person, and they'll get it all together, just like we [did here].

Another theme was the rights, roles, and responsibilities of grandparents, which was a theme in the responses to various questions. Along with providing traditional teachings and playing a vital role in contributing to family decisions, grandparents have a key role in shaping children’s behaviors. For example, correcting children’s behavior is often accomplished through a message woven throughout a story. This form of sharing corrective information leaves children “going away feeling really good about themselves,” as several participants suggested. Another participant confirmed that this form of imparting information is still being used: “My mom did that to me . . . in a loving way . . . and with my children.”

Grandparents also provide care for their children:

You know, grandparents always take their grandkids and they give them a bed to sleep on for the night, and it’s an ongoing thing if parents are out for the night. Not to say they’re not caring for their children; they do provide babysitters, or the kids prefer to go to Gran and Papa’s place. You know, that happens today. I know when I was growing up, my grandmother was always there for us. (Circle group participant)

So the grandparents are stepping in, trying to keep the family together, and there’s no support services for the family, for the grandchild, to keep the kid. They put so much time and energy into trying to provide a healthy, disciplined [family]. (Circle group participant)

The participants also considered birth-family communication in the adoption process important. It would be advantageous for social workers to recognize respect for
the birth family in planning for adoption. Both Circle groups discussed the grief and loss of birth parents in adoptions. One participant recommended assisting in the adoption process by “gather[ing] the family together. . . . It would really help them to get through the process.” Another participant spoke about “flexible boundaries” between the birth family and adoptive family that would be helpful in the adoption process. One participant stated, “I’ll tell you one reason why I wouldn’t want to adopt, is because I don’t want to take the child, separate child from the parents. I would adopt a child if the parents are no longer living: (Circle group participant).

Imbedded in this process is the culturally understood concept that First Nation community leaders will protect their members. Community leadership also ensures that members have “emotional space,” as one participant described it, prior to finalizing the decision making.

Although some participants spoke of the difficulty in maintaining their culture, in which some did not want to participate, others spoke of culture as highly valued by many community members. Some participants commented on the need for community members to know more about the traditional teachings. Some recognized that the culture has gone through a struggle, and one participant summarized the discussion: “That’s what happened. . . . White people think it’s just an individual crisis and self-identity, but I think the whole of Canada doesn’t recognize that we. . . . still have our own culture (Circle group participant).

Several participants believed that social workers are capable of learning about their culture, and they discussed social workers’ self-awareness and willingness to learn. Listening and demonstrating respect are key values in this theme. The participants
recognized that social workers would not understand their culture quickly, but that if they asked, community members would give them the information that they need. One participant identified “listening to understand” as an important aspect of learning another culture.

*What Would Encourage You to Adopt?*

The sixth question had two sub questions: “What would encourage you to adopt through MCFD?” and “How can MCFD recruit First Nation people to adopt?” The two central themes were (a) the need for TV advertisements to recruit First Nation parents and (b) MCFD’s demonstration of a greater commitment to more effective adoption services. One participant lamented having “too many unanswered questions.”

“*Let the people know*” (*Circle group participant*). Several participants recommended that First Nation people receive specific information such as provincial statistics on the CICs in care through television: “If you are looking for people to adopt children, there needs to be more out there, like advertising. . . . How are people going to know that if you don’t?” “For what you are doing now, you’re trying to promote adoption and get more people interested. . . . Get out there and do more advertising”; and “You don’t see that there’s a need out there.” The suggestions for central advertising messages included developing catchy, easily remembered slogans and questioning viewers’ knowledge by using statements such as “Did you know . . . ?”

One participant wondered, “Could you put a number to all these people in foster homes? Even a face—I would like to see the faces of these children in the homes too.” This participant explained that First Nation people need to conceptualize themselves as adopting children who are currently placed with MCFD and that this would be a relatively
new idea. An effective public adoption recruiting campaign that highlights First Nation adoption successes would help to create momentum for adoption applicants: “If one comes, the others will follow.”

A closely related recommendation involves publications that emphasize successful First Nation adoption stories from a First Nation perspective. One participant suggested “Adoption Soup for the Soul”: “If I had heard stories or the number of children out there, and if I know there are children out there, then I would probably start thinking about adoption.” Another participant suggested that a book include “testimonials” on the potential of adoption.

“Is MCFD serious?” (Circle group participant). The participants questioned MCFD’s commitment to finding First Nation adoptive applicants. One participant recommended “a lot more encouragement from MCFD to put that out to the First Nations communities.” Another participant wanted to see “encouragement, openness, and initiative” from MCFD. Yet another charged that MCFD must be willing to work on changes. One participant commented that

First Nation people here need to be convinced again because of all the negative things that happened. When I talk about your campaign to convince us that we can do this, that we can look after our own, I feel that . . . we have to have support. (Circle group participant)

The participants discussed the need to know MCFD’s confidence in First Nation adoptive homes and wanted MCFD to acknowledge their “capacity” to be good adoptive parents and “adapt to new situations.” Several participants wondered how MCFD would respond to curious First Nation adoptive parents; “My question is, are they [MCFD] looking for us to adopt? From what I see, I don’t think they are. A lot of kids are going
into the system.” Another participant noted, “If the ministry wants to get involved in something like that, there are a lot of good resources right here.”

*What Do First Nation People Need to Be Able to Adopt?*

The seventh question is the central research question in the project: “What do our people need to adopt children in the care of MCFD?” The theme in the responses was the need for various policy changes to address cultural plans, the age of adoption consent, social workers’ need to acquire more accurate family information, and the need to keep children at home by working through the adoption process with the birth family.

*“Changes in policy to accommodate First Nations” (Circle group participant)*.

The participants wanted policy changes at the provincial level to include “mandatory consultation” with First Nation communities with regard to child welfare matters, including adoption: “Cooperatively work out policy with First Nation people.” The participants identified a need for a policy that includes the voice of First Nation people, is flexible to their needs, honors culture during the adoption process, offers alternatives so that children can remain at home even in the midst of challenging family situations, and takes a more consultative approach to the adoption process.

The participants also discussed cultural plans that describe the responsibility of adoptive parents to maintain the cultural needs of the child. They described cultural practices as learned only through direct personal experience. Overall, the participants were uncertain of the purpose of MCFD’s current cultural plans and of the options that community leadership has in constructing the cultural plans.

The participants requested that the child’s age of consent be changed to 15 years from 12 year of age, and they voiced their concern that particularly younger children from
their community were being bribed to sign the consent form. One participant gave an example of a foster parent who had called a family member to persuade her to agree to the non-First Nation adoption. The foster parent told the family member that if the child signed the consent, he or she would be rewarded with a trip to Disneyland. The participant questioned the current process of obtaining consents and the age at which children can consent.

Another need that the participants identified was a policy that states that families should have first priority in adoption—"family first" over foster caregivers or stranger adoption. They described showing the birth family respect as acknowledging the family and having the potential for contact after adoption. One participant questioned the current practice: "They say the mother and father are always the first consideration." Policy changes need to include bio-family acknowledgement in the adoption. One participant summarized the First Nation value of birth parents: "The parents have brought this child into this world... We praise the women for the upbringing of these children and what they taught them."

The participants recommended that the birth family be involved in and advised of the adoption; however, the participants ideally preferred birth-family consent to the adoption process. Several identified the grief and loss of the birth family, if it is not dealt with in a sensitive manner, as a barrier to the child’s adopted.

The participants also spoke about the community value of protecting the child’s right to know family information. One participant suggested that foster children receive a family tree so that they know about their biological families. Another participant addressed the fear of First Nation people who are considering adoption, mostly due to the
lack of essential family information which could result in the adopting parents inability to protect the child from inappropriate family relationships. One participant charged that “it’s a double standard. . . . They do what they want.”

One participant spoke about the two different standards for family information—MCFD’s and that of his First Nation culture:

I never thought of it in that aspect, in terms of two pieces of vital information where the standards of vital information are not the same [the First Nation standard versus MCFD’s standard]. One standard is higher than the other. Our standard is pretty high. . . . For us, . . . this is our culture; this is who we are. (Circle group participant)

The lack of information is so extensive that participants wondered how they will connect with their children. Another participant added, “That’s a high number of First Nation children. . . . [They] could be in another province; we don’t even know where some of our people live. . . . It would be nice to know our members, . . . but they take time.”

Several responses to the questions identified “family bloodlines” as a critical issue in adoption and related issues with regard to adoption complexities:

I think that . . . for the ministry, if they really want to get into this [adoptions] with First Nations and get more people interested, they need to know who their child is. . . . What is their background? Where did they come from? Who is their grandmother? Who is the mom, the dad? What band are they registered under? What clan do they come from? . . . The basic ones—the raven, eagle, killer whale—and not every community has those four there; they vary. What’s the heart of the child? You know, it’s good to know who your child is. It’s not just somebody you’re paying someone else to care for, but do you really know your child, who the person is? If you have background information, you’re a step ahead. (Circle group participant)

The preceding comments indicate that a more thorough information system is required to track family history.
The discussions of both Circle groups included the awkward relationship with MCFD social workers; various areas of the adoption process that cross into the Lax Kw’alaam culture, with little understanding of family or community impact; and concerned community members’ recommendations for change.

Study Conclusions

To conclude, the contributions of the Lax Kw’alaam First Nation participants in their responses to seven questions on adoption and the MCFD process generated these results. The First Nation facilitator asked the major research question: “What do our people need to adopt children in the care of MCFD?” The conclusions suggest that the participants from the First Nation community are open to adopting children who are currently in the care of MCFD. The overriding themes that the First Nation participants identified were (a) the concern and commitment of the Lax Kw’alaam community for their children, (b) the need for social workers to understand the First Nation culture and perspective, and (c) the need for MCFD to develop a collaborative adoption process that respects culture and traditions.

"Bringing Children Home"

The Circle group participants agreed on their concern for children whom they see as valued community members and who are currently not connected to their families or the community. The participants discussed these children in terms such as “they belong to us.” They spoke about their worry for the children and felt committed to them, even when they did not have adequate information on where the children were located. The Circle group participants in this project clearly stated their desire to adopt especially their relatives, and possibly other children from connected cultures. They commented that they
are “willing to share, willing to give”; “want more children”; and have a desire to “raise, love, and protect their children.” Consistent with this theme was their desire for their children to be returned to them: “The families who have their kids in care would love to take them back.” One participant stated, “I feel if we don’t take people away from our culture and extended family, it would be better...we could go back to operating more as a community.” The ultimate desire was for a process that would “leave the children home” (Circle group participant). However, the participants in both Circle groups unfortunately did not have the necessary information or support for adoption at this time.

“To Be Respected”

Relationships with social workers was a pervasive theme in both Circle groups. The participants expressed a desire for more constructive relationships with social workers—more mutual, open, and culturally appropriate. They correlated their adoption considerations directly with their experiences with and feelings for child protection social workers. The participants stressed that they needed social workers to initiate positive relationships with First Nation communities in order for them to reciprocate.

The poor outcomes that are evident in the current lived experiences of Aboriginal children, youth, and families compel child welfare to move past tinkering with services to examine what needs to be changed in the values and basic approach of the profession itself to improve child welfare work and relationships with Aboriginal children and families. Reconciliation in child welfare is a process of jointly examining the history of child welfare from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives, understanding the values and beliefs that underpinned poor practice, and then moving forward with a new set of foundational and collaborative values (touchstones) to develop an improved system. (Blackstock, Brown, & Bennett, 2007, p. 64)
"We Need to See That the Other Side of the Table Is Willing to Work"

The participants in both Circle groups recommended that MCFD demonstrate its commitment to a First Nation-focused adoption process. They want to know that MCFD staff and the adoption system will offer support and encouragement during the process. The community is "fighting for things to be better," which requires adoption-related resources.

One participant challenged MCFD to analyze the adoption process and outcomes and compare them with traditional adoption practices—"I think they should really look at what they have done, what has, what hasn't worked for them. . . . You have a lot of gifted people out there; . . . they can see what it is like growing up in a foster home"—and then compare MCFD's practices to custom or traditional adoption "because there's no paperwork in Indian adoption; they just do it" (Circle group participant).

The project was in process on the eve of MCFD's celebration of the historical event of the first BC Aboriginal agency to receive adoption delegation. On January 17, 2008, the Cowichan tribes signed the first provincial adoption agreement with the Aboriginal agency of Lalum'utul Smu'eem in Duncan, BC (MCFD, 2008a).

Scope and Limitations of the Research

Even with careful attention to cultural details, the area of First Nation adoptions is so vast that this research project had many limitations. Foremost, I am a Caucasian middle-class social worker employed with MCFD, which may have altered the project's results. The first Circle group involved participants who knew of me or had heard about me indirectly, and the second Circle group, conducted in Lax Kw'alaam, involved participants with whom I had no direct or indirect contact prior to the Circle group
session. However, the First Nation facilitator led the Circle groups, and the participants appeared to be comfortable with this approach.

The Lax Kw'alaam community was exclusively engaged in the project, but the sample was small. Ideally, a large, diverse participant population of First Nation community members would have offered greater input into recommendations for a more effective adoption process for the province. The constellation of volunteers may have been influenced by a bias in their selection. Furthermore, conducting Circle groups with other First Nation or Aboriginal communities in the northwest or in BC could produce different results. The findings are limited to the views of Aboriginal people in this specific geographical area and can only tentatively be applied to other situations.

An invaluable information source that was missing from this project was the views and recommendations of First Nation children, First Nation birth parents, and First Nation adoptive parents on their experiences with the MCFD adoption process.

The group discussions focused on seven adoption-related questions, which may have limited the findings compared to a narrative research approach. The First Nation facilitator reviewed the research questions, but they were not piloted with a cross section of First Nation people, and, in fact, the first research question was less than optimal.

The project is limited in its examination of the views of First Nation social workers who could contribute their professional and cultural experiences to the research findings.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This chapter presents the study recommendations that resulted from the research findings and conclusions. The goal of this research is to benefit MCFD Adoptions Unit and the First Nation children and families of the northwest, both have directly or indirectly experienced difficulties with MCFD adoptions, and both want to find solutions. The recommendations for future research follow the organizational implications for MCFD Adoptions. The goals of the Hughes Review call for a new practice in current permanency and adoption services for Aboriginal people that includes “engaging with, collaborating with, and establishing partnerships with, Aboriginal communities to deliver outreach, advocacy and support for initiatives that improve results for Aboriginal children and youth” (Representative for Children and Youth, 2007a, p. 10). The Honourable Tom Christensen (as cited in MCFD, 2008b) stated in the “Message from the Minister and Accountability Statement”:

We are also committed to ensuring permanency plans are in place for children in care. We are committed to reducing the time it takes to identify adoption matches for those children who will benefit from this type of permanent family home. (p. 3)

Study Recommendations

The study recommendations are derived from information the researcher collected with the Circle groups and include the following: (a) Keep the children safe and in the community as the first course of MCFD intervention, (b) provide user-friendly adoption information that can be used to recruit PAPs within the community, (c) implement a process of adoption in collaboration with the child’s community, and (d) increase social workers’ hands-on cultural learning.
Supporting Children within Their Community

A recurring recommendation was that MCFD offer supportive services to extricate children from further non-First Nation adoptions. The participants were clear on the need to explore other interventions rather than removing children from their community, which they felt is MCFD’s current primary means of intervention or support: “Child well-being is inseparable from the well-being of the child’s family” (Carbino, 2006, p. 467). This recommendation includes (a) offering family strength-building programs within the community to support birth parents who, when they require treatment, could leave the community while the child, with the support of the Band, remains in the community in a safe place; (b) making on-call respite homes available to community parents who require immediate support, which could be funded upon the child’s arrival and coordinated independently of MCFD’s child-protection monitoring; (c) teaching communities family life skills; the programs could be led by residents who would enlist MCFD social workers as resource coordinators; (d) ensuring that the foster parent immediately agree to adhere to a cultural plan should a child from the community be removed, travel with the child to the community, and provide weekly updates to the Aboriginal agency or Band worker; and (e) making the MCFD social worker accountable for assuring that children and appropriate family members have daily contact, whether by letter, fax, telephone conference, video conference, or other appropriate means, and that contact be extended to community members who have taken on the role of a family member with the child. “Repeatedly, it was suggested that the greatest deficit in the system was [a] lack of emphasis on the importance of one-to-one relationships and individualized planning for children” (Herbert, 2007, p. 235).
Community Consultation

The Circle group participants expressed the need for procedural changes with regard to the level of community consultation in child welfare matters. As one Circle group participant stated, “The best interest of the child should not be established by the Ministry. . . . I would say it would have to be in collaboration with the community. The community [should] have veto over any guidelines.” The objective is to respect the child and community connections. This recommendation includes (a) ensuring that First Nation community leaders provide direct feedback to MCFD at the local office and the regional level on MCFD’s collaboration in adoption and child protection services; (b) offering family group conferencing led by a First Nation person, bringing agreements to the attention of the Band worker, and holding the family conference prior to the child’s being removed from the community; (c) ensuring that the community leadership agrees with all adoptions of community children to First Nation and non–First Nation PAPs, which would necessitate Band approval prior to MCFD acceptance of adoption applications; (d) ensuring that MCFD social workers are available to children and their families for in-person meetings with community leaders as a priority in their job functions; and (e) ensuring that all non–First Nation adoptees can have yearly visits to the community to maintain community and family connections. Lafrance and Bastien (2007) described the critical changes needed in child welfare for Aboriginal people:

Our challenge is now to continue the collaboration and take steps to implement community recommendations. . . . It means we can no longer impose rigid processes that do not work and that consume immense staff and community resources with little benefit for children and families. It means that we need to collaborate on the development of program designs that promote community development and reduce procedural requirements that contribute little to program
quality. Mostly, it means beginning to let loose the bonds of an iron cage that can stifle life and limit the innate creativity in those who care about others. (p. 100)

*User-Friendly Adoption Information*

The First Nation participants clearly identified their need for user-friendly adoption-related information communicated to the residents in a friendly, relaxed, and engaging manner. The community members also require time to get to know the MCFC social worker before the adoption information workshop is held. Adoption information workshops must be led by First Nation persons and include celebratory food, and the MCFC social worker should be present as a resource person. The attendees need ample time to express their related concerns and ideas. The workshops must provide information on the number of First Nation children in the north and include other statistical information, with the goal of informing the community of the need for First Nation PAPs.

The MCFC’s (1999) *Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Services* specifies that,

> Aboriginal people require that ministry-delivered services be respectful of the Aboriginal culture and relationships within communities. Therefore, the Ministry of Children and Families will work with Aboriginal communities to ensure services delivered by the ministry or its contracted agencies are culturally appropriate and accessible to Aboriginal people. (p. 5)

Adoption workshops must also provide community leadership with the adoption information needed to make informed decisions. Adoption workshops need to be ongoing throughout the year to allow various community members to attend. Maintaining connections with First Nation leadership, respecting the right of First Nation community leaders to design the group format, and continuing positive relationships with community members is recommended for optimal workshop success. As Pat O’Brien (2008) stated in his article on adoption in *Focus on Adoption* magazine:
Would you start looking for them [adoptive homes] if you knew permanent homes were easier to find? I hope so. And it is true. We can find unconditionally committed adoptive or permanent parents for every kid in our care. But we have to choose to believe the families are out there first. Once we absolutely know the families are there, 75% of the job of finding the family is done. The other 25%, actually identifying an individual family for the child, becomes the easier part. (p. 15)

*Relationship Necessities and Cultural Dignity*

The necessity for social workers to effectively build relationships and understand the culture of local First Nation people is critical for First Nation adoptive parents to consider adopting First Nation children in the care of MCFD. This relationship is linked to the “comfort factor” First Nation participants believe is missing from their dealings with social workers, which has a detrimental effect on their consideration to adopt. To develop this relationship well, non–First Nation social workers have much emotional work ahead of them:

Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people must jointly understand that they, and the people they care about, will continue to lose if the nature of their relationship does not change. For non-Aboriginal people, the journey will be longer as they are less familiar with Aboriginal peoples than Aboriginal peoples are with them. (Blackstock, Brown & Bennett, 2007, p. 68)

The participants stressed that social workers must understand the identity needs of First Nations children, and accomplishing this requires that they obtain vital family and cultural information about the child, prior to removing the child from the community, and that this information be accessible to those who are planning for the child. This recommendation requires that social workers have extensive cultural knowledge.

Social workers may take cultural training provided by the workplace; they may seek out a First Nation person who would be willing to be a cultural coach, as I did for the project design and implementation; or they may engage in hands-on cultural
experiences to begin their journey in cultural understanding, knowing that the added confidence they will gain by developing effective working relationships with First Nation people will affect the outcomes for the child.

Cultural education is too vital to be left out of professional requirements. MCFD could require a local northern cultural component as part of the social work diploma program offered at the North West Community College, or include it within the constructs of the Bachelor of Social Work program offered at the University of Northern BC. I also recommend hiring social workers who are capable of and willing to connect culturally. “For practitioners, cultural competence requires organizational support, targeted resources and a commitment to staff recruitment that reflects the ethnic composition of the communities being served” (Dolan, 2005, p. 173).

Organizational Implications

The premise in this section is that the child welfare system has the capacity to provide a service that honors First Nations people. “Expectations . . . have changed, with leaders adopting the language of cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork, and followers expecting to participate, to be empowered, and to be members of teams” (Donahue & Nye, 2003, p. 18). By building on the strength and competence that comes with learning, social workers can contemplate a new type of child welfare (R. Walls, personal communication, March 12, 2008). Barnes (1996) explained that tomorrow’s leaders will be those who know that teams—linked and balanced, self-directed units of people—will invariably outperform a loose group of individuals who operate together by chance alone . . . . Teams can be deployed, refocused and motivated for action quickly. When a team is committed to tangible results, it can readily leverage the combined role preferences and skills of its members to achieve outcomes (and processes) beyond the competence and reach of less unified collections of employees. (p. 121)
Team-Based Child Welfare

Based on the findings of this project, specifically the comments made by First Nation participants for; greater collaboration in the child welfare process; increased support services prior to removal of a child; and the strong correlation perceived between First Nation child protection experience and adoption views, I recommend a team-based approach. A team-based approach would shift client support services, currently at the end of the permanency continuum, to the early intervention stage of intervention. This model places the Child Protection worker, Roots social workers, who are responsible for tracking cultural and family information, and Adoption workers at the forefront of child welfare interventions, as a team, to focus on permanency planning. These substantial changes have the potential to reduce the lag time in present permanency discussion and increase the potential to obtain vital family and cultural information.

Within this team-based model, current hierarchal and linear structures are minimized to increase the responsiveness and effectiveness essential for a positive working relationship with First Nation children and families. The family development model (Figure 3) shows that current supervisors for Resources, Family Group Conferencing, Guardianship, and Family Services are shifted to Facilitator roles and functions to maximize the client-service focus for frontline workers. The Permanency Facilitator and Support Service Facilitator utilize the strengths and expertise of workers on their team. The success of the family development model depends on the entire team’s accountability for supporting First Nation families so that they may remain together to the greatest extent possible.
The structural shift includes an established and continual feedback function. First Nation children and families are encouraged to communicate their views on and recommendations for improved child welfare service, either in writing or through a team debriefing group meeting included in team-based evaluations:

The failure to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care calls for an exploration of the child welfare system itself, and the social work profession in particular, to assess how they support or lessen positive outcomes for Aboriginal children. (Blackstock et al., 2007, p. 59)

All team members are responsible for ongoing cultural learning from a local Aboriginal person and a local Aboriginal perspective (Haldane et al., 2003). “Cultural competence can be conceptualized as a process by which practitioners combine their
knowledge and understanding of culturally influenced behaviour with certain skills and abilities in a cross-cultural interaction" (Dolan, 2005, p. 169). Cultural learning is funded and encouraged at a managerial level.

The team members complete tasks according to each member’s talents and abilities, and the team members and facilitator assign them. Members evaluate each other and themselves based on team performance, demonstration of cultural dignity with clients, and each team member’s contribution to overall team success and satisfactory service delivery. This approach seeks out family resources in the child’s community and positions the child for the greatest likelihood of permanency at the earliest possible point of intervention.

The changes that result from this research with MCFD and Aboriginal people will focus on the need for social workers to improve their cultural competence, the educational needs of social workers to increase their cultural understanding, supportive interventions that allow community members to identify the CICs, and adoption approaches that are acceptable to First Nation communities. Leadership opportunities can encourage social workers to find creative solutions, along with their First Nation partners, to the challenges and possible opposition to adopting First Nation children into First Nation homes.

If this study’s recommendations are not implemented, and the state of adoption remains the same, the professional community should question the continued level of potential harm to First Nation people and their children. Should the recommendations be put into action, the implications are a shift in social worker practice that has the potential
to change the future of First Nation children who are currently in foster homes, many without lifelong parental or cultural connections.

Implications for Future Research

Research with First Nation people can easily encounter numerous barriers, and research with First Nation people regarding adoption is rare. Future research that responds to the adoption needs of First Nation children will be possible only when strong relationships with Aboriginal people are established. Researchers must be comfortable in First Nation communities. Their personal character is valued above their credentials as researchers. Spending time in the community prior to conducting business is important to First Nation community residents given the history of professionals’ swooping into the community and then leaving without having made an effort to build relationships.

Researchers in the North may encounter challenging weather circumstances, as I did when the temperature dropped to -29°C the night before I drove two hours along icy roads, before I boarded a seven-seater float plane and took my own food for the three-day stay. When I was ready to travel back home, a storm hit the community, and my departure time and date were questionable.

Researchers must understand the importance of socialization and self-disclosure for First Nation people prior to and during task completions. Researchers need to be flexible; it is not uncommon for interruptions to take place, for participants to want to include a community member who was not first invited, and for the participants to require time—much time—listening to each other and wanting to be heard in what may seem to be unrelated topic areas.
Lengthy ethics procedures can easily dampen the enthusiasm of the researcher and the First Nation stakeholders. Researchers must be prepared to advocate for their research with the university ethics committee and the government research approval department. These departments absorb precious research time which can be best used towards a more respectful process with First Nation community leaders and members.

This research project provided a small cross section of data with participants from one First Nation community. I recommend (a) that a sample of numerous First Nation, Aboriginal and Métis communities be examined to test the generalizability to these results; (b) that longitudinal research be conducted on MCFD adoptions with First Nation adoptees; (c) that research of adoption success for traditional or cultural adoptions versus First Nation children who were in the care of MCFD; (d) that future studies be conducted regarding factors which affect MCFD adoption break downs of First Nation children adopted into non-First Nation homes; (e) that the association identified between child protection intervention experiences and adoption views be explored with First Nation people; (f) that means of ensuring collaboration with First Nation people on permanency planning and adoption be identified; (g) that ways which academia can best support social worker practice with First Nation children and families be determined.

Leadership is relatively new to the social work field; as a result, I recommend that research assess the need for social workers to use a leadership approach in frontline practice. "There is a lack of studied and published literature of social work and transformational leadership, even though social work administration are in favor of the results" (Fisher, 2005, p. 41).
CHAPTER SIX: LESSONS LEARNED

This chapter reviews the lessons learned during the conduct and leadership of this action research project. Stringer's (1999) look, think, act stages are revisited and form the structure for chapter sections. In the midst of daily demands, social workers can benefit from the journey of reflection which is both invigorating and exhausting.

After close to eight years of residency in the northwest, I have experienced the amplified complexities of First Nation culture, the multitude of which has slowly seeped into my consciousness. Even within my own region, many social workers have had limited experience with First Nation people and their culture. It is a rare privilege to be encircled by this ongoing learning opportunity, and the North has transformed me in ways that I would not have imagined, as has this project:

A social worker who is immersed in a northern community unavoidably transforms that community to some extent simply by her presence as an observer. But to open the pathway for dialogue and real mutual understanding is, necessarily, to risk being transformed oneself, and this is in fact the touchstone of dialogue: that it liberates and transforms its players. A northern community, like a work of art, is susceptible to many valid interpretations, but always when it "speaks" and reveals its "truth" it does so because it succeeded in moving and transforming its interpreter. (Delaney, Brownlee, & Zapf, 1996, p. 43)

Reading research, listening to the First Nations people who honored me with their valuable contributions, and reflecting on leadership and adoption issues in the North, has taken me to a new place.

Looking

Forever afterwards I will never underestimate the power and strength of the Lax Kw'alaam community members who believed in this project. It has taught me the importance of asking First Nation people for advice; being open to the awkward,
vulnerable place of learning; and trusting those who are experts in their culture. As I moved through the project I saw the wisdom and kindness of many First Nation people. If I had not first established relationships with them—which were tested by various circumstances—the project would have remained merely an idea, with no hope of completion or expression. I began to wonder how social workers, including myself, could initiate positive change. During the design of this project and through much consultation, my First Nation cultural learning clashed with my Western views.

At times I experienced cultural disorientation. This paradigm shift in my world view affected my personal views and my professional practice. I struggled to authenticate my research experience and honor those whose culture I continue to learn: “As a researcher, you are a curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants. You do not come as an expert or authority” (Glesne, 2006, p. 46).

Thinking

I completed this project while working full time, which made for a hectic and often isolating learning experience. As I worked through several difficult First Nation adoptions, with support from NIFCS staff, I hoped to facilitate a project that would spark positive change in adoptions for First Nation people and those who work within MCFD Adoptions. I have heard the frustrations from both sides, and I believe that there is potential to begin finding workable solutions. The leadership development component of the Royal Roads University program and the humbling experience of leading a project in this atypical area of research, made me wonder whether my ideological hopes had cornered me. With its self-directed design, this project challenged my fear of vulnerability.
"You Are Being Resistant"

The first time that Dr. Bidgood told me "You are being resistant," I was arguing the merits of creativity and expressing frustration with the confines of the thesis structure. Dr. Bidgood was challenging my resistance, and encouraging me to adopt an open attitude to "not knowing" in this area of the learning process. Because I have valued learning since childhood and was now immersed in the master's experience, I thought he was terribly mistaken. However, at a social event approximately five months later we discussed government social workers, and again Dr. Bidgood challenged my resistance to in the learning process. I felt humbled. I conceded that it is difficult for me to be in the vulnerable place of learner. Yes, I agreed that many clients feel vulnerable and resistant to learning from their social workers, but what is the solution when social workers feel vulnerable and resistant to learning? What is the next step when that social worker is me?

I had grown accustomed to what Quinn (2004) describes as the normal state.

In the normal state, we seek equilibrium. In the normal state, we are comfort-centered, externally directed, self-focused, and internally closed. . . . The central purpose of anyone in such a system is to obtain status and resources while avoiding pain and punishment. . . . In the normal state, we typically employ two general strategies of change: Telling, that is, making logical arguments for change and Forcing, that is, using forms of leverage such as the threat of firing or ostracizing. Less often, we may use a third strategy, Participating, that is, using open dialogue and pursuing win-win strategies. (Quinn, 2004, pp. 69-70)

To surpass the normal state, social workers can view this resistance as an indication of strong values and commit to using this energy towards new learning.

"Active resistance indicates the presence of strong values and emotions that could serve as a source of commitment for opponents who are converted to supporters" (Yukl, 2006, p. 159). I suggest that social workers take control by advancing in their professional
development as learning leaders. My reflections yielded Figure 4, the Social-Worker-as-Learning-Leader cycle.

![Diagram of Social Worker as Learning Leader]

*Figure 4. Social Worker as Learning Leader.*

My learning echoes the writings of Johnson (2002):

She said, “I’m curious. How many here are afraid of change?” No one responded so she suggested, “How about a show of hands?” Only one hand went up. “Well, it looks like we’ve got one honest person in our group!” she said. And then continued, “Maybe you’ll like this next question better. How many here think other people are afraid of change?” Practically everyone raised their hands. Then they all started laughing. (p. 81)

*Curiosity*

Curiosity is a way of wondering what could be rather than focusing on the state of what is. Curiosity requires a profound break through people’s worldview to discover the
new state prior to changing current operations (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001, p. 39). “There’s only one way to come to understand the other person’s story, and that’s by being curious, . . . Certainty locks us out of their story; curiosity lets us in” (Stone et al., 2000, p. 37). If First Nation people’s criticisms of the adoption system have any merit, how can social workers consider change within their practice? Kirk (1985) described this as “creative ideas for sociological inquiry” (p. 22).

Curiosity can help people to view opportunity within obstacles. To advance an adoption practice that upholds First Nation cultural dignity, respects birth-family members, and creates openness to consider the same, curiosity must fuel the reflections of social work professionals. Curiosity results in acknowledging harsh realities and producing a climate in which truth is heard (Collins, 2001, p. 76). Helin (2006), an Aboriginal leader of Tsimshian ancestry, a lawyer, and a businessman, stated:

It is true that in Canada and the United States, the respective federal governments are largely the culprits in the well-known historical drama of deceit, cultural villainy, and genocide. At the end of the day, however, the only practical and useful question that should be asked is: “What are we going to do about this mess?” We should be asking, “What pragmatic steps can we take now to make the lives of ordinary indigenous people better?” It should be obvious that we must begin moving forward and start looking for real solutions. (pp. 166-167)

**Learner Attitude**

Adults experience a sense of well-being when they learn (MacKeracher, 2004). Brenda Lewis, MCFD Regional Manager of Collaborative Practice and Programs, commented on the surprising number of northern social workers who have completed their master’s degrees, and continue to work within MCFD. Lewis linked learning to developing critical thinking. “What we know from past experience is an asset, but what leads to successful transformation is our capacity to learn in real time” (Quinn, 2004,
p. 65). For change to occur in First Nation adoptions, social workers require a learning attitude the confidence to be open to challenge, the compassion to listen, and the courage to wade through the vulnerability of learning. Herbert (2007) reported on the desire of social workers to increase learning through child welfare research and professional development. Herbert (2007) studied 1,118 Canadian social workers in a project with the Canadian Association of Social Workers:

An accompanying perception was that child welfare teaching in many schools or faculties of social work is often not informed by the real and current experience of those practitioners who work on the front line. Conversely, the respondents perceived that important child welfare research, emanating from academia, is not easily available to front-line practitioners. . . . Considerable emphasis was placed by respondents on the need for employing organizations to provide ongoing opportunities for professional development. (p. 230)

Listening to understand engages social workers with the challenges of different perspectives and worldviews and, ideally, helps them to meet them with a willingness to demonstrate humility. During this project I listened to the Lax Kw’alaam people’s many stories of adoption experiences and the resulting destructive impact on families and their community. I am thankful for their trust and courage in sharing their history. I have felt emotionally overwhelmed, grief ridden, and vulnerable in my cultural ignorance. As my father (Zuurbier, 1979) explained in his thesis, transformation follows learning. Listening fosters respect for historical pain, which, once expressed, creates space to consider a new approach. Social workers who demonstrate a willingness to listen open the door to change.

*Thinking Outside the Box*

Recruiting adoptive homes for First Nation children requires thinking outside the box, and, simultaneously, many social workers function inside the box. As social workers
watch First Nation children struggle in numerous non–First Nation foster homes, I recognize that the cultural dynamics are unfamiliar to many workers, and I hear the longing of community members to have their children returned. Discovering new solutions requires social worker creativity.

Creative people are identified as those who ignore conventional or standard ‘sets,’ look at things in new and unexpected ways, notice problems that others fail to notice and ask questions that others fail to raise, manifest significant autonomy and independence, are persevering and stimulated by the challenges of hard work, and operate far more by intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation (Branden, 1998, pp. 106-107). The creativity of thinking outside the box can frustrate a strongly hierarchical organization. Management may interpret creativity as oppositional and seek control through increased bureaucracy and hierarchy (Collins, 2001, p. 121). Creative social workers need to find those within the system who are open to developing their strengths. Maxwell (1993) identified creativity as a common strength that outstanding leaders share: “There is always a better way; . . . your challenge is to find it” (p. 446). If social workers believe that they have solutions, even though they are messy and unrefined, to current adoption issues, they need to demonstrate leadership by speaking out. Social workers have a wealth of knowledge; desire to continue learning; and capacity to increase their academic standing. Social workers can contribute substantially to present child welfare solutions. “It’s amazing to think there are people inside big companies spending millions of dollars to rediscover knowledge that already exists!” (Taylor & LaBarre, 2006, p. 97).
Social Worker as Learning Leader

Social workers within MCFD can seize leadership by contributing to adoption solutions. Leadership is not a descriptor of a position; rather, it is a descriptor of personal qualities (Anderson & Ackerman, 2001) that enables all social workers to develop their unique leadership potential and impact adoption services offered to First Nation children and families:

There will be times when every muscle, neuron and cell in your body screams out and resists that 180 degree turn to the inside. Regardless of whether you do it in the moment with the other person; or if you return the next hour, next day or much later and learn it by yourself; if you learn, you face the fact that you create, author, play out and sustain the impact that outside situations, events and others have on you. (Short, 1998, p. 87)

“The leader’s power comes from talent, sensitivity, and service rather than position or force” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 354). Social workers as learning leaders can expect positive change and associated risk taking as they work within a complex, surprising, and ambiguous organization:

When we encounter the fundamental state of leadership, we change. We become a source of variation, a jolt of uncertainty in the system. Once that happens, emergent organizing begins . . . Control systems and status structures melt away. Leadership shifts from person to person, as needed. (Quinn, 2004, p. 82)

This project encouraged me, not only to think about First Nation adoptions, but also to consider the participants and the First Nation facilitator for ideas to move forward and learn more: “Most people don’t believe me when I say that, but it’s true. The more you try to do in life, the more you will find that leadership makes the difference” (Maxwell, 1998, p. 235).
Acting

The ideals of change implementation are just emerging, which makes it difficult to finalize the “act” stage. The ethics process and what I learned prior to the data collection, exceeded my careful planning; however, a great deal of change occurred during the lengthy ethics process. The conversation the project provoked, the information it provided, and the resulting curiosity are encouraging. The union between First Nation PAPs and First Nation children who are waiting in foster homes is only in the beginning stages. I did not realize that key pieces needed to be in place first until I listened to the Circle group participants. Conversely, MCFD Adoptions in Victoria is in the process of exploring workable solutions. Johnson (2002) advised that “it works best, of course, when everyone in your organization knows the story—whether it is in a large corporation, a small business, or your family—because an organization can only change when enough people in it change” (p. 94).

The work of advocating for First Nation adoptive homes has not concluded; rather, it has only begun. I believe that many avenues to advocate for First Nation adoptions will open up as a result of this project. The ability to work carefully to maintain an authentic relationship with the participants and community members signals positive change. Stringer (1999) discussed the “act” stage:

It is this point at which action occurs—where we set out actually to do something about the problems that have been the driving force behind all the activity. . . . Social life is rarely as simple as that, however. We usually find that myriad issues emerge when we start to poke at a problem, which can transform the problem itself and our orientation toward it. Steps taken to solve one problem sometimes take the lid off a whole range of related issues and problems. (p. 133)
The lessons I have learned throughout the project cannot be contained within this brief summary. The story is still in formation. The ideas are being considered, and there is openness to listening for a new way of considering First Nation adoptions. The combination of factors has impacted this community-based action research project with intricacies that I will continue to discover after its completion.

Learning is transformative because it has the potential to lead to change. Personal meanings and one’s personal model of reality can be changed during the constructive and interactive dimensions. . . . One may retreat from possible changes and return to what is already known. But learning normally results in new or modified meanings that are then used to reconstruct previously existing meanings. (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 10)
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APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT INVITATION

My name is Maria Bertsch. As part of my Masters in Leadership through the School of Leadership Studies at Royal Roads University in Victoria, I am putting together a small group in your village. If you have any questions you can call Gerry Nixon, Acting Director of the School of Leadership Studies. Gerry’s phone number is (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

I am an adoption social worker the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). I am also a student learning how more Aboriginal people could be interested in being adoptive parents from this area. As you know, there are many Aboriginal children permanently in the care of MCFD; some of these children are from your village.

The project would provide you with an opportunity to discuss the MCFD adoption process from a northern adoption worker. You be given information about your rights in adoption. This project also seeks to hear your ideas that could increase the number of Aboriginal adoptive parents. Your recommendations will be shared with others in MCFD Adoptions and can assist in creating a more culturally sensitive approach to adoption recruitment.

The volunteer participants will be selected from Band workers and must be:

- Someone who has NOT applied to adopt with MCFD
- Be an Aboriginal person who resides in the village of Port Simpson or Kitimaat village
- An adult, at least 19 years of age
- Be identified as able to express his or her personal views in a small group
- Be considered by the Band worker as a person curious about adoption
- Males and females will be encouraged to be selected by Band workers
- A person identified as NOT having a serious mental illness.

An Aboriginal facilitator will guide each Circle group. Each volunteer will be asked to join a Circle group with total of at least 5 people from your village. The Circle group will be held in the home of a community member and audio taped. Lunch will be provided for all volunteers.

Each volunteer has the right to withdraw at any time in the project, and they have the right to stop participating at any time without negative consequences. Your identity will be kept confidential and your contributions to the discussion will only be used in a general format and will not identify you specifically.

The day after the Circle group, you will be invited to review the information and let me know how you are doing after the group. I will be in your village for 2 days before the Circle group and for a day after the group.

If you would like to learn more about my research please contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx, e-mail Maria.Bertsch@xxx.xx.xx, or contact your Band worker.
Thank you!
Maria Bertsch
APPENDIX C – CONSENT FORM

The research project is part of the requirements for the Master’s of Arts in Leadership at the Royal Roads University. Maria Bertsch is currently a Master’s student at Royal Roads University located in Victoria, BC. Should you wish confirmation of this project, please call Maria’s Thesis supervisor, Bruce Bidgood, PhD at his Terrace phone number (xxx) xxx-xxxx. If you have questions and wish to call Royal Roads University in Victoria at (xxx) xxx-xxxx and ask for the Research office.

This consent form constitutes and agreement to participate in a research project which seeks to provide a learning opportunity for Maria Bertsch in gathering information from Aboriginal people about adoption through MCFD.

The research consists of providing information about the MCFD adoption process and then developing a metaphor that reflects this process in the circle group. The circle group will be approximately 3 hours and the pilot group will be much shorter. The results of this project will be brought to the attention of the Aboriginal leaders and MCFD. Please know that any comments you make will be carefully written so that you are not identified.

Your participation is voluntary and will be anonymous. You are free to leave at any time without being concerned of any negative effects on you should you wish to consider adoption in the future. Even if you decide not to participate, your information will be kept confidential. All documentation will be kept confidential, stored in a secure location and be managed by Maria Bertsch. All results will be summarized. After the completion of the project you will be mailed a copy of the summarized information and all audio recordings will be destroyed.

Please feel free to ask any questions before you agree to be audio taped. Again, if you have any questions or feel uncomfortable about any part of the project, please call Maria’s thesis supervisor, Bruce Bidgood, PhD, at his xxxxxxxx phone number (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

If you have read and agree to this consent, state your name and the date on the audio tape. This is provided as a copy for future reference.

This copy was given to ____________________________ by Maria Bertsch.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ________________

Maria Bertsch
APPENDIX D – CIRCLE GROUP AGENDA

- Opening Prayer
- Introductions, purpose of meeting
- Introduce Maria Bertsch
- Verbal consent discussed, permission to use audio recorder and tape recorder, and confidentiality discussed

- Presentation by Maria Bertsch: an overview of MCFD Adoption Process
- Break
- Review questions for discussion
  1. What do you see as a metaphor for the adoption process from an Aboriginal or First Nation’s perspective? Definition of metaphor: A figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting (or meaning) one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness of analogy (similarity) between them. (As in drowning in money) From Merriam On-Line Webster’s Dictionary.
  2. What are your experiences with adoption?
  3. From your view, how has the MCFD adoption process worked?
  4. From your understanding of MCFD’s adoption process, what does MCFD need to do so more Aboriginal people will adopt through MCFD?
  5. How can the cultural needs of potential Aboriginal adoptive parents be listened to better?
  6. What would encourage you to adoption with MCFD? How can Aboriginal people be recruited by MCFD to adopt?
  7. What do you believe our people (Northern Aboriginal people) need in order to adopt Aboriginal children who are presently in the care of MCFD?

- Group work on research questions
- Closing remarks
- Closing prayer
- Thank you
APPENDIX E – CIRCLE GROUP QUESTIONS

- What do you see as a metaphor for the adoption process from an Aboriginal or First Nation’s perspective?
  - Definition of metaphor: A figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting (or meaning) one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness of analogy (similarity) between them. (As in drowning in money) From Merriam On-Line Webster’s Dictionary.
- What are your experiences with adoption?
- From your view, how has the MCFD adoption process worked?
- From your understanding of MCFD’s adoption process, what does MCFD need to do so more Aboriginal people will adopt through MCFD?
- How can the cultural needs of potential Aboriginal adoptive parents be listened to better?
- What would encourage you to adoption with MCFD? How can Aboriginal people be recruited by MCFD to adopt?
- What do you believe our people (Northern Aboriginal people) need in order to adopt Aboriginal children who are presently in the care of MCFD?
APPENDIX F – TRANSCRIPTOR AGREEMENT

As the audio transcriber for two Circle groups, I have obtained the audio recording from Maria Bertsch, as part of her action research project and to complete her Master’s of Leadership through Royal Roads University.

I solemnly agree to abide by the following:

- At all times, when the audio recorder is not being used, it will be stored in a secure and private place within my home.
- I will not copy the audio transcripts onto my computer or any other device other than the memory chip Maria provided.
- I will not copy the audio information onto any other device or computer. I recognize I have been given the original recording.
- I will not have any other person present in the same room when I am transcribing material.
- I will not disclose the contents of the material I transcribe to anyone; this includes possible conversations about the material which could be initiated by group members, should they identify themselves to me. Should this take place, I will inform group members that I am under a confidentiality agreement.
- I am able to discuss the material with Maria Bertsch at all times.
- I can discuss transcribed material with Maria’s Thesis Supervisor; Dr. Bruce Bidgood until the date Maria’s thesis is signed and approved by Royal Roads University. Following that date, estimated as June 28th, 2008, I am bound not to discuss the contents or events surrounding the material I transcribed.
- Should I find my services questioned in a court of law, I will first personally explain to the judge that I am under a strict declaration of confidentiality. Should the judge insist that I answer the question in a court of law, I will ask the judge to exclude my answers from public record. Following this, I will answer questions as the judge directs me to.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Transcriber for Maria Bertsch                   Date
Terrace, BC