

Learning From The Experiences of Indigenous Children in Care Who Have Multiple School Changes as a Result of Placement Disruption

An Executive Summary of a Thesis by Landy Anderson (2019): Graduate Program in Education - Language, Culture and Teaching, York University, Toronto, Ontario.

Poster Acknowledgment: This poster was created by one of the study's research participants.

Poster Interpretation: The 15 animals in the poster represent the animal names selected and used by the research participants (to maintain anonymity) during the research focus groups.

ABSTRACT

Crown Wards in Ontario change placements 2.6 to 8.6 times (on average) with the provincial average being four times (Contenta, Monsebraaten, Rankin, Bailey & Ng, 2015, p. 20). This means children in care often change schools. The aim of this study is to learn, directly from Indigenous children in care, their experiences of multiple school changes through exploring the rewards and challenges of starting a new school; ways children prepare for a new school; strategies they use to adjust to a new school; and ways the child welfare and education systems can alleviate the impact of multiple school changes. The methods used for this study include focus groups and participant journals. Four overarching themes were identified within the data: Vulnerability, Relationships, Adaptation, and Excitement. This study adds important new knowledge about Indigenous children in care, specifically about their experiences of disruptive school placements.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the 15 Indigenous youth in care who had the courage to share their private stories of the rewards and challenges of going to a new school. Their commitment to attend the focus groups (for some, travelling up to three hours) to participate in this study is a testament to their strength and dedication to improve the child welfare system in an effort to help other Indigenous children in care who may face similar struggles. For this, I say Chi Meegwetch! (the biggest/greatest thanks in the Ojibway language).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	vii
Impetus	1
The Study	1
Participants.....	2
Highlights of the Literature Review	2
a. Placement Stability	2
b. Educational Outcomes of Children in Care	2
c. The Value of Extra-Curricular Activities for Children in Care	3
d. Sense of Belonging at School	5
Themes	6
a. Vulnerability	7
b. Relationships.....	7
c. Adaptation.....	8
d. Excitement	8
Highlights of the Findings	8
a. Lack of Preparation to Start a New School.....	8
b. Friends – A Factor in School Connection.....	9
c. Social Adjustment.....	10
d. Indicators of Adjustment.....	10
e. Framework for Support.....	12
Conclusion	13
References.....	17

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Findings Conceptualized Within the Medicine Wheel	7
Figure 2: Child in Care Indicators of Adjusting to a New School	11

Impetus

In child welfare, “placement disruption” refers to a change in a living situation for a child in care. When a child enters care, they usually leave their original school and enroll in a school close to their new “placement” (foster home, group home etc.) For a variety of reasons, it’s common for children in care to move multiple times. Case in point, Crown Wards¹ in Ontario move 2.6 to 8.6 times (on average) with the provincial average being 4 times (Contenta, Monsebraaten, Rankin, Bailey & Ng, 2015, p. 20). Keeping in mind that Crown Wards are under 18 years old, this means the majority of moves occur during a child’s school years – impacting their educational experience. While there is an abundance of research in the general area of placement disruption, the field is lacking in research specific to placement disruption and its effect on Indigenous children in care.

This study examines the experiences of Indigenous children in care (who have had multiple school changes), in an effort to understand their unique needs when adjusting to a new school. Moreover, the research aims to help Indigenous children in care identify strategies that will guide and inform the child welfare and education systems in better supporting a child’s adjustment to a new school, ultimately mitigating the adverse effects of placement moves.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to learn, directly from Indigenous children in care, their experiences of multiple school changes through exploring the rewards and challenges of starting a new school; ways children prepare for a new school; strategies they use to adjust to a new school; and ways the child welfare and education systems can alleviate the impact of multiple school changes. The methods used for this study include focus groups and participant journals.

The overarching goals for this study are:

1. To help Indigenous children in care have their voices heard about the impact of placement disruption on their educational experiences.
2. To minimize the negative aspects of placement disruption on the educational experiences of Indigenous children in care.
3. To provide a framework for supporting children in care to start a new school, as identified by youth research participants.

¹ On April 30, 2018 the term “Crown Ward” was replaced with the term “Extended Society Care” (Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017, 101[1]). Since this thesis is predicated on a study involving “Crown Ward” data analysis (Contenta et al., 2015) and the literature reviewed pertains to Crown Wards (or children who are being raised on a long-term basis by the government), the term Crown Ward or State Ward will be used throughout this thesis and related documents.

Participants

In total, 15 Indigenous youth (in the care of Native Child and Family Services of Toronto) participated in the study. Five youth participated in the first focus group and 10 youth participated in the second focus group. Eight participants were females (53%) and seven participants were males (47%). Their ages ranged from: 17 (two children); 16 (one child); 15 (one child); 14 (five children); 13 (three children); and 12 (three children).

Highlights of the Literature Review

Placement Stability

The research confirms that placement moves have a negative impact on a child's psychological and developmental well-being (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000; Barber, 2003; Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Harden, 2004; Jokobsen, 2013; Koh, Rolock, Cross, & Eblen-Manning, 2014; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; New York City Administration for Children's Services and the New York University School of Medicine [ACS-NYU] Children's Trauma Institute, 2012). Unsurprisingly, children with more mental health/behaviour problems change placements more frequently (Barber, Delfabbro & Cooper, 2001; Hussey & Guo, 2005; Jokobsen, 2013; Koh et al., 2014; Leathers 2006; Rolock, Cross, & Eblen-Manning, 2014) and children who have a strong sense of belonging/acceptance in their placement move less frequently (Koh et al., 2014; Leathers, 2006).

Knowing that placement changes are psychologically distressing to children in care, the child welfare sector is understandably focused on reducing the number of moves for children in care and on improving the quality of their living situation (Jokobsen, 2013; Unrau, 2007). While the sector's energy is spent on the reduction of placement moves and the quality of the placement, the school experience of a child in care is a secondary consideration.

Educational Outcomes of Children in Care

“Only 44 per cent of youth in and from care graduate from high school compared to 82 per cent of Ontario youth” (Youth Leaving Care Working Group, 2013, p. 3). Similarly, in British Columbia (BC), 47.4 % of youth in care graduate high school compared to 84 % of students in the general BC student population (British Columbia [BC] Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014, p. 89).

While a number of factors contribute to these poor outcomes, multiple moves and a poor systemic response to the educational needs of children in care consistently emerge as important, highlighting the need for improved coordination between child welfare and education systems (Driscoll, 2011; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Akhurst, Berridge & Sinclair, 2004; Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O'Brien, Emerson, & Torres, 2006). Compounding the pre-existing barriers to

academic success for a child in care is the added problem of numerous disruptive changes in placements (Driscoll, 2011; Harker, et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006). It follows that children involved in the child welfare system are at higher risk for falling behind (Trocmé, MacLaurin, Fallon, Shlonskyi, Mulcahy, & Esposito, 2009, p. 3). In fact, in a 2002 BC study by Mitic and Rimer, the researchers concluded that 50% of children in care in grades 10 and 12 were behind at least one grade in comparison to children who were not in care (Mitic & Rimer, 2002, p. 400).

In a revealing study by Martin and Jackson (2002), the researchers concluded that having a caring support system was critical for children in care to experience academic success. The 38 children (in care) identified that they needed a supportive environment in order to achieve academic success. The children defined this to include the types of supports they needed: such as being treated “normally” (like everyone else), having qualified caregivers and child welfare workers, having meaningful relationships with their caregivers and child welfare workers, the provision of resources (like books and a place to do their homework) and encouragement to attend post-secondary school (Martin & Jackson, 2002, pp. 124–127). Interestingly, the Martin and Jackson (2002) study participants noted that the child welfare and education systems had low expectations of them to attend school or to succeed in school. In contrast, the children wanted to be held accountable to attend school and more importantly, they wanted to be held to a higher standard to apply themselves and to be expected to do well at school.

Relatedly, research confirms that a teacher’s low expectations of their students produces inferior results (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2017; Staton, 2018), which is particularly concerning for children in care who are a group known for their low high school graduation rates (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2014, p. 89). Thus, a teacher’s low expectations for a child in care can actually thwart their academic success. For a child who is statistically prone to fall behind in the first place (Mitic & Rimer, 2002, p. 400), having a teacher create a self-defeating prophecy for them simply worsens their academic situation.

The Value of Extra-Curricular Activities for Children in Care

“Looked-after² children are arguably one of the most disadvantaged groups in society and constitute a ‘hidden group’ in relation to sport and physical activity research, policy and practice.” (Quarmby, 2014, p. 944). Youth understand firsthand the benefits of participating in extra-curricular activities, for example, in a University of Victoria study, *Improving Education Outcomes For Youth In/From Care: Fostering Success* (2016), where 20 youth from care were interviewed, one of the key themes of “what helps” to be successful at school was “Fostering participation in extra-curricular activities” (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016, p. x).

As research builds on the educational components of success, the social and recreational components that contribute to a positive educational experience deserve their own special attention too. Sports and extra-curricular activities form meaningful childhood memories, and for children under duress, those activities offer them respite from their distressing life circumstances. For example, residential school survivors had positive memories of recreational activities during their school years:

² The term “looked-after” is equivalent to a “child in care”.

At the Lestock school, Geraldine Shingoose took refuge in extracurricular activities: “One of the good things that I would do to try and get out of just the abuse was try to, I would join track-meet, try and be, and I was quite athletic in boarding school. And I also joined the band, and I played a trombone. And, and that was something that took me away from the school, and just to, it was a relief.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation*, p. 80)

Although the residential school experience and the child in care experience are quite different, the lessons learned from Indigenous children’s memories and experiences during their residential school years show an affinity for sports and recreation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation*, pp. 80–83), as they offered glimmers of light during periods of darkness. This illustrates the need to pay more attention to offering extra-curricular activities for Indigenous children in care, who are most often under a heightened degree of stress from coming into care and changing placements and schools. After moving a child in care, the focus is to stabilize the child into the new placement and settle them into their new school, which responds to their immediate needs. While a positive academic outcome is a primary consideration of the child’s service plan, the social and recreational outcomes deserve equal attention as part of a child’s educational success:

Changes in placements and consequently schools mean that for the majority of looked-after children [aka children in care], school attendance is problematic (Murray, 2012). As such, looked-after children often miss out on school-based sporting activities and are more dependent on out-of-school activities than other children. What is apparent in this study is that changes in placement may also impact on engagement with sport and physical activity outside of school. (Quarmby, 2014, p. 951)

Multiple school transitions and their impact on extra-curricular activities are experienced similarly by military children who move frequently. For example, they may miss trying out for certain teams because they started school late, or their new school does not offer the same sports as their previous school (Ruff & Keim, 2014, p. 105).

It becomes clear through these studies that changing schools has a ripple effect on certain areas of a child’s development. There is mounting evidence of the benefits of sports and the impact of physical activity on ones’ psychosocial well-being, especially for children in care:

It is thought that enabling looked-after children to engage in sport and physical activity ‘equal to their peers’ may provide fruitful opportunities to enhance their physical and psychological well-being (DfES [Department for Education and Skills], 2007, p. 10). This belief that sport and physical activity can aid young people’s social and moral development through its inherent ‘character building’ capacities has led to their use as tools for re-engaging disaffected youth (Sandford & Duncombe, 2011). A growing body of international research suggests that sport can help strengthen relationships and promote ‘active citizenship’, build resilience and address social problems of disadvantage and exclusion through the generation of social capital (Bailey, 2005). (Quarmby, 2014, p. 945)

There is no doubt of the health benefits for children who actively participate in sports. Along with the health benefits derived from participating in sports, children also create positive childhood experiences. In fact, positive childhood experiences can outweigh the negative experiences in one's life. For example, in Haig-Brown's (1988) research on residential school survivors, where some students held negative memories of their school experience, one former student recalled his residential school experiences in a positive light as he "spoke highly of the school largely as a result of his association with team sports" (p.75).

There is a psychoanalytic school of thought (Bowlby, 1982) where childhood experiences predict a person's future behaviour and outlook on life. This is known as a person's "internal working model" (Bowlby, 1982, p. 12). A person's internal working model informs them how to interpret and interact with the world around them (Bowlby, 1982, p. 12) stressing the importance of childhood memories. "[M]emory plays a huge part in how we make sense of the world – how we organize our past experiences and how we judge how we should act in the future." (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1). Positive memories are proven to contribute to good health in "that good memories seem to have a positive effect on health and well-being, possibly through the ways that they reduce stress or help us maintain healthy choices in life." (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1). Thus, the memories in a child's life sets the stage for their adult behaviour and influences their overall health. Notably, some childhood memories last a life time as researchers point to the enduring effect of one's childhood memories:

The most surprising finding was that we thought the effects would fade over time because participants were trying to recall things that happened sometimes over 50 years ago. One might expect childhood memories to matter less and less over time, but these memories still predicted better physical and mental health when people were in middle age and older adulthood[.] (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 7)

The research findings above (American Psychological Association, 2018; Bowlby, 1982; Haig-Brown, 1988) underline the vital need to create positive childhood memories and experiences for Indigenous children in care as the foundation for their well-being. Further, that offering Indigenous children in care opportunities to participate in sports and extra-curricular activities is a good way to promote these types of positive experiences that contribute to their well-being.

Sense of Belonging at School

Students with a positive sense of belonging at school have fewer psychological, health and social problems and are more likely to have academic success and participate in extra-curricular activities (Chiu, Chow, McBride & Mol, 2016, pp. 175–176). Having a sense of belonging at school actually supports a child's chances of staying in school (Hamer, 2012, p. 12). In a study by Rutman and Hubberstey (2016), the researchers found that a sense of belonging for children in care was fostered through supportive relationships with teachers and counsellors (p. 22). Whereas for many Indigenous students, a sense of belonging is created through decolonizing

the school systems and providing culturally responsive curriculum (Dion, Johnston & Rice, 2010, p. viii).

While the literature identifies different ways to create a sense of belonging in the education systems (culturally responsive curriculum, social inclusion, school environment and relationships with school staff), for the research participants, their sense of belonging meant having friends first and foremost, discussed further below.

Themes

Overall, there was a sense of sadness when the children spoke of their experiences and the pervasive loneliness associated with changing schools as a result of coming into care or changing placements. The same feelings of loneliness have been expressed by children in care elsewhere (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012, p.12 and p. 14). One youth explained: “It’s lonely as well when children and youth in care are always having to move or have many different workers” (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012, p.12).

Analysis of the data produced four overarching themes related to the youth’s experiences: Vulnerability, Relationships, Adaptation, and Excitement. These themes are explained below in relationship to the Medicine Wheel directions (see Figure 1: *Findings Conceptualized Within the Medicine Wheel*)

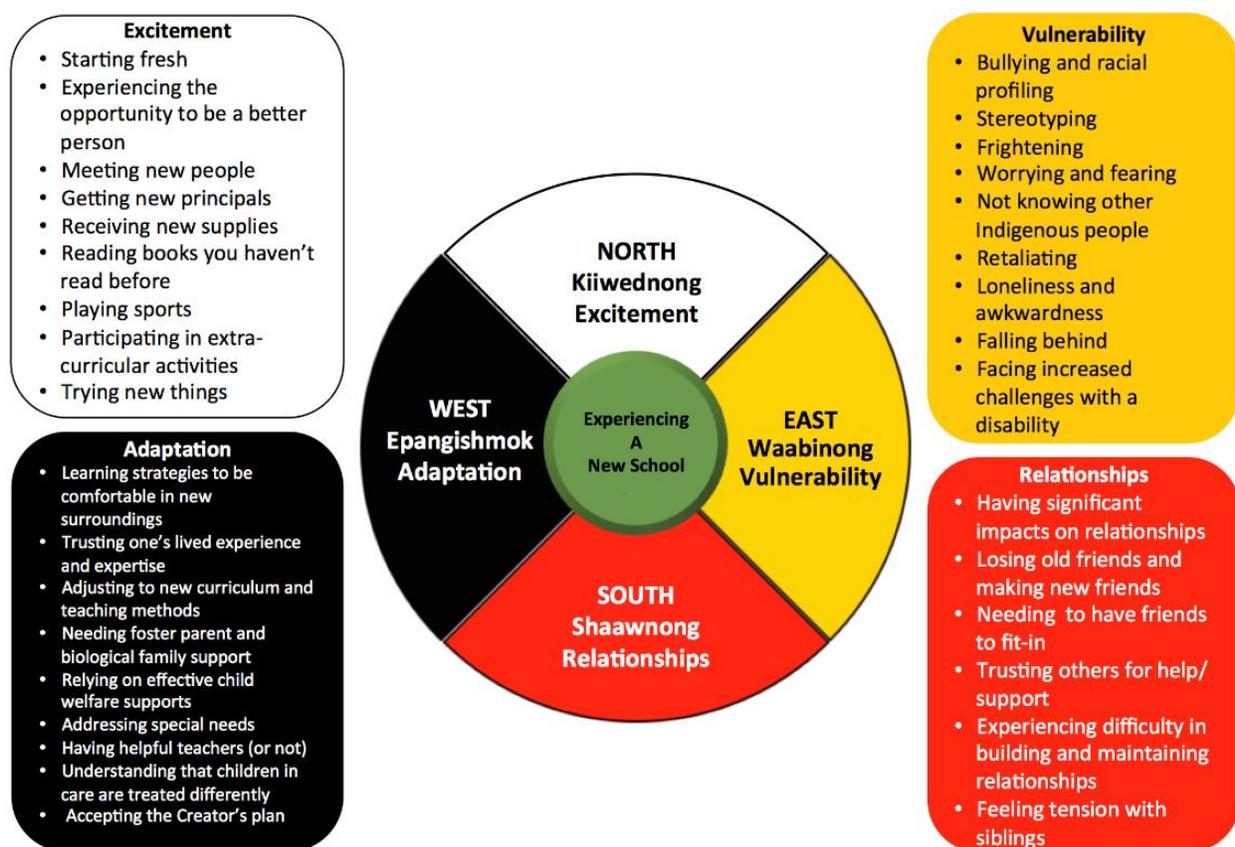


Figure 1: Findings Conceptualized Within the Medicine Wheel

Vulnerability

Indigenous children in care are more vulnerable when they change schools. They are at heightened risk of being bullied and subjected to racism and stereotypes. Understandably, the research participants' previous negative school experiences combined with an impending school change triggered a variety of worries and fears each time they started a new school.

Relationships

The children spoke of how difficult it was to lose friends and make new friends after changing schools. They stressed the importance of belonging to a peer group, which was in fact their first order of business when arriving at their new school. Overall, the children recognized the need to have stability and supportive relationships in their lives and that changing placements and schools had a significant impact on their ability to form and maintain these relationships.

Adaptation

Changing schools is a significant adjustment where children face numerous unknown and frightening situations. Subsequently, they develop ways to adapt and quickly learn how to “fit in” in an effort to adjust to their new surroundings. They rely on supportive adults and systems. The children shared practical advice based on their own experiences of how to adjust to a new school. The variety of advice offered included how to adapt to the new school curriculum, how to navigate the physical plant and how to choose new friends. Along with the practical tips, the children offered cautionary tales on choosing friends and being wary of teachers who may not like them.

Excitement

Going to a new school is exciting because it is a “fresh start” (new beginning in life) and presents opportunities to meet new people and join extra-curricular activities. The children held fond memories of sports & after school activities. Many of the children were able to use the experience of changing schools as an opportunity to embrace change as a good thing. Their positive attitude helped counteract the large number of negative impacts resulting from the school move.

Highlights of the Findings

Lack of Preparation to Start a New School

Changing schools is a significant adjustment where children face numerous unknown and frightening situations. In fact, changing schools can be the “most daunting experience” that children face at a young age (Parent Info, 2018, Five Tips For Starting a New School section, para. 1). The children (in the study) were able to manage these experiences using coping strategies developed over time from their personal experiences. Curiously, the children did not identify any supportive actions or efforts that occurred before starting a new school. One would think that such a significant event in a child’s life would require a degree of support to prepare the child for such an event.

The lack of attention by caregivers and child welfare workers to support children in care as they adjust to a new school was reflected by a lack of policies and procedures guiding the process. For example, when I asked nine Indigenous child welfare agencies to share their policies and procedures to support children in care to adjust to a new school, some of the agencies provided anecdotal information, although no actual policies were attained. Despite the fact that Ontario implemented the Joint Protocol for Student Achievement “JPSA”³ in 2015

³ In 2015 the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Ontario Ministry of Education created a *Joint Protocol for Student Achievement* “JPSA” that provides a framework for school boards and CASs to work together to “improve the educational achievement and well-being of both children and youth in the care of, and those receiving services from a CAS” (Joint Protocol for Student Achievement [JPSA] Template, 2015, p. 7).

(Memorandum from the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015), the 15 research participants (during the 2016 focus groups) did not describe any experiences of receiving specialized educational services as per the JPSA.⁴

Friends – A Factor in School Connection

A key finding of this study is that Indigenous children in care need to have a sense of belonging in the education milieu in order to adapt to a new school. For the research participants, their sense of belonging is predicated on making new friends and having a friendship group. Although the children recognized other aspects of school connectedness, such as having positive student and teacher relationships, having opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities and experiencing academic success, their primary concern was social inclusion.

Having friends at school is a factor in school connection (Akar-Vural, Yılmaz-Özelçi, Çengel & Gömleksiz, 2013). Students who are connected are more likely to attend school, more likely to experience academic success and less likely to have mental health issues or be involved in crime/delinquent behaviour (Akar-Vural et al., 2013; Mantilla, 2012; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

Having friends is an important part of adolescence. Notably, having friends at school is a protective factor for all students (Merritt & Snyder, 2015, p. 492). According to a study of 108 teens (ages 13 to 16 years old) researchers found that teens needed friends to develop a sense of belonging and importantly, that a teenager's friends were a better support system than adults (Knudsen, 2017). For many parents, the truth is hard to admit:

Adolescents begin to rely less and less upon the adults in their lives and more heavily on their peers. Starting to let go is difficult. But teens' reliance on buddies is good for their development and sense of belonging. A new study found that this is especially true in the immediate aftermath of a stressful event, like failing a test. Researchers from Australia's Murdoch and Griffith universities surveyed teens in real time throughout the day and found that, after something bad happens, they cope better emotionally when they're with peers rather than with adults. (Knudsen, 2017, para. 1–2)

Similarly, the participants found sanctuary in their peer group compared to the bullying they faced from other students who made fun of them for being in care. Participants were subjected to cruel remarks such as: “[Y]our mom doesn’t want you” and, “[Y]our parents left you”. Participants talked of how frightening it was to go to a new school for fear of being bullied and facing the unknown. Thus, having solace in a friendship group helped to counter these factors. In *Promoting Resilience in Child Welfare*, Gilligan (2006) also recognizes the

⁴ As part of the JPSA (2015), school boards are required to have “REACH” Teams (Realizing Educational Achievement for Children/Youth Teams) whose primary task is to “support and promote the educational achievement of students and the development of Education Success Plans” (p. 6). The JPSA and its specialized services (for children involved in the child welfare system) serves as an example of how the child welfare and education systems can work more effectively to support children in care to have improved academic outcomes.

importance of having friends while in care, and concludes that resilience is enhanced for children in care by a “sense of secure base/confiding relationships” and “social support” (p. 31). Thus, it comes as no surprise that participants focused on having friends as a priority, given the therapeutic and protective value in friendships, as noted by Merrit and Snyder (2015), Knusden (2017) and Gilligan (2006) above.

Social Adjustment

The social adjustment of children in care needs to be understood and supported by the child welfare and education systems. Children without a healthy social network are more vulnerable (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016, p. 32).

The importance of social inclusion for children in care is evidenced in the research where children in care consistently demonstrate difficulties with social adjustment (Barber & Delfabbro, 2006, p. 164). The research participants similarly highlighted their need to feel included, hence their desire to fit into their new social system as the first order of business when changing schools. Since the research participants were unanimous in their thinking that making friends in their new school is a primary consideration, adults at home and at school need to support children in care to find friends. These opportunities can be created by ensuring that children in care have access to social, recreational and cultural activities. Although the children viewed school as their only means to find friends, non-academic and community settings also provide natural ways to form friendships.

NCFST’s cultural programs are a prime example of how to provide opportunities for social inclusion. By using culture as the foundation of their programs, it allows the children to build a sense of their cultural selves and to form bonds within their own social group. These bonds and sense of self were evidenced in the focus groups, where the children demonstrated cultural competence in Indigenous customs (smudging, receiving tobacco, and participating in a talking circle) and appeared to have positive relationships with each other. In fact, many children in both focus groups knew each other from participating in NCFST’s cultural programs. Participating in cultural programs offers children social opportunities and provides cultural continuity, which is a protective factor that contributes to a child’s resiliency (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

Indicators of Adjustment

Similar to protective factors discussed above, the children identified a number of indicators that would show how well they were adjusting to their new school. They provided specific examples in the following categories: emotional, social, cognitive and behavioural. These indicators (as they relate to adjusting to a new school) are described further below and conceptualized in the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 2: *Child in Care Indicators of Adjusting to a New School*).

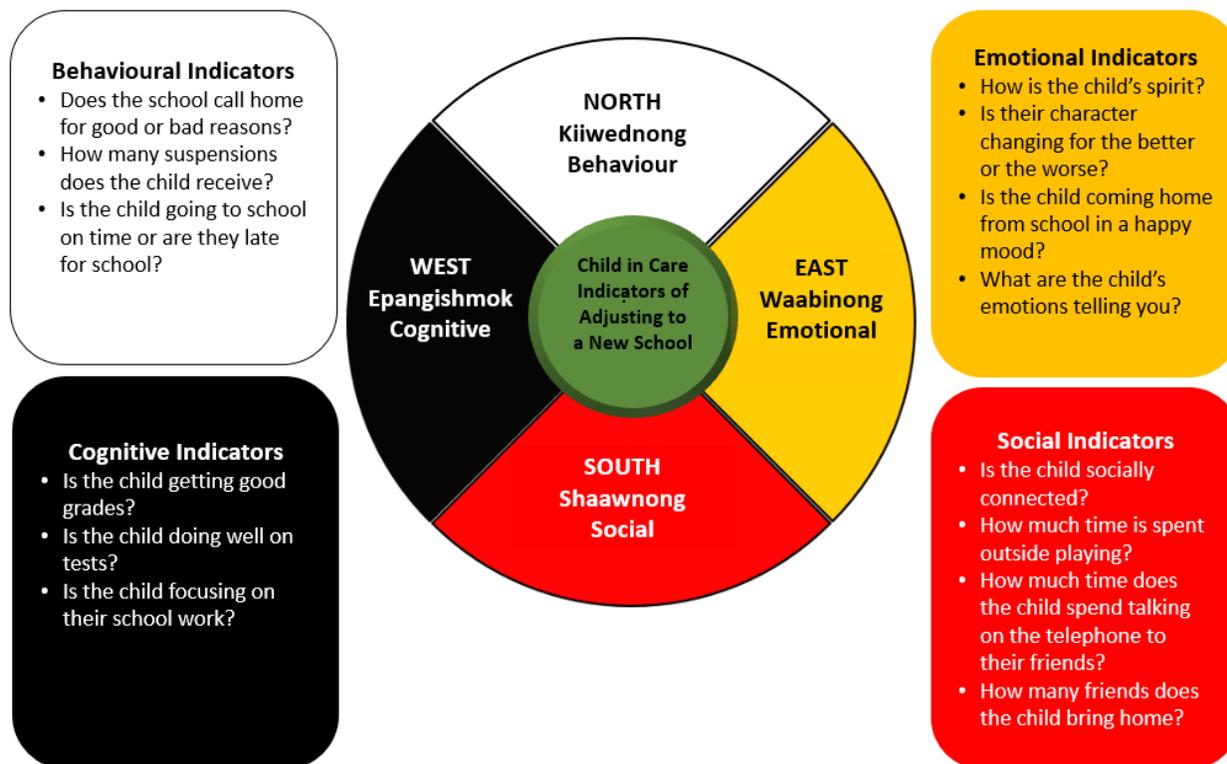


Figure 2: Child in Care Indicators of Adjusting to a New School

Overall, the children simply described healthy behaviours and ways of functioning that can be considered a model of well-being for children in care who are adjusting to a new school. For example, the children explained how their moods were a good indicator of their adjustment. This is the starting place of the Medicine Wheel. The East is where a person's "spirit is born" (Pitawanakwat, 2006, The East – Waabinong section, para. 3) and where their attitude towards life is formed. The influences of the East help to create a "healthy mind" (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008, Introduction section, para. 6). In essence, the participants described the Eastern characteristics of their spirit and emotions. Participants said, "We came home and we were happier" and, "So, it's your emotions, your changing your character that's how people know you adjust".

Next, when asked how their caregivers, teachers and workers could tell how the children were adjusting to their new schools (or not), the children said that they were doing well when they were socially connected. Again, the children reiterated the importance of having friends, punctuating the need for social connection. The children described the components that rest in the South – where relations reside. The South guides "how we interrelate" to one another (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008, A Medicine Wheel's Life Learning section). Participants shared the following indicators of being socially connected: "[T]he amount of time that you're out playing,"; "The amount of times you're on the phone"; and "The amount of friends you bring

home". Again, the children's indicators of adjustment point to the importance of having friends and a social network, features of the South.

Further, the children noted that getting good grades was an indication of how well they were doing. Basically, the children described the characteristics of the West – where knowledge comes from. One child said, “[B]ut like if you feel bad or anything, then you probably like not do good on tests and stuff”. Another child said, “Teachers would know if I’m adjusting by my grades [...] or focusing”. It was interesting that the children tabled good grades as an indicator of their adjustment, given that children in care are a group known to fall behind (Trocmé et al., 2009, p. 3) and are more likely to repeat a grade (Brownell, Roos, MacWilliam, Leclair, Ekuma & Fransoo, 2010, pp. 806–807; Trocmé et al., 2009, p. 3). Despite these odds, the research participants yearned to do well at school and pointed to their cognitive functioning as a good marker of their adjustment.

Lastly, the children stated that their behaviour at school is an indicator of how well they were adjusting to their new school. This is the physical component of the Medicine Wheel, in the North, where behaviours reside. The North is also a place of healing (Nabigon, 2006, p. 117). Therefore the North is a good gauge for recognizing problem behaviour and understanding the extent of the problem. The children agreed that problematic and non-problematic behaviours were indicators of their adjustment. They provided examples of how caregivers would receive calls at home because there were problems at school (or better still) receive calls at home for good reasons. One participant said, “And like, you’re not getting calls home [from the principal] and you’re not getting suspended and stuff”, and another participant added, “And like when they got calls home it was good stuff”. Another behavioural indicator identified was whether they were arriving on time.

Framework for Support

This thesis promotes a platform for change and an opportunity for reflection and reconciliation. It allows Indigenous children in care to have their voices heard about the impact of placement disruption on their educational experiences. It has the potential to minimize the negative aspects of placement disruption on their educational experiences – a direct response to their needs. Indigenous children in care need the community, government, child welfare and education systems to work in partnership to help them have a better experience in adjusting to their new school and subsequently a better experience in care. The pleas of the children in this study resonate with and add to the existing literature on best ways to address their needs and wishes.

The children provided a range of responses to the research questions, leading to a possible framework for the kind of supports needed to help them adjust to a new school. Many of the children identified needing supportive adults and effective child welfare and education systems to help them achieve academic success and also to respond and take action when they are under duress. Some of the children relied on their workers to monitor their progress and help them make good choices in life. Some of the children expected their workers to maintain frequent contact with their school and caregivers. In particular, the children expected their workers to advocate for them and offer them a choice whether they could stay in the same school

or start a new one. The children offered practical advice for their teachers to, “be helpful” on the first day of school and they encouraged teachers to make children in care feel comfortable on their first day by, “offering to give us extra support”. They wanted their caregivers to be “understanding” and “encouraging” by offering, “support, love, and hugs” and driving them to school on the first day. At times, some children relied on their caregivers and biological parents for advice. They wanted their caregivers to ask how their day was and take a genuine interest in how they were adjusting to their new school by paying attention to their non-verbal cues. For example, they stressed the importance of paying attention to their health indicators in accordance with the social, emotional, cognitive and physical components of their lives. Additionally, the children identified the following key areas for the child welfare and education systems to focus their attention on: bullying, school safety, academic progress, behavioural issues, social adjustment, sports and extra-curricular activities and access to academic resources. To honour the principles and key areas that the children identified as part of their support plan, one must keep in mind that each child has their own version of what constitutes support. Therefore, the development of any support plan for a child in care must be created with the child as the leading voice.

The children never spoke about the role of community in their experiences. Perhaps the absence of this was based on their lack of experience with community support. Regardless, it is understood that the Indigenous community involvement is valuable to Indigenous students (Friesen & Krauth, 2012, p. 20). Relatedly, researchers Dion, Johnston and Rice (2010)⁵ confirm the need to increase community involvement in order to decolonize and Indigenize the school curriculum, thus improving the Indigenous student’s school experience. Following this line of thought, the same proves true for Indigenous children in care, by Indigenizing services to help them to form a cultural attachment to their community and strengthen their Indigenous sense of identity, commonly known in the child welfare system as the provision of “culturally relevant services” (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017, p. 8). The need for child welfare workers to work more closely with Indigenous communities is also reinforced in the *Ontario Child, Youth and Family Services Act (2017)* where the children’s aid society is compelled to involve the child’s Indigenous community (First Nation, Métis or Inuit) by communicating with them on a regular basis (section 72). While the role of the Indigenous community was not identified by the children as part of their framework (to support Indigenous children in care to adjust to a new school), the inclusion of a child’s Indigenous community in their lives is an obvious protective factor (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000, p. 607). Thus, the additional support gained from the involvement of the child’s Indigenous community can only be viewed as an added layer of support for an Indigenous child in care.

Conclusion

Generally, youth who exit care: “have low academic achievement; are more often unemployed or underemployed; often experience homelessness or unstable housing; are

⁵In 2010, researchers Dion, Johnston and Rice conducted an evaluation of the Toronto District School Board’s Urban Aboriginal Education Pilot Project (UAEPP) with “over 200 students, parents, teachers, community members, administrators and other UAEPP stakeholders” (Dion, et al., 2010, p. vi).

frequently involved with the criminal justice system; become parents early; have worsened health outcomes; and experience deep loneliness” (Kovarikova, 2017, p. 6). Further, youth who exit care are known to have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than war veterans (Kovarikova, 2017, p. 24). With so many systems involved in raising children in State care, any strategic direction or reform (from the government) needs to be informed by children growing up in these systems in order to properly respond to their social, emotional and educational needs. As these children struggle to achieve academic success and develop meaningful relationships and support systems in their lives, they continue to be challenged by the number of moves they experience during their time in the child welfare systems (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

The research findings from this study confirm the existing knowledge in the field (that placement disruption is psychologically distressing to children in care and affects their academic capacity to be successful), and they confirm the need to take greater action to promote placement stability for Indigenous children in care and minimize school disruptions.

The research participants’ traumatic experiences of being bullied and frightened in their new schools are similar to experiences of other Indigenous children during the Indian Residential School era (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada). Today’s child welfare and education systems designed to care for Indigenous children in care are an epilogue to the Indian Residential School systems and Sixties Scoop era (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018) because they forcibly remove children from their homes and legislate them to attend a colonial education system.

With the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in Canada’s child welfare system (Statistics Canada, 2011) the historical displacement of children from their homes and communities during the residential school era continues in modern times, simply shifting as what was previously the Sixties Scoop morphed into what is known today as the Millennium Scoop (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). In fact, there are more children in care today than at the height of residential schools:

The review by the [Ontario] province’s human rights commission finds a “staggering” number of Indigenous children in care across Canada — more now than there were in residential schools at the height of their use — and Ontario is part of the dismal situation. (Canadian Press, 2018, para. 2)

The current paradigm of care is rooted in colonialism and imperialism, which is causing “multiple negative social and economic disadvantages, such as low levels of education, high levels of unemployment, extreme levels of poverty, inadequate housing and health disparities” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018, Indigenous Children section, para. 3). This is a direct cause for the over-representation of Indigenous children in care, as “research shows that Indigenous children are severely over-represented in Canada’s child welfare system (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018, Research on Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare section, para. 1). There must be a paradigm shift in the approach to looking after Indigenous children that is bound by the social well-being of the Indigenous community. The child welfare

and education systems have a legal and moral obligation to do a better job responding to the needs of Indigenous children in care.

As the study's findings show, Indigenous children in care are subjected to multiple school and placement changes causing extreme duress and increasing their chances of being subjected to various forms of racism, discrimination and bullying. The findings did not reveal any cultural indicators that would support the children to reduce their traumatic experiences while in care. Yet Indigenous peoples repeatedly state (and have proven) that the only solution to heal the trauma and promote wellness for Indigenous peoples is to have culture as the foundation of their lives (Assembly of First Nations, The National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation & Health Canada, 2011; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer et al, 2000; McIvor, Napoleon & Dickie, 2009). Knowing that Indigenous children in care experience multiple school and placement changes, if the foster homes and schools were culturally responsive then these types of forced moves would be less traumatic. By utilizing culture as the guiding principle, children could anticipate a consistent and supportive response from foster homes and schools as part of their move. The children would be able to anticipate the cultural markers (ceremonies, community engagement, traditional parenting styles, relationships with Elders, Indigenous curriculum and representation in schools etc.) that would establish a culturally consistent environment. These types of culturally intelligent responses would make placement and school changes less frightening and more predictable or, better still, when children are brought into care, all efforts should be taken to keep them in the same school and community.

In closing, this study highlights that Indigenous children in care, ages 12 to 17 do not receive additional support nor the necessary preparation to start a new school. The findings confirm that changing schools is a major source of stress for Indigenous children in care (with many complicating social, emotional and academic factors that influence their experience), which ultimately increases their vulnerability to other life stressors and increases their negative school experiences. Consequently, the child welfare and education systems have a shared responsibility to provide additional supports for Indigenous children in care when starting a new school. These types of supports must nurture a child's spirit as the place of preparation for adjusting to a new school environment and later academic successes. Additionally, support plans to help Indigenous children in care need to be developed in consultation with the child as the leading voice and with the following conclusions deducted from the research, in mind. These are:

1. **Having friends and a sense of belonging** are the most important part of an Indigenous child in care's school adjustment. Accordingly, Indigenous children in care prioritize social inclusion (in their school environment) above all else.
2. **Protective factors** promote resiliency in a child's development. Indigenous children in care benefit from the following types of protective factors: friends, culture, community, and supportive adults (teachers, workers, caregivers and biological parents) and systems.
3. **Positive childhood memories** are proven to contribute to good health in adulthood whereby creating a pathway for adult well-being. Nurturing a child's spirit is the starting place for all good things to follow.

4. **Sports and extra-curricular activities** form meaningful childhood memories that offer Indigenous children in care comfort and respite from their stressful life circumstances

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