LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AS PRAxis: A REFLECTIVE CRITICAL NARRATIVE OF CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE AND SERVICE TO ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

by

Stephen William Kozey

B.A., University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon), 1968
M.S.W., The University of British Columbia, 1972
M.A., The University of British Columbia, 1976
M.Ed., The University of British Columbia, 1983

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in
The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Educational Leadership and Policy)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

June 2012

© Stephen William Kozey, 2012
ABSTRACT

“The truth about stories is that’s all we are.” Thomas King (2003, p.2).

This study is a reflective critical narrative by a non-Aboriginal practitioner whose professional practice has been associated with provision of services to Aboriginal children and families. The themes of the study include: my efforts to make meaning and theorize about my practice; illustrations of how Aboriginal epistemologies and worldviews have transformed my practice; and evidence in the literature, supported by my practice experience, that meaningful service change inclusive of ‘place-centered knowledge’ is necessary for transforming child welfare service and service delivery.

My narrative draws on: stories and oral accounts of Aboriginal Elders and carriers of local knowledges; families engaged in Aboriginal Family Group Conferences; statements of Aboriginal community leaders and non-Aboriginal human service agency personnel including government officials. Some of the data is represented in the vignettes; from personal reflections of my participation in ceremonial work and Family Group Conference sharing circles.

This reflective narrative responds to three questions: first; what knowledge and human service practice elements a non-Aboriginal professional service provider should possess in order to provide an effective service to Aboriginal children and families, second; what are the impacts of re-introducing local knowledge as the foundation upon which an alternative and effective Aboriginal child welfare service delivery system can be achieved, and third; what paradigm shifts in human services are necessary for the professional helping disciplines to become ‘facilitators of’ rather than ‘obstacles to’ changes that are required for the effective delivery of child welfare services to Aboriginal populations?
I call for a service change that re-introduces local cultural practices including ceremony, healing, and sacred spiritual practices; and a general shift in relationships between professionals and families from a linear ‘results based’ approach that identifies with professionalism and Eurocentric knowledge to a relational and ‘process based’ connection and communication that is characteristic of Indigenous epistemologies. Such a transformation is necessary in order to engage the collective resources of Aboriginal extended families to help reduce the high rates of Aboriginal children held in Provincial protective care across Canada.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... iv

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................ viii

List of Vignettes ..................................................................................................................... ix

List of Reflections .................................................................................................................. x

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER ONE: Situating My Practice .................................................................................. 1
   Children Impacted Most by Assimilation Policy ................................................................. 4
   Strategically Designed Changes to My Practice Roles ..................................................... 6
   Six Stages of ‘Becoming’ a Practitioner .......................................................................... 9
   The First Stage of Practice: Community Social Work .................................................... 10
   The Second Stage of Practice: Social Planning and Community Development for
   Service Equity .................................................................................................................... 13
   The Third Stage of Practice: Adult Education and Community Organization ............... 15
   The Fourth Stage of Practice: Expansion of Vocational and Educational Horizons ...... 16
   The Fifth Stage of Practice: The Band Administrator Role ............................................. 21
   The Sixth Stage of Practice: The Facilitator Role ........................................................... 24
   Reflecting on Practice ....................................................................................................... 25
Reflections on Researching my Practice

References
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Chronological Evolution of the Indigenous Centered Social Work Role .........................94

Figure 2: My Practitioner Indigenous and Mainstream Educational Profile.....................................101
LIST OF VIGNETTES

Vignette 1.1 Advocating for Aboriginal Paraprofessional Inclusion into the Social Work Profession

Vignette 1.2 Misunderstanding What Counts as Success

Vignette 1.3 Planning for Increased Funding and Program Expansion

Vignette 2.1 Listening to Elder Stories

Vignette 2.2 Applying Mainstream Advocacy to Support Aboriginal Aspirations

Vignette 3.1 Introduction to Aboriginal Ways

Vignette 4.1 Integrated and Holistic Service Delivery

Vignette 5.1 Keeping Children Connected to Family

Vignette 5.2 Facilitating Family Circle Work

Vignette 5.3 Describing My Family Circle Work Practice
LIST OF REFLECTIONS

Reflection 1.1 ‘Professionalism’ in Social Work Excludes Band Workers ........................................... 8
Reflection 1.2 Hegemony Interferes with Career Opportunity ............................................................. 20
Reflection 1.3 Politics are Always a Factor ......................................................................................... 23
Reflection 2.1 Experiencing Local Indigenous Knowledge ................................................................. 41
Reflection 2.2 Disappointing but not Surprising Outcomes ............................................................... 54
Reflection 3.1 First Nations Cultures versus Western Science Culture .............................................. 66
Reflection 4.1 Social Work Seen as a Project of Colonialism .............................................................. 81
Reflection 5.1 Building Relationships, Teaching and Learning ......................................................... 108
Reflection 5.2 Experiencing Relationships: Making Meaning ............................................................. 117
Reflection 5.3 Evaluating My Family Circle Work Practice ............................................................... 123
My search for ‘making meaning’ of my practice in a scholarly way led me to engage in studies of the Leadership and Policy Program of the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver BC. This decision was influenced by the fact that the program has an impressive representation of Aboriginal faculty members. I am fortunate to have had the guidance of committee members Dr. Mark Aquash and Committee Chair Dr. Michael Marker whose research and teaching of Indigenous epistemologies have profoundly enhanced my understanding of ‘place-based’ knowledge. Committee member Dr. Garnet Grosjean’s inspiring counsel has also been invaluable to me in the completion of this journey. To all three of you, thank you for believing in this project as worthwhile and for your support to its conclusion.

The program focused on examination and renewing professional practice, and for a few years our “wide-awake” cohort comprising twelve students began a dialogue of examining educational policy and leadership issues. I am thankful to all members of this cohort for the ongoing support and camaraderie during the course period of the program.

I am deeply indebted to the colleagues with whom I’ve practiced with over years, especially the students in the off campus part time Bachelor of Social Work program. The collaborative learning that we experienced mirrored the best examples of collaborative learning within a local Indigenous epistemological and ontological paradigm. The class experiences will forever remain for me an integral part of our collective journey together where community partnered with university in order to elevate our skills, legitimate our local practice within mainstream criteria, resulting in an enhanced service to our constituent members and service users, while transforming our own knowledge and skill levels.
I acknowledge the generous financial and scholarship award supports from The Network Environments for Aboriginal Research (NEARBC). Your support helped me immeasurably in the completion of this project. Karen Shipman is an efficient, effective, and organized professional who assisted me with administrative tasks such as scheduling, and editing. I thank you Karen for your help in making this task achievable and on schedule.

There are many Aboriginal colleagues and Aboriginal family friends who have been supportive of my practice over the years. In Lower Mainland BC, the George, Paul, Gonzales, Newman and Jones families in particular, have always been a source of inspiration and support for me. I thank you all for your untiring support and continuing relationships.

Being a family member of the Wilson and Joe families immersed me directly in family events and local ceremony of all types. This form of cultural immersion is invaluable and I am forever indebted for your kindness, friendship and respect. Most of all, your teachings, and commitment to embracing wellness at a time when healing in Aboriginal communities was in the early stages of acceptance, has been instrumental in supporting my own transformation of self and practice.

Lastly, but first on my mind, I thank my family for their patience with me along this journey. To my step daughter Natasha I thank you for your ‘technical and electronic’ assistance, your wit and sense of good humor also helped to tone down the stress related periods of this experience. And to Radina, your patience, support and wisdom have made the journey possible amid all other family and vocational obligations. I am indebted to you all, as you have enriched my scholarly journey and as a result made my life and practice a more meaningful discovery.
CHAPTER ONE: SITUATING MY PRACTICE

“The greatest bridge between cultures is the person who is schooled in the philosophies of both cultures.” V.F. Deloria (2005).

My professional practice has always been associated with a response to serving Aboriginal children, families, and communities. My vocational experience complemented by formal education in Social Work; Adult Education; and Community and Regional Planning is what I bring to my practice. I am a non-Aboriginal practitioner keen on reflecting on my practice in a scholarly way. I consider myself as an anti-colonialist facilitating social justice for Aboriginal children and families through my practice. I use the terms First Nation and Aboriginal interchangeably, with ‘First Nation’ used in reference to an organizational context and ‘Aboriginal’ used more as a general reference to Aboriginal people and groups across Canada. I also use ‘Indigenous’ to more broadly refer to Indigenous populations across the globe.

I have a long association with First Nation populations. After completion of a Master of Social Work degree field placement with a First Nation, I served for ten years as a social worker with that First Nation. Obtaining the job was directly related to the ‘relationships’ that were established during the field placement. It was, however, much later that I truly began to appreciate the deeper meaning and importance of ‘relationship’ between practitioner and the Aboriginal person or persons receiving a service. Establishing a meaningful relationship is part of successful service delivery to Indigenous Aboriginal people. This is supported by the literature emanating from Aboriginal scholars described in detail later on in this study. From 1980 to 1990 I served in various positions as a middle and senior manager with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, responsible for allocating funding, providing advisory services, and administering the Federal government’s Trusts Program responsibilities to BC Central Interior First Nations. This service period was followed by ten years of service as Administrator with a First Nation in the
Central Interior of BC. In 2000 I returned to the original First Nation that I became employed with after completing Social Work studies at University. I refer to my vocational career as coming ‘full circle’ as it is extremely insightful to note what has changed and yet disappointing to find a 'lack of progress' in many areas of human service delivery after being away from a particular community for more than twenty years.

The positive working relationships and trust that can be built up over the years can become a powerful tool for ‘outsider practitioners’ working along with and eventually becoming part of the ‘insider practitioner’ group themselves. Some scholars refer to this process of non-Aboriginal practitioners being accepted in the community and thus able to do effective work usually happening only if the outsider has a long standing positive relationship with the local community (Walmsley, 2005; Wilson, 2008; Gair, 2005; and Ladson-Billings, 2000). On a personal level, being a member of an Aboriginal family for twenty years has been invaluable for me in advancing my understanding and participation in Aboriginal family life in a very direct way.

To my embarrassment now, my understanding of Indigenous knowledge and consequently Aboriginal knowledges during my early years of practice was marginal. Similarly, I do not recall that Aboriginal service providers, who are now my colleagues, took as proactive a stance thirty years ago as they do now in promoting retention and use of place-based local knowledge and worldviews. Perhaps it is only in recent years that the results of their efforts have brought more positive acceptance and changes in public school pedagogy and college level course offerings in Aboriginal education. This is not surprising as the processes of de-colonization and re-introduction and recognition of Aboriginal knowledge’s in Canada have only become topics of serious study in selected academic institutions over the past twenty years.
As I look back on the first twenty years of my practice there were the visible carriers and teachers of local knowledge; evidence of the traditions and cultural practices in all the communities that I worked in, that was passed on orally through conversation, in works of art, and in story works of various kinds. As my colleagues and I in government at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, listened to the stories of the people, I recall how for most non-Aboriginals the stories were received and assessed as curious and romanticized parcels of privileged knowledge that we as government agents were exposed to. The value, importance, and meaning of these local epistemologies were not fully understood and appreciated and thus not recognized as experiential systems of knowledge, by most ‘outsiders’ in government such as I; who came into contact with Aboriginal people temporarily in the course of their work as employees of government. This unfortunate reality has been well documented by Aboriginal scholars (Hart, 2002; Briskman, 2007; Yellowbird, 2005; Sinclair, 2009;) and non-Aboriginal scholars (Gair, 2005; Walmsley, 2005; Shewell, 2004) alike.

Similarly, the ontology, ‘how Aboriginal people viewed the world’ was quite different from the mainstream society worldview. The Aboriginal people’s relationship to all living things, the animals, and the ecology were indeed curious for outsiders who had little contact with Aboriginal populations.

The introduction of Social Work was seen by the government as the helping profession that would legitimately address matters of Aboriginal child protection and family well being by assessing local conditions of child rearing in accordance with the dominant society standards. What the social workers who first came into contact with Aboriginal people did not understand about the people were the rich pools of local resources that exist within the community. In this regard, the people that I worked with related to me volumes of rich historical information
consisting of: stories of unique experiences of family members; stories imparting beliefs and what was valued and why; stories embedded in ancient local history, mythology, and spirituality; stories of lessons learned and laws and protocols that were followed by their ancestors as part of respectable and ethical behaviour. While the eyes of the people relating the stories sometimes became moist, there was an enthusiasm and a sense of happiness and pride as they offered this information about “who we are”.

From my recollection of the early history of Canada, the value of the rich Aboriginal cultures, their significance and their potential for inclusion into program service delivery, each with their own epistemological base and ontological stances, were overshadowed by the policies of government that forbid the first people to practice and retain their languages, their traditional local knowledge and cultural practices. For Coast Salish people for example, “schooling, as a weapon of Imperialism, is one of the most recognized sites of symbolic violence and trauma” (Marker 2011, p.201). These were places where the state not only attempted to dislodge the Indigenous students’ culture, and connection to the land, but were places where modernist ideologies of individualism and western science were forcefully asserted as a superior way of life, notes Marker.

The racist attitudes of early settlers saw Aboriginal populations as being in the way of their progress to acquire land and resources and build wealth and achieve a competitive edge as each of the early settler families individually strived for success and the good life.

**Children Impacted Most by Assimilation Policy**
I have always felt a need to respond to socially unjust policy, practice, and services as they apply to Aboriginal children and families because the injustices were blatantly evident as I went about my work with Aboriginal families in various communities. From my first months of contact
with Aboriginal families I could see the inequality of services available to Aboriginal families as compared to mainstream society. I could also sense the despair and hopelessness of many families that reside on reserves (land set aside by the Federal government for the use of status Indians) in First Nation communities who struggle with multiple social issues. I always felt a need for change and reform in the way that services were delivered to Aboriginal families.

Similarly, after beginning my work with Aboriginal families and communities as a ‘helping’ social worker, it came as no surprise that I always reflected upon and desired to ‘make meaning’ of my practice, ‘just how am I doing…am I making a difference…how and when will I know if I am making a difference….who will tell me if my contribution is meaningful and useful?’ Deep down when alone in those reflective, retrospective moments; uninhibited from place, race, and the chase of succeeding; progressing; qualifying; competing to become a successful professional and so on, such analysis often consumed my thoughts.

Occasionally, I would meet someone that I refer to as ‘authentic and trust worthy’ with whom I could freely dialogue and engage to test ‘like minded ideas’ that would lead me towards a deeper understanding and meaning of what I do in my practice. Such experiences also made me appreciate the difference between discussions without a purpose versus productive dialogue (Freire, 2003, p88). Those delightful moments were too rare over the early years and thus the continuing desire to know more about the people that I worked with, and how to adjust my practice to be most helpful in bringing about positive change in services and service delivery, always propelled my curiosity and desire to learn more and thus to make my practice as meaningful as necessary for positive change to occur for the people that I serve.
Strategically Designed Changes to My Practice Roles

Prior to attending university for my Masters degree in Social Work, I had worked for two years as a Psychiatric Service Worker at a Regional Out-Patient Mental Health Clinic providing follow-up services to a caseload of patients released to care homes in the community from a Provincial Mental Health Institution in Saskatchewan. It was an experience that I valued as it placed me in an advocacy role in helping clients with mental challenges adjust to family and community. I was able to help clients with adjustments to community life by building relationships with family, employers and government personnel. Though I enjoyed the work, there remained a lingering concern within me that either I did not really understand Social Service work or what I was doing was not really social service work even though the job title confirmed that it was so. To resolve this dilemma I decided to obtain Social Work formal education and training at the earliest opportunity. After the first year of work in the mental health program, I applied for and was appointed to a new position of Regional Social Worker for the Mentally Handicapped, a similar government initiative where mentally handicapped patients from an In-Patient institution in Saskatchewan were released to group homes throughout the Province. My role was to recruit care homes through public information and education. I really enjoyed this work which can be more appropriately described as community development work resulting in placement of handicapped persons in supervised community residences.

Following graduation from the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia with a Masters level degree, I continued to seek to understand the relationship between social work education and ‘real life’ community social issues.

Vignette 1.1 Advocating for Aboriginal Paraprofessional Inclusion into the Social Work Profession

As a novice social work graduate who just completed a Master’s level educational program, and after a highly successful learning opportunity in my field placement, I was hired by a First Nation to assist a young Aboriginal Council member who managed the Social Service Department of
the First Nation. The main workload consisted of administering the Income Assistance program on reserve but issues of child protection were rapidly rising as a priority. The added responsibilities that the government was devolving to the First Nation increased the workload and demand for more staff. Persons who were involved in similar social service positions with First Nations in Lower Mainland BC would meet regularly and support each other in coping with this demanding workload of social issues on First Nation reserves. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada would coordinate some of the meetings and at times the First Nation Workers would meet alone to review common challenges at work.

One of the main interests of the “Band Workers” as they were referred to was equal recognition with government social workers. In the mid 1970’s I was part of a group of “Band Workers” that lobbied the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia to allow Band Workers without degrees to enter the School of Social Work as mature entry level students. After a couple of meetings with no results, we approached the Board of Registration of the British Columbia Association of Social Workers (BCASW), who seemed intrigued at establishing a relationship with First Nation social service workers. Shortly after an agreement was reached which essentially was that if an applicant for registration had completed 200 hours of acceptable training, they could be accepted as Registered Social Workers of the Association. In addition to obtaining credits by attending approved training stipulated by the Board of Registration, I had developed several Community Education short courses on social work with Aboriginal people and community social issues. These courses were rated and approved as eligible for inclusion as part of the 200 hours that were necessary for the completion towards achieving registered social work designation by the BCASW. The results from this agreement with BCASW and local training were that some eight Band Workers received their Registered Social Worker status over a two year period. We were anxious to expand this training to nearby communities. The courses that my colleagues and I designed at the local level brought an air of excitement to us all as here
we were in our own community; we designed the courses, conducted an assessment of needs; set the standards; evaluated our own progress and really looked forward to a dialogue about solutions. However our enthusiasm was cut short some two years later when we were advised that the BCASW Board of Registration had decided that a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work would be a minimum requirement for registration as an association approved social worker by the BCASW.

Reflection 1.1 ‘Professionalism’ in Social Work Excludes Band Workers
It is interesting to reflect back as what we now know about local Indigenous knowledges, as it helps us to understand our enthusiasm of thirty years ago. We were creating local solutions to local problems by involving local people. This attempted effort of thirty years ago is the essence of this narrative study, that is, that local knowledge is the praxis upon which positive service change can occur in Aboriginal child welfare. History repeats itself and in 2003 I was proud to once again be part of a group that initiated a partnership with the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia, this time to offer a part time off campus Bachelor of Social Work degree program in the community. Not surprisingly many of the candidates in the current program are those that had participated in our 1973 pilot project with the BCASW. Dominant mainstream Institutions and professions are reluctant to welcome membership into their club under any terms other than their own. Such practices and policies perpetuate colonialism and keep valuable ideas and opportunities for learning with other cultures at bay. This was a lost opportunity for the BCASW as well as the First Nation for a partnership could have developed to address both parties’ needs. It is more evident now than ever before that traditional social work practice is less able to help with Aboriginal family needs while a new Indigenous social work is emerging that is more in sync with local protocol, laws, values and needs.
My entire career since then has been associated with providing services to Aboriginal families and communities. I describe the progression of my practice as a chronology of at least six distinct stages, each with its own theme and logic of pursuit. I describe each period briefly, but collectively these periods describe my journey searching strategically for a meaningful role and approach to my practice that would bring about reform and effective change resulting in equitable services for Aboriginal children and families.

Six Stages of ‘Becoming’ a Practitioner
My work with Aboriginal people always presented challenges for me. From the beginning of my practice I could see the inequalities, the racism, the betrayal and treatment of Aboriginal issues by the public, by institutions, and by the education system that taught from books, that misrepresented Aboriginal history, values, beliefs, knowledge, and worldviews. While I didn’t fully appreciate it at the time, my journey always led me to try different approaches in order to help Aboriginal people receive equality in recognition, service and social acceptance based on what I call a ‘humanistic’ practice. Humanity for me is a high level word it means that each person’s life is as purposeful as any other and it is what makes humans show compassion and respect for each other in order to live a balanced and harmonious life. It is no wonder that there are six stages to my journey as in searching for what knowledge and professional approach could be most helpful in delivering services for Aboriginal children and families, my practice career took me full circle until I discovered that the local knowledge is the praxis that can (in the words of my Aboriginal colleagues) ‘guide, protect and provide’ the energy, and wisdom to bring about the changes that we want in developing services and their delivery as a way to achieve meaningful support for Aboriginal children and families.
The First Stage of Practice: Community Social Work
The first phase of my practice consisted of providing direct Social Work services of a general nature. This first five years of work with an Aboriginal First Nation consisted of carrying a “generic caseload” which I learned later was “to do whatever was required” without specializing or compartmentalizing. According to Indigenous social work scholars Baikie (2009) and Absolon (2009), when doing social work with Aboriginal people one should be prepared to do almost anything that is necessary and helpful. What I observed over the first years of my practice was that Aboriginal people disliked and did not trust social workers. They tolerated me and over time our communication improved after they got to know me and realized that I was directly employed by their Nation, rather than the government. Clearly the relationship with government was not built on trust. Being new to the community I would listen a lot. I lived one block from the reserve community that I worked with therefore I was visible in the community as I attended many of the local events and ceremonies.

In spite of the progress that I was making in relating to the people, the sheer lack of resources on reserve as compared to mainstream society was glaring and troubling to me. Efforts did not appear to be made by government to provide services equal to that of the non-Aboriginal community and the resources, both financial and human did not exist locally to address these service gaps. The gaps and disparities included: a lack of affordable low income housing; lack of training and job development on reserve that resulted in high unemployment rates; a lack of affordable Day Care, Pre-School and Infant Development programs; limited access to mental health services; and most non-insured health services to First Nation people on reserves is accessible only from the Medical Services Branch of the Federal government Health Department as opposed to local provincial and municipal health center services that are available to the mainstream population. The bureaucratic complexities of accessing specialized health services; assessment, and diagnostic services result in immense hardships for First Nations communities.
I did not realize then that many of these inequities such as less per capita funding for Aboriginal child protection services as compared to service levels for non-Aboriginal children would continue to exist till today, some four decades later. This recent claim by the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada to the Human Rights Commission of Canada was upheld by the Federal Court (Scoffield, 2012). In any event, I thought I was doing fine in relating to the people. I began to see that in spite of the best efforts of social workers like me working with First Nation communities, that simply assigning more social workers to serve Aboriginal communities would not address the inequalities in service.

My Social Work degree training did not equip me with the skills to address this service gap. I learned early on that historically, the social work profession did not have a good image and record of service to First Nation peoples. A review of the literature in this area reveals “a great deal of negativity around the world concerning Social Work’s track record in working across cultures and with Indigenous and First Nations Peoples” (Gray, Coates, and Yellow Bird, 2008; Hart 2002). It became obvious to me that to be effective in bringing about change in services for Aboriginal children and families required something more than just having on staff persons with a social work degree.

After a few years of service with a First Nation, some of the mainstream competitive ideological thinking began to enter my thoughts such as: ‘one should be careful about working with one organization for too long’ for loss of creativity and interest in the work could diminish. I also noted, from my attendance at meetings and training courses, that First Nation social workers employed with First Nations where not equally respected by the social work profession and employers of social workers such as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Provincial child welfare authorities. In my somewhat confused reasoning at the time, I felt that ‘perhaps I needed
more education in social work’ and ‘maybe I should move on to work for non-Aboriginal agencies for a time’ in order to be comparably recognized’ as a professional social worker.

Another experience that bothered me at this time was that I was often asked by the surrounding agencies to attend their interagency meetings and case consultations where the focus seemed to be on making decisions about terminating a student’s attendance at school or referring a student to child protection authorities, rather than to work directly with the local Aboriginal parents and families. I felt uncomfortable always being asked to provide information without the presence of and the approval of the parents.

At times I felt that I was being essentialized, as if I knew everything about the reserve community because I was employed there and therefore that I should assume responsibility for school and child welfare issues of the Aboriginal community. In any event, I did not feel comfortable responding as a spokesperson for the community, but seemed pressured to do so by mainstream agencies and professionals. Eventually I became better at responding to mainstream naiveté. At other times I could feel the romanticized notion of Aboriginal acceptability when agencies needed the support of the local first Nation in order to qualify for government funding for various discretionary based programs. These early experiences led me to think about how I could assist local people to represent themselves as effectively as possible in regards to concerns relating to in-school education and social concerns as brought forward by police, probation, and child welfare authorities. I reasoned that I would enroll in a graduate level Social Planning and Community Development education program and use this knowledge as a process to empower local Aboriginal people to become directly engaged in planning for community services for their people.
Following five years of experience with a First Nation as a social worker, and after examining the university course calendar of courses offered in various disciplines, I noted that the School of Community and Regional Planning, Master’s level program, offered some courses on weekends. I reasoned that if I had knowledge in planning, particularly social planning, that my practitioner role with the Aboriginal people I worked for could become more diverse and perhaps more meaningful as I could plan in a comprehensive way for services that did not currently exist in the reserve community. So, I went back to graduate school to prepare for the next stage of my practice.

The Second Stage of Practice: Social Planning and Community Development for Service Equity
I began the second phase of my chronological practice progression, that is, the planning and development of programs and services for my employer, the First Nation community, so that services to children and families would be equal to and similar to the social services that existed in the mainstream non-Aboriginal communities. ‘Equality brought about by accessing similar and equal services should bring about improved conditions’ I reasoned. During this period, and in addition to my regular generic caseload, I focused on proposal writing to access government make-work programs like the Federal Local Initiatives Fund which was designed to help stimulate employment during winter months. During this period I was pleased to take on a lead role in drafting proposals that resulted in funding for:

- A blacktopped hard surface area to utilize for children's recreational activities;
- An outdoor campsite with accommodation for overnight stays;
- A six bed pre and post treatment residence for alcohol addicted men;
- A Provincially licensed daycare on reserve;
- A six bed nursing home; and
In response to a large scale mall development on reserve, a locally designed employment service was organized which acted as a liaison between mainstream services and the local reserve communities and offered pre-employment and pre-training orientation to unemployed reserve residents.

These types of services are relevant for many Aboriginal communities today but they must be designed and planned with local people; they must be funded realistically; and the opportunity must exist to train and employ local Aboriginal people in the positions created (RCAP, 1996). The projects that I described above were all designed with ‘good intentions by a few’ but they were implemented with minimal engagement of the community members. They were implemented with great excitement and fanfare by the few that were directly involved, but they were not developed with adequate community engagement and support and thus most of these projects had a short lifespan. The large scale development promised jobs for the local First Nation people, but once the projects were built there was no onus on the developers to employ local people. Broken promises and complete dominance by the developer over local social concerns prevailed, and is in some cases the common practice today.

The daycare was initially attended by children while their mothers were engaged in training. However, as soon as they gained employment and were required to contribute financially to the service, they chose to use the services of extended family members and grandparents instead of paying for the daycare. The recreation blacktopped surface area could not be retained for children’s activities and eventually was used by nearby residents for repairing their cars (due to a lack of organized and supervised programs). The outdoor campsite was used for several years but was subjected to continual vandalism and damage which led to its closure. The six bed residence for alcohol addicted men closed as all local residents preferred to stay in private homes with relatives. The facility was then utilized by non-local residents primarily and local
funding could not sustain the project by serving non local members. A similar fate was faced by the nursing home program. The employment project created a lot of hope and expectations in local membership participants but contracts and leaseholds developed between contractors and the First Nation Council were not designed in a proactive way to ensure even partial hiring of local people in the job generating project. My enthusiasm and first efforts in developing my skills in social and program planning were met with great disappointment.

Never being one to give up on advancing my practice, I began to look for alternative ways to provide services. I chose a third approach to my ‘social’ work focusing on the role of Adult and Community Education as a form of community development. I reasoned that this might be a way that all members of a First Nation might more easily become engaged in providing services to their community. This community development focus was quite different from the two previous approaches of direct service provision and social problem resolution through social planning, where efforts consisted of resolving and responding to social problem matters. I experienced for example, that a workshop for parents of ‘problem children’ not only did not receive a favorable response from parents who did not have any ‘problem children’ but it stigmatized, labeled and prevented participation of those parents that truly could benefit from such a workshop. I reasoned that there had to be other more effective ways for me to make a more effective contribution to my Aboriginal employer in my role as a graduate practicing professional Social Worker and Community Planner.

The Third Stage of Practice: Adult Education and Community Organization
The third stage of my practice focus thus became Adult Education as a form of community development. The logic behind this effort was that with an adult education approach, all of the community could be involved in an educational activity without attaching a stigma to its
participation. Hence, I assumed that parents would be more likely to attend a workshop on ‘developing positive teen relationships’ than a workshop for ‘parents with troubled teens’. The Adult Education approach would allow participants to learn from those parents who already have positive relationships with their teens and thus their participation could be helpful for all parents and especially the social service staffs who are typically struggling to find such answers. I felt that my own knowledge of adult education needed development and after finding out that all courses in a Masters level program at a nearby Institution were offered from four thirty p.m. and onward, I committed to the program on a part-time basis and completed the Master's level degree some six years later.

The newly acquired adult education skills prompted me to engage in a variety of exciting short courses such as “making effective presentations” following a Continuing Education approach offered by community colleges and university institutions. It added a dimension of teaching to my practice as I facilitated short courses in skills development for Aboriginal Home and School Coordinators, Aboriginal Social Service Workers and related training for the purpose of engaging local Aboriginal people, qualifying them for various paraprofessional positions in the community.

The Fourth Stage of Practice: Expansion of Vocational and Educational Horizons
After some six years of steady employment with one First Nation, I applied for various positions in government relating to managing programs for Aboriginal people. A sample of the job competitions that I applied for were:

- Superintendent of Child Welfare for the Government of the Northwest Territories;
- Regional Director of Aboriginal Child Welfare, Whitehorse, Yukon; and
- Senior Manager of Program Operations, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Toronto Ontario.
In follow up inquiries about my performance in these competitions, I was informed that my experience was too limited and my managerial skills unknown since my experience was mainly focused on practice at the local level; thus I was not successful in any of these competitions. I felt betrayed by education, for after acquiring three master’s level degrees in a particular practice area, my practice was considered “too limited”. I had naively assumed that government would value people with a good formal education supported by a lengthy work experience such as I had at the community level. I was feeling somewhat demoralized and thought ‘is this what oppression feels like?’

I finally concluded that my practice experience must be ‘too narrow’ and consequently I became more determined than ever to obtain a job with the Federal government in a position that served Aboriginal populations. The results of the previously unsuccessful competitions temporarily instilled in me a sense of inferiority towards the mainstream society institutions and government. I experienced doubt about my own employability thinking ‘is this similar to what Aboriginal people experience when they are marginalized?’ It seemed to me that my practice experience was judged as less worthy and less meaningful because it was with a First Nation employer in comparison to a mainstream organization such as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). These responses from government competitions led me to recall my father’s first words (which I found to be so disappointing and embarrassing at the time) when he learned that I had accepted a position with a First Nation, that for a short while his words began to haunt me; he said “you need to be concerned about job security when you accept a position with an Indian Band”. His comments I understand now were merely reflective of a mainstream prevailing attitude that by and large exists today, that anything connected to First Nation organizations or people is somehow less worthy or that it must be viewed with some suspicion and skepticism in regards to quality and standard as compared to mainstream. That so many non-Aboriginals feel this way is
an indication of how little they understand the historical relationship of Canada’s Aboriginal people to Canada as enshrined in the constitution of Canada (Kovach 2010, p.159).

However, the humiliation of being told that my practice experience was too limited fueled a strong desire for a change in employment. I learned of a vacancy at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) as Superintendent of Social Development in Central Interior BC. I was told by my acquaintances in government that the position was hard to fill because Aboriginal Chiefs in the region had effectively lobbied to close two District Indian Affairs offices and that the Chiefs wanted more control over their own affairs. The slow progress of change at my place of work plus the newly self created fear of being perceived as ‘having a limited experience’ because my only employment experience was with a first Nation, led me to accept a position titled Superintendent of Social Development with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, as I searched to ‘broaden and legitimize my experience’. The messages that I was getting from the job competitions that I attended were that experience with a First Nation at the local level was less worthy than a work experience in government. Little did I realize then that I too was experiencing the marginalization in regard to my vocational experience because it was with an Aboriginal employer.

The work with INAC begins my fourth stage of practice focus which I assumed would allow me to be part of effecting policy changes from within INAC by reforming services for Aboriginal people. Of course as I began to understand government operations and politics, I soon found out how unrealistic my initial thinking was about effecting change in government policy for Aboriginal people. I will relate a couple of sample experiences in detail later on in the vignettes, but in general my experience with the diverse groups of First Nation people in south central BC was extremely rewarding. Along with three colleagues, we were able to re-establish a working
relationship with the Chiefs of Central Interior BC sufficiently so that they would accept us into their territories to meet, review budgetary matters annually, as well as attend to other program requirements throughout the year.

While at Indian Affairs Canada, I had advanced as far as I could after serving in all the major divisions of the Department. But the greatest disappointment for me was that while terms like “devolution”, “partnership” and “self-government” became new acronyms for government services to Aboriginal people every five years, signaling a new approach to developing positive working relationships with the Aboriginal people, I learned that these were merely new political labels for existing programs that referred to the succeeding five (5) year departmental funding submissions to Treasury Board. I saw little effort by departmental management to engage local communities in their own service planning by recognizing their local resources and knowledge base. Program funding formulas and program criteria were generalized and finalized as national formulas for service delivery. Little attention was, and continues to be, paid to the diversity of needs of First Nations across Canada. Whatever is planned and implemented is done so through the lens of the dominant culture and the hegemonic forces of institutional and government policies. Policy analysts in Ottawa devise funding formulas that are applied across Canada and they seldom address the diverse conditions and needs of First Nations. Planning ‘with’ First Nations would better achieve results for both parties than planning ‘for’ First Nations with limited variables to address diverse needs (RCAP, 1996).

Vignette 1.2 Misunderstanding What Counts as Success

Early on I found my work with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada enjoyable and rewarding as the work required a lot of direct contact with the First Nations in our District area. This was familiar to me as I had previous experience in relating to First Nations at the community level.
My own promotional opportunities within government came quickly. After two years as Social Development Superintendent, I competed and was successful in obtaining the position of Head of Band Operations. Some two years thereafter I was appointed to Superintendent of Lands and Trusts and finally I spent the last three of my ten years with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada as Acting District Manager.

Towards the end of my tenure with government, I experienced great disappointment at what played out like “reverse discrimination” as the position that I held as Acting District Manager was not staffed for a period of three years. I had hoped to be appointed to this position on a permanent basis. Ironically, I was informed by my superior that this position will be held open for Aboriginal trainees as part of the government’s affirmative action policy for training senior managers. While trainees were off to Ottawa on training, I carried out the full responsibilities of the position in an acting capacity.

Reflection 1.2 Hegemony Interferes With Career Opportunity
During the time that I served as Acting District Manager, the Chiefs and Councils of several First Nations wrote letters to the Regional office expressing their support for me to be considered for the permanent position of District Manager. I looked upon this expression of support as an appreciation of the relationships that were built during my team’s work with the various First Nations. However I soon found that having good working relationships with First Nation leaders was not valued by my employer.

One afternoon I was asked to come to a short meeting with the Regional Operations Manager just before a staffing decision was to be made for the District Manager position. This was a senior management position and I was keenly interested to be an applicant for several reasons including the desire for a more permanent working relationship with the First Nations in the area.
My boss began with a long introduction to a negative message which was that I needed to understand where my loyalty should lie in regards to my job. I was pointedly told that a District Manager’s loyalty must rest with the Department, “not with the Band or its Chiefs”. The establishing of positive relationships with Aboriginal community leaders in the provision of government services to them was looked upon as a deficiency in my practice as a manager, even though the stated government policy was and still is to develop good relationships with the Aboriginal people. This was an astounding revelation to me. Thereafter, as an employee of Aboriginal Affairs Canada, I felt disappointed, betrayed and defeated in going to work each day after ten years of dedicated service. This feeling was similar to that which I have stated elsewhere, of my first day at public school (I was five years old then with a limited English vocabulary) when I was strapped on the hands for speaking Ukrainian and not speaking English to my cousin during school hours. My suspicions and mistrust of authority figures resurfaced. Again I thought to myself ‘Is this what oppression feels like?’ I was sickened by the negative judgments that had been made about me by my boss namely because I had established positive working relationships with the local First Nation leaders in the area. I was just as committed to the government agenda (whatever that represented) as to those of the First Nations, but the show of appreciation for my work from the chiefs was seen as threatening to a bureaucracy that doesn’t reward genuine partnerships that could promote success for the agendas of both government and the First Nations. The experience led me to leave the government service at the first opportunity.

The Fifth Stage of Practice: The Band Administrator Role

Consequently, after a disappointing experience in government; when the Chief and Council of a First Nation in the geographic area that I served invited me to join them as Administrator of their organization, the decision was an easy one for me to make. I thus embarked on my fifth practice role as an administrator with a First Nation which I looked forward to with some enthusiasm. An
Administrator position brings with it opportunity for some control and though I never aspired for control in order to exercise power over others, I thought it might be an opportunity to experiment with the idea that managing service delivery effectively and creatively at a local level might bring about desired changes in service content and service delivery for the member children and families.

While the experience was yet another challenge for me that I appreciated, I soon found that the Administrator role was not one through which I could influence change in any serious way. There are several reasons for this. First of all, an Administrator at a First Nation organization works within a complex political environment. There was at the time at my place of work a lack of clear delineation of duties between the Administrator position and the political roles of Chief and Council members. Even if role differentiation exists, it doesn’t prevent Chiefs or Council members from exercising their influence in the Administrative area. I realized that I was not enjoying the Administrative functions of expenditure control, budgetary planning, and human resource management as I thought I would. I missed working in the capacity of advocate and creative project developer or facilitator where one could bring forth new proposals and funding opportunities that could help bring about change within the community. By this time I had observed how many contracts were being let to outside consultants to assess community social needs and to evaluate existing social programs. Some of the work I felt could be carried out by local people working as a team along with an experienced team leader with experience in understanding and working with local community centered research. Human Resource issues were difficult to manage, for while Council members demanded better employee performance, disciplinary actions by me as the Administrator were not consistently supported by the Council members. The Administrator position did not bring about the results for me that I had expected.
Vignette 1.3 Planning for Increased Funding and Program Expansion

During the period when I held down the position as Administrator of a First Nation I also assumed the responsibilities for the Social Programs in that Nation. Having been an employee of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) gave me an advantage of knowing what resources existed and how they could be accessed. In regards to funding for services for children and families, First Nations and especially those with smaller populations were encouraged by INAC to join with other First Nations or Tribal Councils for accessing delegated Provincial child protection services. After reviewing the criteria for funding it became clear that by joining with a neighboring tribal group could easily bring additional funding of $300,000.00 to the community. As administrator I was able to place this opportunity on the Council agenda for consideration to be followed by approval. To confirm what I had been recommending, the Council invited the Executive Director of the neighboring tribal agency to a Council meeting. The information that I provided was verified and I received approval to continue planning for this project. The planning involved a needs assessment that included several successful community meetings.

The membership in the community, were very supportive of the initiative as increased funding would certainly result in the hiring of several more staff to work in the community. I attended orientation and staff meetings with the designated delegated agency that we were to join with and they too were supportive of this addition to their tribal council service plan for seven First Nations.

Reflection 1.3 Politics Are Always a Factor

Just before year end in the year 2000 I received an invitation to return to the employ of the organization that I had worked with years before in order to assist with implementing their Health Transfer Plan. Meanwhile no Council decision was made in regards to finalizing of the
agreement for child care services. Because I left this First Nation at the beginning of the year in 2000, I do not know precisely why they did not join forces with a neighboring child welfare agency except to know that all other parties except the Council whose community stood to benefit, were in favor of the plan. This is yet another example of a lost opportunity that was available to a community for increased funding but the Council did not support it for political reasons.

Disillusioned with the Administrator role I sought to do contract work where I could select projects that I felt comfortable with and where implementation of change was an objective of the work to be done.

The Sixth Stage of Practice: The Facilitator Role
This led me to a sixth role in my practice, one where I began to facilitate the re-introducing of local, traditional, and contemporary ways of working with people. From community development theory and practice, came the notions of empowering local people through adult education and community organization. The work of Freire and his concept of ‘conscientization’ inspired my efforts as did the reading of the literature and my own increasingly elevated understanding of local knowledge. This resulted in my becoming more confident in applying traditional and contemporary local knowledge as part of my social justice practice with Aboriginal people. I humbly practiced to improve my skills and become successful in obtaining a position as a facilitator of traditional and contemporary decision-making in circle work with Aboriginal children and families.

As part of a consultation and advisory role for several years prior to 2007, I assisted First Nations in securing funding for initiatives such as the Health Transfer program from Health
Canada, as well as drafting proposals for alternative Aboriginal Child and Family Service delivery approaches. I have come to learn about the local Indigenous Aboriginal knowledges of the people in each locale where I am employed. This knowledge and the application of it, has transformed how I think about my practice, how I conduct myself and relate to the people that I work with.

I am now in balance and harmony with my practice and it no longer is a cause of stress for me. It is a joy to include the people that I work with, in whatever planning I do as part of my work. These opportunities arise daily. I am currently in the role of facilitator and coordinator for organizing Family Group Conferences, which are alternative approaches for responding to child protection issues. Care plans that are developed for children in family group conferences can be accepted in Family Court in accordance with sections 20 and 21 of the British Columbia Child, Family and Community Service Act (RSBC 1996). In the community, the Family Group Conferences are known as Family Circles and to the greatest degree possible, I include parents, family members and community support people as part of a team where all voices are included. This Circle work is easy for me to engage in as I believe that as we assist people in overcoming their challenges, that the dignity and humanity of individuals must always be maintained and respected. I often hear complaints from families within our region that other professionals do not treat them with respect.

Reflecting on Practice
My practice has always been centered on providing a service to Aboriginal families and communities. The practitioner roles have varied including that of a social worker, working with a defined caseload; a community organizer introducing new programming in response to service gaps; a government civil servant providing advisory services and allocating program funding to
First Nations; managing local resources for a local First Nation as an administrator; providing training and teaching short courses as part of community education; sessional lecturer at a social work school at university; and various consulting service projects related to improving service delivery planning for Aboriginal communities. Ever since the first vocational engagement with Aboriginal communities, my approach has been to reflect on ‘how best can I help’? or ‘what role can I engage in that would be most beneficial for the people and community, while still being satisfying for me?’ I have always been one to question why INAC services were being allocated as they were and I observed a need for inclusiveness of the Aboriginal people in the design and ‘planning of the services with them’. In comparing First Nation’s local government to regional and municipal communities, we see that INAC federal services are designed in Ottawa by program analysts far removed from the voices of the six hundred plus local diverse Aboriginal communities across Canada.

Becoming a student in The Educational Leadership and Policy Program in the Faculty of Education at UBC helps me to guide the learning journey in a scholarly way and has introduced Indigenous research as part of the learning experience as well. Since enrolment in this program of study, I experience a “heightened consciousness” and a “wide awakedness” to whatever I do in my practice”. These terms as articulated by Schutz (1967, p.258) cited in Maxine Greene (1994), refer to paying an active mode of attention to one’s practice. The opportunity has now arisen for me to reflect and to make meaning of my lengthy practice serving Aboriginal children and families. The notion of theorizing about my practice with Aboriginal people was initially intriguing as it complimented the holistic nature of my ‘helping’ practice that is inclusive of Indigenous research. Since Aboriginal knowledge is based on experience and since I have spent many years working in local knowledge environments, I was intensely drawn to explore the meaning of my practice in a scholarly way. I found that my early eye opening experience at university was similar to that of Aboriginal scholar Kathy Absolon (2009, p.176) who said:
It wasn’t until my doctoral studies that I had the incredible opportunity to experience classes taught by Indigenous professors with choices of explicitly indigenous courses. For the first time in my education I experienced a sense of normalcy, the presence of cultural mirrors, peer dialogue, relevant knowledge and contextual validation. Indigenous education by and with Indigenous people possesses a capacity for transformation.

Dominant themes to my practice have centered on capacity building; to empower people I engage with; and to facilitate for service improvement to Aboriginal children and families to be at least equal to that of the mainstream society. Scholars writing about the role of non-Aboriginals working with Aboriginal populations, all refer to effectiveness of practice as being related to the length of service and effort to participate in local community life events. I concur that to be seen as an effective practitioner one must participate in and be present at community events, and ceremonies.

The changing practitioner roles as described in the six stages, coincided with my practice taking on a paradigm shift from the use and reliance on Eurocentric western knowledge to an increased understanding and utilization of the local Indigenous knowledge of each of the locations of my practice and application to service content and delivery to the local Aboriginal children and families resident there. When I speak of ‘understanding local knowledge’ I mean learning about the local history of the people, their laws, protocols of procedure and behaviour for various occasions (ceremonies), their beliefs, values, and distinct cultural practices (Absolon, 2009; Hart, 2002). As a ‘helping’ professional, utilization means that I would encourage people to re-introduce their ways of responding to child and family issues, such as circle work, ceremony, and spiritual healing.

In the Educational Leadership and Policy Program, in addition to learning about the value of reflecting on practice and that scholarship can also involve researching and theorizing about
practice and that qualitative research about practice is as important as quantitative objectivist focused research, I was introduced to Indigenous knowledge and in particular Aboriginal Indigenous knowledges of British Columbia. Having already established relationships with many Aboriginal people, families, and communities through my earlier work within their territories, I began to reflect on these experiences and to make meaning of that experience.

One area of extreme concern to First Nations, caring professionals both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is the continuing high rate of children that are removed from families and communities and placed under the custody of the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development. Since my first encounter with an Aboriginal community I have been concerned with the inequity of services for Aboriginal children, a social issue that just does not get addressed year after year. My experience as a practitioner with this social justice concern is inclusive of my various roles within Aboriginal populations as described earlier. I have learned a lot about this topic from many Aboriginal people, cultural teachers, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal university Instructors. In my story I relate how my practice has been transformed as a result of the work with Aboriginal people and the insight that I gained from their local knowledges. Similarly, I share some of my insights into how services to Aboriginal children and families might be transformed. The irony to my journey is that after years of searching for the right combination of formal education to guide my practice with Aboriginal people, I have found that the teachings at the local level, that is, the epistemological and ontological essence of each Aboriginal community are the forces that can best guide a ‘helping practice’ within their communities.

Reflective Questions
In reflecting on practice in this study I focus on the following questions:
1. What knowledge and practice elements are useful for a non-Aboriginal Human Service professional to understand in order to provide an effective service to Aboriginal families?

2. What are the impacts of introducing local knowledge as a framework on which an alternative effective Aboriginal child and family service delivery system can be achieved?

3. What paradigm shifts in social work and the related professions are necessary for the professional helping disciplines to become ‘facilitators of’ rather than ‘obstacles to’ changes that are required for the effective delivery of child welfare services to Aboriginal populations?

Dissertation Outline
Ironically the local Indigenous knowledges of Aboriginal groups across Canada have not been recognized and acknowledged as a key element for transforming how child and family services are developed and delivered in First Nations communities across this country. Historically, the complete denial of the relevance of Indigenous knowledges and government efforts forbidding their use have indirectly contributed to increasing the number of Aboriginal children that continue to be removed from their family homes (Baskin, 2011). Throughout this dissertation I articulate how and why local knowledge is a necessary component for a service transformation to be achieved. My story describes how coming to understand and apply local knowledge in my ‘helping practice’ with Aboriginal people has transformed ‘my self’ and ‘my practice’ in providing a child welfare service to Aboriginal children and families. Within this story are helpful observations; some tested, some not tested, about how positive change might be achieved.

Chapter Two describes the rationale for selection of the critical reflective narrative as the method chosen to describe four decades of practice. The experiences are described in vignettes presented as a chronology of experiences over six defined periods in time. Reflections in the vignettes complement the literatures to support presentation of my arguments. The strengths of the method are discussed and arguments both challenging and supporting the narrative method...
are identified. How and why narrative inquiry complements Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous research methodology is articulated.

Chapter Three supports my experience that the driving force for change in service and service delivery to Aboriginal children and families is the re-introduction of local knowledge. Local knowledge is defined so that there is no doubt in the reader’s mind about how it differs from western Eurocentric mainstream knowledge. Working with Indigenous knowledge includes conducting Indigenous research, in accordance with an Indigenist research methodology. Some aspects of Indigenous knowledges are sacred and practitioners, especially non-Indigenous practitioners, need to be sensitive to this reality and know ‘how to behave’ around sacred knowledge when the information becomes known to them, in order to retain credibility from ‘those that know’.

Chapter Four describes the history of social work with Aboriginal people that began by social workers as agents of government assimilation policy that led to the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents and family homes to government funded and church managed residential schools. The historical chronology leads us to the present where in some sites Aboriginal knowledge is beginning to be seen as valued and is being re-introduced to some school classes at various levels at the secondary school, college and university level. I explain and illustrate why I believe the university-community relationship holds a good deal of promise as a fertile ground for education that leads to a respectful, truthful, and legitimate study of the plurality of Aboriginal Indigenous knowledges of Canada. New models of place-based social work will emerge from these place-based knowledges.

Chapter Five describes a practice experience with Aboriginal people over four decades illustrating how gradual changes in my skill level development progressed from what Dreyfus, in
Flyvberg (2001, p21) refers to as the beginning practice of a novice applying “rules based” skills and moving towards that of “expert” more akin to a current scholarly approach to my practice where I seek to ‘make meaning’ of my practice in a phronetic way, that is, to apply it to any child protection related issue in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reason.

Transformation occurs in the ‘self’, that is, me as a person; in those colleagues and clients with whom I have established relationships; and the sum total of cumulative, collective, and collaborative learning leads to positive insights into how changes can be made to types of service and service delivery for Aboriginal children and families.

Chapter Six summarizes the central arguments, and their potential contributions to the field. Limitations to the study are described with suggestions for future research in this field.
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY: CRITICAL REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE INQUIRY
AS SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

Writing, exploring and discussing our essential narratives is a route to taking responsibility and control of our lives, professional and personal. (Bolton, 2006, p.205).

Influential Beginning
In this narrative I talk of transformation, of self, of practice, of my understanding of Indigenous ways, and most importantly how this transformation leads me to pose suggestions for transforming Aboriginal child and family practice, an activity which I am keenly interested and in which I participate in through my daily practice. What makes these transformations unique for me, and perhaps other committed practitioners in similar practice settings, is that the changes have come about as a result of engaging ‘mind’ and ‘heart’ through a commitment of learning ‘with and through’ local epistemological and ontological ways. I say ‘mind’ and ‘heart’ for a reason. In mainstream education, the focus is on using your mind, your intellectual capacities, in order to learn and gain understanding of phenomena. Indigenous knowledge on the other hand, being ‘process’ and ‘holistically orientated’ includes release of emotion, and feeling as part of a balanced learning process within a healthy environment(Baskin,2011). Consequently, I do not rule out my own feelings or those whom I work with because I know that they are a part of the ‘helping relationship’ regardless of whether I work with Indigenous or mainstream people. I consider the word ‘client’ disrespectful and an inadequate description of a ‘helping relationship’ when engaging with Aboriginal people. This in itself is a teaching from local Indigenous knowledge’s, and it is one that has empowered my practice; it has helped to build positive relationships with all people that I engage with and it brings a measure of ease, happiness, and minimal stress into my work space.
‘Client’ as a term, is seen as a labeling and stigmatizing term as viewed through an Indigenous lens as it sets up an unequal relationship that always positions the client at a subordinate level in relation to the professional that is assigned to help the ‘client’. In my view ‘helpers’ need to lead by example, and always respect the humanity of the individual, regardless of the circumstances they present. Inappropriate behaviors and acts are not to be tolerated but respect of the humanity in all persons is to be respected. The aspect of ‘adding heart’ to my helping ‘resource bank’ if you will, is a core element of the transformation of self, and practice that I refer to. It is present in all activities related to my practice approach, whether I am teaching, conducting Indigenous research, facilitating circle work, or planning ‘program service change’ with my Aboriginal colleagues.

I can’t compare my ancestral Ukrainian background of experiences to that of Aboriginal peoples, as the government has slotted those of my cultural type into the multicultural basket (St. Denis & Schick, 2005). Our government gives itself the privilege to define, position, and situate cultures socially and geographically via discourse, policy and legislation. Aboriginal people experienced domination and marginalization early on in Canada’s history by being displaced by colonial settlers supported by a ruthless government policy that resulted in assigning reserves in Canada as places where Aboriginal people had permission to reside which they could call home. Assimilation policy provided basic government survival assistance which was intended to civilize and Christianize the Aboriginal population (RCAP, 1996).

First traumatic experiences in a person’s life can impact one’s emotions giving rise to any number of psychological and sociological reactions (Parada, 2009). I reflect back to my earliest days in school, in fact it was my first day of public school attendance at a prairie country school where I experienced the wrath of public education. I was sent to the cloak room by my teacher
where I was forcefully strapped across the hands for communicating to my cousin in the Ukrainian language. The incident unsettled my emotions and impacted how I related to teachers and authority figures for years. When I attended High School at a small town prairie school, I heard reference to my people of Ukrainian origin as “garlic snappers”, that is, those who ate garlic sausage and smelled bad in public. From early on in my life I was sensitive to how people who were not of the dominant white western background were marginalized socially and publicly, through discourse, text, and real life relations. For me, I internalized negative references to my culture; these feelings were uncomfortable and at times made me feel unworthy with a tendency to withdraw from being at the center of any group activity where my input was necessary.

For a period of two years between age eleven and twelve my parents moved to Toronto and I attended a school where there were students from various ethnic backgrounds. Being in the presence of student peers of different color and culture helped me somewhat, to understand cultural diversity as a teenager and coupled with the experiences as related earlier, I was in a sense at least minimally prepared for the experience of doing social service work with an Aboriginal population. That is, I knew that ‘listening’ was important for understanding and that people of different cultures had differing beliefs and values than the majority mainstream population and that mainstream people were not always nice in their opinions and judgments of people who were different from themselves.

Coping with being ridiculed for speaking your language or for belonging to a particular ethnic group, can raise introspective negative thoughts of ‘self’ that are not easily forgotten. At times during the early years of university and later in the early years of practice, I would question whether what I do and what I know is really worthy or not. But, I also had dreams about being a
competent professional and living a good life. After some years of practice with Aboriginal people, my curiosity about learning continued as I sought to find “what would work” in developing services for Aboriginal children and families. What would make a difference? A gradual and heightened understanding of the history of colonization and oppression faced by Aboriginal populations came about as a result of my listening to the stories (the narratives) of the people. These narratives made an impact on me; I knew they represented the truth, as they were the ‘lived experiences of many’ that spoke to me. Their stories were quite different from what I had learned in public school and social work courses at the university. In public school and my early years at university the stories about Aboriginal people were told by non-Aboriginal teachers and instructors and they tended to present Aboriginal groups as one culture, generally focusing on their inability to adapt to mainstream society. The diversity of Aboriginal populations, their philosophy of what constitutes knowledge, their worldviews and their cultural practices were seldom a topic of study. It is thus ironic that the university I chose to do further study at has become the site where I have found answers in how to transform services and their delivery for Aboriginal populations. The presence of Indigenous instructors in courses of study with a ‘lived experience’ of diverse Aboriginal cultures across the globe; supported by discourses led by, and texts written by, Indigenous scholars identified for me a trusted site for a continuing honest dialogue related to Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews.

Why Personal Narrative
Nash (2004) argues that the three most important qualities needed to do scholarly personal narrative writing are passion, resilience, and faith (p.131). Passion is about the excitement and enthusiasm that I have for the work I do. Resilience points to my ability to recover from setbacks with a renewed vigor, spirit, and determination to find what will drive change in my area of practice. I have faith that my approach is the correct one to achieve personal, practice, and agency goals of the child and family agency with which I am engaged.
For Nash, personal narrative puts the self front and centre to use personal insights to draw later conclusions for readers; typically we are drawn to the voices of others. However, regardless of our successes we need to speak in our new voice and “stay in the present moment”, says Lamott, cited in Nash (p.46). He refers to how ‘self’ changes, when in scholarship you find your niche in your practice. When one finds this niche, our personality and behavior changes with it.

Writing, exploring, and discussing our essential narratives is a route to taking responsibility and control of our lives, professional and personal, says Bolton (2006, p. 205). From birth we are surrounded by stories telling us who we are and where we belong, what is right and what is wrong. Information is retained in the human mind as narrative. Narratives are central to human understandings, memory systems and communication, whether we know it or not, according to Bolton. The stories form a complex, volatile system: complex; because each life is constituted out of a range of characters and situations; volatile; because it constantly changes with every individual action or event, whether it is mine or those around me. Narratives are thus suitable for describing Indigenous epistemologies in that they too are process constituted and are in a constant change mode as compared to Euro-centric knowledge that is standardized, fixed, and end product constituted. Indigenous knowledges are experientially-based and depend on subjective experiences and the inner workings of the self to generate social interpretations, meanings and explanations (Castellano, 1999).

A story resists singular interpretation, and by its nature “captures nuance, indeterminacy and interconnectedness in ways that defy formalistic expression and expands those possibilities for interpretation and understanding” (Doyle and Carter, 2003, p. 130 cited in Bolton). Individual experience is described as raw and authentic; yet it is no more or less than another story; a
story which others will cap with their own. Frank (2004, p. 209), correctly claims that what counts with any story is what people choose to do with it. He calls that practical wisdom and this develops what Greek philosopher Aristotle has referred to as phronesis; an opportunity for all to use narrative in becoming an expert at what we do by making ‘the right decision, at the right time for the right reason’. Certainty goes down as experiential knowledge goes up. An experienced practitioner learns all the time, and is open to being wrong (Bolton). Bolton (2006), claims that a deep understanding can be gained by entering another’s feeling, thinking, perception and memories “This is writing beyond what you know, and has to be; if you know where writing is going to take you, start at that known point, and write on into the unknown” (p. 211). Researchers with Aboriginal populations become co-learners rather than experts, and increase their own awareness of the ethical considerations regarding research with Aboriginal communities (Castleden and Kurszewski, 2000). These words mirror my own experience and practice with Aboriginal communities.

A Decision to Examine My Practice
In thinking about how to present my practice transformation in a scholarly and meaningful way and secondly, to pose suggestions for changes in my field of practice, I chose to critically examine my own extensive practice. My intention is to tell my stories for a purpose, thus it will be a critical reflection and one that I hope to illustrate will qualify as social justice work. Bolton (2006, p.203) asserts that practitioners can gain greater observational powers and a sense of authority over their work and more of a grasp of its inherently complex political, social and cultural impact by “examining their own and others” practice through written narrative. I have examined the written practices of Aboriginal scholars that have been engaged doing what they define as Indigenous social work (Hart, 2002; Absolon 2009; Sinclair; 2004; Weaver 1999) and others as their findings mirror my own experience.
Personal narrative as cultural performance has transformative power to assert self-definitions about who, and what, matters: the existence, worth and vitality of a person or group has meanings not otherwise available to an audience, (Langellier and Peterson, 1997). Linda Kaufman’s critique of a therapeutic model of personal narrative asserts “writing about yourself does not liberate you, it just shows how ingrained the ideology of freedom through self-expression is in your thinking” (p.269). From Langellier I understand that narratives can help describe my changing practice roles and the challenges that I faced with the advent of each new role. In thinking about my practice roles throughout my career, I sometimes feel like a cultural insider, sometimes an outsider, often an ally and occasionally an enemy, simultaneously oppressor and oppressed, thus story telling teaches me and then teaches me again how the differences of geography, of history, of culture, can make a difference and that ‘context’ is truly significant.

A good deal of my practice as a social justice program facilitator is engaged in collaborative learning via a community development strategy, where learning is comparable to a teacher-student interaction. The form of this teacher-student relationship is what Freire calls the teacher-student contradiction, where the poles of contradiction are recognized so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.

For Freire, education must begin with this resolution of the teacher-student contradiction (Freire, 2003). In my practice examples of earlier years with my Aboriginal team members, I introduced them to the Eurocentric, the professional and academic modes of mainstream social work content and information. In turn they introduced me to their Indigenous local Aboriginal knowledge and practices related to their cultural values and beliefs and thus we have developed respectful reciprocal relationships. Over time, and with the benefit of our reciprocal relationships,
the imbalances have almost disappeared, as I became familiar with ‘their ways’ and as they became engaged in pursuing mainstream university level study in Social Work with local experiential knowledges as a framework for their study assignments. Many Aboriginal colleagues have experienced western knowledge, professionalism and Eurocentric thinking in the course of their own practice or while pursuing formal studies in social service work and related disciplines. This of course conveniently sets the stage for my team members and me to engage in brisk dialogue about the bi-cultural world we function in within our Aboriginal child and family agency settings. In particular, our interest in introducing local ways into how we work with our families, we are beginning to realize that mainstream social work cannot and should not evaluate our performance in regard to our work as it is knowledge and practice from another cultural perspective and context. Thus, such practice should be evaluated in relation to measurements and standards directly related to local knowledge. My experience informs me that when the benefits of local cultural practices such as spiritual work, healing circle work, and ceremony are evaluated by social workers who are not from the local community or who are not familiar with local cultural practices, that the benefits of those practices to the local people are underestimated and therefore devalued.

Learning through narrative, sharing stories of personal experience as well as stories of others is also a way to conceptualize the learning process. Clark (2008), in addressing qualities of narrative concludes that narrative learning is an effective teaching method. Bolton (2006) describes narrative writing as a reflective inquiry into professional practice. Bolton describes how professionals find narrative straight forward and an enjoyable way to conduct an enquiry. It makes the taken for granted every day practice into something different, an object to “be pushed and pulled to see what happens. Asking What, Why? How? When? Where? Who? of the material is an inherent dynamic part of the process” she argues (p, 204).
As an advocate of narrative inquiry, Bolton views inquiry based learning as a core of teacher education programs where students ‘learn through’ inquiry rather than ‘being prepared for’ inquiry. She argues that “Narrative is an attempt to create order out of a chaotic world” (Bolton, 2006, p.204) and that inquiry based learning should become the core of teacher education programs. Story making needs to be examined critically to create fresh accounts of our lives from different perspectives. Listening to peers, visualizing, and learning from story telling about knowledge, values, and identity is more important than attempts to arrive at a true account says Doyle (2004) in Bolton. I concur with Bolton based on my own experience of listening to stories that have impacted me over the years. These stories whether originating from university professors, a grandparent, a parent, or a trusted friend can be so impressionable as to remain part of one’s core belief and value system for some time. They also serve as powerful lessons learned and imprinted permanently in our memory and consciousness. Hawaiian indigenous scholar Meyer (2001) claims that anyone with a drop of Hawaiian native blood has genetically and culturally encoded unique ways of knowing and learning; and therefore ethnic Hawaiian children (and other ethnic minorities to a lesser degree) have special needs for uniquely tailored curriculum and instructional methods. Of course the stories are easier to understand, comprehend and store in our memory bank to become part of one’s intellectual and social make up, if they are part of one’s own cultural experience and developmental environment (Meyer, 2001). If as an ‘outsider’ practitioner you are not an Aboriginal person from the local community, the stories can take time to be absorbed, understood, and have meaning, let alone to become part of one’s practice. My own experience with First Nation Elders serves as a good example of this.

Vignette 2.1 ‘Listening to’ Elder’s Stories.

In the early years of my practice as a social worker I was privileged to work in an Aboriginal community where I was assigned to make weekly visits to six small village sites within a twenty mile radius to provide a variety of social services including: income assistance; child welfare
assessments; and counseling. After being introduced to most of the households by a local Council member over a period of several months, I started to make my weekly visits to the communities on my own.

As I made weekly visits from family to family from village to village I witnessed first hand the diverse artistic talents and life skills of various individuals and families. I would be invited to observe various projects in the making such as; racing canoe construction; totem pole carving; wood carving; jewelry making; fish and wild meat preserving; drumming; singing; longhouse dancing; ceremonies for various purposes; shaker church services and so on. People were friendly, generous and eager to share their culture and identities of ‘who they were’.

Reflection 2.1 Experiencing Local Indigenous Knowledge

Typically I was always asked to join families for a meal or coffee on every visit, and because of the large number of people to be seen on each visit, I was often required to decline but not to forget to accept such offers on my next visit. Elders in particular would get into explaining in quite some detail their ‘family tree’, and along with that, legends about the local areas, always referenced by geographic sites and identified recognizable points in the nearby landscape. Many of the legends involved animals and inanimate objects as if they were humans. I was intrigued but too naïve to understand the meaning of their stories and the culture so did not fully appreciate the richness that I was privy to in those stories in my early years as a social worker. Sometimes I could not understand why an Elder would laugh as they told a story and at other times their facial expressions turned serious. Unfortunately, I did not at the time understand that I was experiencing the people’s expressions of their local knowledge and worldviews, they were truly proud to share their history and culture of ‘who they were’ with those whom they had established a respectful relationship.
When I was invited to attend ceremonies in the community, including the longhouse and other events where ceremonial mask dancers were present, I could see the head-dresses and other costumes of the dancers representing animal forms such as raven, eagle, a two-headed serpent and so on. It was not until later on in my practice, after my Educational Leadership and Policy engagement at the university, that I came to understand that it was local aboriginal epistemology and ontology that I had experienced in the early years of practice as a social worker.

This narrative study is grounded in qualitative inquiry because it provides a sensitive mode of inquiry more in line with cultural oral traditions and non-positivistic worldview of Aboriginal people. A positivist approach would tend to discount intuitive wisdom and indigenous knowledge (Hoare, Levy and Robinson 1993, p.46). A qualitative approach allows participants to have and give voice and capture unique context and matter within the research process. Thomas and Bellefeuille (2006 p.5) conducted evaluation of Aboriginal mental health programs and contend that a reason to situate their Aboriginal research in the qualitative paradigm is that it focuses on social issues, the research process itself is emergent theory, methodology, and method may evolve in response to and in the course of the research experience. They further contend that the qualitative paradigm is most congruent with Aboriginal science. I understand “Aboriginal science” to refer to what is experientially and cumulatively known by Aboriginal people in regards to their relationship to the environment and consequently ‘how one needs to relate to it’.

Aboriginal literature has been critical of a rational quantitative paradigm of research because of its intent to generalize experience, universal truth and minimize differences and complexity of Aboriginal diversity in cultural values, worldview and knowledge base. Qualitative research is favoured as being more suited to explaining diversity and content of Aboriginal cultures.
Consequently various Aboriginal scholars (Battiste and Youngblood-Henderson, 2000; Colorado, 1988; and Smith, 2001) assert that the aim of qualitative research is to enhance understanding. This is compatible they explain, with Aboriginal epistemological worldviews which seek to understand the lived experience of people in all its complexity and diversity, and without any intention of uncovering a universal truth about experience as phenomena. The following quote by Youngblood-Henderson effectively summarizes the Aboriginal worldviews that consider the Earth and referent life on the Earth as an interconnected web of life functioning in a complex ecosystem of relationships.

Aboriginal knowledge is not a description of reality but an understanding of the processes of ecological change and ever-changing insights about diverse patterns or styles of flux. Concepts about “what is” define human awareness of the changes but add little to the actual processes of change. To see things as permanent is to be confused about everything; an alternative to that understanding is the need to create temporary harmonies of interdependence through alliances and relationships among all forms and forces. This web of interdependence is a never-ending source of wonder to the Aboriginal mind and to other forces that contribute to the harmony. (Youngblood-Henderson, 2000 p.264).

When Youngblood–Henderson argues that “Aboriginal knowledge is not a description of reality” he is pointing out the differences between the definition and origin of how we come to understand Aboriginal knowledge systems generally versus how western knowledge is defined and understood. In Aboriginal knowledge what is “real” is what is experienced (Castellano, 2000). Hence what qualifies as the truth can only be based on experience. In western knowledge what is real and what becomes the truth is what has been universally accepted and scientifically proven via a technical rationality analysis. Understanding the distinction between Western and Aboriginal Indigenous knowledge systems is essential before we can design and develop programs and services based on new paradigms.
Introducing Indigenous Research Methodology
The early years of research with Aboriginal people has been described by Denzin (2005 p.15) as the period of the “lone ethnographer, the man-scientist who went off in search of his nature in a distant land. This was a period of classical ethnography organized around beliefs and commitments; objectivism; a complexity with imperialism; a belief in monumentalism; and a belief in timelessness in that what was studied would never change”. As Denzin recounts the age of the “lone-ethnographer” conducting positivist research with Aboriginal people is over. Denzin is referring here to the recent changes in regards to ethics in conducting research about Aboriginal issues and Aboriginal people. The changes include the necessary approval and permission from local authorities, addressing ownership of the research outcomes, and following local and Institutional ethics guidelines in regards to the conduct of research related to Aboriginal people. The Tri Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans has published its 2nd Draft Edition of Chapter 9 “Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples in Canada” The research guidelines about conducting research on Aboriginal people are becoming more instructive to all stakeholders so as to reduce misrepresentation and disrespect towards Aboriginal people and to the academic community for past unethical research practices in research about Aboriginal people.

I draw my vignettes and stories from my past and current local research and narrative data in the form of orally transmitted stories of Aboriginal people that I engaged with. This consists of my own interpretation of stories as told by Elders of various First Nation communities. My narrative describes the qualities of Indigenous research methodology that present marked differences when compared to mainstream research ethical guidelines. The ‘data’ for this study consists of my own practice experiences as understood and interpreted through a critically reflective lens.
Smith (1999 p.1) proclaims that “research” is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary. Increasing resistance to research conducted by outsiders, by aboriginal leaders, and by aboriginal academics has made it difficult to conduct Aboriginal research without aboriginal consent and ownership. My lengthy experience of working with several First Nations as a social worker, adult educator, and program facilitator has provided me with insight into the traditions, philosophy of knowledge, and worldview of some First Nations in British Columbia. In spite of my experiences from the close connection with Aboriginal people, I have chosen to speak only of my own experiences, my own self transformation and my practice transformation as a result of a long association with Aboriginal clients, colleagues and teachers experiencing their knowledge, worldviews and research methodology. The narrative can be defined as ‘a truth about an experience of mine’.

I use critical narrative reflection as a way of expressing changes in my experiences as I progress in my practice. Writing, exploring and discussing our essential narratives is a route to taking responsibility and control of our lives, professional and personal (Bolton 2006, p.205). Bolton describes our lives as being brought up by stories that define us, telling us who we are, where we belong, what is right and what is wrong. I am reminded immediately of how closely his definition resembles the transmission of knowledge and oral communication of Aboriginal people as imparted through stories. Story telling and interpretation of stories in Aboriginal cultures also becomes a form of Indigenous research methodology where stories are the data which take into account various story variables such as: who tells the story; to whom is the story told; for what purpose; in what context is the story told and so on (Archibald, 2008).

it’. This is practical wisdom that develops phronesis, a term originating with Aristotle, and meaning that one masters their practice skills to a level beyond referring to a set of rules and protocols, and instead, a practitioner, for example, acts intuitively always making ‘the right decision at the right time for the right reason’. In what follows I will identify sources in the literature that will both defend and critique the personal narrative methodology. Examples of helpful resources here are: Kennedy (1997) on “The connection between research and practice” and Richardson (1994) on “Conducting research on Practice”.

I agree with Bolton (2006) that a writer has the privilege of entering into the life of another. Deep understandings can be gained by entering another’s feeling, thinking, perception, and memories. In reading a scholarly paper produced by Hawaiian scholar Meyer (2003), I am again reminded that “knowledge is memory”. Indigenous knowledges are based on experience and they are passed on orally to other persons and retention of the knowledge is based on the memory of the words of the person imparting the knowledge (telling the story).

**Constructing Theory**

In delivering my own story, I have thought about where narrative relates to theory. I believe that my practice experiences mirror constructivist learning theory, which argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from their experiences (Joldersma, 2011). The learning that occurs through dialogue with my colleagues also mirrors a process in which through dialogue and reflection one reaches a state of “conscientization” as described by Freire (2003). At this point individuals reach a state of awareness in which they understand how oppression is affecting them and this is the education that can propel them to take action to resist their oppressive condition. It was this kind of thinking, for example that propelled our team for exploring how we could achieve registered social work status through the BCASW years ago.
More recently, it was also the motivation that propelled our team to take an assertive stance by going to the university and partnering in the development of a part time off campus undergraduate social work education program that was organized around the needs of the Aboriginal students and not those of the university. Many hours of reflection and dialogue took place with our group as we looked at the weak position that the students were in and through dialogue we began to consciously vision ahead and see how much stronger the students positionality as social workers would be once they achieved qualifications that were equal to that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Critical theorists contend that reality is more fluid then one fixed truth, it is instead shaped by our culture, gender, social and other values. Promoting change to improve conditions is the objective of an Indigenous methodology of research,( Wilson, 2008) and I extend it to my practice experience generally, whether I teach, facilitate circle work, or dialogue strategically with my team members, as we prepare to approach each, social problem, or child protection matter, for resolution in the community. I contend that this learning process is related theoretically to constructivism because the fluidity of the reality is specific to the people and the location that holds them, that is, the place-based knowledge and worldview of the people of a particular place. Each place has its reality, therefore what we do and how we do it is constructed based on the ways of local people and the impact of their environment. In the family circles, Elders tell stories of past historical events of family connections between Aboriginal groups between different First Nations that came about through intermarriage or some similar human connection. These are local realities, the protocols, ceremonies, and customs constructed and unique to each ‘place’.
Place-based knowledges create and produce their own theory that relates to ‘what Indigenous people do, what their beliefs are, and what life experiences become shared as common experienced truths’. This kind of learning is similar to constructivist learning theory where the background and culture of the learner is taken into account to shape the knowledge and the truth that the learner creates, discovers and attains in the learning process (Wertsck, 1997). My own learning for example has been enriched immensely as a result of discovering local Indigenous knowledges, achieved at university from the course work instructed by Indigenous professors.

I am drawn to constructivism as my own learning and teaching has always included the qualities of a constructivist approach to learning. For example, in a constructivist approach, instructors adapt to the role of facilitators and not teachers (Bauersfeld, 1995). Where a teacher would give a lecture to cover subject matter, a facilitator helps the learner to get to his or her understanding of the content. In the former the learner plays a passive role, in the latter, the learner plays an active role in the learning process where the emphasis turns away from the instructor and the content towards the learner. This change of role implies that a facilitator needs to display a totally different set of skills than a teacher. A teacher tells, a facilitator asks; a teacher lectures from the front, a facilitator supports from the back; a teacher gives answers according to a set curriculum, a facilitator provides guidelines and creates the environment for the learners to arrive at their own conclusions; a teacher mostly gives a monologue whereas a facilitator is in continuous dialogue with the learner (Rhodes and Bellamy, 1999). A facilitator needs to be able to use learner initiative to steer a learning experience to maximize the learning outcomes.
Critiques of Constructivism

Most criticisms of constructivism relate to research with children therefore I do not consider them as seriously applicable to the Aboriginal adults that I dialogue with. It is however worth presenting some of the criticisms. Kirschner (2006) for example, describes constructivist teaching methods as “unguided methods of instruction” and suggests structured learning for individuals with little or no experience. Again, the criticisms of the constructivist approach to learning are directed at novice learners whereas my involvement is with adults with years of experience in human service work as paraprofessionals working alongside professionals in the health and social service sector. When constructivist learning is extended beyond a traditional focus on individual learning to include collaborative and communal dimensions of learning as in Indigenous family life where rewards are constantly present, the learning becomes a place-based ‘way of life’, hence a place-based indigenous theory. In constructivism, researchers, and authors articulate the constructivist perspective differently by emphasizing different components.

In my narrative I try not to be overly self-indulgent and not to over personalize which is a criticism of the personal narrative by some. I am drawn to the approach because the role of the teacher is not to dispense knowledge but to provide students with opportunities and incentives to build it up (Von Glaserfeld, 1996). Mayer (1996), and others view teachers as coordinators, facilitators, resource advisors and tutors or coaches. This closely resembles the role of teacher, tutor, and facilitator that I carried in the off campus, part-time social work program for colleagues at our child welfare agency of practice. My multi faceted role in this community centered project was to introduce new ideas and provide support and guidance for students to make sense of the ideas for themselves. The other role was to listen and inform action. Teaching in this way is also a learning process for teachers. For Von Glaserfeld (1995) learning emphasizes the process and not the product. How one arrives at the answer is more important than retrieving a
solution. Learning is making sense of one’s experiential world. There is an acknowledgement of multiplicity and flexibility in constructivism which permit a variety of characteristics and principles of constructivist learning. Making sense of my own practice experiences with Aboriginal children and families is theorizing about my own learning transformation since engaging with Indigenous Aboriginal knowledges.

Smith (1993) alerts us to the arguments that point to weaknesses of personal narrative. Personal narrative, he argues is dependent on notions of ‘self’ and ‘identity’ which are sites of contestation and reproduction of hegemonic relations. The autonomous, rational, and enlightened self can be viewed as problematic and contradictory. According to Smith, this is a genre born in a discourse of individualism, heroics, and “star” worship. It is thus important to ask whose interests are being served by particular narratives. Apple (1996) warns that such writing can serve the chilling function of saying “enough about you” which winds up privileging the white middle class person’s need for self display (p. XIV).

Apple and others however do agree that personal narratives have long been used in education to evoke perspective taking, compassion, and critique of providing common sense. Over time, the personal can evoke the political. Through their stories, the authors of narrative create space for conversation, reflection and critique (Lefebvre, 1991). Working with this genre both inside and outside the academy can move us collectively to forge a liberatory, post colonial praxis. Talking to one another, collaborating in discussions that cross boundaries can create space for intervention (bell hooks, 1994). hooks argues that for those in the academy this type of collaboration creates possibilities for leading the academy into the process of educational and social change. I agree with bell hooks, having experienced collaborating with university, as part
of a local First Nation group that successfully sought and succeeded in developing a community centered social work undergraduate degree program.

Relationship is the key to what it is that narrative inquirerers do according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000). In current practice with Aboriginal groups, ethically minded practitioners and researchers must not be disrespectful of the people and make unethical decisions such as those of past non-Aboriginal ethnographers and researchers, but must conduct their research with the full partnership of each local First Nation. In respectful relationships the local people own, participate, and evaluate the research work using local measurement and evaluation standards. For Clandinin and Connelly narrative inquiry in the study of experience as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. The purpose of the retelling, like retellings in any aspect of the narratives of our lives, is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directives and new ways of doing things.

*Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience; it is people in relation studying with people in relation. Clandinin and Connelly.*

In this narrative I describe how learning within an Aboriginal cultural environment has progressively transformed me. From the perspective of a ‘helping practice’ delivering services to Aboriginal families, my practice has evolved through at least six identifiable stages to its present form of developing and delivering services to Aboriginal families as outlined in the previous chapter.

As I continue to advance my practice through a role in facilitating Family Circle work (Family Group Conference work), I am once again beginning to feel confident that change is possible in transforming services for Aboriginal children and families. My enthusiasm and understanding of
what will work; the skills that I need to improve in my practice have changed; I too am going through a self transformation. I am eager to talk about this process, share my experience, hear stories of persons in similar roles, and thus advance local knowledge and practice as part of transforming service change to Aboriginal children and families.

From a social constructivist view it is important to take into account the background and culture of the learner throughout the learning process, as this background helps to shape the knowledge and the truth that the learner creates (Wertsch 1997). In regards to defining culture, Browne and Varcoe (2006) provide an excellent description of the complexities involved in defining culture. Not only is there complexity in what elements we focus on in defining culture, but also how we define it relates to our own self image of what a particular culture is. “Most non-Aboriginal people are still caught up in the stereotypical images they see in the media and overlook emerging Aboriginal modernity, viewing Aboriginal people in cultural terms while Aboriginal people see themselves in cultural and political terms” (Browne and Varcoe, 2006 p.3). This refers to the notion that most non-Aboriginal people’s knowledge of Aboriginal people is still influenced by media information which often misrepresents Aboriginal interests by focusing on negative stories. Similarly a modernistic pan-Aboriginal understanding of Aboriginal people has gradually developed where the dominant society recognizes the Aboriginal people culturally, but still are not accepting and understanding that Aboriginal people have political rights that relate to the special legal relationship that Aboriginal peoples have with Canada.

Similar to Freire’s (2003) aversion for the teacher-student or researcher-subject dichotomy, my association with colleagues and people that I work with is one where we learn from each other in a respectful way. I must remain humble enough to re-learn what I thought I knew about Aboriginal people, their culture, their philosophy of knowledge and their worldviews. I ensure that
the `authority' which I enjoy as practitioner and researcher not be allowed to degenerate into authoritarianism. In this regard my research draws insights from Indigenous researchers: Rigney, (2008), Smith (1999), Marker, (2004), and Archibald (2008). Their research has contributed greatly to my understanding of Indigenous research. Swisher in Bishop (2005 p113) cited in Denzin & Lincoln (2005), identifies Indigenous research as a call for power of definition over issues of research with initiation, benefits, representation, legitimating and accountability being with the Indigenous peoples. She says “we can and must do it ourselves yet it is clear that non-indigenous people must help, but not in the impositional ways of the past”. Swisher’s description is fitting for describing my own practice role as a team facilitator where I often find myself leading a group through dialogue, analysis and reflection resulting in new ideas based on old ways of knowing (local Aboriginal knowledge). In my practice with Aboriginal families local Aboriginal knowledge based on generations of relational experience contributes to the theorizing that I do about my practice leading to transformation in self and the services that I am able to offer to Aboriginal families through my practice.

Vignette 2.2 Applying Mainstream Advocacy to Support Aboriginal Aspirations
The title suggests an expected David versus Goliath outcome. As a social work student I did a field placement with an Aboriginal agency consisting of both rural and urban reserve communities. Norm, an Aboriginal social service graduate from a local college with a two year diploma in social service work was the lone employee of the Social Service Department. Norm and I had developed an effective working relationship and I was hired as a social worker with community project responsibilities.

The school of Social Work that I had graduated from organized social work practice into three streams: casework; group work; and community organization. I had selected community organization on the assumption that this was the route to take in coming to a position of authority in order to effect social change for Aboriginal people within the social service system.
My relationship with Norm became strong in a short period of time. I listened a lot as Norm fascinated me with his good humour and open communication and sharing of reserve life. Norm administered the Federal Income Assistance program to his people and sought my assistance in working with Provincial social workers to try and control the high rate of removal of his Nation’s children to non-Aboriginal foster homes. When his membership heard of a large retail shopping mall development on reserve, he asked me to coordinate an employment and job readiness initiative to prepare his people for employability within the new development. He informed me that many job opportunities would be available to his people, and since he was a member of the elected Council, I too believed that this opportunity would come to fruition.

My thinking as a recent graduate in social work was that if Aboriginal people had equal access to training, this would prepare them sufficiently to succeed in gainful employment. I was to find out later that I had underestimated the greed of the dominant forces, in this case, the development company and the subtle continuation of colonial practices. I coordinated a project where we interviewed two hundred local Aboriginal members, who completed applications that were to help enlist them for training related to their job selection preferences.

Reflection 2.2. Disappointing but not Surprising Outcomes.
The applicants that were interviewed and had their applications documented, held high expectations of obtaining jobs that would be within walking distance of their homes. When the shopping mall opened only six (6) Aboriginal persons were originally hired in hotel custodial positions, a year later only one Aboriginal person remained employed there.

These results were both sad and sobering for me as an enthusiastic community organizer. I began to reflect on why this initiative to prepare local Aboriginal people for employment, had
failed so badly. I began to understand more clearly the challenges of enhancing social
development conditions for Aboriginal people. The following list contains my critical analysis of
why the project failed; it illustrates several reasons for the failure of the project and was a good
example of the continuing marginalization of Aboriginal initiatives.

1. The membership was not adequately prepared by the Council and the developer to officially
   participate in the planning of the project.

2. Local research and evaluation of local needs were not conducted.

3. The leasehold contract between developer and the First Nation as it related to employment
   was ineffective and non-binding as it only made reference to the hiring of local members; “if
   they are qualified”.

4. Lack of organizing the engagement of economic and financial expertise to represent the true
   value of the First Nation’s interests, and the possibilities to be achieved.

In regards to local amenities, a more organized and informed strategy on behalf of Aboriginal
interests is necessary in order to respond to the hegemonic forces of the larger society whose
entrepreneurial goal is typically profit generation and not social and economic stability of the
local First Nation people.
CHAPTER THREE: UNDERSTANDING AND RE-INTRODUCING ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE

“Knowledge is being, living and doing” (Ermine, 1995).

The Shameful and Dehumanizing Early History of Colonial and Settler Control
Unfortunately educational course content in public education institutions is rather sketchy in regards to the early history of inhumane treatment of Aboriginal populations across Canada and the United States. To fully appreciate why ‘identity’ and ‘intergenerational trauma’ are important to an understanding of Aboriginal people, it is necessary to know the early truthful history of settler and First people’s relationships as well as the relationships between Canada and the First People. From Stannard (1992), and Churchill (2001), we learn that among the examples of genocide across the world, the United States stands prominent as up to four million native Indian people were slaughtered under official government decree (Stannard, p. xiii). It is posited that Hitler used the United States native holocaust model for his extermination of Jewish people (Churchill, 2001). Stannard’s work summarizes a genocidal destruction of over four centuries, which he describes as the worst human holocaust the world has ever witnessed. In 1851 California Governor Peter Burnett promised that a war of extermination would continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race became extinct. In Canada a more technical, less brutal approach, was taken towards the Indian people, called assimilation. LaRocque (2010) describes how colonizers mask their oppressive behavior with a system of thought and representation, falsifying history and being ready to do anything to transform their usurpation to legitimacy (p. 37). Another approach is to harp on the victim’s demerits so deeply that they cannot help leading to misfortune. She points to the “demonization” of First People’s which she says is “next of kin to animalization”. She cites Fanon as noting that “the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil” (p. 38). LaRocque carefully deconstructs imperialist writing concerning white and native relations into plain words as resistance to colonialist text replacing it with truths expressed by, and written by, Aboriginal scholars, writers and artists.
LaRocque explains how “savagery” was so deeply embedded in reference to Aboriginal people and articulated in binaries. Civilization stands for what is illuminated, progressive, and decent, while savagery is its shadowy underside. Such a civilization is repeatedly outlined against Indian savagery, she says, in which savagism is seen as a psychosocial fixed condition, the antithesis of the highest human condition. Indians are by contrast delineated as wild, nomadic, warlike, uncultivating, unculturated, aimless, superstitious, disorganized, illiterate, immoral and technologically backwards (p41). Such thinking prevails in recent times as in the 1991 landmark Court case of Delgamuukw v. the Queen. BC Supreme Court Justice Allan McEachern quoted Thomas Hobbs saying that natives lived “nasty brutish and short lives too primitive to qualify for land rights” (p.44). Similarly, often times advisor to Stephen Harper, Tom Flanagan argues that industrial people represent a superior stage of development such that by natural law they have claimed a right to dispossess hunters from their sovereignty over nature. Native hunters are portrayed as disorganized and brutal ‘bands’ aimlessly wandering over land (p.45). The understanding by non-Aboriginals is that it is morally correct to disinherit Aboriginal hunters. When whites and Indians behaved in the same way, positive values were assigned to Euro-Canadians and negative ones to the natives. Writers depict native resistance to white encroachment as Indian violence. Despite all the atrocities of war and human torture in the history of Europe, colonialists believed their form of warfare as rationale. Jennings is quoted in LaRocque:

> A rational honorable and progressive activity while attributing to the latter [the Indians] the qualities of irrationality, ferocity and undeemable retrogression, Savagery implies unchecked and perpetual violence (p. 50).

Words and myths of early writers are still prevalent today, according to LaRocque. She argues that native people were neither: bloodthirsty, insanely irrational, wild, nor anarchic as portrayed. Indians could not win as every aspect of their life and culture was censured. The dehumanization continued to be depicted in novels such as Ralph Conner’s The Patrol of the Sun Dance Trail, where a half-breed scout Jerry is described as “lips bared in a snarl”---harking
back to the savage in him” (p.58). Native author Maria Campbell argues that it was not only in residential school but also in most schools that natives were racially shamed. LaRocque quotes Howard Adams (p101) said that wherever he went:

I knew that whites were looking at me through their racial stereotypes… it made me feel stripped of all humanity and decency, and left me with nothing but my Indianness, which at the time I did not value…Not only did my sense of inferiority become inflamed, but I came to hate myself for the image that I could see in their eyes. Everywhere white supremacy surrounded me. Even in solitary silence, I felt the word ‘savage’ deep in my soul.

Adams talks about the subconscious desire of native people to be accepted and to succeed in white society, but that this is not understood at the conscious level. “The supposed splendor of whiteness and ugliness of things not white deeply affects native people in their thought and behavior; these flattering and pleasing myths reinforce the white man’s so called superiority; but to native people they are degrading and destroy their esteem, confidence, and pride” (p.103).

Joanne Cardinal–Shubert in LaRocque (p.111) argues that to dispel the hounding myth of savagery; means having to say “we were not the savages, you were”. The impact of dehumanization is so devastating that a lengthy colonial experience not only deprives people of their right to define their experience authentically, but even deprives them of consciousness of such a right. For Maria Campbell in LaRocque (p.121) the process is excruciating and disorientating because:

…it makes us hate what and who we love. And we live shrouded in shame twice over; racial shame, and to the extent that we may be conscious, shame about feeling ashamed.

The influence of text in novels can be effective in misrepresenting the truth and artists, poets, travelers, soldiers, missionaries, and novelists have all had a role in portraying Indians as a ‘vanishing’ people who existed in the past. This breeds the notion and statements by non-
Aboriginals that Indian people should ‘get on with it’ which devalues the current existence and value of Aboriginal people and in devaluing their existence reinforces racial inferiority. It is frightening to what lengths colonialists will go to in order to entrench their material benefits.

LaRocque correctly claims that authenticity demands that native people be different, but if that difference is defined legislatively or socially or if the difference is restricted to the pre-historic past “such a difference is not ours” she argues. “We will resist until Canada heals itself from the NERO complex, until we the Indigenous are no longer the Other in our own lands” (p.126). She is referring to Canada’s lack of fully addressing its obligations to Aboriginal people. As a practitioner engaged with Aboriginal people, like LaRocque I too am committed to the effort of re-inventing Aboriginal societies to the core of what is Canada.

**Place-Centered Knowledge**

It is only in the past twenty years that Indigenous local knowledge has been recognized as a foundation and framework which the helping professions such as social work need to embrace if they are to be helpful in participating as allies in work to improve child welfare service delivery to Aboriginal families and children. This awareness has come about as a result of the study, and research work of many Aboriginal social work scholars (Baskin, 2005; Hart, 2002; Morrissete, 1993; Absolon 2009; Bruyere; 2001) as well as a smaller group of knowledgeable non-Aboriginal scholars (Walmsley, 2005; Gair, 2005). Preservation, retention, and keeping alive Indigenous knowledge and education within the academy in Canada and the USA is due to the research and persistence of many Indigenous educationists: (Deloria, 1995 Cajete,1994; Fixico, 2003; Marker 2011; Archibald, 2008; Barnhardt,1999; Kawagely,1999; Battiste, 2000;and Smith,1999; to name but a few).
Indigenous people have used their accumulated knowledge to survive and flourish in some of the most difficult environments in the world to develop rich cultures that describe different relationships with their surroundings than those of western cultures (Tidemann, Chirquin and Sinclair (2010 p.3). This knowledge has accumulated over many generations and is related to the people’s interactions with the physical and spiritual world through processes of conceiving, considering and experimentation (Arben 2008, cited in Tidemann et al).

Typically the knowledge that results from these processes is unique to a particular Indigenous group and their geographic location and is therefore often referred to as “local knowledge” or “place-based” knowledge. What makes it difficult and complex for non-Indigenous populations to understand about Indigenous knowledges is their diversity and the need to understand and know that Indigenous peoples comprise local knowledges that are closely related to the geographic areas where the people have resided over time. For example in British Columbia alone, there are at least 196 Aboriginal First Nations that exist as distinct legal entities. In Canada, some 630 distinct Aboriginal entities are legally recognized by the Federal government. Apart from local place-based qualities of each First Nation as described above, there are some core commonalities of all First Nations across Canada. These commonalities relate more so to the impacts of government policy, such as: the formation of the reserve system as residential sites; the schooling of children in residential schools and other restrictive and inhumane laws prohibiting use and retention of language and cultural ceremonial practices.

Indigenous people’s knowledge about the world and the place of people in it forms an understanding of existence that is connected to spirituality (each person’s relationship with the universe), language and environment. Western scholars therefore describe Indigenous knowledge as holistic and grounded (Briggs et al, 2006) while Indigenous people refer to
themselves as a living concept that is relational, pluralistic and infinite (Little Bear 2000). The central quality of Indigenous knowledge is connectivity where all elements may be infused with spirit and where human life is not superior to other elements. Spirituality that is hard for Western minds to grasp is a dominant feature of most Indigenous cultures. Indigenous knowledges are passed on to future generations through oral and cultural transmission.

_We are not human beings having spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience._ Pierre Teilard Chardin

One can say of Aboriginal knowledge that ‘learning of our culture occurs by living it’, where the young always look to the Elders and absorb the messages transmitted in the Elders stories. They also learn by being with and watching how adults carry themselves. Other teachings are inscribed in the symbols of totems, art, song, ritual, ceremonies and dance. Some of the teachings are sacred and not available in written form, chosen keepers and carriers of the knowledge have a responsibility to safeguard and pass on portions of the knowledge to future generations or specifically to a particular individual family or group. Sacred aspects of local knowledge can be described as private in that the information is not available to “outsiders” nor is it written. Over the past three decades there has been a wider appreciation of the Indigenous perspective and Indigenous knowledge in academia largely due to the influence of Indigenous scholars taking their place in academia and presenting their ontological and epistemological stances using a medium that Western scholars understand. Indigenous knowledge does not yet have a parallel status with Western knowledge in academia, and similarly there has been little acceptance of Indigenous methodologies such as narrative or story telling (Tideman et al, 2010, p.4).

In my review of Indigenous knowledge, I have focused on publications on Indigenous knowledge in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Sweden, Africa, and Canada. The literature
informs us that Indigenous epistemologies and world views are place-based, where philosophy of knowledge and world views are based on the experience and relationships of the local people, their connection to the geographic land base (over time) and all surrounding living life forms and non-living objects. The complexity of Aboriginal knowledge cannot be overstated and I hope to clearly describe those complexities including the historical reluctance of researchers and policy makers to accept Indigenous Aboriginal knowledge on its own terms. Battiste and Young Blood Henderson (2000, p39) for example point out that: “rather than attempting to understand Indigenous knowledge as a distinct knowledge system, researchers have tried to make Indigenous knowledge match the existing academic categories of Euro-centric knowledge”. Similarly Daes (1994, para.9) cited in Battiste and Young Blood Henderson, asserts that Indigenous knowledge is “a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity”. He correctly concludes that the diverse elements of any Indigenous knowledge system can only be fully learned and understood by means of a pedagogy employed by the people themselves including their apprenticeship, ceremonies and practice. Aspects of indigenous knowledge cannot be separated from the traditional territories of the people concerned. What tangibles and non tangibles constitute the knowledge of a particular Indigenous people must be decided by the people themselves. This knowledge, wherever it survives, is transmitted primarily through symbolic and oral traditions (Battiste and Young Blood Henderson, 2000, p 48).

The difference between Indigenous scientific knowledge and Euro-centric scientific knowledge is summarized best by the following quote from Battiste and Young Blood Henderson:

The traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples is scientific in the sense that it is empirical, experimental and systemic. It differs in two important respects from Western science, however traditional ecological knowledge is highly localized and it is social. Its focus is the web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, natural forces, spirits, and land forms in a particular locality opposed to the discovery of universal ‘laws’. It is the original knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have accumulated extraordinary
complex models of species interactions over centuries within very small geographical areas, and they are reluctant to generalize beyond their direct fields of experience. (p, 44).

Consistent with the colonialist approach toward recognition of Indigenous peoples’ knowledge and worldviews by government and the dominant institutions, there has been little attention paid to understanding local Indigenous knowledges of small Aboriginal populations. Recently, however, Aboriginal scholars, such as Rigney (1999), Alfred (1999), Bishop (2004) McCormick (2007), Archibald (2008), Marker (2004) and Smith (1999), present a contemporary view of Indigenous knowledge that attests to the need for inclusion of an understanding of colonization, racism, and resistance as forms of strength within Indigenous knowledges that must be part of an Indigenous education. The relational aspect of an Aboriginal person’s experience indicates that emotional energy for example, must be in balance before students and adults can absorb new information and move on to new and higher levels of learning and acceptance. Feelings of security, familiarity and belonging can play major roles in determining how Aboriginal patients for example, respond to a variety of diseases and illnesses (McCormick). Thus McCormick (2008) contends that an environment of support for the local extended family can play as great a role as any other force (including medical remedies) in helping an Aboriginal person cope with a particular disease or disability. These researched conclusions are informative to health and social service providers working with Aboriginal children and families.

Once we understand the knowledge base and worldview of the particular Aboriginal group that we are engaged with, including the local values and cultural practices of the Indigenous people that we work with, we can then respect, communicate and support the local people to become sufficiently empowered to act on their own behalf and become part of the solution for service identification and delivery. I am not advocating for a rejection of current mainstream practices, rather I am advocating for an inclusion of local knowledge and cultural practices that can help to
improve and enrich service delivery for Aboriginal people in what is for them an existence in a bi-cultural world.

Opportunity for ‘voice and space’ is a necessary criterion in order for local practices to be recognized and legitimized. Legitimization through inclusion of local cultural practices is a necessary step in order to achieve the respect, recognition, and ultimate sharing of power by all stakeholders, in decision making around service delivery for Aboriginal children and families. For child welfare personnel engaged in the provision of a service to Aboriginal families, understanding and working with the local Indigenous Aboriginal knowledge of the families that they work with is a prerequisite to building healthy user-service provider communications and relationship that opens the door for inclusion of local cultural practices as part of care plans for Aboriginal children. This reflective narrative will make recommendations on how this objective can be achieved.

Vignette 3.1 Introduction to Aboriginal Ways
Reflection on past events that lead to new understandings and meaning are a useful way of learning about minority non-dominant cultures. I will share a few examples of observations and communications that I have had with Aboriginal families that I have worked with in the past; some of them illustrate the damaging impacts of colonization and oppression on Aboriginal people.

I worked in a community where there were several people who were not considered Elders if chronological age was a measure, yet they are extremely knowledgeable about local history, cultural practices and protocols for ceremonial work in the community. ‘Why is that I pondered?’
Those Aboriginal children who did not attend residential school and were cared for by grandparents were taught and guided to experience the local protocols and cultural practices of their people. Children that attended residential schools on the other hand, had lost the opportunity to retain their language and cultural practices and the resulting trauma experienced there ill equipped them for parenthood when they came back to their home communities. Many knowledgeable local cultural teachers have imparted to me that they attribute their knowledge as originating from the teachings of grandparents. Colonialist intrusion such as the residential school system is responsible for denigrating the natural family functioning of local Aboriginal populations leaving a multi-generational lasting impact on affected families. The results have created: high rates of child removal by the state; gaps in personal development; loss of pride and use of local language, protocols, and cultural practices.

To ‘observe and to listen’ are traditional Aboriginal ways to learn about anything new. As a social work graduate I was invited to attend various cultural events including longhouse work. I was eager to learn all in short order; I would ask why certain procedures were carried out; ‘what is the purpose of the ceremony’ and so on. Often I didn’t get answers to my satisfaction and was informed that I would find out in time. Many months later I learned of a story about a non-Aboriginal who once mocked dancers in the longhouse in a disrespectful way. That person apparently mocked the process or the people within the longhouse and was taken unwillingly to become a dancer. In general lay terms, by becoming a dancer one graduates to a position of recognition and esteem within the community by having completed the disciplinary work of the longhouse protocols. This story left me with a lasting memory of the importance of the traditional Aboriginal value of ‘seeing and listening’ in a respectful way.
Throughout the years of my practice I recall occasions where a conversation about work conditions or related matters would turn to blaming, passing judgments, or what could be described as gossiping. I noted that whenever conversations would turn this way that Elders present would withdraw, remain quiet or remove themselves from the immediate area. When I would ask why the Elders reacted this way I was informed that it is not respectful and 'not the Indian way' to talk negatively about another person. Later on in my studies at university I came across Rupert Ross’s (1992) work which helped me to see the Elders behavior as adhering to the traditional Aboriginal rule of not interfering in another's personal affairs, otherwise stated as adherence to ‘the ethic of non-interference’ (p.13).

Reflection 3.1 First Nations Cultures versus Western Science Culture
As described earlier, each Aboriginal group has a distinct knowledge system and worldview that is connected to their geographic place of residence and it is important to know and understand the local cultural practices, protocols, beliefs, and values of each. In addition to specific qualities of each Aboriginal group, there are core qualities that are common to all Aboriginal groups across North America and these originate primarily as a result of assimilationist government policies and their negative impact on Aboriginal people. Both general and specific values of Aboriginal people must be understood in order to be effective in working with Aboriginal people as a helping person. In the course of my practice I experienced personally, observed, and listened to narratives that coincided with the core values of aboriginal people such as described by Cajete (1986). Experiencing each is extremely helpful to an understanding of the diversity of values between Aboriginal and Euro-western cultures. I was privileged to have this experience while serving as a ‘helper’ with Aboriginal families. (This outline from Cajete, (1986) illustrates the differences in values between Western and Indigenous cultures):

The mutualistic and holistic oriented mindsets of Native American cultures, on the one hand, and the rationalistic/dualistic mindset of Western science which
divides, analyzes and objectifies, on the other (p. 189). Teaching science must include becoming conscious of First Nations values (p. 176).

The following outline of selected and idealized Native American core cultural values represents a basic perspective of some of the underlying contrasts between traditional Native American and non-native American values and associated behaviors and attributes. This is not meant to reflect the wide variations within the Native American population which is related to relative levels of cultural assimilation or the differences between Native American cultures. However, it will provide a general frame of reference for the pre-instructional strategies and planning of a curriculum such as "Science from a Native American Perspective. (p.177).

Personal Differences. Respect for the unique individual differences in people. "Non interferences in the affairs of another or verbalizing one's thoughts or opinion only when asked are common native American expressions of this value" (Cajete, p. 178). Mutual respect is shown by "minding their own business."

Quietness. Interpersonal etiquette that may mask anger or discomfort. Historically, it is related to survival strategies. Patience. "All things unfold in their own time" (p. 178). "Patience revolves around respect for individuals, group consensus and "the second thought". Avoid "pressure on Indian students to make quick decisions or responses" in class.

Open Work Ethic. "Work revolves around a distinct purpose and work is done when it needs to be done. The non-materialistic orientation of many Indians is directly reflected by this value. Only what is directly needed is accumulated through work. Work is always tied to a specific job. ... School work must be shown to have a direct and immediate purpose" (p. 179).
Mutualism. It is "expressed through cooperation". Had survival value. "Being part of the group, 'solidarity,' group security, and consensus is highly valued" (p. 179). In class, balance cooperative activities with competitive activities.

Non-Verbal Orientation. Listening over talking. Talking must have an immediate purpose. Small talk is only for close friends. "Words have a primordial power so that when there is a reason for expressing words, it is generally done carefully. ... In social interaction, the emphasis is on the affective rather than verbal" (p. 180). In class, do not force a group discussion or ask a student to answer. Lecture and demonstrations can be comfortable. Immediate purposes for discussions, inquiry, role playing, or simulations, are needed.

Seeing & Listening. Essential to an oral tradition. "Storytelling, oratory and experiential and observational learning were all highly developed in Native American cultures. In class, "modified case study methods, storytelling and experiential activities can all be highly effective if presented from a Native American perspective" (p. 180). Balance listening, observation, and speaking by students.

Time Orientation. "Things happen when they are ready to happen. Time is relatively flexible and generally not structured into compartments as it is in modern society... The solution is to allow for flexibility and openness in terms of time within practical limits" (p.181).

Orientation to Present. "This orientation stems from the very deeply embedded philosophical emphasis in Being rather than in Becoming. Present needs and desires will tend to take
precedence over vague future rewards" (p. 181). Relevancy must be in terms of time and place for each student.

Practicality. "Many Indians have less difficulty comprehending educational materials and approaches which are concrete or experiential rather than those that are abstract and theoretical. ... Learning and teaching should begin with numerous concrete examples and activities to be followed by discussion of the abstraction. (However, this does not mean that Indian cultures do not have abstract concepts or that Indians are incapable of dealing with them)" (p. 182).

Wholistic Orientation. Indian culture celebrates an integrated orientation to the whole (e.g. healing and social organization). "Presentation of educational material from a holistic perspective becomes an essential and very natural teaching strategy for teaching Indian people.

Spirituality is "integrated into every aspect of the socio/cultural fabric of traditional Native American life. It is considered a natural component of everything. As a general educational tool, it presents a good advance organizer for concept presentation in that all aspects of Indian culture are touched by it. The discussion of the general aspects of spirituality and religion is an important part of the ethno science curriculum, although precautions must be taken to respect the integrity and sacred value of each specific Indian tribe’s religious practices and their inherent privacy" (p. 182). Keep all discussions general and non-specific as possible.

Caution in "unfamiliar personal encounters and situations. ... Results from a basic fear about how their thoughts and behavior will be accepted by others with whom they are unfamiliar or in a
new situation with which they have no experience" (183). In a classroom, try to alleviate such fears. "An open friendliness and sincerity are key factors in easing these tensions" (p. 183).

Classroom Discipline. "The cultivation of self-discipline is valued ... Behavior is regulated through group and peer pressure, withdrawal of approval, shame, and reflecting unacceptable behavior back to the individual are the main forms of punishment in the Traditional Indian context" (p. 183). "Withdrawal of approval and a clear understanding of the consequences of the breech of the standards of behavior; are a key consideration in this situation" (p. 184).

Historical obstacles that have been identified from aboriginal research experience are:

- Lack of partnerships with communities;
- Researchers in control of all aspects of the research procedures;
- No meaningful participant involvement;
- Lack of trust in researchers by the participants;
- Conflicting world views of researcher and participants;
- Lack of understanding by participants on purpose and impacts of research;
- Irrelevant research methods, which are not compatible to Aboriginal culture;
- Community not involved in identifying solutions; and
- No follow-up or reporting back to the participants.

Indigenous research for Aboriginal people embodies a response to colonialism and oppression, and in this regard it calls for decolonization not just for the oppressed but also for the oppressors. Indigenous research that is conducted by respected Aboriginal researchers is almost always conducted for a purpose that calls for a change in understanding or in living related conditions for the people (Wilson, 2008; Cajete, 2000; Young Blood Henderson, 2000).
This work comes at a time when current mainstream child welfare services for Aboriginal families do not produce the desired results of reducing the number of children removed from Aboriginal families by the provincial government child protection authority. A positive result from the research of family circles will introduce how inclusion of local cultural practices as part of service delivery to Aboriginal children and families of a First Nation can be a catalyst for transforming the service content and delivery process to local families.

My experience in facilitating Aboriginal family circles which are a local traditional form of Family Group Conferencing are conducted for the purpose of responding to any family and community related issue by involving family members and community service providers to arrive at mutually satisfactory conclusions often referred to as ‘Care Plans’. These ‘sharing circles’ may be described as dynamic group process conducted within an environment of local Aboriginal protocol and procedure. The dialogue and reflective discussions in the circles mirror the ideology of Freire (2003). At each Circle, we reflect back, assess meaning, identify grey areas and establish formative follow-up procedures that are inclusive of all participants. Participants of each family circle are considered as ‘a family’ for that case incident and all communication and follow up actions adhere to local knowledge traditions. I view the participants’ action as a primary criterion for measuring success (Argyris, Putman & Smith, 1985) that is, what changes did parents make as a result of participation in the Family Circle. Similarly, what changes in their service practices did service providers make in response to their participation and observations of Family Circle work that is centered on local knowledge.

Resistance to What’s Known

Anthropologists in their hunting and gathering for the authentic native construct identities and favoured ‘informants’. [They distinguish] some of [their] informants as knowing more than others; because they know things others did not. But how do they know this? From [their comments] are we left to assume that anthropologists and historians have recorded all there is to know? How do they ‘know’ that some people know more than others? Watson (2002, p.12-13).
The Watson quote shows that academics that represent themselves as “knowers” have produced knowledge about Indigenous people but their way of knowing is never thought of by white people as being racialized. Moreton-Robinson (2010) says that “Whiteness establishes the limits of what can be known about the other through itself, disappearing beyond or behind the limits of this knowledge it creates in the others name. Whiteness for Moreton Robinson has a similar stature to ‘professionalism’ in the social work profession where social work sees itself as being the authority ‘to fix’ social issues of all races, gender, and ethnic groupings. Through its discourse and text it sets itself up as the universal invisible regime of power. This logic is consistent with Foucault’s “regime of truth” notion (Foucault, 1980.p.133).

I was interested in Moreton-Robinson’s citing of Montag (1997, p.284) who posited that a feature of modernity was the development of humanness as universal, but it was incommensurate with inhuman qualities and appeared paradoxical given the existence of racial difference. Montag then goes on to cite Sartre who was troubled by the racist methods of colonialists. Consequently Morton-Robinson says that the paradox was resolved through the racialized distinction between the animal and the human. The universalization of humanity required this separation that was enabled on “social and juridical morals” (p.77). The morals normalized whiteness as the measure of being human. Montag agrees that:

> The universal was one of the forms in which the white race historically appeared… in this way, the concept of whiteness is deprived of its purely racial character at the moment of its universalisation, no longer conceivable as a particularistic survival haunting the discourse of universality but, rather as the very form of human universality itself. (1997, p.285).

Therefore the universalisation of whiteness as the representation of humanity locates the racialized other in the space between the human/animal distinction. The ‘other’ may have attributes of both but is never exclusively human or animal. Whiteness is defined as neither
animal nor liminal making its claim to be truly human (Moreton-Robinson, p.77). This illustrates how through subtle discourse and representation whiteness becomes ‘the usual’ the standard by which all ‘others’ are measured.

Moreton-Robinson (2004,p.81) cites Attwood as describing ‘Aboriginalism’ then positions himself as observing positive changes in the relationship between Aboriginals and European Australians.

First, Aborigines are viewed as socially constructed subjects with identities, which are relational and dynamic rather than oppositional (in the binary sense) and given. This challenge to essentialism and the teleological assumptions embedded in Aboriginalist scholarship involves historicizing processes that have constructed Aborigines, thus revealing how Aboriginal identity has been fluid and shifting, and above all contingent on colonial power relations. This approach necessarily involves a new object of knowledge- Ourselves, European Australians rather than them, the Aborigines- and this entails a consideration of the nature of our colonizing culture and the nature of our knowledge and power in relation to Aborigines. These new praxes and knowledges radically destabilize conventional ways of establishing identity or the existential conditions of being for both Aborigines and ourselves, but they also have the potential to offer new means for a mutual becoming. (1992, p. xv).

Moreton-Robinson cites Muecke (1992) and his concern that Aboriginalist discourse in society conflates discourse with Aborigines (p.82).

This legacy forces contemporary Aboriginal subjects, in turn, into positions of essentialism (you are Aboriginal), or representativeness and knowledge (you would know about kinship systems of the Western desert), and consequently they are constantly called upon to display this essence, or this or that skill, as if culture were an endowment. This is an enormous burden, and it is the Western version of culture which gives them this, not the Aboriginal. This is not to say that the Aboriginal version of culture is the thing to be achieved, the thing that will necessarily correct this idea, or complete ones being… This nexus of grandeur and limitations—the inability to be able to see oneself as specifically culturally focused – has had the unfortunate effect of inhibiting the formation of a strong Aboriginal intellectual group in Australia. ‘Culture’ thus seems to me to be the prison of twentieth century Aborigines. (1992, p.40).
But, Morton-Robinson notes, that in the above quotation Attwood refers to ‘ourselves’ as European Australians, but fails to name whiteness and this works to deracialize the European Australians, she says. This equating of ‘whiteness’ with ‘humanity’ by Attwood, claims Morton-Robinson, maintains a position of power in which whiteness reproduces itself and contributes to mainstream epistemological refusal of accepting or elevating the specific knowledge from another "knowing subject" (p.87). It is really important for all practitioners to understand how the dominant universal system regenerates and repositions itself, even in the most subtle oft invisible ways as the “producers of knowledge”, and what I recognize now as the false universal humanist claim to possess impartial knowledge of the Indigenous other. It is time to accept that ‘universalist intellectuals’ and Indigenous societies need to be truthfully and authentically ‘ethically clean’ enough to contribute to the Indigenous social justice agenda.

‘Whose Problem: Let’s Blame the Victim’
Young (2004, p.104) cites Muirhead in describing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals relations in Australia:

A lot of non-Aboriginal people are scared of Aboriginal people. Why is that?

A lot of non-Aboriginal people feel great shame in relation to Aboriginal people. Why is that?

A lot of non-Aboriginal people feel great arrogance towards Aboriginal people. Why is that?

Those are not questions about Aboriginality; those are questions about whiteness, so for me the foundation for reconciliation is wadjelas reflecting on their own culture in their own heart about what’s going on. (Muirhead, 2001).

Susan Young cited in Moreton-Robinson (2010, p104).

My career has been filled with listening to people from all walks of life referring to the ‘Indian problem’ and it is always challenging to engage with them in a dialogue long enough for them to grasp the point that Muirhead makes, that is, that these problems, these fears, these judgmental
reactions are not about “Aboriginality”, they are about being non-Aboriginal, and in particular as he says “whiteness”, and what my Aboriginal colleagues similarly call ‘white thinking’.

This is very important point for social workers to grasp. I agree with Young (herself a “white social worker”) that social work as a profession has yet to fully engage in an understanding of itself as a racialized profession and to explore how this impacts their practice. Young shows that anti-racism itself overlooks shifting its “behaviors and attitudes”, by focusing the gaze outward still to the different. Different from ‘us’, as though the (unspoken) white ‘us’ were the norm (p.14). Young describes antiracist social work that is described separately from other oppressions to include strategies of social change such as listed by Ahmed (1994) when she cites (p.115).

- Developing a critical consciousness
- Accountability downwards
- Knowing the community
- Knowing the agency
- Collective working
- Expert testimony.

These descriptions could be applied to any anti-oppressive work Young says and further that anti-racist social work presents race as unproblematic, pointing mainly to the disadvantages experienced by people of color and their representation in the negative social and economic indicators of society.
Young then cites Thompson (1993) who offers a different framework which more directly addresses racism (p115) and what I see as a more resistant approach to responding to racism.

- Recognize our own racism
- Recognize cultural difference not cultural deficit
- Be able to argue affirmative action on the basis or recurring discrimination.
- At all times consider how policies and practices affect people of color
- Maximize the power of clients – give them choices
- Don’t dump.

I must admit my own social work training did not teach me to understand anti-racism as Thompson describes. Now that I understand anti-racism more completely it has become part of my ‘civil ethics’ as the only way that I respond to these matters of race. Young and Aboriginal Australian and New Zealand Maori scholars such as Smith (1999): Rigney (2006); Nakata (2007), Anderson (2003), and Bishop, (2008) and others have made a lot of progress within the academy by resisting whiteness and introducing Indigenous epistemologies that deconstruct and lead to a more effective process of anti-racism and decolonization in comparison to what I would call ‘feeble attempts’ to define anti-racism driven by a non-resistant stance within professions like social work. Maori scholars as well as Aboriginal scholars in Canada and the United States are to be acknowledged for presenting Indigenous epistemologies as ‘stand alone’ place-based epistememes. In my view, it’s hoped that continued ‘resistance’ contributions by Aboriginal scholars and practitioners will reduce the invisibility (‘the masks’) of white dominant privilege in the future. For Indigenous social work education, dialogue and documentation about these matters must form part of curriculum content.

Creating new futures says Dei, is a long physical and emotional struggle. It consists of:
Rewriting our indigeneity must embody the view of ancestral knowing and geographies of cultural memory. Pedagogies of resistance (including cleansing spirituality by asserting the importance of the learner’s spirit) must be directed at helping young learners overcome the de-spiritizing aspect of schooling… we cannot disconnect ourselves from our surroundings, cultures, histories and heritage. We must act on the basis of our history and spirituality (p.10).

Dei also cautions against generalizing and the need to avoid what he calls “hyper-localization”. It is important to keep clear specifications of all local knowledges and as well to highlight the shared commonalities of Indigenous knowledges. It is important to fairly and as precisely as possible to represent both the ‘local’ and the ‘general’ attributes of Indigenous knowledges without confusing and trivializing them in the western academy. The strength of local knowledges has been well documented by Aboriginal scholars and local people in recent years. Changes to Aboriginal child welfare service must have local knowledge as the framework on which new models of service can be developed and delivered.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE NEED FOR ABORIGINAL CULTURALLY RELEVANT SOCIAL WORK

“Social Work, like sailing, gardening, politics and poetry, law and ethnography and crafts of place, they work by the light of local knowledge.” (Geertz, 1983).

Social Work’s Struggle for Relevancy with Aboriginal People
Linda Smith (1999 p.1) argues that non-Indigenous ethnographers and anthropologists have conducted research in Indigenous communities in the most disrespectful and unethical ways, falsely portraying Indigenous history, misrepresenting local cultural realities thus perpetuating colonialist and oppressive actions that have plagued Aboriginal people in Canada since early settlement of Euro Westerners in North America. ‘Social Work’ and ‘Social Workers’ are even more despised than ‘research’ because of roles and responsibilities that social workers have been charged with. Social Workers as enforcers of government policy were at the Aboriginal family door taking away children to the residential schools to become ‘properly’ educated. In the 1960s, social workers were again at the Aboriginal family doors, removing Aboriginal children to non-Aboriginal foster homes largely because ‘parenting’ in Aboriginal families did not coincide with how parenting was perceived in mainstream society.

Research in recent years by Indigenous (Blackstock, 2004) and non-Indigenous scholars (Walmsley, 2005) confirms that research for child protection removal of Aboriginal children is more so related to poverty, lack of parental employment, income, and adequate housing. It is because of these reasons that the percentage of Aboriginal children in care in British Columbia, for example, is steadily increasing to a point where fifty four per cent of children in protective custody are Aboriginal (Vancouver Sun, November 11, 2011). In 1970 only thirty percent of children in care were Aboriginal. Therefore, in spite of perceived improvement of social conditions for Aboriginal people since 1970 social workers are still engaged in the removal of Aboriginal children from their parental homes in record numbers. Again poverty conditions, a
lack of housing, and low income impact many Aboriginal families resulting in an acceleration of child protection concerns.

The resources become even more diminished for those families that leave reserve communities for life in the urban centers. Typically, difficulties arise when the families are unable to meet high rent payments. Isolation adds to the problem as the extended family social supports are often not present in the urban setting. It is these factors, not increasing physical and sexual abuse that contributes to removal of Aboriginal children. However, the reasons for high rates of Aboriginal children in protective custody of the government are perceived by mainstream as Aboriginals being inferior in parenting skills and deficient in child rearing and caring for family. Continuing socio-economic marginalization perpetuates colonialist and oppressive treatment of Aboriginal populations. This is why ‘social work’ is not only a ‘dirty word’ but a much ‘feared word’ for Aboriginal parents and families. It is no wonder that as I read the literature on this topic by indigenous scholars, instead of references to ‘social worker’ in texts, one finds their references to those that help families simply referred to as ‘helpers’ (Absolon 2009; Hart, 2002).

Individuals and families that I have been engaged with in my own practice similarly do not refer to me as a social worker, but rather ‘that fellow that helped me’ and if I am present they will directly refer to my name. This is a typical indigenous way to address someone, as this is who I am, and there is no greater honor in being addressed than to be called upon and referred to by one’s own name. I can understand now why many Aboriginal scholars refer to Social Work as a colonialist project. I can understand now why social work practice with Aboriginal families needs to complement local ways of knowing, local protocols, and the community interconnected relationships. Aboriginal people know quite well that social work has a culturally destructive side. Social work has made great efforts to become relevant in order to help Indigenous
societies. Coates, Gray and Yellowbird (2010), clearly describe how social work had been inadequate to address needs of diverse groups because the profession is a modernist invention with a history of silencing marginal voices and importing into the diverse cultures western thinking from the United Kingdom and United States of America primarily.

Vignette 4.1 Integrated and Holistic Service Delivery
The type of issues and concerns that came to my attention for a response as a social worker at the local First Nation level were varied and ranged from informational requests to complex family matters and include the following: child protection concerns from Provincial social workers; requests for help in completion of forms for pension, health, and status identification cards; referrals and request for information from Probation workers; visits to Provincial and Federal jails to interview local incarcerated members; and requests from a variety of local off reserve agencies wanting assistance and help in how to work with local Aboriginal students, and parents; police and corrections agencies seeking information on their Aboriginal clients; and requests to come to off reserve agency meetings to talk about “work with Indian people” and “why is alcohol such a big problem on reserve”.

Income assistance processing was a large part of my work and for many individuals and families this was their only source of income. Usually the families had special needs for dietary, appliances, bedding and clothing and decisions needed to be made on eligibility for these needs. Many services available to families off reserve boundaries were not available to the Aboriginal families, such as Day Care; rehabilitation services for adults; housing emergency repairs; major appliance repair and replacement; and services for disabled children and adults.
Reflection 4.1 Social Work Seen as a Project of Colonialism

Aboriginal peoples generally do not view the social work profession as helpful in coping with family and community needs. The efforts of social workers and others have proven to be largely ineffective, the social work profession has not stood out as being in the forefront of advocacy efforts to expose or combat poverty issues, human rights abuses, nor has it been a major supporter of efforts to uphold land claims and treaty rights (Gray, Coates & Yellowbird, 2008, p.49). Similarly, critical; social work scholars assert that social work has not adapted its knowledge and practice approaches in tandem with Aboriginal peoples. Instead the profession’s focus still attempts to adopt its therapeutic approaches to problems that may arise in Aboriginal populations. In child welfare the social worker’s attention is still on focusing on individual pathologies rather than reform of the current oppressive service delivery system. In this approach the first contact between the social worker and the parent or guardian is made at the point of an investigation of child protection, for example. Mainstream government regulations and worker professionalism guide the decisions from this point on usually resulting in removal of children from family and community. Too often little if any prevention work is done by social workers with parents and family in utilizing the collective and holistic strengths and resources of the local community to assist families with resolution of local child and family matters. “In short, social work has largely attempted to ‘Indigenize’ social work in the same ways it has attempted to export its Anglo American methodology to non-Western nations” (Gray, Coates, Yellowbird p.50).

In addition, social workers and the social work profession are not looked upon favorably by Aboriginal people because social workers played a large role in the removal of Aboriginal children during the residential school period and later as part of the “60’s scoop”. To be effective in Aboriginal social service practice in general, requires a major shift in thinking and practice towards the inclusion of local cultural practices.
I believe that the university-community relationship holds a good deal of promise for effecting positive change for Aboriginal families. I strongly support the challenge for the two parties to enter into dialogue for positive service change. The changes that have been documented as successful to date involve local cultural teachers working with professionals, learning from each other, once again restoring each other’s faith in humanity.

Typical Canadian public responses to discussions of Aboriginal social issues is to equate Aboriginal history and experience to immigrant settlers to Canada. The comparison of the history and experience of various ethnic groups in Canada to the Aboriginal people of Canada is wrong headed and non productive. A common response towards the causes of Aboriginal social issues, such as unemployment, poor health, and low levels of education completion is to “blame the victim” for their present circumstance. The usual response that I hear from the public at large is that Aboriginal people are not ambitious enough to find work; they are too dependent on social assistance; and “they receive too many benefits” from the government. Regarding intrusions into Aboriginal life by the “residential school experience”; “the 60’s scoop”; and the legislation making it illegal to participate in cultural practices and ceremonies, the response is usually “they should get over it”. These are typical responses by many Canadians that do not understand the history of the relationships between Canada and its Aboriginal people, and hence they cannot make a more informed response. It is important to know what the knowledge level of the public is in regards to Canada’s relationship with its Aboriginal people as this begins to explain the minimal level of ‘understanding’ that exists within the larger mainstream society. The understanding of history, knowledge, and culture of a locally defined Aboriginal people is a key element in initiating positive change by the helping professions to adjust service delivery to Aboriginal population needs. This is supported in the literature by many sources (Absolon, 2009; Smith, 1999; Hart, 2002; and Baikie, 2009).
Current literature on Indigenous knowledge is directed primarily at the general education of Aboriginal students (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2005), school science (Cajete, 1994) and environmental resource based knowledge as applied to the natural resource sciences. This research informs us of how an Aboriginal person is likely to respond to a variety of situations, such as environmental concerns, local history and so on, in comparison to a person within mainstream society. The Aboriginal person will respond to these issues from his or her own experienced knowledge or that based on the oral transmission of ancestral historical experiential knowledge. A non-Aboriginal is likely to respond to similar questions based on a review of documented written abstract information originating from scientific records as they relate to the land and the environment. Once we as practitioners know and understand the different values and cultural practices of the local Indigenous population we can then respect, communicate and empower local people to apply the appropriate resources for the planning, identification and delivery of child and family services. In Canada, there have been strong recommendations made to design Aboriginal child and family services that are “culturally appropriate” following the Royal Commission report on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996).

A review of the literature relating to the Maori indigenous experience in New Zealand in obtaining alternatives to mainstream child welfare policy and service delivery, confirms that bi-cultural partnerships can work effectively in giving space and voice to the indigenous community, by recognizing Indigenous cultural practices. The literature argues that child welfare alternatives in New Zealand are effective because Indigenous Maori knowledge and world view are recognized and legislated as part of the Maori service model for Maori children.

In Canada, there is a deep desire for changes in Aboriginal Child Welfare as articulated by National, provincial, and local Aboriginal entities and associations. For meaningful change to
occur, however, the lead must be taken by local Aboriginal people in each First Nation community. Such a challenge is not easy within the current hegemonic system at a time when regardless of government policy, Aboriginal communities across Canada are only beginning to re-introduce some of the traditional cultural practices that have supported strong and healthy families in the past as part of current service delivery. The impact of colonialist policies such as the residential school system was followed by the 60’s scoop which saw the removal of Aboriginal children from their families beginning in the 1960’s. A review of the literature as it relates to service delivery for Aboriginal children indicates that there is currently little evidence of what an Aboriginal child welfare service delivery system that might be designed with local knowledge and control as its foundation would look like; what it would encompass; how it would be delivered; and by whom?.

Aboriginal communities need to be fully engaged in developing their own models of child and family service alternatives based on local knowledge and cultural practices (RCAP, 1996; Baskin, 2006; Blackstock and Trocme, 2005; Pennell, 2007; Strega and Carriere, 2009). Consideration of service delivery change to Aboriginal communities must include a critical review of the literature on colonization of aboriginal peoples in Canada and the importance of “re-claiming the authority of the oral tradition” as Smith (1999) asserts. This research is informed greatly by theory of social justice pioneers such as Freire and Fanon. In my work with First Nation communities I find that the Elders and knowledgeable members, who are carriers of the knowledge of the community, continually reflect back on the oppression and colonialism that has impacted their people. Elders take a position similar to Kirkness (2002), asserting that:

We must ensure that every aboriginal man woman and child know of their oppression. They must know how the oppressors stole their language and culture through schooling in residential schools and day schools, how the Indian Act has destroyed their identity and how all this has contributed to the weakening of our people and their communities. (Kirkness, 2002, p.2).
She cites Freire (1978) who argues that:

Only through knowing can the oppressed realize the ideological distortions that influence and shape their understanding of political reality (Kirkness, 2002, p.2).

Before contact with non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people had many ways of healing themselves and resolving child and family issues and concerns. This research will form part of the history that my study will provide. The fundamental philosophy underlying these traditional healing practices is the interconnectedness of the individual with nature, family, community, society and the universe (Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006). In my child and family service work with Aboriginal communities, in the Family Circle Program, sharing circles and healing circles are the most commonly used form of intervention. Bellefeuille (2006) contends that based upon Aboriginal worldview, the healing circle reflects the interrelatedness and sacredness of all living forms (Hart 2006, Nabigon 1999). The Family Circle is intrinsically non-hierarchical and inclusive, representing respect, equality, continuity, and interconnectedness (Absolon 1993). Hart (2002) produced an excellent account of the history of sharing circles, their purpose, type, and protocol for application. Family circles are effective traditional ways of intervening and resolving child and family concerns.

Bellefeuille (2006) like most Aboriginal scholars argues that additional work is needed to shift child welfare education and practice from a position of power by the majority over a less fortunate minority to a pedagogy and praxis premised on Indigenous knowledge that encompasses Aboriginal philosophical and healing methods. This draws attention to the fact that health and wellness for Aboriginal people is seen within a holistic and community lifestyle framework and Bellefeuille suggests that Aboriginal people in general can greatly benefit from a closer liaison between Western and Aboriginal Worldviews. He is in effect calling for the inclusion of Aboriginal healing practices as part of child protection service and if this were achieved the Aboriginal children and families would benefit as a result of this inclusion. The
acceptance of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews is a first step of sharing the power necessary to bring inclusion of Aboriginal voice into design and delivery of effective child welfare services for Aboriginal people.

My own practice is one that promotes and provides opportunity for inclusion of aboriginal knowledge. This narrative articulates in a comprehensive way the three sources of my own understanding of Aboriginal knowledge: the literature as informed by Aboriginal scholars; the stories and teachings of Aboriginal Elders, teachers and colleagues; and my own experiences of living with and working in Aboriginal communities.

**A Culturally Appropriate Dialogue**
An Aboriginal employee in the BC Ministry of Child and Family Development conducted a comprehensive review of various models of collaborative practice carried out in First Nations communities in BC (Cameron 2006). Most of these program models originated as partnerships between the provincial child welfare authority (MCFD) and First Nation groups. Some of these collaborative practice models take the form of a family group conference which was adapted by MCFD as an alternative to family court for Aboriginal parents who come before MCFD or Family Court. A thorough review of the literature of Aboriginal child welfare initiatives in Canada confirms that the control, management, and facilitation of these initiatives rests with the government, various educational institutions, and consultants, the majority of whom are not of Aboriginal ancestry or have not experienced lengthy associations with First Nation groups.

I believe that for an Aboriginal culturally appropriate program to be successful, it must be designed on an Indigenous knowledge framework, in these case examples, the epistemology and ontology of the local First Nation that one is associated with. My own observed response to the question of why the Aboriginal families respond so positively to the Family Group
Conference (FGC) and related healing ceremonies that my co-researchers and I facilitate, is because I believe ‘Aboriginal people will respond more readily to what they know’. This is in reference to the fact that the family circle services that we conduct are delivered utilizing local cultural protocol and practices that are consistent with local traditional and current customs and laws. Therefore, it is easier for Aboriginal parents for example, to understand an Elder from their own community who is outlining responsible child care based on local values and their interpretation in comparison to a professional Social Worker who (in attempting to achieve the same result) is emphasizing responsible child care by quoting parental responsibility as outlined in a section of a provincial statute, policy directive, or professional social work standard relating to the care of children. For Aboriginal people there is a disconnect between how they observed family matters were dealt with in the home in comparison to the standards that are applied for acceptable child care by the social workers on behalf of the MCFD.

While the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development favours inclusion of local practices as defined in a policy and procedure guide document entitled “Presumption in Favour of Collaborative Manning and Decision Making” (2008) its own Auditor General in May of 2008 concluded that the MCFD has not adequately addressed and delivered “culturally appropriate” child welfare services to the Aboriginal families that are on its child protection caseload. This is a serious finding as more than fifty four percent of the children in care in BC are Aboriginal children, while Aboriginals represent but five percent of the BC population. The reinforcement of what is culturally appropriate varies immensely with variables such as location, socio-economic status, and ability and desire to maintain and sustain a distinct Aboriginal cultural identity. A sparsely populated First Nation with few remaining Elders may experience difficulty in retaining past traditions and teachings as the oral accounts of Elders would become restricted and eventually unavailable.
A scholarly examination of the Auditor General’s finding would address the following elements: definitions; substance; discourse; experience; and evaluation of what is “culturally appropriate”. These elements require a careful examination of the literature supplemented by a dialogue about difficult questions such as: when is a service considered to be culturally appropriate; when is it authentic; how will we know that it is authentic; and whose truth counts?

**Cultural Competency Models: Misunderstood and Abused Concepts**

In attempting to address the diversity of cultural and ethnic groups, the social work profession tends to create service providers who are culturally competent and cross culturally sensitive. Baskin (2011,p.55) informs us that the cultural competency model was a popular way of addressing “difference” in social work practice during the 1980’s and 1990’s. The model helps direct social workers to become more aware of and sensitive to the specific norms, practices, and behaviors of “cultural” and “ethnic” groups. Sensitivity to these norms and behaviors is seen as beneficial to the relationship between the social worker and the service user. Services could then be offered within a framework of a particular culture. My experience confirms that this approach continues to be written about, discussed, and measured as part of evaluating how child protection services in BC for example are able to respond to Aboriginal child and family service needs. The 2008 joint review of government child protection programs by the Auditors General of Canada and BC concluded that the Ministry was unable to determine the cost to deliver culturally appropriate services. This is not surprising as in my view, a needs assessment of each First Nation would be required to be conducted by the local First Nation people in order to define the appropriate services that are needed and secondly to cost them in a rational way.

Baskin and others have shown that the emphasis on management and service provision is assumed to provide mostly white service providers with an increased ability to communicate with
non-dominant populations. I have often witnessed a scenario where non-Aboriginal social workers attempt to impress their colleagues or other service providers with their knowledge of First Nation service users or First Nation matters in general, based on single or limited experiences. What I have learned is that unless a person was a First Nation member who has grown up within the community, one would not have a good knowledge of the local history, protocols and cultural practices of that community. For some people there is the assumption that within the cultural model the social worker is culturally free, therefore only the ‘Other’ has culture. If we don’t attend to the social, economic, and political realities of the Aboriginal people, we can be left with the conclusion that Aboriginal people have ‘cultural barriers’. If we don’t take into account power differences and how power is maintained through a social hierarchy that marginalizes particular groups of people, then the cultural competency model is limited concludes Baskin (p.56).

Cross(1998) references a five stage continuum of cultural competency for child welfare agencies, beginning with the most negative stage of “cultural destructiveness” leading to the most advanced stage referred to as “Advanced Cultural Competence”. Cross argues that at this end of the scale, the agency seeks to add to the knowledge base of culturally competent practice by conducting research, developing new therapeutic approaches based on results, and publishing results of demonstration projects. Such an agency would hire culturally competent staff and advocate for cultural competence throughout the system and improve relations between cultures throughout society. I agree with Cross that many variables are in play that would need to be coordinated in order to lead to cultural competence of an individual’s practice; an agency’s service; or a community’s approach. Stated in another way, attitudes would need to change to become less biased; policy changes would need to become culturally impartial; and practices would become more congruent with the culture of the service user from initial contact to termination. Pon cited in Baskin (p.57) poses a question, “why do so many in the social work
profession continue to engage in practices of cultural competency even though cultural competency is an outdated theory about culture embedded in modernist and colonialist discourses”? His answer is that clinging to cultural competency is based on Canada’s desire to forget about the cultural genocide of Indigenous people. In this way the focus is shifted on to the Other without having to engage in learning about social violence, such as colonialism and racism. This thinking is consistent with Prime Minister Harper’s denial statement in 2009 at a G20 conference in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania when he stated that Canada does not have a history of colonialism. Rather than focus on the processes that have marginalized our Aboriginal people, it becomes easier for many to talk about cultural competency as a problem of Aboriginal people, in that they create the problem as a result of their culture. I agree with Pon, that culture is extremely complicated and there is too much information associated with what constitutes culture for anyone to become competent in every aspect of it. In general, I can accept that culture has shifted from being a stable, fixed, set of attributes to a view of culture as a matter of debate about representation and complex relationships that individuals take up in relation to them.

**Indigenous Centered Social Work: Theorizing a Social Work Way of Being**

Social work as a discipline that emerged from a Euro-western history and social welfare context was centered in Euro-western derived theories and methods (Baikie, 2009). It has been assumed by the profession that knowledge and practices could be applied to all peoples regardless of culture and historical circumstances. Most social workers that I come into contact with today still practice with this false understanding. Local Aboriginal knowledge skills are assumed to be personal, not professional and therefore have no place within professional educational or practice settings is their thinking. In the past fifteen to twenty years Indigenous methods like the talking circle, family group conferencing, and restorative justice are gaining popularity in social service settings. Family group conferencing as an example originated from the Maori child
welfare experience in New Zealand around 1988. The family group conference as an alternative to Family Court processes, engages Aboriginal extended family members along with state service providers to discuss and arrive at acceptable care plans for children. The process reduces the number of children that are removed from the community and places a greater responsibility on extended family members to provide support and care for children. The practice is in place in some States in the USA, and Provinces in Canada in varying degrees. Sharing and healing circles have come to be increasingly used in recent years as alternatives to traditional individual and family counseling.

Baikie states that Indigenous social workers and social work educators have resisted attempts by mainstream social work institutions to assimilate or categorize Indigenous methods as “cultural”. Baikie’s work informs us that many text books construct and practitioners perceive Indigenous social work as simply a specialized field of Euro-western social work that targets social problems experienced by Indigenous peoples, such as: high rates of child neglect; violence; addictions and suicides. Sometimes further confusion is created in which the term Indigenous is used to denote a person or practice from a specific location as distinguished from universal knowledge or practice that is unrelated to First Nation people’s territory. Baikie describes how postmodernism claims that there are multiple ways of knowing, doing, and being in the world and that no one way is privileged over the other. Similarly internationally social work scholars have criticized universal approaches and advocated for locally driven and therefore authentic forms of Indigenous social work education and professional practice. Both these events have helped to define Aboriginal social work, even though as Baikie correctly concludes, Indigenous social helping is subordinate and inferior to “real” social work.

On the one hand Indigenous social workers may argue that they do not need their knowledge and practices validated by the mainstream profession; however, the question arises how do we ensure the professional existence of Indigenous social work in the absence of external
recognition, given that mainstream social work institutions maintain the legislative, structural and
discursive power over what social work is; who practices it; and where they practice. I am
reminded here of the attempts that my colleagues and I made with the BC Association of Social
Workers in order to become registered social workers. After an initial approval to BCASW
membership of several Aboriginal paraprofessionals, three years later membership was curtailed
to all who did not hold an accepted social work degree. The profession regulates power within
social welfare environments. For example recently negotiated self government arrangements
require social workers in child welfare to be registered with and regulated by the provincial
associations, while fulfilling helping roles and responsibilities in Indigenous communities.
Dominant modernist ideals separate a worker’s personal life from their professional role;
whereas Indigenous social workers combine their personal experiential knowledge with their
professional knowledge as part of their means of helping. If we theorize Indigenous centered
social work using anti-colonial and post colonial thought we can open up possibilities. Baskin
(p.49) describes an Indigenous centered social work paradigm that is both localized and
globalized and incorporates both traditional and contemporary knowledge and practices. For
Baskin, Indigenous centered social work will include some components of traditional social work
such as structural social work where structures such as employment, education, and justice
create barriers for Aboriginal people because of oppressions such as racism. Structural social
work advocates and raises consciousness on behalf of service users. Baskin asserts that the
struggles of Canada’s Aboriginal people differs from those of other populations and ethnic
groups as a result of colonization, consequently the world views of the local Aboriginal people
need to be taken into account along with a recognition of their specific Aboriginal rights as we
attempt to provide improved services to children and families that still reside in marginalized
environments across Canada.
Indigenous social work consists of a reconceptualized person-in-environment perspective that understands the person in their totality: physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional (Hart, 2001), and do not separate the “inner space” from “outer space” (Ermine1999). Indigenous centered social work moves Indigenous practice out of the localized while still accounting for the global diversity of Indigenous people and their ways of social helping (Baikie, p.50). Baikie cautions that “Indigenous centered” is not to be confused with a pan-Indigenous perspective which fails to take into account the diversity of Indigenous peoples and Nations. For example, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people argue that the medicine wheel concept is not traditional to a specific nation and should not be used within those First Nations programs and services. Hulan and Eigenbrod (2008, p.16) illustrate how strongly the Maliseet people oppose the medicine wheel which was brought to their territory in a fraudulent way and represented as a Maliseet tradition which they claim it is not. This indicates how diverse and therefore complex understanding Indigenous knowledges can be and caution needs to be taken before one can speak not only truthfully but with authority about a specific locally centered approach to ‘helping’.

Indigenous social workers integrate their own cultural knowledge with that of the other First Nations into their practice further blurring the distinction between what is “cultural” and what is “professional”. Consequently a generic base of Indigenous social work knowledge and practice has emerged. So while the medicine wheel and talking stick are not traditional to every First Nation, they are widely understood in many Indigenous social work courses as foundational practice concepts and methods related to disciplines of astrology and archeology to mark dates, events, to describe ritual, promote healing, and to generally assist in the teaching of Indigenous beliefs and ways. Similarly restorative justice and family group conferencing models that originate with the Indigenous Maori people of New Zealand are achieving widespread appeal and use within both Indigenous and non-Indigenous social service settings (Baikie, p52).
Since 1960 a distinct Indigenous centered social work practice came into being on a continuum beginning with traditional Elders and healers, followed by self help groups, then trained para-professionals, and most recently professional indigenous social workers. Figure 1, illustrates Baikie’s chronological development of the ‘Indigenous helper’ role. Women, spiritual healers and some Elders were the earliest recognized local helpers. Over time these helpers complemented their work with self help projects such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Since 1980 local helpers began to become involved in a variety of college level human service training to advance to paraprofessional skill levels. More recently since 1990, the number of Aboriginal local helpers graduating from undergraduate and graduate human service related disciplines; at universities across Canada are increasing annually.

Figure 1: Chronological Evolution of the Indigenous Centered Social Work Role
Indigenous cultural practices place the Indigenous social worker in a dilemma about what is ‘real’ or what is the ‘truth’. For example, Euro-western child welfare legislation specifies that only biological parents or legal guardians can make decisions for a child while in the indigenous community, extended family members have obligations to assume care for a child if the parents cannot. Thus Indigenous social workers while impacted by the powerful ideologies of colonial society are also active participants in the creation and maintenance of colonized relationships. Efforts need to be made by Indigenous social workers to develop critical consciousness, that can decipher Euro-western versus local cultural practices and realities. Increasingly experiential knowledge or practice wisdom as noted by Fook in Baikie (p57) is valued by Indigenous helpers over the university acquired expertise of “professional” social workers.

Indigenous social workers no longer need to transform into a generic Euro-western social worker in order to be considered a professional social worker says Baikie, as Indigenous social work draws its knowledges, practices, and identities from the broader collective of Indigenous social work knowing. “Theorizing Indigenous centered social work moves the term Indigenous social worker from a personal to a collective way of being” (p.61). What Baikie is referring to is that mainstream social workers are essentially trained to work within an individualistically organized society, while effective child welfare work with Aboriginal populations calls for an understanding of how extended family structures of Aboriginal societies can work together collectively to support the children and families of each community. An effective Indigenous social worker, whether Aboriginal or not must understand the collective structures and environments of Aboriginal communities.
The Elements of a ‘Helper’s Practice’.
Aboriginal social work educator Kathy Absolon (2010) argues that in choosing to become a helper with Aboriginal people, one chooses to become a helper within realms where challenges, pain, trauma, and turmoil exist. However, after years of practice within such an environment, I feel my practice is one full of inspiration, hope, possibilities, and vision. My own journey follows the path of many Aboriginal helpers who leave their home territory for formal training in Euro-western institutions. Ironically that type of social work education does not teach that local ceremonies, conducted by spirit helpers offered the best medicine for facilitating healing. The local teachings address balance, humility, truth, respect, sharing, and love. In all Indigenous communities, there are these helpers and Absolon (2009, p.185) suggests that we must try to recognize who they are and bring them into our own practice as holistic helpers. This is very much the local model of my practice in that it utilizes local resources to the greatest degree possible for achieving an effective preventive social service delivery system for Aboriginal children and families.

Overcoming one’s own shame which came from past voices that gave messages of being unworthy, stupid, and inferior, and realizing the beauty of one’s own culture gives strength to Aboriginal helpers to negotiate and succeed in western education. Absolon (2009,p.176) describes the importance of supportive allies in academia; that is, the Aboriginal instructors, and occasionally non-Aboriginals which brought contextual validation to her own cultural teachings leading to a level of bi-cultural competency. For Absolon, liberating theory helps to explain that oppression experienced by Aboriginal peoples is systemic and structural, and that differences in education and employment are a result of structural inequalities and institutional oppression. An Indigenous centered approach welcomes and draws from mainstream empowerment approaches such as: reflection and action; group work; and community work as allied methodologies of practice. I have found these approaches to be strengthened with the
application of local holistic teachings and practices. There is tremendous diversity among Aboriginal communities, but a practitioner must be able to see those spirits, strengths, and resources.

Indigenous traditions are holistic, based on cyclical and circular teachings. The use of Circles has become recognized as powerful in teaching, healing, and learning processes (Absolon, p.179). In Circle work, all participants’ mere presence along with their words impact other participants in various ways for different reasons, and when this happens it is a joy to see human interaction at its best. Other contemporary Aboriginal scholars who have strongly influenced my own helper practice and facilitation of Circle Work are Graveline (2000); Hart (2002); Baskin (2011) and Wilson (2008). Absolon summarizes the facilitator role in circle work in the following quote (p180):

> Patience is required along with the belief and faith that the answers lie within the people. Share the facilitating by having others take responsibility for various aspects of the processes, such as the opening, scheduling, facilitating, praying, singing, drumming, recording, and organizing. Create a collective process. Effort is needed to reassure, affirm, and validate what people have to offer and to create a safe space for people to explore hearing themselves share openly within a group.

Re-storying is a process of restoring history by telling the truth and it is common to have re-storying occur in circle work led by Elders or keepers of the knowledge. Absolon (2009, p.183) describes how conducting local research as part of re-storying can be a powerful experience for participants who experience being a researcher in their own community. Absolon (2009, p.185) describes the talents, and skills of the local people as the “gems” that lie beneath a community’s surface. These gems can be found in the sacred knowledge holders. In my practice as a non-Aboriginal circle facilitator, I search to find these gems and seek their involvement in circle work as co-facilitators; teachers and healers much like Baikie and Absolon describe the conduct of effective circles. The learning that I experience from these respectful relationships is invaluable.
and helps me learn how to organize, participate in, and respectfully behave during and around
ceremonial work as it evolves from our circle work with Aboriginal children and families. I share
with Absolon, some of the following descriptions of what an effective helping practice entails.
Competencies that are useful to include are: responding to blaming, obsessive and manipulative
behavior; responding to lateral violence; and working with the aftermath of psychological,
spiritual, mental and physical trauma of colonization. Supportive approaches for helpers are:
strategic use of humor; dialogue that leads to critical consciousness’; stories that restore truths;
histories in own voices; sharing circles as tools to build collective critical conscious team work
and circle work; and understanding that our practices are bi-cultural.
CHAPTER FIVE: TRANSFORMATION: MAKING MEANING OF PRACTICE

“Practice without thought is blind: thought without practice is empty.” Kwame Nkrumah (1998).

I have always reflected on the fact that a lot of what I know I have learned from the relationships with people around me. Perhaps that is why in my journey ‘what I learn’ and ‘what practitioner role I take on’, I always feel comfortable in the facilitator role, helping, or training others on the job. I used to inform my Aboriginal colleagues who were in clerical positions at many of the First Nations that I engaged with that if they observed what I do and had an interest in helping others, that through this approach to their work they could eventually become ‘helpers’ (social workers). This became a reality for many persons in administrative clerical positions in the First Nations that I have worked with in the past.

On looking back, this is not uncommon in First Nation communities, that is, for various persons in the community to assume the role of a ‘helper’. In reflecting on my own learning, I can see that a similar progression applies to my own advancement in education with Aboriginal knowledges at the university. That is, as I recall the stories that my colleagues and people that I provided a service to shared with me, the stories have a deeper and different meaning to me now than they did in my early years of practice. As a novice Non-Aboriginal social worker I was absorbing information transmitted through oral tradition and while I listened to the stories attentively and with great respect, I did not at that time in my journey understand that I was being welcomed by a people with a rich but different worldview and philosophy of knowledge as compared to my own dominant mainstream education that was of the Euro-western tradition.

Over the past twenty years, Aboriginal scholars, through their research and teaching in the academy and local communities, have advanced our understanding of the impact of colonialism
on Aboriginal people. The research results have led to some educational institutions including 
Indigenous knowledge in pedagogy; curriculum content; in teacher and social work education; 
and creating space for the study and research of Indigenous knowledges from historical to 
contemporary perspectives including the articulation of impacts of colonialism and oppression on 
the people.

There is no known research available on Aboriginal child and family agencies and programs 
under local First Nation control that are entirely designed on a framework of local Indigenous 
knowledge and cultural practice. After my years of participation and observation of attempts by 
government and local communities to make improvements in services to Aboriginal children and 
families, there has been little progress made as the percentage of Aboriginal children in care 
keeps increasing with time. I believe that for meaningful change to occur that each entity 
engaged in Aboriginal child welfare can be successful if local knowledge and worldviews are re- 
introduced as the core foundation of new program goals and ‘helper’ practices. This key 
acceptance would help to create change in many areas: the program goals and objectives; the 
content of ‘helper’ education; the ‘helping practices’; and the measurements and standards for 
evaluation of locally controlled models of child and family care.

**Centering a Practice Approach**
In describing my current practice approach, I would start by saying that I merge my total life 
experiences and formal education skills, with the context of my engagement. In my case that 
means that I reflect on my past and current practice experiences with Aboriginal families. I think 
about core similarities in the diverse Aboriginal cultures, I apply principles and practices I have 
learned from my formal educational disciplines and merge these with respectful ways to carry 
out my practice. The totality of what I bring to the practice is illustrated in Figure 2.
Most of my current practice time is consumed by preparing and organizing Aboriginal Family Circles in response to developing safe and healthy care plans for Aboriginal children requiring legal protection, or who are considered ‘at risk’ in their current living arrangement. I apply a holistic approach to interviewing, assessing needs, conducting interventions, conducting Indigenous research or when I am engaged in facilitating good teaching or conducting family circle work. While Figure 2 illustrates my experiential and formal educational profile; it is useful for anyone who is engaged in facilitator work to map out their practitioner practice profile. Mapping the process helps to centre and describe one’s practice with the people that one is engaged with. It is also a way of respecting and defining service as it relates to context. Each
family and each person that I engage with brings a different perspective to the helping relationship. The diagram is an illustration of a ‘Practitioners Profile of an Indigenous Holistic Approach to Helping’. Hart (2002) describes the holistic relationship and explains how the helpers must be willing to share their life experiences as part of the support in the healing of others. Personal experience can be used to demonstrate alternatives for healing (Ross, 1996). Hart argues that helpers understand their lives as a journey and that “within the helping relationship”, their journey is in relation to the journey of each person they are helping (p.54). In this way he contends that helpers are better able to recognize the learning and type of support required by those they are helping. He further states:

Helpers are able to seek out the positive attributes in other people’s lives and experiences. In turn they are able to see and acknowledge the reciprocity in the helping relationship, since they will likely learn and secure support from the people with whom they are working (p.55).

In my practice the dynamic processes of the Family Circle and Spiritual Healing Circles are so attuned to humanitarianism, authenticity and reciprocity that at the closure of each Circle I am humbled and with the greatest attention I listen to the closure of each Circle where participants respond with words like: “I learned so much today”; “I really liked this Circle”; “I like how you did this Circle”; and “I’ve never been in a Circle like this before”. From Circle work that I facilitate, I now know that the learning process is reciprocal as two years ago my confidence in leading Circle work was not nearly as effective as it is today due to my enhanced understanding and learning of the local protocols and teachings. I was at that time still at the stage of questioning myself: ‘do I have enough skills to be doing this’ and ‘I wonder what others think of my work?’ and ‘should I even be doing this if I am not from here’. With observation, patience and learning Indigenous ways from the Elders, and my colleagues, many of whom are teachers and local carriers of their knowledge; I can now reflect and answer my own questions of doubt that arose when I first began to conduct family circles. This type of work is undertaken with ‘heart and
mind’ always with a focus to learn, is what some Aboriginal educational scholars have defined as working within a scholarly Indigenous framework.

Cree educator, Laara Fitznor (1998), articulates that:

…sharing circles embrace such concepts as learning from one another, and learning from what is said, gaining information and knowledge to incorporate into one’s life, honoring and respecting what is heard, honoring the confidentiality of who said what, sharing the joy and pain of others, recognizing that what each person says is placed on an equal footing (no one person’s voice is more important than another’s) and the willingness to share information about one’s experiences in light of personal growth and development. Sharing circles promote personal well-being of Indigenous peoples. They reflect the traditional concept of interconnectedness (p.34).

Michael Hart (2002) supports Fitznor’s understanding of sharing circles:

Sharing circles are both helping techniques and processes which set the stage for people’s ongoing healing, growth and self-development. The general purpose of circles is to create a safe environment for people to share their views and experiences with one another. They have several goals, including the initiation of the healing process, promotion of understanding, joining with others and growth. (p.61).

Context Guides Practice
Not unlike Aboriginal scholars who contend that “many Indians will not write about tribes other than their own, even if they have insights into these cultures” (Mihesuah, 1998, p.12), I have learned from the people that I am engaged with that in order for me to be consistently ethical and respectful in my practice, my teaching, or research work, I can only reflect on what I have experienced with place-based Aboriginal cultures with which I am associated. I can not make claims in defining and describing what a particular Aboriginal culture is, rather I can only relate how those cultural practices and local values and beliefs have impacted me and my practice. My own story describes a practice experience spanning four decades, with the beginning practice skill level described as compatible with Dreyfus’s definition of a “novice” practitioner (in Flyvberg 2001, p.21) as operating at a “rules based” skill level. Gradually as my understanding and skill
level of applying local ways to my practice advanced, the quality of my skill advanced sufficiently for me to engage in a scholarly approach to my practice that seeks to theorize about and make meaning of the practice.

The methodology consists of describing my slow but steady self transformation as a practitioner impacting my colleagues and service users around me. This process of learning is a dynamic and empowering description of educational facilitation and collaborative learning. This kind of thinking when it moves out of the individual and forms, and becomes part of the collective, is ripe for making positive change as the stories and vignettes illustrate throughout this work.

Vignette 5.1 Keeping Children Connected to Family
I am in the third year in the role of Coordinator-Facilitator of a Family Circle Program for a First Nation. I have learned a great deal about the differences of working with a local Indigenous Aboriginal knowledge system as opposed to a western Eurocentric paradigm. Learning to facilitate family circles was accelerated due to the fact that circle work within the First Nation that I became affiliated with is centered on the local protocols and cultural practices of the local First Nation. I have also learned that Indigenous knowledge is based on experience and is ‘process’ oriented as opposed to systemic ‘product’ oriented Eurocentric knowledge. Working with a ‘process centered’ knowledge presents a facilitator with many options in the preparation and facilitation of family circles as each circle is reflective of the collectivity of all participants in the circle inclusive of the thoughts, skills, life experiences that they bring with them. This is a rich combination of human experience and creative potential coming together for a purpose.

Family circle work is a process that can be case specific to local family and community needs, this means that a facilitator can be flexible and creative in preparing for each family circle based
on each family’s needs. This is important because rather than applying a set formula or standard to the preparatory work of each Circle referral, what I do is start planning for each Circle with the full participation of the parents and family that have been referred, as pre-planning partners. In this regard planning for the Circle starts with ‘real live data’. By conducting Family Circles in this manner, the purpose of a Family Circle need not be held only for the purpose of responding to child protection concerns; rather what has evolved over the past year, is that referrals come to the program from service providers or directly from families as ‘self referrals’ responding to observed ‘at risk’ perceived behaviors seeking help for a variety of family needs or resolution of social issues.

In the following vignette, requests are made by social workers for Circles to be held to develop plans of re-connection of children (that have been in care till age of majority) to parents and family. Social Workers reason that it is important that young adults have an opportunity to meet their families when they come out of care. As part of Circle preparation, I contact family members on both sides of the family, including any that may be out of province or country. I explain the purpose of this Circle and invite their participation. While this process is voluntary, almost always family are eager to meet young relatives that have endured the foster care system.

In thinking about scheduling agenda items for the Circle several days in advance of the Circle, I would invite grandparents or family members to do an opening prayer and make any welcome statements or introductory comments which they gladly accept. Often these events are special occasions for the children who may have never met members of their family. It seems to me that the agenda should recognize special occasions with ceremonial work. I will invite knowledgeable persons to fill a master of ceremonies and ‘floor man’ role.
There are many seasoned speakers in First Nation communities, but I usually ask younger cultural teachers to officiate as they relate well with the children and the teenagers. I talk briefly with the cultural teachers as part of the circle preparation and agreements are made that define the agenda and protocols for the Circle. It is common for co-facilitators to bring a drum, to sing a song, or to tell a story followed by a prayer. I would give a few introductory remarks about the agenda, explain the purpose, and ask for input about guidelines and rules of conduct for the Circle. I talk to all my co-facilitators about how they would officiate. Typically they agree to give a talk representing the community, focusing on explaining today’s events as a learning opportunity for those coming out of care. After opening remarks, we would do an Introductory Circle with each person holding the Eagle feather while they were speaking. For focusing the purpose, I ask each person to: identify who they are; describe how they are related to the child or children, and to provide their hopes for today and perhaps to relay a message to the children on the occasion of their coming of age.

Caregivers typically are thankful for being invited to Circle work. They affirm that it is important to know ‘where we come from’. They are proud of their foster children completing grade twelve. Following Circle introductions, co-facilitators may sing a song complemented with drumming a blessing of the food. Lunch is always available and after lunch, time is set aside for presentations followed by games and crafts work, picture taking and sharing of greetings and family stories.

The presentation ceremonies are held in accordance with the local traditions of acknowledging that includes “blanketing” where those honored are asked to come to the front of the room by the ‘speaker’ and ‘floor man’, and a ceremonial blanket is placed around her shoulders. A floor man explains what is happening and why and reiterates that it is a protocol of the Agency, represented today by a social worker or myself wanting to honor a child that comes out of care and we express our good feelings about them, to their family. As part of the ceremony, a head band is placed around the forehead, and a blanket is pinned across the shoulders. Those
honored are presented with gifts. As a speaker explains the meaning of this way of acknowledgment there is usually complete silence in the room, everyone is attentive including infants that may be present. I like to close Family Circles with what I call a short ‘closing circle’ round table, as a final opportunity for all to share thoughts, feelings, and acknowledgments.

Sometimes older persons will share stories about young persons and the young ones listen intently. Sometimes family members thank caregivers for looking after their children and emotions of joy spill over to all participants. Sometimes family members or caregivers give thanks for the Circle process and they explain that they have never participated in Circle work before and that they now have a great respect for it. Often participants will identify how much they have learned from events of a Circle. When a Circle is requested by a social worker, it represents to family the human side of the worker, this is important in light of the dislike that Aboriginal people have of social workers as proponents of assimilation due to their roles in bringing Aboriginal children to residential school and more recently removing children as part of the ‘60’s scoop’. These Circles conclude with singing of a beautiful song or drumming performed by family members or supporters.

Since the circle process is dynamic typically involving a release of emotions, feelings, tensions, sometimes relief, and sometimes grief; it is important to conclude by giving each person a final opportunity to reflect on the day’s experience. It also serves as a chance for the quieter less verbal person to offer their insight. For me as the facilitator it also provides an opportunity to address any last minute concerns, for even though there may not be time to fully review a last minute concern, I can provide information, guidance, and direction about how that ‘last minute concern’ might be addressed. For example, it can become the subject of a follow-up circle, or it can be facilitated by a current participant in the Circle by working directly with the person with the concern. The important piece is that the concern is known to all in the Circle and they instantly become witnesses in regards to how even a last minute concern will be dealt with. ‘Witnessing’ is part of Coast Salish ceremonial work where witnesses are called upon to witness
a ceremony and retain the proceedings as a form of memory and record of the proceedings of the event. In Indigenous cultures this is a common way of orally maintaining a record of important events. What I call the group presence, the collective dynamic process, guides and support all related matters raised within the circle.

Reflection 5.1 Building Relationships, Teaching and Learning
There are variations in how a circle is prepared and conducted which relate to purpose and family protocol. Sharing circles are not guided by a set program format or standard. In this example, we were working with the local Indigenous Aboriginal knowledge of a family and planned the Circle consistent with local cultural practices. This is consistent with Kovach’s assertion that “It is pertinent to note that Indigenous knowledge’s can never be standardized, for they are in relation to place and person” (Kovach, 2010, p.56). What transpires in the Circle, will relate to a large extent to the purpose of the Circle, and to variables such as family tradition, age of the honored person and participants, and the message that is to be conveyed. Consequently, as facilitator I take into account the social worker’s suggestions that since children that are honored are not familiar with their own culture, that the communication and interpretations of what we impart is done so that they could understand the meaning of certain activities and protocols respected during the Circle. Similarly, Elders remind me at prior preparatory meetings, that our work should be interpreted for ‘the young ones’ so that they could absorb the teachings. In doing Circle preparation work I consider these comments and suggestions of the Elders of a family and I plan accordingly.

In non-Aboriginal Family Group Conferences, the facilitator tends to direct and introduce the agenda. In Circles which I facilitate, I explore every opportunity to involve family and community to the greatest degree possible. In doing so it becomes easier for family members to assume
ownership and follow up during Circle conclusions. It is for this reason that I involve local co-facilitators who, prior to the Introductions, explain to the participants why we are engaging in conducting Circle work in a particular way. Selected co-facilitators explain that this was the way of the local people, to gather in a Circle and acknowledge young people at critical times in their development, reaching puberty, reaching adulthood, completing a period of education and for purposes related to achievements worthy of recognition.

The case examples that I have experienced are similar in terms of describing Aboriginal circle work to those of Hart (2002) and Wilson (2008). There are many reasons for me as a facilitator to call on others from the community to explain local protocols. First of all, some co-facilitators are already respected members of a local First Nation, thus they speak from their own experience, their own reality which is understood by family members in the Circle. In this regard their spoken words are their truth, and this truth relates directly to the local ways. Secondly, from a facilitator change agent perspective, I have always believed that in facilitating change, the effectiveness of my facilitation is directly related to the degree that the individual or family with whom I am working can assume immediate responsibility for actions that they feel comfortable in assuming. For me this is a part of effective empowerment and advocacy that always stays clear of a facilitator creating dependency. Hart (2002, p103), in describing the qualities of conductors of sharing circles states that “sometimes they are Elders or persons who have gone through specific training and preparation. They are to be kind, gentle, moral, ethical, confident, strong, flexible, good listeners, patient, accommodating and respectful”. Conductors do not direct other people; instead they support people to determine their own goals.

An immediate satisfaction to me as a practitioner of family circle work is that a bigger societal challenge is always realized and that is the extending of dignity and humanitarianism to those
who seek help. Aboriginal people I work with call it ‘building up’ a person so they can face life’s challenges on their own without fear and humility. Hart (2002, p.90) refers to his experience “In each of the circles in which I participated, there was at least one person who commented on their learning that had taken place in the Circle. Indeed, in several, if not all, of the circles I learned something”. Learning from the knowledge that originates from local history, environment, and the relation of all beings living and non-living is experiential learning and it is extremely powerful to witness it in a circle either as a participant or a circle facilitator-conductor.

Graveline (1998p.185) cites Weil and McGill who define “experiential education” as people individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter and then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. It allows the learner to use more of his or her senses to learn, which reinforces the understanding that learning comes from many sources including oneself, and not only from formal mainstream theory. Elders’ lengthy talks in some circles represent teachings told in short story form. Other results that support circle work are the opportunities, the space that circles provide for expression of deep respect as evidenced by a grandma addressing a caregiver as ‘you are my sister’ and thanking her for raising her grand children. Young persons who accompany cultural teachers as apprentices are a fine example of inclusiveness and in ceremonial community work there is always an acceptance of local young people to participate in the work. The Family Circle can be used as a vehicle to achieve formal connections for children that are in protective care to their families. In reflecting on re-connection Circles, learning is an end result for most participants, most specifically reference this in the closing circle and speaking for myself, I learned that to take healthy risks (inclusion of ceremonial work) to engage and empower others, usually brings positive results.
Vignette 5.2 Facilitating Family Circle Work
One First Nation that I was employed with always maintained that the ultimate responsibility and control for protection and care for Nation children rests with the Nation. Consistent with this position is the Nation’s political position which resists the adoption of Nation children except in extraordinary circumstances. Similarly, becoming a Provincial Aboriginal delegated child and family agency, was viewed by the Chiefs and Council as an interim measure until the Nation assumed full jurisdiction and control over the protection and care of services to Nation children and families.

Since becoming a provincially delegated agency, the foundation upon which the changes that have been made in service delivery consist almost entirely of the introduction of local knowledge: traditional and current ways of knowing; including local belief systems, values, laws, protocols and local Aboriginal cultural practices. This vignette describes a Family Circle project as an example of re-introducing local knowledge and practice in responding to Aboriginal child and family issues. Related agency service examples that rely on the core local teachings are cited to illustrate the commitment to change that the agency is making by investing in it’s own epistemology (philosophy of knowledge) and ontology (worldview) to transform child and family services and their delivery to their people.

The Family Circle Program: Early Beginnings
With initial short term funding secured, a proposal was approved to offer a Family Group Conference service that would re-introduce local ways and cultural practices into the Circle process. Referrals of protection files of Nation families would be accepted from any Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) office in the Province. As soon as the proposal was approved we began to conduct our own Indigenous research by asking for input from Elders, cultural teachers and our youth.
When we talk about Aboriginal research in Aboriginal Circles we are not just talking about the goal and the finish; we are talking about everything that happens in between. Between the beginning and the end of any given research project is process. It is in the process of conducting research that the researcher engages the community to share knowledge, recreation, and work. (Absolon and Willett, 2005, p.107).

Research for the needs assessment phase of the project consisted of interviewing twenty Elders individually for a period of two hours each; asking each what the local First Nation child care program should include. Elders shared in depth personal stories which almost always included the impacts of colonialism, oppression and the disregard for the Aboriginal local language, customs and cultural practices by the state (governments), church, and settler society. Residential school experiences and later the removal of children during the “60’s scoop”, beginning in the early 1960’s reinforced the marginalization of “our history, culture and our very existence”. One of our Elders aptly described his residential school experience as follows; “I lost more than I learned at residential school”.

The Elder’s reference to what was lost as a student in residential school includes: a loss of identity; a loss of practicing and learning the local cultural practices; loss of dignity and self respect that was replaced by shame; and in general an inhumane dehumanizing treatment.

In addition to interviewing the Elders as preparation for the Family Circle project, community gatherings were held throughout village sites. A sample of testimonies from various Elders during the research phase provided encouragement and direction to the project:

- It’s been a long time coming …doing things the old way.
- I was hoping for this, it’s an idea we all had in mind.
Today kids don’t know where they come from…when I was young it was told to me over and over.

Children never knew anyone to be mean; we were brought up to respect people.

I always dreamed it would be this way.

The Elders approved a name for the Family Circle Project and explained it’s meaning in their language. This model is based on local laws of conduct as they apply to family matters. Local values are demonstrated in a holistic way in the Circle where decisions are made by consensus.

While collecting data for the ‘needs assessment’ phase, consultation with youth in the Nation elicited a positive response from the youth. The youth wanted to learn about local ways, history and tradition. They wanted to know “who we are” and were eager to invest time in order to re-learn the rich local history. Nation Elders challenged the Family Circle Project to re-introduce some of the “old ways’ into Family Circle work with Nation families. Their assessment was that many of the families do not understand and consequently do not relate well to existing mainstream child welfare services and practices. This assessment is supported by experience with residential schools and the subsequent mistrust of “outsiders” who became involved in local family affairs. In the past, government policy and outsiders generally, disrespectfully devalued culture and ceremony and thus forced the local acceptance of the larger society’s norms and values upon Aboriginal families.

**Circle Work Process**

Participation in the Family Circle program is voluntary; however the inclusion of traditional and contemporary cultural practices in each Family Circle is encouraged. It is important for the facilitator to be familiar with respected Elders, carriers of local knowledge, and spiritual healers in and around the community whose identities are not easily known or written for general public
reference; but who through oral transmission are known for their knowledge of protocols for ceremony and special occasion gatherings, and for being keepers of sacred knowledge and procedure for ceremonial work. For a facilitator to understand and use this information and knowledge about local protocols in Circle planning and preparation can take time and is developed only after long periods of association, direct experience, along with a gradual development of mutual trust.

The Circle process is all encompassing and holistic in that all of the family’s strengths, history and the connection of their membership to the community are recognized within the Circle. This process of recognition gives support and adds strength to the family to address the issues that challenge them in regards to safe child care. Local resource people are recognized as service providers and advocates for the family. A preventative approach where families began to address their own concerns using their own family and community resources is the ultimate objective of the Family Circle process.

Preparation and Pre-Circle Decisions
In Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) protection referrals, I begin preparation by meeting the referring social worker from MCFD; a service provider, if a service provider referral; or a family member; if a self referral is made. I seek to obtain from parents and family their reasons or purposes for holding a Circle, along with their expected Circle objectives. I ask the social worker for all known family members and service providers that he or she feels can contribute to the Circle; I ask the parents a similar question, and seek their preference as to whether they would like to do the invites of circle participants. They appreciate the option and preferences vary, based on the family inter-relationships at any given time. Occasionally I, as facilitator, may influence denial of a participant’s invitation, if their presence is assessed as
counterproductive to the Circle process. Alternatively I may encourage a parent to invite a family member even though the parent is originally reluctant, if the social worker and I think that person’s presence would be in the best interests of the child and the Circle process.

I interview all participants in advance of attending the circle at which time I explain the purpose and process of conducting a Family Circle. This information includes explanation of the guidelines to participants informing that Circle guidelines for participation are grounded in the local rules of conduct as defined by local Nation law and protocol. An eagle feather is used extensively and is held by each participant while speaking. This has its own built in guide as no one else is to speak while another holds the feather. The use of the feather eliminates cross talk and symbolizes respect and attentiveness to the person holding it. In turn, the purpose of the feather is described as grounding the speaker and giving strength to whoever holds it as ability to speak from both ‘the heart and mind’.

Other items discussed in preparatory meetings are: location, timing, type of meal to be served, extent of culture and ceremony to be included. Families are encouraged to make these decisions so that they are able to absorb that our effort is sincere in engaging them as partners in the decision making of care for their children.

The Family Circle
Each Circle opens with a prayer, a song, drumming or a combination of each by an Elder, a community member, or invited family member. As facilitator, I always introduce myself in sufficient detail for participants to make the connection of my relationship to the agency and community. The agenda always allows for a welcome from a community member to share family history, teachings about local laws, protocols, customs, the significance of these, and ‘why we are doing the Circle this way today’ There is a respectful acknowledgment of the family’s strengths and their value to the community.
During the introductory phase of each circle, the facilitator, community representative, and cultural teachers support participants by encouraging them to express their views and they explain to all who are present that; the circle process by definition and with the support of the Eagle feather, ensures confidentiality and values circle participants as equals. This safe environment for human interaction is emphasized to ensure that everyone’s safety, dignity, and humanity is preserved and that everyone is respected and can speak openly. Power imbalances are addressed in this way.

Decision making concerning rules occurs by consensus. I explain why certain rules of conduct for the Circle are important and I ask participants in the Circle for feedback until there is unanimous agreement on the guidelines. Traditionally, local decision making is by consensus.

In circles that are conducted in response to a protection referral, the family, during their private time, has a major influence, for it is their commitments made during private time (without the presence of Social Work professionals) that become a core piece of the plan. If necessary during private family time, participants will look to me as the coordinator, a service provider or to an Elder for guidance. Any one of these people can be called upon by the family to help during their private time depending on their need and preference.

The family members present in “private family time” develop the plan for the family and children based on the information presented in the opening circle where family strengths, needs, and concerns have already been identified and listed on a flipchart or writing board.
Following review of the family’s care plan by social workers it is approved by the MCFD Supervisor. As Circle Coordinator I allow for time to clarify follow up, ‘when, who, and how will follow up of the Care Plan be conducted?’ The follow up decision is included as part of the Care Plan summary and a typed version of the final approved care plan is passed on to all participants.

A short round table closing circle is held to debrief and offer each participant an opportunity to share final thoughts. The circle typically ends with a blessing, prayer, song, or drumming by an Elder, community member, or invited family member. Circles conducted for non protection and self referrals can vary immensely depending on, purpose, the nature of the social issue, and the relevant support resources that are identified. Because local knowledge is ‘experiential’ and ‘process’ oriented, adjustments to procedure can always be made to coincide with family needs. This process is a dynamic collaborative re-learning process. At fifty circles a year, with an average of fifteen participants per circle, up to seven hundred and fifty local members per year are engaged in the family circle work that I facilitate. One participant summed it up this way:

I am glad for the Circle today, in past our people relied on a Circle, so we now rely more on spiritual practices, and we’re learning too of the old practices.

Reflection 5.2: Experiencing Relationships: Making Meaning
A reading of Shawn Wilson’s book, Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods, (2008), presented me with many insights into my own work through comparisons with his. Incidentally, Wilson talks about how indigenous people introduce themselves by making reference to who their parents and grandparents are. This is a foundational thing that defines ‘who you are, where I am from and what my relationships are’. Wilson discusses his own relationships with student colleagues at a university and cites the benefits of such relationships such as; being invited to present at conferences, as others want to know more about your research. He says “a key to being included is not only the work that you have done in the past
but how well you have connected with others in the community during the course of your work” (p. 81). The strength of your bonds with the community is a valued component of your work. Being asked to make a presentation may not be solely based on the content of the presentation, but how well one presents their work (connects with the audience) and communicates with other Indigenous scholars. Wilson discusses the notion that “this way of doing things might be seen as nepotism” by people unfamiliar with the Indigenous way of doing things. He concludes that even though it probably is, nepotism does not have to carry the negative stigma that it does in the dominant society.

He describes this different way of interpreting “nepotism” in what I consider to be another Indigenous teaching, that demonstrates the differences in meaning of a statement made in the dominant system versus what it may mean in a healthy way through an Indigenous interpretation. In the dominant system nepotism generally involves the use of friends and relatives in an effort to keep others out, whereas in the Indigenous community the strength of already established bonds between people can be used to help uplift others by bringing them into the circle. As I reflected on my own experiences, I began to understand that the main criteria that First Nation employers relied on in making employee appointments for example were based on the quality of relationships that candidates had achieved with previous First Nation employers.

My selection for employment with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada was largely based on my experience with work at a local First Nation level. Some years later, and for a period of two consecutive years I was asked by a First Nation to consider working with them as an administrator. After two years I did take up the offer. In reflecting back, I had a positive working relationship with the Chief and council of that First Nation, as an employee of government, they
knew me as a person, they were familiar with my service delivery approach and they knew what to expect from me, hence they felt comfortable in employing me. This criterion in hiring was based on the ability of a candidate to establish respectful and productive relationships.

On several occasions throughout my career I was invited to work with an Aboriginal organization because of their direct knowledge of my work and how I went about fulfilling my role. They made an employment decision based on previous relationships. To be clear I am not suggesting that relationship is the sole criteria for employment selection. What I am saying is that when the usual mainstream educational qualifications are satisfied, that Indigenous employers will usually use ‘relationship’ as the selection criteria of greatest importance in their selection of a candidate.

How Aboriginal people address you informally and in what manner they address you, gives evidence of the humor that is part of Aboriginal life communications. Assignment of nicknames representing animals and non-animate earth objects are also common in Aboriginal cultures. At one place of employment, one of the Chiefs always addressed me as “Mr. Comfortable”, a humorous reference to my surname which he chose to translate as ‘Comfortable’. I interpreted that reference to signify that he was at ease in joking with or about me, but also that he was supportive of my practice with his people. Another colleague of mine always refers to me as “Mr. K” as we met in the hallways at work each morning.

Moving On To Transformation of Agency Services

In one First Nation, in addition to referrals of local First Nation protection files from MCFD, referrals from service providers as well as self referrals are accepted from families. This is encouraging as success with prevention activities reduces the need for protection intervention.
The following examples show how the Circle Program can evolve and respond to resolution of a variety of local family and community issues:

- Family Circles held in groups of multiple families and participants to address specific behavior and addiction concerns of teenage children.
- Family Circles to address Elder abuse.
- Combined tri-partite circle efforts inclusive of: family work, Circle work, and spiritual healing work.
- Smaller ‘preparatory’ Circles to prepare families for larger circles (family group conferences) that address MCFD child protection files for the purpose of involving family in the care planning for their children.
- Circles for the purpose of re-connecting children to families.

Local knowledge is readily accepted when it’s applied to how we work with local people, consequently other divisions in an agency use local knowledge extensively in their program delivery. A weekly Father and Grandfather Circle can help support service for male members of a community. A Grandmothers and Aunties Circle can offer a similar service for female members. Weekly Talking Circles in many First Nations provide a forum for persons addressing addiction issues. In my observation, effective agency service work with youth is done in group learning sessions with a heavy emphasis on teaching of local cultural practices. Re-introducing cultural practices also requires adjusting workforce schedules so that work with youth can be done in the evening and on weekends to coincide with other youth activities and youth interests.

Re-introduction of Circle work is spreading throughout First Nations. A community service provider in one First Nation commented that some families do address internal family challenges ‘in the old ways’ and that there needs to be a re-education and a re-validation of how to
respectfully respond to community child and family issues. This example indicates that for some Aboriginal families traditional ways are practiced for more intimate family functions, but because the child welfare system is too removed from local knowledge systems and protocol, even the local people have not seriously considered that a new model of practice could be built on their own local knowledge framework.

Vignette 5.3 Describing My Family Circle Work Practice
The main vehicle for conducting my current practice is the Family Circle. There are many types of Circles, each with a particular focus and set of protocols, usually related to: initiation of the healing process, promotion of understanding, and joining growth with others (Hart, 2002, p. 61). Since my practice is with Aboriginal children and families, the purpose of the sharing circle is to give the family space and voice to be directly involved in planning for the safe care of a child. There are of course other types of circles including sacred circles, where specific spiritual and place-based work is conducted. These circles are quite different, and I do not facilitate these types of circles where, as Hart describes, symbolism is enacted in meetings, sun dances, sweat lodges, sweet grass ceremonies, pipe ceremonies, and feasts are held where participants confer celebrate, and pray. Thoughout history Aboriginal people used sharing circles for various purposes by ‘coming to ones own people’ for advice on a variety of matters, similar to accepting counseling when compared to the mainstream system.

I analyze and compare the Family Circles that I conduct along with my team, to Hart (2002) an Aboriginal scholar who has described Circle work in some detail as an Aboriginal approach to “helping”, where helping is a more accurate term than ‘social work’ to describe the work that a helping person would do in an Aboriginal community. Size of circles can vary from five to thirty people; the average number of participants is fifteen. The length of our circles also varies from
two to six hours with the average length at three hours. Our circles attract referrals from service providers and individuals (self-referrals) in addition to referrals from child protection social workers. This creates diversity in terms of the purpose of each circle. The location is important and again flexibility is important and a number of sites within the Nation communities are selected from a pool of community facilities. Preparation for a circle is important, I contact each circle participant, preferably in person to describe the process and involve all participants in the planning. This dramatically reduces conflict at the circle as each participant understands the purpose and is aware of who the participants will be. It is important to work towards reducing any anxieties, fear, or uncomfortable feelings that participants may express prior to a circle.

Guidelines are important and these are reviewed at the beginning of each Circle. I use an Eagle feather exclusively in every circle. As Hart (2002, p. 83) describes each Circle opens and closes with a prayer. I have learned to open and close and lead with a prayer, however as facilitator, I encourage and invite the family to make those choices. This approach strives to involve family in decision-making as it is their ‘family circle’, while I see my role as one of engaging and supporting each person’s participation to the greatest degree possible. Creating a good atmosphere is important and I try my best to contribute to this in my introductory remarks to each circle. I typically list the purpose and agenda on a flipchart inclusive of key statements and words that relate to each Circle’s purpose. The preparatory meetings of participants and the introductory remarks at the Circle both create the atmosphere for productive sharing. In my introduction, I will refer to the specific purpose of the Circle but in addition, I always ask an Elder (usually from the family) as a community spokesperson to explain why we are conducting the Circle in a local cultural format. I encourage family members to sing a song, do a drumming piece or relate a family story as part of the introduction. This person’s words connect the circle process to the community. Similarly the community representative will use words to acknowledge the worth of the family to the community; this is uplifting and eases anxieties and
tensions that Aboriginal parents typically experience, when confronted by social workers and
the Courts, who are making plans on behalf of their children. Feelings are shared and
acknowledged, emotions are released, and commitments are made.

Reflection 5.3 Evaluating My Family Circle Work Practice
For me, learning occurs in each Circle. Participants speak of learning as noted in the vignettes.
This coincides and is supported by participants in Hart, (2002, p. 90) where he states, “In each
of the sharing circles in which I participated there was at least one person who commented on
learning that had taken place in the circle. Indeed, in several, if not in all, of the Circles I learned
something” (p.90). Katz and St. Denis (1991) in describing Aboriginal worldviews stated that
everyone is mutually a teacher and a learner and in order for everyone to learn from each other,
including the conductor, they are to facilitate, have humility, strength, and courage. I have
facilitated circles over the past three years where persons with drug and alcohol addictions have
turned their lives around after coming to a circle and sharing, listening, and where family
members create an intervention type atmosphere of emotional exchange in the circle which
leads some individuals to make choices that begin to change their lives.

The process of interaction within a circle is dynamic; Hart (2002) describes a participant who
spoke of his release of energy that permits him to open his own doorways to centeredness,
balance, and harmony (p.96). Symbolism reflective of Aboriginal spiritual worldviews are
brought in to the circle, such as burning of a candle placed in the middle of the circle floor,
placing water, or other objects representing spiritual meaning. Circles typically produce positive
results as emotions have been released, anxieties disappear, and at closure participants thank
each other for their support and kind words. Participants will often hug each other and leave
feeling really good (Hart, p. 83). Before closure, I inform participants that a summary of
discussions will be provided to each participant. I review follow-up procedures before the circle concludes. Many circles now do request for a follow up circle to ensure that all decisions made have been implemented.

Developing a skill in closing a circle is important and is a skill that I did not excel at in my first couple of years in circle work. I always conclude circles with what I used to call a ‘round table’ closing circle. I eventually realized that use of the word ‘round table’ was probably not an appropriate term as we had no table in the circle, it was more of a remnant recalled from mainstream education. There are many reasons to finish a circle with a closing circle commentary from each participant because it creates an opportunity for everyone to: offer a thought which they may not have had an opportunity to express earlier; it invites and brings forth suggestions for follow up; it gives opportunity for each participant to acknowledge and give thanks for the day, the people present, the creator for the day; give thanks for the food that was prepared; and affords opportunity for respectful commentary relating to the mystery of life itself that is expressed in many different ways. As I witness the closures and the eloquent words that are spoken, it symbolizes for me a spiritual and respectful modeling of a way of recognizing how as humans we should always conduct ourselves. I leave each circle with a heightened respect for each participant and for the hope that they will take action to strengthen their well being.

Hart’s (2002), description of his research into circle work produced results that are very similar to my own experience. Facilitators he says” would assign someone to open and close the circles if they did not do so themselves. I always prefer to assign this function to a family Elder or spokesperson as it gives them a greater role of participation in the process of circle work. The results are always rewarding as one can imagine, because each family spokesperson will inject something unique into their delivery. They may describe a segment of family history, or describe
a family accomplishment, but whatever is said has an empowering impact on family participants and it sets a pleasant tone and environment for the work of the day. Hart says that sharing circles “usually include a closing prayer and acknowledgements such as handshaking or hugging…would be hugging each other and leave feeling really good” (p. 83). He says that the atmosphere is usually one of mutuality and support and the conductor (facilitator) stresses that all participants can learn from each other since all in the circle have a significant view of the things that were experienced.

Examples from Hart emphasize another important quality of circles which is that they are not hierarchical (p. 84). Everyone is on the same plane “even the facilitator should blend into that…you’re there to help make sure the circle keeps going but you also share.” Consistent with this reasoning, I take the opportunity to highlight the closure of each circle with what I see as the positives of each circle and give thanks to participants for the insights we all gain from their sharing. This is collaborative learning at its best.

Self Transformation

“The self is not ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of creation.” Dewey

Greene (1978) comments that both Dewey and Sartre believed that what we become and what we make of ourselves, depends upon what we do in our lives. If what we do is simply routine and mechanical, the quality of our selfhood becomes thin and hollow or, those who Thoreau describes as living their lives in “great desperation” (p. 22). Greene contends that there are always persons who turn to teaching as they see themselves as committed to arousing others to critical thinking or “to conscientization” and to bring about social change. I agree with this reasoning as my proactive purpose is to facilitate capacity development in the First Nation
community to begin to participate in developing new programs based on their own knowledge, in order to change service type and delivery to the children and families. Government policy in child welfare excludes this resource entirely, and may be the reason that government policy in this area of service perpetuates robotic insensitive criteria to drive existing programs that are failing and continue to traumatize parents, children, and families by removing Aboriginal children from parental homes in escalating record numbers. As workers, teachers, and human service workers with Aboriginal people, we can chose to be merely efficient and function compliantly within our service organization or we might continue making ourselves what we might be. For me this equates to bringing in resistance to my practice, so that injustices that I am aware of such as misrepresentations in discourse and text about Aboriginal matters are challenged and clarified. It means that I do not sit idly by and say nothing when half truths or untruths are spoken.

‘So what is it that has changed within me and within my practice as a result of my practice with Aboriginal families?’ Engaging with a person or persons with whom I am ‘helping’ is standard practice. Whether my interaction is with an individual, a family or a community group, I consider the ‘helping’ relationship as a partnership whose objective is to lead to some beneficial outcome or solution. Taking this stance necessitates consistent good listening, clarification of meaning, and understanding what is communicated. As part of respectful communication, I always observe peoples emotions, temperament, and actions as they relate their stories. I conduct myself somewhat similar to how Aboriginal scholar Priscilla Settee’s (2007) words describe her role in working with her people:

I have chosen to become an instrument to channel the untested ideas, or words, or meanings people share when using their own voices. (p. 269).
She says that their stories help us as ‘helpers’ to understand the hurtful aspects of colonization through the eyes of those who suffered in silence. Their stories help us appreciate how some informal structures help people heal from the hurtful features of western domination. Stories also help us see how processes of knowledge generate support or negate legitimization of Indigenous peoples.

In the early years of my practice with Aboriginal families, I would ‘prescribe’ solutions originating from mainstream ‘professionalized directed learning’ using the rationale of equality. This reasoning basically implied that if Aboriginal families had access to the same services as non-Aboriginals their child and family needs would be adequately addressed. Eventually I learned that resolutions of needs and solutions were more complex than that. Clearly my practitioner role has changed from ‘prescribing’ to ‘facilitating’ solutions in partnership with those working, requesting, and needing ‘helper assistance’. In facilitation of Family Circle work I truly experience a simultaneous challenge and joy of participation in dynamic group communications. This work is approached with respect and humility and has helped me to understand more deeply and profoundly ‘the humanity’ of all people.

Unexplored Opportunities
In the course of my practice I see many examples where service delivery to aboriginal children and families can be improved and in some cases markedly transformed. Because diversity is a factor with aboriginal communities in regards to: size; location; degree and type of colonial settler impact; and socioeconomic stability; lasting solutions will need to mirror that diversity. Consequently we must be aware that some of the observed suggestions that I make will only apply to certain communities. Diversity must therefore be at the forefront even in the service delivery solutions that are proposed. It is for this reason that government programs for aboriginal
children and families have not met expected targeted results. Government has always applied a standardized formula for allocation of funding for example, at the expense of omitting the unique needs and priorities of First Nations across Canada.

As an outside scholar I make these claims about ‘opportunities’ because I have successfully participated in some and they have led to profound changes to my practice and to individuals and families that have been part of my practice. I have been influenced by the insights learned from those experiences and most importantly for how various initiatives have produced valuable services to the local people including changes to how child welfare services are delivered to local aboriginal children and families. It is my experience that ‘insider’ scholars (and I include non-academics such as: healthy Elders, cultural teachers; and carriers of the local knowledge) can make an even greater contribution than ‘outsiders’ in transforming service delivery by facilitating, organizing, and rallying the local community forces that are in waiting to become a part of positive service change.

As Aboriginal scholar Cyndy Baskin (2011) asserts, “The answers are in the community”. These words echo those of my community organization professor of thirty years ago in the school of social work who like Baskin (2011) also said” most of the resources needed to resolve social issues are to be found in the community”. My own practice experience confirms that the answers for service change do lie within the community. It is time to engage community for service change for Aboriginal children and families. It is time for all parties responsible for service delivery to engage with service users as partners for service change. It is time to resist what isn’t working and to forge ahead with what is likely to bring results. We need to break new ground, this effort can’t be facilitated by the mainstream system, and such initiatives must be led by and with strong Aboriginal leadership.
“When you’re ahead of your time, you have to create your own path” Cajete

Teacher and Facilitator Skills and Opportunities
Working with Aboriginal organizations where there is a practical interconnected environment presents opportunities for people with a variety of human service related skills. Elders who are carriers and keepers of the local knowledge are always called upon as teachers at all levels of education from public school to First Nation Studies programs at our universities. People who have addressed addiction and have reformed from dependences and use of them become excellent teachers as well. Many First Nations now are organizing these local resources for as recent research shows (Baskin, 2011) the resources are in the community”. If mainstream institutions and particularly government policies, would acknowledge that local resources are useful and beneficial for local human service development, that would be a huge shift as current government funding for Aboriginal programs are fixated and dependent on mainstream identified qualifications that are ‘outsider and professionalized’. Throughout this narrative, I emphasize recognition of the ‘local knowledge’ as the ‘core’ to all that pertains to an opportunity for positive service change. One can see how making that one shift, that is, valuing local knowledge as at least equal in importance to mainstream knowledge, would present many new options for service change. As indicated, if government came to this understanding, it would remove the ‘handcuffing’ of funding of locally designed Indigenous preventative models of service change.

Elsewhere in this document, I describe my experience in facilitating development of an off campus part time Bachelor of Social Work program for Aboriginal colleagues at a First Nation that I was employed with. Because of ‘interconnectivity’ that is my experience in work with First Nation human service organizations; I was able to assist a First Nation task group in the coordination of this program. During the planning for the selection of course instructors, I was asked to instruct a social work course in community organization at a university school of social
work. My learning journey in the Ed.D program reminds me of Boyer’s (1990) categorization of four roles for scholarship and my own opportunity to experience all four roles as a result of engaging in learning about Indigenous local Aboriginal ways of knowing. From ‘helper’ to ‘co-learner’ to ‘teacher’ and then again to ‘learner’ in the Ed.D program, the ‘process’ based nature of Indigenous Aboriginal knowledges has helped me to develop and experience my own scholarship in a holistic way inclusive of: indigenous research methodology; teaching; application; and integration of knowledge.
Experiences in Child Welfare practice with Aboriginal people, and more recently the educational experiences in the academy expanded my understanding of Indigenous knowledges, and had a profound impact in transforming my practice, making it more relevant to the needs of Aboriginal families as stated in previous chapters. In addition to a personal and practice transformation, the journey has identified areas for change in Aboriginal child welfare practice with the introduction of community centered models driven by local protocol and cultural practices. Identification of ‘unexplored opportunities’ in Aboriginal child and family service change comes easy to me as a practitioner who has been in the field for many years. To initiate action for qualification and consideration as pilot projects and then to implement models for service change is challenging. The control and ultimate responsibility for change to the present system is tied to a government policy of funding that is based on measuring ‘pathology’ (the number of Aboriginal children legally in protective care) as opposed to ‘prevention’ based family strength supports. In this chapter I identify examples of ‘the unexplored opportunities’. I have directly participated in exploring some of these opportunities with positive results; others cannot be achieved until local political and local program management decisions are coordinated at a community level. Still other examples are observed examples which appear to me to be obvious opportunities for transformation in practice. However they need to be developed further with the program users and community memberships before they can become fully supported by all stakeholders to become viable service changes for Aboriginal children and families.
Adjusting to Modernity by Maintaining ‘Who We Are’
The dominant Euro-western tradition in the America’s typically surround, stifle, minimize, and control the opportunity for local Indigenous groups everywhere to: identify themselves through traditional and contemporary values and belief systems and to exercise rights that already have been granted by the federal government in Canada’s constitution and federal statutes. Government programs such as the federal Self Government program and the provincial BC Treaty process are initiatives that grant and extend the rights of First Nations to govern themselves and their established territories and to participate more fully as partners within the mainstream geographic regions of the country wherever they reside. The difficulties with these processes are that: they become legally complex and costly; and First Nations are pressured to give away previously held rights (such as income tax exemptions for income earned on reserve lands) in order to conclude Treaty or Self Government program negotiations. Many First nations perceive government objectives with these program processes as subtle continuations of assimilation policies that seek to extinguish current and future Aboriginal held rights.

Mainstream society by and large is not cognizant of the diversity among First Nation groups whose local populations in Canada can vary from as low as fifty people per First Nation to a high of several thousand. It is not uncommon for mainstream sources to make erroneous, attitudinally negative, and sweeping generalizations about Aboriginal people. In many classrooms and indeed in some academic institutions, teachers and community professors are similarly lacking in interest and knowledge about local Aboriginal populations, their knowledge systems and worldviews. This calls for a constant vigilance by the local Aboriginal people to inform, to educate and to make known ‘who we are’ and ‘why we reside on reserves’ and so on. The reserve system was not designed by the First Nation people; it was imposed by government as part of the assimilation process enacted by government. This naivety about Aboriginal history for mainstream Canadians is a burden to local Aboriginal populations, but it can also serve as an
opportunity for them to show ‘who they are’ and to participate within mainstream by educating them, about their own local history and culture as well as articulating the special relationship that Aboriginal people have with Canada.

Mainstream publics need to understand for example, how and why the history and rights of Aboriginal people are different from and cannot be viewed as part of Canada’s multicultural groups. The main difference is that Aboriginal people inhabited Canada and North America before European explorers and settlers arrived. In recognition of this, Canada has enshrined its relationship with its Aboriginal people in the Constitution. Racism against Aboriginal people gets lost as a result of the focus on multiculturism and a tendency by mainstream society to link Aboriginal people with ethnicity as represented by multiculturism. This makes anti racist work extremely difficult in Canada. Multicultural education that includes cultural difference but excludes discussion of race is ill preparation for teachers and any other professionals in improving relations between Aboriginals and white Canadians.

There can be no uncertainty in fact and in law that Aboriginal people have a special relationship with Canada and that relationship cannot be described as simply being a partner of Canada’s multicultural mix. The continuing subtle racism and marginalization towards Aboriginal people requires from them and their allies, a constant effort to resist colonialist and racist actions. Frankly many Aboriginal people have explained to me that they have given up the struggle for continually having to identify and explain “who we are and why we are here”. It smacks of trivializing they say,’ it doesn’t feel good, and too often the questioning isn’t that sincere’.
Because much of the history of Aboriginal people has been incorrectly documented in text and
discourse, the effort to speak the truth needs to come from all sources but especially ‘helpers,
teachers at all levels, and researchers, both Aboriginal and informed non-Aboriginals’ that are
engaged in working with ‘the truth’. Speaking truth to power and conducting our practice by
responding with resistance to what is not true is an obligation of us all with a humanitarian
conscience that are involved with Aboriginal people in a human service role. I feel that it is
important to represent both local and general attributes of Indigenous knowledge without
confusing and trivializing them in the western academy. The strength of local knowledges has
been well documented by Aboriginal scholars and local people in recent years.

Local Knowledge as Praxis
Changes to Aboriginal child welfare service must have local knowledge as the framework on
which new models of service can be developed and delivered. From my experience, keeping
alive local Aboriginal knowledges and cultural practices is twofold; first there is a need for a
more organized and focused approach not only to preserve but to work with and use local
knowledge as part of program planning and service change. Second, is the need to seriously
evaluate locally defined laws (traditional and contemporary) protocols, and ways of knowing as
the guiding principles and codes of conduct relating to all matters of Aboriginal life whether
located on First Nation reserve communities or non-First Nation urban locales.

Because Indigenous knowledge lacks the overt ‘face’ that is, it is ‘process, experiential and
spiritually based’, it is thus practically unrecognized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous publics
alike. Unlike westerners, Indigenous publics seem to lack the capacity to flaunt their knowledge
as a badge of cultural and intellectual integrity in a public way. I contend that this is because one
of the qualities and indeed essence of Indigenous knowledge, is not to overly publicize or
promote ‘what is correct’ because knowledge and ‘what is true’ is always in a state of change, and promoting one’s own individual accomplishments is not an Aboriginal quality.

The social work profession in my view is guilty of claiming to be helpful to Aboriginal populations, without accepting Indigenous knowledges as ‘stand alone epistemologies’. What makes Indigenous theories of culture distinctive is in part that they are less a matter of theory than process, and therefore we cannot just enumerate the content of the theories more effectively; we must engage their dynamism in creative ways. I have seen how the re-introduction of local knowledge can make a difference in human service work with Aboriginal families, by working with and honoring accepted local cultural practices. Local Aboriginal people will say that local knowledge and worldview is a way of life and that the best way to keep it alive is to live by its traditions, protocols and practices.

Understanding and utilizing their local knowledge is therefore paramount for the local groups of First Nation people in order to retain their identity. I also believe that every ‘helper’ whether professional or not; whether Indigenous or not; needs to come to understand and learn to utilize local knowledge in order for their own practice to be effective. My plea here is not a new discovery for ‘those that know’, but based on my own experience, it is necessary for all ‘helpers’ of Aboriginal groups to resist misrepresentation, assimilation, and disrespectful interpretation; but rather to engage with the local Aboriginal knowledge of the people that they are engaged with as this knowledge will inform and legitimize their practice.

Ironically as I write this, the president of the University of Manitoba has today (October 27, 2011) apologized on behalf of the University for being silent during the period when residential schools
operated to assimilate Aboriginal children through residential school education. The University played a role in educating the teachers, clergy, and politicians he said, and they perpetuated the failed system of assimilation. The President apologized on behalf of the University for being silent on this topic of colonialism until now (Global CTV News October 27, 2011). This was the first university in Canada to make an apology to the Aboriginal people and is yet another reason to ‘keep hope alive’ that eventually the academy will create space in all universities across Canada for Indigenous knowledge’s to thrive not as an ‘added historical romanticized component’ of the dominant university culture, but as legitimate educational epistemological partners with a deserved place in the academy nurturing Indigenous knowledges, research methodologies and humanitarian ways of being to their full potential for all Canadians to understand, study, and benefit from. I agree with Battiste (1998) who asserts that Aboriginal knowledge is categorized as particular and local but not normative.

**Balancing Emotions**

“No I become myself. It has taken time, many years and places. I have dissolved and shaken. I have worn other people’s faces.” May Sarton

As part of my journey I continue with my own learning and value the Indigenous knowledges that I can absorb to be a part of the bridge of persons schooled in the philosophies and histories of both Euro-centric and various Indigenous Aboriginal cultures. In thinking about how emotion impacts learning, I recently sketched this short verse called “Balancing Emotions”.

It is critical for me to be proud of what I do know.
For if I am not proud of what I know,
I become ashamed for not knowing what others may think that I should know
When I am ashamed because of what others may think that I should know
It emotionally interferes with balancing the emotions that I need, in order to know.
Much time has elapsed for me to reach a state of becoming proud of what I now know.

I am thus, comforted by the fact that the journey has led me to a discovery of the meaning of, what I now know. (Stephen Kozey, 2011).

This verse summarizes for me my learning journey beginning with early experiences in public education. Learning from and applying tools from Indigenous knowledges has re-instilled in me a quiet confidence to value my experiences and expand my practice to engage in teaching and Indigenous research initiatives through the art and skill of facilitation. As a social justice educator and facilitator of family circle work, I can commit to being an ally, to support Aboriginal rights, aspirations, and advocacy for Aboriginal child and family initiatives.

Through my experience I have come to realize that education does not end once one completes a Bachelor of Social Work or a Master’s or a Ph.D. There is only so much learning that can take place in a classroom, no matter now exemplary the professor is at teaching or how relevant the reading materials are.

**Contribution of the Study**

From attendance at conferences and meeting other practitioners working with First Nation groups, it is clear that a transformation in child welfare service and its delivery is long past due. Most recent efforts at bringing change to this area are coming from government and therefore via dominant western mainstream laws. This narrative study calls for development of local models, controlled and arranged entirely by a local authority. I understand that this can be difficult to achieve as funding from government is tied to child welfare program delivery. However a way to break the cycle is to take the risk and venture into unfamiliar territory, embrace developmental models, practice delivery through the local model, improvise and make what adjustments are necessary in order to keep access to current funding, and along the way
prove that the local model is worthy of funding. This is a delicate balancing act, but it is achievable, that is, continue to provide a service under delegated authority but to build the new model now. ‘The old house should come down only after the new one is built, and it meets all inspection standards’ of the funding authorities. I believe that an academic-community relationship is essential in order for the academy to help support and legitimize the local models as viable alternatives, in terms of applicability and cost. Government will not accept Aboriginal research as readily as Academic research, thus I see great opportunities for partnerships between First nations and academia as academia is still one of the few sites that will accept Aboriginal knowledge and research at face value. No serious research has been done in this area of Aboriginal Child Welfare service delivery change to date. The need for this relationship to flourish is past due. I hope to be directly engaged in a partnership community and university project on Aboriginal child welfare service change in the near future.

**Limitations of the Study**

I have studied my own practice as a non-Aboriginal practitioner whose entire career has focused on advocating for and on behalf of Aboriginal families and communities. Because of the unique experience of working with one community in two different time periods some thirty years apart, the internal assessment of my own progress in understanding my practice, as well as tracking the progression of my experience in Aboriginal child welfare over this period consumes this study. I have not searched any available written documentation or surveyed First Nations across Canada to establish the number of persons who have had similar practice experiences. However, I do believe that it would be a useful comparison and identification of commonalities of practice elements in the course of similar work with child welfare agencies. Gradually there has been a shift towards First Nations hiring their own members who have graduated with a formal university education, in social work and related disciplines. Documenting their experiences and then comparing them with non-Aboriginal practitioners can be a useful area of research, since the majority of social workers in contact with Aboriginal families and teachers that teach
Aboriginal students at all levels are still mostly non-Aboriginal and this will continue for some time until the number of Aboriginal graduates increases in these fields of practice.

Use of personal narrative methodology requires that researchers always maintain a discipline and sincerity about their work so as not to fall victim to some of the defined limitations and critiques of the methodology. Kirschner (2006) refers to personal narrative as unguided methods of instruction. Smith (1993) says personnel narrative is a genre born of self and identity which are sites of contestation and reproduction of hegemonic relations. Similarly Apple (1996) warns that a personal narrative genre can have the chilling function of privileging the white middle class person’s need for self display. Consequently as I engage with Aboriginal families in my practice, I approach my relationships in the most humble and respectful way that I can. I feel privileged to be accepted as a ‘helper’ within each Aboriginal community that I engage with. The relationship that I experience in my practice as I engage with each Aboriginal episteme continues to transform my ‘self’ and my practice. To be respectful I can only speak about these experiences.

Future Research
During my practice I have noted areas in need of research. The area of Aboriginal child welfare service and its delivery is ripe for Indigenous research as the service system is currently dominated and controlled by government child welfare authorities. Within the past ten years there have been two streams of development in education that can impact Aboriginal child welfare service change. The first is the ‘spaces’ that have been created in some socially conscious academic institutions across Canada and the United States that support inclusion of the study of Indigenous epistemologies and the second is the acceptance of Indigenous research methodologies within those institutions. Those Indigenous scholars who have been at their work for the past twenty years or more have made an impact in bringing awareness of Indigenous knowledges to the study and research agendas of their institutions. Aboriginal social work educators have already introduced and described how local knowledge must be a subject
of understanding and study for all ‘helping persons’ engaged with Aboriginal child and family
services and their delivery..

In suggesting items for future research I am referring to opportunities that would arise by
following an Indigenous research methodology that would adhere to the ethics and protocols of
conducting Indigenous research mentioned elsewhere in this narrative. This does not suggest
that there is no opportunity for a non-Indigenous research agenda, it is just that such research
in past has harmed rather than truthfully represented Aboriginal interests and so it is not my
interest to evaluate how it might be useful, if at all as part of this work. Although not an
exhaustive list, the following are further examples of areas where future Indigenous research
may help to support service change in Aboriginal child welfare.

Future research should compare narratives of non-Aboriginal practitioners who are doing similar
social service related work in order to identify commonalities in practice experience. The results
would serve to be useful for Non-Aboriginal practitioners who still make up the majority of the
social service work force that is engaged with delivering child welfare services to Aboriginal
families across Canada.

I submit that to be successful, the local community needs to control and manage all aspects of
service change strategy. Demonstration project models are needed to show how engagement
of local child welfare personnel and resources can be creativity achieved in local service
delivery of ‘community specific’ child welfare services. Similarly, demonstration projects are
needed for a comparison of the costs of offering prevention programs versus the current option
of funding that is focused on funding protection programs that are ‘pathology and problem’
focused.
I have experienced that University and Aboriginal community reciprocal relationships offer hope for positive change in service change to Aboriginal children and families. Programs such as the part time off campus Bachelor of Social Work program that I had the opportunity of being involved with need to be explored for feasibility of expansion across the more isolated regions of the Province. Professional undergraduate training of Aboriginal service practitioners would have a substantial positive impact in upgrading the Aboriginal service provider skills of First Nations across the province.

In the near future there will be more opportunities in Aboriginal child welfare for what some Indigenous scholars such as Rigney (2006), refer to as “Indigenist research”. Such research follows an Indigenous research methodology; the research is controlled by, and owned by the local First Nation. This research is holistic in nature; it is a ‘process’, it must be done for a purpose, to improve conditions for the local people. Practitioners of Indigenist research are few at the present time, but as more Aboriginal graduate researchers and some non-Aboriginal graduates become qualified, local community centered research should help to accelerate service change for Aboriginal children and families.

**Reflections on Researching my Practice**

I began my career as a social service worker with no prior understanding of Indigenous knowledges or a realization that there were other ways to view the world than the Euro-centric system which I was taught in public school, high school, and mainstream educational institutions. Immediately after graduation from Social Work I became immersed in the culture of an Aboriginal community where local ways seemed different from my own culture and upbringing. As a member of the social work profession, I saw the inequality in services available to First Nation families and reserve communities and I focused heavily on achieving social justice by introducing mainstream services to reserve communities as remedies. To apply the
full range of mainstream services would address needs in an equitable way, I reasoned, in the early years of my practice.

As I attended various ceremonies such as: longhouse work; funerals and memorials, I initially found them intriguing and useful ‘traditional’ practices to know about from a historical point of view. Documenting, recording, and preserving, are after all ‘product’ based mainstream qualities of education. I now participate in and encourage the families that I work with to use their cultural practices as support for a healthy well being. In reflecting on my early practice I recall that within the community I conducted myself with patience and an open ear (listening) at all times. This paid dividends, for even though I was an ‘outsider’ the people were accommodating and patient with me as well. They seemed eager to explain their culture, their beliefs, and values through stories. In retrospect I can understand now why a people once forbidden to disclose and live by their ways, would be eager to show ‘who they are’. In reflecting on my visits with families, though I did not request to make appointments at my office, all the work seemed to get done on my visits to the communities. On my visits to their homes, the families seemed eager to tell stories, ask questions, and share their humor. Of course I now know that they were ‘building relationship’, seeking out ‘who I was’ and how I approached my ‘helping’ practice. The stories meanwhile contained within them the issues; and the background information to their, concerns, and needs.

For the past ten years I have come to understand and begin to practice with Aboriginal epistemologies and worldviews as a framework for my practice. In reflecting and studying my own practice, I realized that I needed to make my own practice as meaningful as it could be, in order to respond to local aboriginal child and family needs. In the journey to find the right combination of knowledge and skills to equip me to respond to the child and family service
needs of Aboriginal people, my own practice has been transformed. The transformation has occurred as a result of approaching my work through local Aboriginal epistemologies and worldviews of each First Nation that I engaged with.

In retrospect the journey has been reciprocal, in that any local achievements resulting from my involvement are matched by the generosity of local people and service provider colleagues in interpreting and conveying to me the local Indigenous teachings. Because my practice journey was always conducted within a local epistemological and ontological framework, the results to practice have been extremely rewarding. By choosing to experience my introduction to scholarship in the academy through an Indigenous knowledge framework, leads me to benefit from extraordinary holistic rewards. The ‘process based’ experiential learning from local knowledges has transformed my practice, evolving to a place that offers what I might coin as ‘holistic options’ for my ‘facilitator’ practice. The Indigenous framework and the holistic experiential journey, conducted through the halls of the academy, have sufficiently elevated my practice to one where I can pursue all four of the scholarship priorities defined by Boyer (1990). I can now pursue teaching, conduct research via an Indigenous research methodology, focus on integration and make meaning of the research, and of course continue application of this work to practical solutions and supports relevant to Aboriginal communities. In holistic practice I do a little of each, every time I extend a ‘helping’ hand.

Earlier on I described the six stages of my practice. In the first five stages I excelled in what I did, I achieved success as measured in mainstream standards and in a sense won all the intellectual battles but lost a desire to teach, work collaboratively with others, and to truly enjoy the practice experiences. Having found my niche in what I do now, at the sixth stage of my practice, I say with pride that I love the work that I do, and I love the people that I work with. The
work has become an enjoyable interactive activity that I enjoy daily, and it has become ‘who I am and what I do’. For me, the persistence to excel at my practice, to search for truths, to make my proactive role meaningful is best expressed through personal narrative of my own story. This story can be critiqued, debated, compared and assumed by other scholars, and in the process it becomes open to public scrutiny; it reaches its place in the public arena.
References


