

ENGAGING INCARCERATED INDIGENOUS YOUTH IN THE NORTH

by

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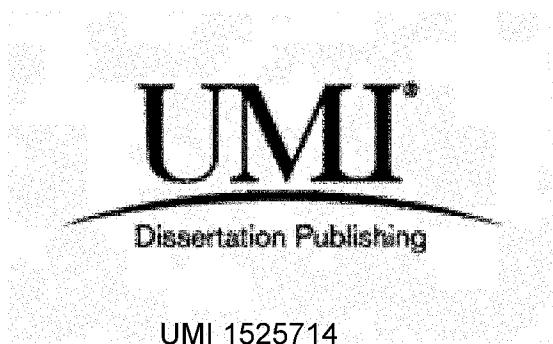
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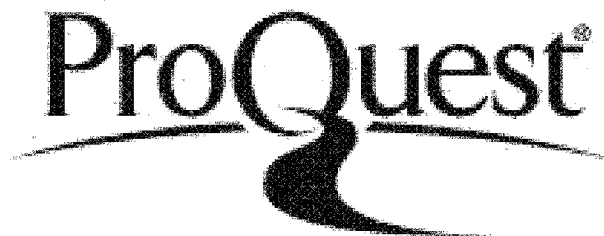
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Abstract

Policy makers, health and social service professionals, and community members alike remain highly concerned about Indigenous youth involvement in the youth criminal justice system. This thesis undertakes an exploratory analysis of the personal experiences of incarcerated Indigenous youth in northern British Columbia (BC). Interviews were conducted with six youth at Prince George Youth Custody Services (PGYCS) who have experience residing in both a northern, rural Aboriginal community and an urban centre. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis and the findings highlight the significance of relationships with family and peers and, in particular, with their grandmothers. Additionally, the youth articulate their goals and the desire to further their education. The information shared postulates that incarcerated Indigenous youth populations are at a critical point in their lives, where informal and formal social supports, using a strengths-based social work approach, is essential to the efficacy of preventative and intervention approaches. This research attempts to accurately examine the reality of this population while honouring their experiences and voices.

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Dedication

For my late father, I know that you are present - in spirit - cheering me on; and, to the youth who have allowed me to write about and honour their experiences - this is also for you. I wish you all well on your pathway toward success and wellness.

Chapter One: Introduction

The only time things are 'normal' is when I'm at my kookum's (grandmother in Cree), when she makes me supper and we're eating at the table together; she's always there for me. That's about as normal as things get. What do people expect? I've become angry...but I don't want to live like this forever.

These few words provide a glimpse into the reality of one incarcerated Indigenous youth's life; a portrait that depicts a manifestation of challenges many incarcerated Indigenous youth can identify with. The shared stories represent the personal experiences, tragedies, and hopes of one highly vulnerable population and provide a window of analysis that encapsulates the web of factors that frame their experiences. The primary interest of this research is their perceptions of their experiences that is storied in their voices.

These populations experience a set of circumstances unique to their social location. Current literature examines and verifies the fact that the intergenerational footprint of colonization and forced assimilation leading to historic inequities is directly linked to the high number of incarcerated First Nations persons compared to non-First Nations persons in a majority of jurisdictions across (Canada Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 1996; Canadian Council on Social Development, 2013). Incarcerated First Nations youth who engage in anti-social behaviours, high-risk lifestyles, and gang activity are part of the larger group of the incarcerated Indigenous population. It is known that this population experiences a reality quite different than most young people as a result of race, class, and disconnection to culture. It is therefore necessary - in an attempt to understand the matter - that we view youth-offending as a symptom of much more complex matters. This study will include a review of the literature with a focus on a micro/macro analysis to assist in

understanding the individual experience within the broader context. Certainly, Indigenous youth who are incarcerated are a product of historical events and policy/structural impacts (Amnesty International, 2004). BC's Representative for Children and Youth states that,

B.C. has the second-lowest youth crime rate in the country and a strong delivery system of youth justice programs and services. The system has been thoughtfully built and supported and has been seen as part of a child and youth development system, rather than simply a mechanism for punishment and isolation. (B.C. Representative for Children and Youth, 2009, p. 4).

However, it is important to note that there remains a disproportionate representation of Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system; a matter that has been an on-going concern for some time. Attempts by policy-makers, youth justice professionals, and social workers to reduce the trend of over-representation of Indigenous youth, to prevent recidivism, and to prevent youth from graduating to the adult system have been constant. While there continues to be a focus on intervention and alternative justice strategies, there must also be strong attention given to multi-level preventative and intervention approaches that address the high rates of Indigenous youth crime, where policy and ensuing practice(s) are fully responsive to the underlying, complex structural causes of this phenomenon.

This qualitative study examines the experiences of Indigenous youth incarcerated at PGYCS located at the edge of Prince George in north-central BC, Canada. While the youth interviewed as part of this study speak of their experiences of hardship and triumph; they also speak of their hopes and their goals. They convey desperation, strength, and a willingness to pick up and move on in the face of many complex challenges. It is critical that we hear the voices of Indigenous youth in order to truly understand their situations.

Figure 1. A Bird's Eye View of PGYCS

Below is an image (retrieved from: <http://www.cla.sd57.bc.ca/index.php?id=1562>) of the youth custody facility located on the peripheries of Prince George in Northern BC. It is an open and secure custody centre with an enclosed field. It houses youth who are on remand and who have been convicted of minor or serious crimes.



Chapter Two: Building the Foundation

Research Problem and Objectives

Globally, Indigenous populations and non-Indigenous allies remain collectively devoted to addressing matters related to the ongoing health, social, and political injustices experienced by Indigenous populations. With respect to the area of justice, there has been considerable attention devoted to understanding the significance of culturally appropriate justice measures, such as restorative justice practices. This study will not focus directly on justice measures, but instead will engage and explore with some of the Indigenous youth population in-custody their thoughts and personal experiences. Research to date offers an analysis and explanation for the incarcerated Indigenous offender disparity, with respect to the Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system across the youth and adult populations. However, the entirety of this research focuses primarily on policy and the way that programs and policies work. Additionally, previous research is, for the most part, based on quantitative methods. In order to speak to the matter of incarcerated Indigenous youth in the north, it is necessary to understand the situation from the perspective of Indigenous youth as it is seen ‘through their eyes.’

The objective of this research is to explore and honour the experiences of Indigenous youth incarcerated at PGYCS. Although it is difficult to quantify direct effects, it is clear that Indigenous youth who were living in a First Nations community and who were incarcerated inevitably become disconnected from their families and community, and experience a drastically different social and cultural reality (Bell, 2012). Upon their release, it is not uncommon for youth, as part of their probation order, to re-locate to an urban centre, as viable probation-ordered services are often inaccessible in rural communities (Shannon

Elliott, personal communication, May 21, 2013). A Prince George Youth Probation Officer (YPO) supervisor notes that, “YPO’s look for programs that fit a youth’s needs (aboriginal, substance abuse, female, individual or group settings). Most youth return back to their home after completing these programs unless the family has come up with other options for the youth to reside elsewhere...” and that “relocating” on a long term basis is usually based on family (or MCFD if youth is in care) decisions” (Shannon Elliott, personal communication, May 21, 2013). It is therefore important to understand the ways in which they are impacted throughout these periods of transition. Identifying the needs of this population upon their release, to prevent recidivism and to ensure they have the required resources to succeed, is of equal importance and central to the underlying purpose of this research project.

Overall, it is my hope that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of the incarcerated Indigenous youth experience, particularly within the context of northern Canadian settings. The research will focus on the question: What do Indigenous youth in-custody believe they need to be successful upon their release from PGYCS? Underlying this question is a sub-question: What does this population need for support from mental health professionals, school professionals, and other service providers? The information provided could then be considered when examining and modifying the system, so that this population receives and benefits from supports that best suit their unique needs.

More specifically, many of the formal supports this population is likely to encounter, such as front-line staff at the PGYCS, probation officers, therapists, youth care workers, education system professionals, social workers, and the like; may develop greater insight and knowledge about the incarcerated Indigenous youth as a result of this research. This may lead to heightened awareness, increased sensitivity, and alternative approaches to

practice. Additionally, it is my hope that the ‘voices’ of this population are used to inform management and policy-makers in decision-making processes at the policy level. Research with vulnerable populations under the age of 19 who are in an institutional setting is rare. However, it is critical that we provide the child and youth populations with the opportunity to ‘voice’ their thoughts so they are heard and empowered, and most importantly so that their needs are met to the fullest degree.

Definition of Terms

Conducting research involves careful consideration of each step of the process. The defining of key technical terms is essential at the outset for a variety of reasons. For instance, in quantitative research processes and applications it provides for a concrete measurement in the way that we operationalize and measure variables and it provides consistency. In the context of qualitative-based research, defining important terms offers clarity and helps the audience understand the terms within the scope of the study. The terms that are significant for the purposes of this study are defined below.

Indigenous. The term Indigenous refers to people whose ancestors were Indigenous to Canada regardless of whether or not they are “registered Indians” as defined by the Indian Act. Referring to Indigenous cultures is equivalent to referring to Asian, European, or African cultures - each of these cultures includes a wide variety of nations, customs, traditions, languages, and outlooks. It would be misleading to suggest that a list of common cultural traits could describe the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures. For the purpose of this study, it is an individual who self-identifies as being of: First Nations, Inuit, or Métis decent. Accordingly, I will use the terms First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Indigenous, and Aboriginal interchangeably when referring to these populations

Adolescence. While the term teenager refers to a specific age group, the concept of adolescent or adolescence encompasses the developmental period marked by a web of complex physical/biological, social, and cultural factors that occur generally between the ages of twelve and eighteen. It is viewed as a transition period between childhood and adulthood. The concept takes on a different meaning in non-Westernized countries and varies within different societies and cultures. However, the concept has in recent times become increasingly globalized. Historically, the concept did not exist for Aboriginal populations, nevertheless, Aboriginal children and youth maintained social roles and levels of autonomy and responsibility (Dehart, Sroufe, & Cooper, 2004). In contemporary times, identity development takes place within this stage of growth and development. I use the term adolescent interchangeably with the term youth.

Best practice. Use of the phrase “best practice(s)” has become popular in the last few years in the realms of social work, health, education, and justice. Otherwise referred to as evidence-based practice or promising practices, it is the processes, methods, techniques, approaches, modalities, and/or treatments in the profession for which systematic empirical research has provided indication of effectiveness (Cooper & Lesser, 2011). The Social Work Policy Institute (2012) defines it as:

a process in which the practitioner combines well-researched interventions with clinical experience and ethics, and client preferences and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatments and services. The practitioner, researcher and client must work together in order to identify what works, for whom, and under what conditions. This approach ensures that the treatments and services, when used as intended, will have the most effective outcomes as demonstrated by the research. It will also ensure that programs with proven success will be more widely disseminated and will benefit a greater number of people.

Formal social supports. The term formal social supports refers to professionals who work with youth, which often consist of teachers, educational support staff, mental health

professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists), youth supervisors at the youth custody centre, and other social services/social work professionals. Informal support persons play an equally significant if not even more important role in the lives of young populations. Informal support networks consist of elders, family members, community members, peers, and other vested individuals who go out of their way to devote their time and energy into developing a trusting relationship and connection with youth—to guide them in a healthy and positive direction.

Identity. The notion of identity gives rise to many connotations and ideas. A person may assume that their identity is strictly physical in nature according to their race and other physical attributes. Others might point out that their identity centres around the sense of nationalism in being “Canadian” for example, and/or their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and culture. Identity essentially refers to an individual’s sense of self that is aligned to a continuity of values, behaviours, and cultural practices. Our present idea of identity is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one. For the purposes of this thesis, the term is defined as the sense of belonging (one’s experience of a sense of ‘place’ in their communities), and how one relates to others. It is a concept that derives mainly from the work of psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950s and his social identity theory (DeHart et al., 2004). Identity, as we now know it is social and personal; it is those aspects of a person that form the basis for his or her sense of self-worth and distinction.

Rural First Nations communities. In Canada, rural Aboriginal communities are referred to as First Nations communities or as termed in the Indian Act: “Indian Reserves.” For the purposes of this research the term northern, rural First Nations communities will refer to communities that are geographically rural (more than 80 kilometres from the nearest

town/city) and north of the City of Williams Lake. The term north or northern is an intangible concept and oftentimes implies climate conditions, geographic attributes, and remoteness. In north-central BC, many First Nations communities are rurally located and transportation consists of commuting by vehicle on narrow, non-paved logging roads for hundreds of kilometres. Some of these communities are only accessible by airplane, where weather often compromises one's ability to travel in and out of the community during the winter months. As such, health, social, and education services are usually very limited.

Resiliency. Resiliency refers to the human capacity (individual, group, and/or community) to deal with crises, stressors, and normal experiences in an emotionally and physically healthy way; it is an effective coping style marked by one's personal psychological traits to endure obstacles and adverse and traumatic experiences (Barker, 2003). The level of resiliency is often measured by factors that act as a shield. These factors are made up of one's individual traits, such as personality traits, having experienced healthy attachment, a tendency and openness to trust others to support them, and other factors, such as supportive families and communities. Healthy development for some adolescents can become derailed by stressors that often put them at a heightened risk of engaging in risky behaviours, long-term health problems, and declining achievement. Protective factors can offset risk and build capacity, where, in spite of stressors, individuals are able to lead healthy and successful lives as they make the critical transition from childhood to adulthood.

Success. Success can take on a variety of meanings; it is a subjective notion. Some individuals may equate success with personal development, educational and career accomplishments, happiness, or reaching a desired goal of some sort. Success may also be closely tied to notions and values that are aligned with social and cultural norms and

expectations. For the purposes of this research, success is a measure of positive outcomes that are a result of an Indigenous youth's sense of self as it relates to established connectedness and the relationship with their family, the land, the community, and their culture.

Mental health. Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization (2012), is "...a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"; mental wellness, on the other hand, is the foundation of an individual's well-being. In contemporary Western society, mental wellness is a relatively new and emerging concept referring to a holistic approach: the integration of mind, body, and spirit where wellness is promoted through one's connection to culture, spirituality, community, land, as well as through developmentally enriched environments. In the context of First Nations wellness, increased mental wellness leads to healthy levels of self-esteem and self-worth (Health Canada: First Nations, Inuit and Aboriginal Health, 2011).

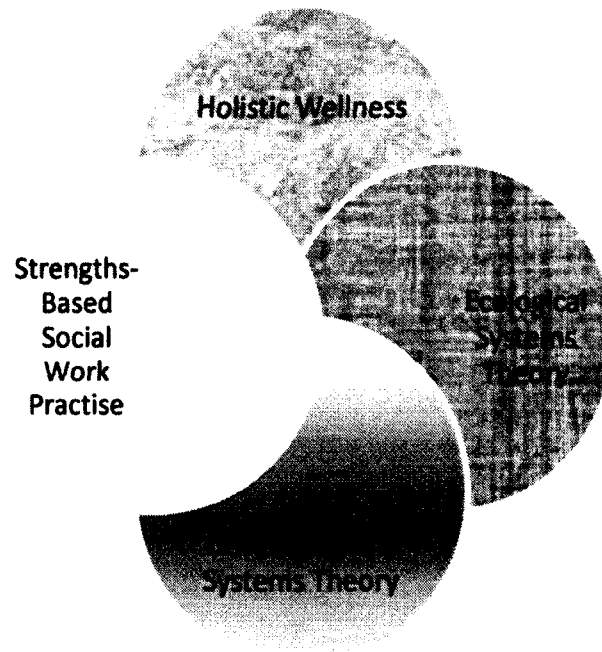
Incarcerated youth. I use the term youth-in-custody and incarcerated youth to refer to those between the ages of 12 and 18 who are confined in the PGYCS (a secure facility) as arranged by the Courts, and during which time are under the supervision of MCFD (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2012). At times, depending on the conditions of one's sentence and the criminal charge, youth may either be transferred to an adult facility prior to the age of 18 or continue their sentence at PGYCS following their eighteenth birthday.

Theoretical Framework

In the discipline of social work, practitioners are urged to bridge the gap between social work theories and practice. This process of convergence is known as praxis. Social work scholars search for methods and theories relevant to the population in which practice and research are applied. The merging of theories underpinning this study is comprised of a framework (or lens) that provides for a perspective: a means and pathway for exploring and understanding the matter at-hand. More specifically, the theoretical framework guided the research and offers a basis for understanding the interplay between relevant social work theory and empirical explanations.

The elements of this theoretical framework merge both Western and Indigenous worldviews with respect to the practices and promotion of wellness and mental health. Summarized are the contextual elements that are a part of this framework which include: Holistic Wellness, Ecological Systems Theory, Developmental Systems Theory, and Strengths-Based Social Work Practice. As you will discover, there is a set of core elements with similar features found across the perspectives, which is the rationale behind the unification of the approaches to exploring the influences on a young person's socialization in the context of contemporary social work practise. All of these viewpoints resonate with me as they form a strong basis to contemporary social work practice. I conclude this chapter by offering a brief overview of one diverging perspective.

Figure 2. Theoretical Framework



Holistic Wellness

The holistic approach to wellness, in the context of mental health, has in the last decade become increasingly recognized by social workers and health care professionals. The approach moves beyond a focus on mental illness toward a focus on well-being and balance, and encapsulates the dimensions that make up the entirety of an individual or the ‘whole’ person. According to Loiselle and Laurretta (2006, p.6), “...the notions of wholeness and interconnectedness lead to the fundamental Aboriginal concept: that of balance. These notions represent the inclusion of all aspects of one’s inner and outer life and imply the requirement of a balanced attribution of energy, attention and care between all components of the human being, i.e. the physical, the emotional, the mental and the spiritual, and between all related systems.” This represents what is sometimes referred to as the “Wellness Wheel”.

In a general sense, the “Wellness Wheel” stems from an Aboriginal philosophy of life and encapsulates the above mentioned aspects to a person’s well-being and human experience. This circular intersecting framework includes: the physical, emotional/psychological, spiritual, and environmental factors that attribute to one’s overall wellness. A holistic approach is a comprehensive and integrated approach that is flexible enough to respond to the complexity of human needs.

When understood in the context of mental health services approaches, the wellness wheel reveals the strong and intimate connection that exists between individuals, their culture, their communities, and their inherent lands. More specifically, Aboriginal worldviews reflect an interconnectedness that exists between all living forms, and one that contributes and acquires life through the living phenomena of people, animals, earth, and waters. Tsey, Whiteside, Deemak, and Gibson (2003) explain that this significance, of what can best be described as the web of social and health determinants and the interconnectedness of each element, needs to be addressed when aiming for optimal wellness.

A holistic approach can be practised with all populations; however, as social work professionals in Western society, it is important to tailor a model of practice that is culturally responsive to the worldview of the people being served. That said, there are many Indigenous worldviews and Aboriginal perspectives to wellness and the model presented by Loiselle and Lauretta (2006) is simply a general framework for practise that can be altered and adapted to capture the specific practices of a person’s unique culture. In the context of Indigenous holistic wellness, oftentimes this suggests implanting an approach that includes

the aspect of spirituality, an aspect that in most recent times is being included in a person's overall plan of care in various areas of social work practice.

Ecological Systems Theory

The second component of the theoretical framework is Ecological Systems Theory (EST) otherwise known as Ecosystems Theory, Person-Environment Interaction Model, and Development in Context Theory. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a pioneer in the field of human development (1979a), offers insights, through the ecological perspective, that contributes to our overall understanding of the organisms-environment interrelatedness, of individuals, families, and communities. This theory provides concepts social workers are likely familiar with and grounded in as part of our work as social work practitioners, systematically making the link between the macro and micro dimensions of environmental systems. Certainly, the ecological perspective, in application to social work has been an integral part of social work practice since the 1970s. EST grounds social work practice on the basis that "...the systematic understanding of the processes and outcomes of human development [is] a joint function of the *person in environment*" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p.188). Bronfenbrenner (1979a) explains that, in order to understand human development, we must first examine and look to the entirety of the system one is born into, grows within, and becomes a part of.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979a) approach to understanding individuals, families, and communities is helpful because it is inclusive of all the systems in which individuals are enmeshed. It is based on the idea of empowering individuals through understanding the individual's needs and strengths. According to Bronfenbrenner, the only way we are able to systematically examine an individual is by examining them as an organism that is part of a larger, multi-level context. Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner defines development as "...the set

of processes through which properties of the person and the environment interact and produce constancy and change in the characteristics over the lifecourse” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a, p.191).

As introduced in his book, “The Ecology of Human Development” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a), Bronfenbrenner explains that the world of an individual consists of five systems of interaction: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, (4) macrosystem, and (5) chronosystem (a component he added to the revised theory).

The first layer is the microsystem, which can best be described as an individual’s main surroundings and exposures within his/her environment (physically, socially, and psychologically) and stands as the setting for his/her experiences in the social world. It is within the microsystem that most direct interactions take place. This system consists of a person’s family, school, peers, neighborhood, and other immediate experiences within their environment (Farrington, 1994). The microsystem is comprised of personal experiences one endures within their immediate surroundings, which act as the reference points of their world.

The second layer is the mesosystem. This element refers to the interactions and relations the individual has with those they are in direct contact with in the micro realm of their microsystem. It describes the influences members of the microsystem have on each other. This includes the interactions that are at play between the young person’s family experiences to school experiences; from school experiences to peer experiences, and so forth. It is important to understand one’s experience in each setting to obtain a complete picture of a young person’s development.

The third layer is the exosystem, which refers to the emotional-psychological element of the individual that arises in parallel with the relational aspects of his/her context. Accordingly, it is the indirect, trickle-down effect of experiences from one person to the next. These are aspects of an individual's life that influence his/her socialization even though the young person has no direct role in them. For example, 14 year old Johnny resides in a single parent household and his father works long hours. Johnny is influenced by his dad's work schedule and as a result becomes impacted by the pattern of interactions between himself and his dad, which become increasingly infrequent in nature. Johnny does not directly experience the influential nature of systems at play (the influence of the environment) but is nonetheless impacted. Thus, the settings and/or events of the exosystem have an indirect impact on an individual.

The fourth layer, the macrosystem, reflects the broader world the person is situated in, that is, the larger cultural context. It is the outer layer of the structure which contains the cultural values, attitudes, norms, ideologies, laws, and, customs of a particular culture and/or community. This is an additional layer that affects a young person's development.

A later version of Bronfenbrenner's theory includes the cronosystem. This is the continuum of a sequence of events and conditions present over a given person's lifetime. It encompasses both the past and present and is the patterning of events and transitions over the life course, which also includes socio-historical circumstances. This includes normative life changes (puberty, transition from elementary school to high school) and non-normative changes (death, divorce).

Developmental Systems Theory

Much of the information that underlies Developmental Systems Theory (DST) will

be familiar to social workers since it encompasses ideas expressed in concepts related to human behaviour and the social environment. Over the past two decades, human development has increasingly come to be understood as a function of the relationship between the maturing individual and his or her changing environment (Berk, 2007; DeHart et al., 2004; Lerner, 2006).

Research within the disciplines of social work, psychology, and sociology that explores and examines the issues of youth defiance and incarcerated youth, provides an empirical foundation for the perspective that youth are a product of their social surroundings (Masten, 2006; Theokas, Almerigi, Lerner, Dowling, Benson, Scales, & von Eye, 2005). In other words, a young person's behaviours and choices are a result of their experiences in the world. Contemporary theories of adolescence, stress developmental systems models that integrate both individual and contextual levels of analysis in a relational manner – one that places substantive emphasis on understanding the diversity of adolescent development, based on a larger framework that incorporates the distinction and interplay between intra-individual variability and inter-individual stability, variability, and change. Donald Ford and Richard Lerner (1992) presented the first integrative theory on human development in “Developmental Systems Theory: An Integrative Approach.”

Ford and Lerner (1992) assert that promoting positive youth development requires an examination of personal and contextual variables. A basic premise of DST, reveals a focus on the fluidity of change and transactions of variables across time and contexts – that, “...development is a process where change occurs not only within the individual but also within the layers of the environment within which the individual exists” (Vimont, 2012).

Michael Vimont (2012) author of “Developmental Systems Theory and Youth Assets: A Primer for the Social Work Researcher” states that, DST

...views individuals as a complex system existing within other complex systems. Any part of the system whether it is internal or external to the individual can and does bring about change. DST emphasizes that neither a person’s internal characteristics or their context characteristics are the primary cause for functioning and development. (p.502)

Whereas EST concentrates primarily on the layers of one’s social environment (where later on a biological component was incorporated), DST takes it one step further and views development as a phenomenon that occurs on many levels simultaneously and includes: biological, psychological, interpersonal, familial, societal, cultural, physical ecological, and historical components.

According to DST, every young person grows up within a series of hoops, or environments. Over time, as a young person passes through childhood into adulthood, each environment influences and is influenced by the next. Understanding the different settings in which young people grow up, how these environments interact, and how to work with young people within these different settings, is key to helping young people thrive.

Moreover, the principles underpinning DST are deeply rooted in a preventative and strengths-based approach to social work. DST frames matters in a positive perspective and is culturally context-based; therefore, as Vimont (2012, p.505) states, “...diversity is appreciated and expected because the developmental system will vary across individuals and groups.” Informed by developmental theories, DST truly encapsulates the merging of core elements of the strengths-based approach and the person-in-context perspective – both of which are theories that remain at the heart of contemporary social work. DST provides a useful starting point for understanding how Indigenous youths’ realities become shaped by

external forces. Where much psychological theory focuses entirely on the individual and his/her deficits, this framework captures a fuller, more complete, and culturally fitting perspective for analysis.

Strengths-Based Social Work Practice

The last component of the theoretical framework is the strengths-based approach. A strength-based approach shifts the perspective away from focusing on the deficits of an individual or population; it is a form of social work practice where one's abilities, growth, and strengths are recognized and celebrated. With respect to research practices, Ermine, Sinclair, and Jeffery (2004, p.12), authors of "The Ethics of Research Involving Indigenous Peoples," state that, "Among the most repugnant aspects of Western research for Native people in the historical context, has been the emphasis of research on negative social issues; described as the application of a pathologizing lens." In keeping with the principles foundational to my project and ethical research with Aboriginal peoples, I will assume a strengths-based stance and remain focused on steps toward positive transformation; a process that allows individuals to become empowered through active participation and engagement. I will use a positive strengths-based approach to identify and understand influences experienced by Aboriginal youth in-custody and focus on the future and planning (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). It is critical to shift intervention approaches to a strengths-based approach.

A strengths-based approach focuses on developing and expanding on assets that are known as protective factors. All individuals have strengths and abilities that are often unrecognized or untapped. In this case, these are defined as strong relationships, life skills, positive identity development, and community connectedness. As previously mentioned, the

above noted personal assets are central to my definition of success. While it is important to link present-day disproportionate (mental) health, social, and justice outcomes to historical events like colonization (Schmidt, 2000; Smith, 1999), it is also important to balance this picture by moving forward in remaining positive and optimistic. It is crucial that we focus on positive changes that have occurred throughout time, as all too often discourse is coloured by negativity and criticism.

In the realm of social work, social worker-researchers exist to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities. They are key players in a field that is primarily concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness and problem behaviours; commonly observed by many professionals as deficits and pathologies. Social workers often work hand-in-hand as part of a team of professionals who subscribe to and use the medical/disease model in diagnosing deficits and when treating mental health problems and illnesses. This is also true of those who work in the youth criminal justice system where those in conflict with the law subsequently become tagged with various labels. However, over the years there has been a shift in perspective from a deficit-based approach to a more functional strengths-based approach as a practical and meaningful philosophy to helping (Benard, 2006).

The principles of social work and their application in practice are based upon the notions of empowerment and self-determination, and recognizing that, despite the challenging situations people face, within each individual lies strengths and endless possibilities that are both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature (Benard, 2006). A strengths-based approach frames events in a positive and constructive way, where windows of opportunities for growth are opened. Promising interventions with individuals, families, and/or

communities require one to acknowledge their strengths, re-frame negative and challenging situations, and build onto and expand their strengths. Re-framing events or situations often enables individuals to move from a state of hopelessness, self-blame, and despair to one of confidence and hopefulness. A strengths-based approach involves systematically examining one's survival skills, abilities, assets, and resources – all of which are assets – that can be used in some way when facilitating a pathway of growth and success (Benard, 2006).

Clearly, applying principles consistent to a strengths-based perspective and resiliency brings with it many advantages. It also answers the question: How best can we, as social workers, intervene to support the populations we work with? A great deal of research that focuses on resilience has provided answers by identifying the specific protective and prevention factors that contribute to working with adolescents and their families and communities that not only examines their challenges, but uses their challenges as opportunities to engage their innate resilience, to foster healthy individual developmental growth and needs (Phelan, 2008).

Likewise, the intersection of principles that govern the aforementioned perspectives provide for a sound theoretical framework guiding my thesis. The phenomenon of development as a foundation for understanding the broader nature of one's personal experiences shaped by layers of fluid and complex dynamics, based on one of the leading thinkers of developmental psychology, has since been expanded, leading to what is known as the bio-psycho-social model of social work. The applicability of the bio-psycho-social-spiritual model (also referred to as the wellness wheel) includes the biological and spiritual components representative of a holistic approach. Altogether, this framework allows for a

comprehensive analysis and foundation for examining and preventing Indigenous youth incarceration.

Researcher's Personal Standpoint

A combination of past and present-day factors have motivated my interest for this particular research endeavour. My personal experience as a First Nations youth has provided me with personal insight into the struggles many other First Nations people are faced with today. That being said, however difficult my adolescent years were, I am fortunate to have acquired a worldview that I deem dynamic and ever-evolving, and most importantly a worldview that is grounded in principles consistent with Indigenous values. Furthermore, the worldview I have adopted is based on a merging of two worldviews, as you will discover in the culmination of my thesis. The perspective of local community, values, and cultural practices are merged with Western psychology and psychiatry. I made the conscious decision to integrate and negotiate these two, oftentimes polarized, worldviews, in recognizing the critical benefits of doing so.

On that note, the term “world view” is borrowed from the German word “weltanschauung” (Funk, 2001). It means a person’s fundamental “world outlook” or life perspective, life understanding, or a view of life. Each person’s life understanding takes shape over time as the individual grows and their consciousness develops, as they engage in new events and experiences, and interact with others and with their surroundings. The ‘lens’ through which I have come to view the complexities of the world today are mostly derived from my personal experiences as an Aboriginal female who resided in the urban areas of northwestern Ontario and central BC.

Like many other Aboriginal youth, I was faced with the experiences of alienation and sensed “lostness.” It was not until I entered college, with the support of many people, where I began to learn about all of the things I often questioned: about my family, myself, and the issues many other First Nations people face. I am grateful to have acquired a level of critical consciousness that allows me to see past certain experiences and moments in time. Knowledge nourished and fulfilled certain pieces of my forming identity and truly paved a pathway of understanding into my personal life-experiences. I have come to understand how knowledge can be not only empowering but healing on different levels. This is one element of significance I keep in mind when working with Aboriginal youth populations today; that to avoid personalizing adverse experiences one must understand their circumstances within the broader context. Paving a pathway of awareness through education is also one of the basic principles of structural social work practice.

Certainly, I do not expect the youth participants I met with throughout the course of my thesis research journey to simply make healthy and positive choices, upon their release from PGYCS, in order to be successful. Essentially, I cannot expect them to, in the short-term, move beyond a state of anger, gloom, and despair. Therefore, I must take a step back, ‘meet them where they are at’ – at this point in time, and appreciate their individual strengths.

Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Despite our best attempt at eliminating research bias, it is a fact that all research is subject to researcher bias; qualitative and quantitative perspectives have their own ways of approaching subjectivity and are very much influenced by the paradigms guiding the research. My reason for aiming to focus exclusively on the research participants’

experiences and omit my personal experiences surrounding adolescent identity, lies in the fact that this research is not about my experiences. Secondly, while there may be general common experiences across the milieu of shared stories in relation to my experiences as a once alienated Aboriginal youth, my experiences as an adolescent took place roughly 15 years ago.

I recognize that the socio-historical contexts differ with respect to the contrasting time periods. More specifically, the experiences of Indigenous youth over a decade ago may have been different compared to the experiences of this population today. Many factors and dynamics that shape the adolescent experience including policy and practice, popular culture, mass media, and geographic location, to name a few, are factors that are fluid and shift across time; and as a result, impact a person's experience according to the circumstances of that particular place and historic period. It is fair and realistic to note that things are not stagnant across time but do indeed change in varying ways and degrees. Certainly the age of technology and the accessibility to popular culture outlets was not as available when I was a teen.

In direct contrast to quantitative research traditions, which view objectivity as a goal, qualitative researchers acknowledge that the very nature of the data we gather and the analytic processes in which we engage are grounded in subjectivity. Depending on the underlying paradigm, we may work to limit, control, or manage subjectivity, or we may embrace it and use it as data. It is, however, a mistake to equate qualitative research with subjectivity and quantitative approaches with objectivity. It is important to note that many factors may interfere with one's interpretation of data, including the researcher's emotional involvement with the topic of interest and presuppositions formed from reading the

literature. In order to deal with biases and assumptions that come from their own life experiences or interactions with research participants, which are often emotion-laden, qualitative researchers attempt to approach their endeavor reflexively. Finlay (2012) states that:

Reflexivity can be defined as thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of “what I know and how I know it” to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge. (p. 532)

Reflexivity, or self-reflection (which leads to self-awareness), is carried out in a number of ways. One of the most valuable is for the researcher to keep a self-reflective journal from the inception to the completion of the research processes. In it, the researcher keeps an ongoing record of her or his experiences, reactions, and emerging awareness of any assumptions or biases that come to the forefront. These emerging self-understandings can then be examined and set aside to a certain extent or consciously incorporated into the analysis, depending on the frame of the researcher. Another reflexive strategy is consulting with a research/thesis supervisor, research team members, or peer de-briefers who serve as a mirror, reflecting the researcher’s responses to the research process.

The above is particularly important for an “insider” person. I consider myself an insider person based on my status, more specifically, my identity as a young, First Nations person. Certainly, my experiences as a First Nations person cannot be generalized to the wider Canadian Indigenous population. When the interviewer is an “insider” with respect to the population being investigated or when she or he is very familiar with the phenomenon of inquiry, there is the potential for a relatedness that a person who is not an “insider” may not

have. Therefore, I will strive to represent participant viewpoints fairly and avoid interpretations that represent my previous experiences as a young First Nations person.

In terms of this research, I recognize that my personal experiences as a youth have allowed me to appreciate this population's experiences on a much deeper level than the average person. More specifically, prior to carrying out the interviews with the youth participants, I made the effort to continuously and at every stage of the research process, reflect on the questions that I chose to ask, the ways in which I interpreted the responses of the feedback provided by the youth participants, and how I chose to analyze their shared words and stories. It was important that I became aware of any preconceived notions and biases I held which might compromise my ability to observe matters clearly.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this study concern the limited opportunity I had to establish a trusting researcher-participant relationship. My perception, based on my observations while carrying out the data collection piece, was that many youth experience the 'revolving door' syndrome at PGYCS. More specifically, many of the youth are in and out of the institution rapidly and repeatedly. The population that was interviewed are highly vulnerable and are more likely than not, entrenched in a gang-like culture, where they do not trust others, and especially, do not trust persons who are in (or simply linked to) positions of authority. These factors, to some extent, may have affected the amount of information the youth were willing to share. Certainly, some youth disclosed a higher degree of personal information than other youth.

The preliminary proposal put forth a research design that was comprised of participatory action research (PAR) where the initial plan was to meet with each youth prior

to delving into PAR related collaborative activities. It was my hope to develop an adequate level of rapport with the youth population prior to carrying out six educational-conscious-raising focus groups that were to take place weekly. However, this plan was not successful given the logistics of the situation. Firstly, the average length of incarceration is 14 days to 45 days. Secondly, there was to be no mixing of the female and male youth. Thirdly, I did not want to interfere with the abundance of programming that was available and being accessed by the participants at that point in time. Many youth were involved in employment skills certification courses, Aboriginal programming, and mental health programming. As well, some of the youth were locked down for behavioural reasons, and as such I was not able to meet with them during these times. All of these circumstances made it impossible to utilize a PAR approach, which restricted the overall scope and findings of the study.

Limitations of this study concern the possible biases of the researcher, the individuals studied, and the setting where the interviews took place. Certainly, it was my intent to carry out the research interviews with the youth in the institutional setting as it may have elicited a different response than if I were to carry out the interviews with youth outside of the Centre (upon their release in the community). The setting likely provided for a different kind of experience where their thinking and perceptions may have been clouded by the effects of drug and alcohol use if the interviews were carried out in the community. Moreover, while in the Centre the youth had the opportunity to reflect on the connections they made between losing their personal freedom, the harm caused to others and to the community as a result of their actions, and taking personal responsibility for their actions and their future. It can be viewed as a “time out” moment which allows an individual to

examine who they are and what they have done. The time spent in the Centre may have contributed to a level of transformed thinking and a period of self-discovery.

Figure 3. PGYCS Secure Courtyard With Teepee

The PGYCS offers an array of Aboriginal-based programming. This includes providing the youth with the opportunity to learn about the history and cultural practices of First Nations peoples, locally and beyond. Photo taken by Janine Cunningham.



Chapter Three: Literature Review

The following literature review provides a backdrop to understanding the matter of incarcerated Indigenous youth populations within the broader social context. Overall, there is a considerable base of literature related to Aboriginal youth mental health matters and Aboriginal incarceration. However, little is written from the perspective of Aboriginal youth and in particular, there is a paucity of culturally-based research grounded in the realities of living in the north and drifting to and from a rural First Nations community.

Historical Perspective

When examining contemporary matters that speak to the experiences of Indigenous peoples, it is essential to first describe and acknowledge the historical processes of colonization and the impact on these populations in Canada. The notion of colonization conjures images of the land acquisition and the forced re-location of a population, as part of the physical ‘take over’ of a geographical location. This is merely a fragment of the story.

When conversations arise between myself and others (about the history of First Nations peoples in Canada), oftentimes individuals are outright unaware of the historical experiences of these populations. They are often quite shocked when they learn of the unjust experiences of cultural genocide, residential schools, racism, stolen generations, and the eradication of entire tribes and cultures. It is apparent that the general population remains ill-informed or simply uninformed about these matters. I am then left to question, with respect to those who are cognizant of the aforementioned events, whether the history they learned in school or in their family household, was portrayed through an ideological lens that viewed First Nations peoples as “others”, savages” in need of acquiring ‘white man’ ways? Additionally, I have come to recognize ignorance and the ways some individuals in society

come to understand colonization is largely attributed to the manifestation of the ideology that one race is superior to another, which at a subconscious level can lead to a level of internalized inferiority and superiority.

Indigenous peoples represent a large diversity of cultures yet they all share similar indistinguishable social and political pasts that directly contribute to present-day social trends. Several Indigenous populations in Canada were introduced to new agricultural and social structures by European settlers in the 16th century (Pobihushchy, 1986). The colonization process intensified and essentially became “written in stone” when the Canadian government implemented the Indian Act in 1867. Consequently, the ideological, administrative, and legal characteristics of Indian policy, as set out by the Department of Indian Affairs (a segment of government specifically designed to enforce compulsory measures like the residential school system), was constituted specifically to completely assimilate these populations. As a result of this Act, the social, political, religious, and economic structures of Aboriginal peoples were fundamentally abolished, temporarily, while new European structures were introduced, which sharply contrasted Indigenous populations’ ways of ‘living, being, and doing.’ Social disarray and cultural dislocation affected health and wellness in ways that are clearly present today.

Traumatic events, such as the processes of forced permanent settlement into communities, known as Indian reserves; the loss of hunting and traditional lands and, with them, the loss of traditional means of survival and the period of residential schools shattered the social cohesion (Pobihushchy, 1986). Indigenous populations were forced to relinquish the lands they lived on, their cultural practises, and the right to govern themselves. Aboriginal identity revolved around rituals and spirituality which were forbidden and

traditional leaders were replaced by bureaucrats and church missionaries. The intergenerational impact and cycle of violence endures. Many individuals today speak about their experiences in residential school in which individuals have experienced violence and abuse – psychologically, sexually, emotionally and spiritually (Indian Residential School Survivors, 2002).

It is important to discuss the impact on those who went to residential school. Those who attended residential schools state that the institution was characterized by rigidity, authoritarianism, and lack of emotional support (Indian Residential School Survivors, 2002). Many former students of these institutions indicate that their confinement and treatment left them ill-equipped to become healthy, caring parents (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Indian Residential School Survivors Society, 2002). Survivors today speak of the difficulties they face showing affection to their children, and in some cases the abusive behaviours they once experienced have been inflicted onto their children. Like the splash from a rock tossed into a pool of water, the ripple effect of residential school and resulting individual trauma has impacted not only the personal lives of those who attended, but the generations of individuals, families, and communities for generations thereafter (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009).

Taken together, the impact of the residential school experience has contributed to the development of serious social problems in some communities, leading to high rates of (domestic) violence, substance misuse, and other potentially harmful addictions, such as gambling – all of which are factors that contribute to high rates of child neglect (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). These problems become further reinforced by negative and harmful stereotypical attitudes by those who fail to understand the historical legacy of colonization

and its adverse consequences with regard to Aboriginal peoples. Years of social marginalization, marked by a history of assimilation and cultural genocide, continue to affect Aboriginal populations today. This is particularly evident when considering the young Aboriginal populations in Canada and poor outcome indicators.

MacMillan, Wieman, Jamieson, MacMillan, and Walsh (2009), authors of “The Health and Well-Being of Aboriginal Youths in Canada” assert that:

... the children [of Aboriginal families] are the most vulnerable and they first grow into adolescents then into adults....for many Aboriginal youths, their development is tempered by the intergenerational impact of socially oppressive and culturally destructive historical events... (p.97)

Macmillan et al. (2009) highlight the fact that in traditional settings there were special ceremonies, such as the “vision quest”, for young individuals who were transitioning from a young person to an adult. Unfortunately, the loss of traditional cultural practices and the clash between modern mainstream Western society, has created wellness difficulties for Indigenous youth in recent times.

For Aboriginal peoples, colonization is not just a legacy of the past. While contemporary life is, to some degree, shaped by history; there also lies a horizon of hope, wellness, and justice. The strength and resiliency of these populations serves to remind us all of the significance of ‘community’, culture, and empowerment. Today, there remains an unceasing movement and multi-level approach toward sovereignty. Many First Nations persons are involved in the processes related to the long-term vision of sovereignty. More specifically, there are initiatives which involve the re-claiming jurisdiction of children (in government care) through community led child welfare practices. Likewise, many First Nations communities are revitalizing cultural practices as part of their health and social programming. The Wet’suwet’en First Nation’s ANABIP/Anuk Nu’At’en Ba’glgh’iyi

z'ilhdic (we are talking about our ways) Program applies cultural customs and traditional decision-making processes related to the care of their children and families, which ultimately serves to revitalize cultural practices, provide community capacity building, and build resiliency. Aboriginal peoples are renewing individual and collective agency and through social and political activism, empowerment, and reconciliation.

A Diverging Perspective

Differing beliefs remain about the situations of many First Nations individuals and communities, both on-reserve and off-reserve, and the factors that contribute to social issues such as poverty and violence. Some would argue that the individual is responsible for his/her life situation and must make the right decisions to better themselves and thereby become successful and contributing members of society (Helin, 2006; Iyengar, 1990). Ideological standpoints such as this are reinforced by ideologically embedded forces that negate the complexity of societal structures and social institutions that shape the individual experience, in the justification of matters such as poverty, crime, and disease, for instance. This standpoint lends itself to the belief that individuals are not products of their social, political, and economic environment, and the policies that perpetuate these social issues.

Those who have adopted the concept, philosophy, and culture of individualism include Calvin Helin (2006), author of "Dances With Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance." Helin, a Canadian First Nations lawyer and businessman suggests that modern day welfare programs promote the cycle of dependency on the welfare system. Helin's (2006) solution toward economic and personal self-sufficiency is based on his personal experiences where he describes what it was like to break free from a childhood of poverty he experienced living in a First Nations community to his current experiences of

attained success. Helin (2006) argues that adapting to a global economy via fiscal independence while being future-oriented (rather than focusing on a past of historical injustices) is key for Aboriginal populations who are in the process of improving their lives. In short, he believes that Aboriginal populations simply need to return to being the hardworking self-sufficient people they were prior to European arrival in order to ameliorate the social and economic trends of today.

However, the real world is more complicated. Whereas Helin (2006) attributes poverty (which can lead to a plethora of social issues) to a reliance on the welfare system, the solutions he proposes detract from the fact that Indigenous communities are bound by State sanctioned policies which restrict their capacity to become economically and socially flourishing, self-governing communities. Helin (2006) fails to shed light on any realistic practical solutions for Indigenous populations in their struggles for autonomy and self-governance, and the complex processes that are involved at the community level and at the macro/policy level. Certainly, for social workers and sociologists, the individual and society cannot be separated. Indeed, individuals make their own choices, much of which is shaped by very powerful social forces. Dismissed in Helin's (2006) limited perspective of human behaviour and society and his account of one's dependency on the system, is an examination of significant variables that are a part of the social structures and the broader picture, which must be considered in order to fully understand the phenomena of one's personal circumstances related to their personal development. One of the most misunderstood and marginalized groups include the young Indigenous populations of Canada.

Indigenous Youth in Canada

Many Indigenous youth in Canadian society, today, are at a crossroads, of sorts.

While many youth are traversing the risks of adolescence, embracing their identity, and realizing their strengths and potentials, many other youth are faced with disadvantage, disparity, and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. To begin this conversation one might ask: Who are the Indigenous youth of today and where are they? Where do they spend most of their time? What is the proportion of youth on-reserve compared to off-reserve? And, why are younger populations gravitating to the city more than ever?

Resources in Northern First Nations communities are often limited. Inadequate funding limits the development of social infrastructure as well as provision of potable water and adequate housing (Durbin, 2009). To date, the federal government has not taken any practical steps to resolve the issue of inadequate housing on-reserve (Durbin, 2009). It is a known fact that cramped housing places individuals at a heightened risk of respiratory problems, such as tuberculosis; mental health issues; stress-related illness, and social problems (Durbin, 2009).

While some young First Nations youth spend a majority of their upbringing on-reserve and are urged to stay, many are choosing to leave for a variety of reasons. Poor living conditions, along with higher rates of violence, substance use, and limited educational or employment opportunities create a reality where many young people view the city as a place of escape and opportunity. Additionally, many young children and youth enter the urban environment through the child welfare system or the justice system. Certainly when families and communities are struggling with the aftermath of colonization and its adverse social impacts, it becomes difficult to support youth in their respective home communities.

For many the choice to journey away from their home Aboriginal community, leaving behind ties and connections to culture, family, and community, is not an easy one. In

most cases, educational opportunities on-reserve do not compare to the opportunities that exist off-reserve especially given that schools on-reserve, in comparison to schools off-reserve, do not receive equal levels of funding (Blackstock, 2011a). Today, where the city provides for opportunities to attend high school and post-secondary institutions, as well as participate in a growing and diverse economy, it also brings challenges and barriers for those who do not have social support systems to turn to in times of need. According to the 2006 Census, the number of people who identified themselves as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, exceeded the one-million mark, reaching 1,172,790 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Currently, more than half of the Canadian Indigenous population lives in the city (Hunka, 2012).

“Moving Upstream: Aboriginal Marginalized and Street-Involved Youth in BC” found, based on research with young Aboriginal populations, that more often than not, young Aboriginal persons are not socially or psychologically prepared to effectively manage the drastically different realities they are faced with when leaving home at a young age. This study found that a large number of youth left home before they entered their teen years; 40% of males and 47% of females had their first run-away experience at age 12 or younger (Saewyc, Bingham, Brunansi, Smith, Hunt, & Nortcott, 2008). Furthermore, it was found that Indigenous youth are at a higher risk of becoming street-involved due to the lack of affordable housing and the inadequacy of wages and social assistance (Saewyc et al., 2008). While young Aboriginal youth have promising dreams when they drift to the city they may be unmindful of the unique challenges that come with the cost of urban living. In larger cities, where housing costs are the highest, a number of youth find themselves in poverty living on the streets, in shelters, or “couch surfing.”

A study carried out by Carrado and Cohen (2011) entitled “Aboriginal Youth At Risk: The Role of Education, Mobility, Housing, Employment, and Language as Protective Factors for Problem and Criminal Behaviours” examines a web of important elements that impact the lives of Aboriginal youth populations in Aboriginal Friendship Centre catchment areas. Friendship Centres are organizations located in urban settings that provide essential culturally-based programs and services and play a pivotal role in the development of a First Nations “community” in urban contexts. Variables that were examined in the attempt to understand social policy implications and prevention strategies include: gender, household and family structure, housing, education, geographic mobility, language, and employment and income. The study concluded that in urban contexts an individual’s tie to family is a significant protective factor which translates into an increased likelihood of school being a protective factor. Additionally, it was found that support services that target at-risk Aboriginal youth in the educational system are crucial with respect to prevention and intervention work.

This population experiences complex challenges and it is important that those who drift between their home First Nations communities and urban centres are supported during this time and have available social supports within reach. This is particularly important because they are at a developmentally sensitive and critical time in their life when they are navigating complex and sensitive matters of identity development, growing independence, and new responsibilities.

Adolescence: A Cultural, Social and Biological Experience

The word “adolescence” is derived from the Latin *adolescere*, which means to “grow into maturity” (Sebald, 1992). The Canadian Pediatric Society (2003) defines

adolescence as “the onset of physiologically normal puberty, and ends when an adult identity and behaviour are accepted [and that] this period of development corresponds roughly to the period between the ages of 10 and 19 years, which is consistent with the World Health Organization’s definition of adolescence.” A Reference for Professionals Developing Adolescents (2002) developed by the American Psychological Association states that adolescence is generally defined as the period between the ages of 10 and 18.

The meaning of adolescence varies across cultures and at different historical moments. Without doubt, there are biological and psychological characteristics unique to adolescent development; nevertheless, social and cultural variations embedded in the socio-historical, economic, and political realities further influence and define this transitional stage of development. Throughout most of history, adolescence was an unknown stage of life. The concept of adolescence developed as a distinct period in the lifespan under a number of unique social and economic conditions emerging at the arrival of industrialism in which teens served an economic function to their family unit.

Essentially, there is no standard definition of “adolescent.” It is a concept that can be defined in numerous ways with consideration to factors such as physical, social, and cognitive development, as well as age (American Psychological Association, 2002). In addition to the major biological changes associated with puberty, adolescence also involves significant social and psychological characteristics that influence adolescent development (Berk, 2007). This is a time where adolescents begin to test their boundaries as young people while simultaneously craving a sense of independence as they mature. In addition, young persons are confronted with numerous changes during a time in their life where all of the

above mentioned forces and the natural desire to carve out a sense of identity can lead to personal difficulties.

In the literature, adolescence is frequently portrayed as a negative stage of life: a period of storm and stress to be survived or endured (American Psychological Association, 2002; Earls, 1992; Mann & Friedman, 1999). Most adolescents are able to make a smooth transition into adulthood, but for some the transition is wrought with difficulty. The psychological nature of identity development that occurs during this period can be a daunting process. This aspect of adolescence can create an array of issues, especially if the individual is not shielded by protective factors (American Psychological Association, 2002; Chandler & Lalonde, 2000). Protective factors include the individual's family setting; relationships with peers, family, and professionals; formal and/or informal social support networks; learned coping skills; and a range of experiences (Chandler & Lalonde, 2000).

An epidemiological study conducted by Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, and Hallett (2003) verifies cultural continuity as being an important protective factor for Aboriginal children and youth. In the study they conducted they focused on the child and youth populations of 130 Tribal councils comprised of 196 Aboriginal Bands in BC. Chandler et al. (2003) examined what they deemed as a "developmental explanation" of "personal persistence" relating to the crisis of cultural disintegration and dislocation of Aboriginal communities. They found that Aboriginal youth fared better in healthy communities where culture had been sustained and, as a result, exhibited very low levels of self-destructive behaviours. Chandler and Lalonde (2000) assert that communities that a) had achieved a measure of self-government; b) litigated for Aboriginal title to traditional lands; c) accomplished a measure of local control over health, education, and policing services; and

d) created community facilities for the preservation of culture have a high concentration of social capital. These communities are therefore, by varying degrees, insulated from the high levels of social problems, which we see in many communities, today, where cultural and spiritual traditions are disintegrating. Additional measures of local control over child and family services and involvement of women in band governance were also shown to dramatically lower youth suicide rates (Chandler and Lalonde, 2000).

Table 1

Commonly Cited Protective Factors (Chandler & Lalonde, 2000)

Individual	Family	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy temperament - Intelligence/cognitive ability - Genetics - Self-esteem - Sense of responsibility within family and community - Developed sense of identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive parent-child attachment and interactions - Structure and rules within household - Father involvement - Parents level of education - Small family size - Positive mother/father relationship - Exposed to cultural practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive relationship with an adult - Participation in extra-curricular activities - Positive school experiences - Community involvement - Female community leadership - Opportunity to connect with elders and role models - Local community control/ self-governance

The Resiliency and Strengths of Indigenous Youth Today

While the above mentioned characteristics (noted in Table 1) provide a general profile of youth delinquency; it must be understood that Aboriginal youth in Canada experience a reality that is truly unique to their cultural and social location. Phinney and Rosenthal (1992, p.145) assert that "...the process of identity formation has an added

dimension due to [Aboriginal youths'] exposure to alternative sources of identification, their own ethnic group and the mainstream dominant culture." Furthermore, Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) explain that disconnection to culture leads to one's inability to formulate a healthy sense of identity, which creates experiences of confusion and depression. Thus, it is simply a matter of time before many Aboriginal youth, who are struggling to mold an identity during a critical time in their lives, seek refuge, and subsequently, tap into what can otherwise be perceived as survival strategies, in order to accommodate experiences of emotional and psychological distress.

Where the period of adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by the carving out of an identity, Aboriginal adolescents are particularly vulnerable to drifting through this period in search of comfort and acceptance, and remain at-risk to situations that consist of identity formation difficulties and/or depression amongst other mental health and wellness matters (Corenblum, 1996). Aboriginal youth who reside in rural, northern Aboriginal communities and have endured experiences of poverty and violence are at a higher risk of finding themselves in conflict with the law and involved in the youth criminal justice system (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Morgan Jamieson, personal communication, August 19, 2011). Oftentimes, various elements coalesce to become a gloomy reality of despair and low self-esteem, leading to youth de-prioritizing their goals and future.

The concept of 'resiliency' is frequently defined as the capacity to spring back from adversity and live a successful life of positive prospects despite emotional, mental, or physical distress. Dehart, Sroufe, and Cooper (2004) state that "...resilience is not a magical trait that children [or youth] have from birth. Rather, it is a capacity that develops over time

in the context of a supportive environment” (p.363). As such, it is a developmental outcome. Risk factors, such as poverty or parental alcoholism, increase the probability of a negative outcome. Risk can reside in the individual, family, or wider environment, with vulnerability to a negative outcome increasing with each additional risk factor. In short, the more risk factors - the higher the chances of a negative outcome. For example, a situation where protective factors are present consist of a young person who has nurturing parents, a positive connection to school, and a social support circle, which can help to counteract risk and decrease individual vulnerability to adverse conditions.

The consensus in the literature is that Indigenous youth in Canada, today, who reside on-reserve, experience a reality unique to their social location, as a direct outcome of the historical experience of Indigenous peoples (Corrado, Cohen, & Watkinson, 2008; Chandler et al., 2003; Department of Justice Canada, 2004). Given the essential elements of the marginalization of Aboriginal youth, there continues to be an increasing focus on determining social work, education, and health practice approaches that strengthen the identity of this specific population. Presently, many Aboriginal leaders, helping professionals, and community members including professionals at PGYCS, acknowledge the need to implement culturally appropriate resources.

Overall, the characteristics, experiences, and statistics concerning young people provide a window into the future. Examination of the conditions of youth cohorts, and how the experiences of young people have changed, provides us with important, and much needed, insight into whether improvements seen in recent times are likely to continue. Accordingly, one of the important matters to examine is how conditions for young people have changed in recent decades. Positive social and economic transitions by youth and

young adults, which include completing high school and transitioning to post-secondary education followed by the beginning of a career, are critical for a future of human, social, and economic capital in Aboriginal communities working toward the actualization of self-governance. Understanding the factors, practices, and policies that facilitate First Nations individual and community success is essential.

On the other hand, while young Aboriginal populations are urged to stay in their home Aboriginal communities, to remain a part of their families and communities, the paradoxical reality that exists with regards to the situation is that there are minimal to no opportunities on-reserve for young populations once they complete primary education (grade 7). The decision to migrate to cities is often interpreted to mean that the Aboriginal person rejects his/her community, traditional culture, family, and wishes to assimilate. A television documentary series entitled “8th Fire: Indigenous in the City” (Hunka, 2012) that recently aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, poignantly casts light on this particular dilemma, among other issues, Indigenous peoples face when living in the city. The documentary highlights the unique experiences individuals face when having to re-assert their culture within the wider population of non-Indigenous Canadians: an act that requires a solid sense of self, strength, and determination. Nevertheless, increasing numbers of young First Nations are navigating and asserting themselves like never before.

According to Statistics Canada 2006 Profile of Aboriginal Children, Youth and Adults (2011), 62% of First Nations populations in Canada living off-reserve have attended post-secondary studies. Despite their diversity and persistent barriers faced by this population, and even more so for those living on-reserve where social resources are scarce, Aboriginal youth are moving from high school to post-secondary education in greater

numbers. For example, the last graduating class at the University of British Columbia saw a record number of Aboriginal persons complete medical school (University of BC, 2012). Furthermore, Aboriginal persons with a university degree increased between 2001 and 2006 and continues to increase (Luffman & Sussman, 2007). It is noted in “The Aboriginal Labour Force in Western Canada” (Luffman & Sussman, 2007) that 60% more Aboriginal people now have university degrees, from 5% of all Aboriginal people in 2001 to 7% in 2005. There is emerging evidence, which suggests that Aboriginal youth acknowledge that opportunities are endless and they are positioning themselves as future leaders for their communities and their cultures in the 21st century. These are all important developments that should be celebrated.

“Let’s Hear More Indigenous Success Stories,” (Calliou, 2012) an article printed in a nationally distributed Canadian newspaper, the Globe and Mail, weighs in on the unequal attention given to stories which mostly speak to negative matters often coloured with an undertone that perpetuates stereotypes. All too often, success stories in general and stories that signify achievement are not pointed out. The newspaper article states,

Ask your average Canadian their impression, right now, of this country’s indigenous people and their hopes for prosperity, stability and success in their communities. In all likelihood, you will hear about a story they read recently involving an aboriginal community’s struggle with housing, education, youth motivation or even a rising rate of suicide. What you probably won’t hear is an answer that demonstrates even a basic knowledge of Canada’s indigenous people’s involvement in the economic growth of this country; the initiatives they have under way for preparing the large numbers of indigenous youth poised to enter Canada’s labour force.

The article points out the fact that many more Aboriginal youth are taking on positions of leadership and taking advantage of educational and economic opportunities. Exposing youth to success stories motivates them and helps them to believe that they are indeed capable of achieving great things. While Indigenous youth success is growing, there remain many more

youth who drift between their home rural, Aboriginal communities to urban areas who find themselves confronted with poverty, alienation, and culture clash (Saewyc et al., 2008).

The Issue of Disproportionality

Today there is a real concern for Aboriginal youth and their state of well-being. While Aboriginal youth are portrayed by the media as being “troubled” or a burden on society’s justice system; stereotypes that become perpetuated in the larger society, Aboriginal youth are indeed a resilient population, especially in the face of many personal and collective hardships. There continues to be a large emphasis on the negative health, social, and education indicators of the young Aboriginal population; however, as time goes on, there are also increasingly many more Aboriginal youth who are leaders and role models in their respective communities. Ensuring that First Nations children, youth, and adults have access to education, cultural knowledge, and holistic approaches to addressing health and social matters, has been at the forefront of many First Nations leaders’ agendas today. BC’s First Nations Child and Family Wellness Council is merely one group devoted to community capacity building, wellness, and political advocacy and support for First Nations communities (First Nations Child and Family Wellness Council, 2014).

Today, many Aboriginal youth grapple with complex identity matters coupled with other personal matters, which might include the stresses of family dynamics, racism, and poverty; however, a large number of these individuals are able to develop into healthy, functioning young adults. Without generalizing the entire Aboriginal youth population in Canada, we must recognize the fact that there are many youth who have endured extremely challenging situations, and who become successful. More specifically, these are individuals who now contribute to their local community, who take advantage of the opportunity to

learn and practice their cultural traditions, who recognize that their 'voice' matters and are not afraid of addressing important issues, who meet their educational goals, and who move onto completing post-secondary education. There are many youth today who inspire others and instill hope. Most importantly, these are people who are vital role models for the younger generations. At the same time, there are many youth who slip through the cracks.

While there have been substantial improvements across various areas through many promising and recent initiatives, Aboriginal over-representation in the criminal justice system is recognized as an important social policy issue, and 'closing the gap' remains a key priority in many jurisdictions, including north-central BC (Department of Justice, 2004). Aboriginal youth in Canada are more likely than non-Aboriginal youth to find themselves faced with youth criminal justice matters (Canadian Criminal Justice Association, 2011; Department of Justice, 2004). The Department of Justice Canada's "Backgrounder: One Day Snapshot of Aboriginal Youth in-Custody Across Canada Phase II" (2004) states that, "While the incarceration rate for non-Aboriginal youth was 8.2 per 10,000 population, the incarceration rate for Aboriginal youth was 64.5 per 10,000 population."

Many articles, books, and government-initiated research projects are devoted to addressing matters that concern Aboriginal youth. This is a result of the fact that Aboriginal youth, in comparison to non-Aboriginal youth, experience heightened levels of poverty, family violence, educational failure, incarceration, depression, and cultural alienation (Chandler and Lalonde, 2000; Corrado et al., 2008; Richards, 2008); all of which are factors that serve to reinforce one another and increase the risk of Aboriginal youth mental health and wellness issues. More specifically, the rate of suicide is 4-6 times higher for Aboriginal males aged 15-34 and 5-8 times higher for Aboriginal females aged 15-34

compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2007). Aboriginal youth suicide is deemed an epidemic in many rural Aboriginal communities (Chandler et al., 2003).

Aboriginal children and youth in northern BC experience additional disparities. For instance, Aboriginal children and youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system across Canada (Trocmé, MacLaurin, Fallon, Knoke, Pitman, & McCormack, 2006). In 2009, 53% of children in government care in BC were of Aboriginal descent; in BC's north region this number is 77% (BC Ministry of Health, 2012). In addition, high school completion rates among Aboriginal youth, in comparison to non-Aboriginal youth, remain low (Richards, 2008). Between 2007-2010 25.8% of First Nations youth living off-reserve between the ages of 20 - 24 were non-graduates or not attending school, compared to 8.5% of non-Aboriginal people (BC Teachers Federation, 2012).

Negative stereotypes or misunderstandings of Aboriginal youth in both the subtlest and most obvious forms also affect and distort their sense of self. Aboriginal youth are often mistrusted, assumed to have alcohol and drug issues, and perceived to be less competent or able compared to people from other backgrounds. Racist attitudes and comments in schools, shopping malls, and interactions with other youth and adults, all speak to the pervasiveness of these beliefs at all levels of society (Susan Burke, personal communication, February 19, 2010). Some youth speak about the "look" they are subjected to when they enter public facilities and how they feel that they are being watched, prejudged, or accused of criminal behaviour solely because they appear Aboriginal (Susan Burke, personal communication, February 19, 2010). Experiences of 'otherness' felt by Aboriginal youth further amplify the level of social exclusion and the feeling of isolation.

Prior to colonization, Aboriginal youth had a 'place' within their societies. They experienced inclusion and a sense of identity: a sense of belonging to their families and communities. The erosion of social order in communities, as a result of colonization, ultimately led to the breakdown of many cultural values and ideals. Historically, many Aboriginal societies practiced initiation ceremonies to introduce and celebrate boys and girls as adult members of the community. This was referred to as one's rite of passage. Hans Sebald, author of "Adolescence: A Psychological Analysis" (1992) describes the sociological dimension of adolescence and puts forth an interesting and noteworthy statement that can be generalized to Canadian society:

The intensifying circumstances that make American society the epitome of an adolescence-troubled society include the extraordinarily long period between defining an individual as a child and as an adult. Further, there are no distinct rituals signifying the termination of childhood and entry into adulthood. Many societies have such specific rites of passage, and anthropologists believe that they provide guidance to the individual and serve as an integrative function for society. (p.3)

The Indigenous Youth in Context: A Micro/Macro Analysis

In understanding that "the personal is the political", structural social work within a human rights framework emphasizes the political aspects of the personal, and the personal aspects of the political. This means identifying the myriad of factors that shape a person's experiences which are clearly tied to a much broader picture. More specifically, the notion of (social) health is largely a response of the individual's environment framed within ideologies or the broader forces of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism embedded in policy.

The World Health Organization defines the social determinants of health as

...the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices. The social determinants of health are mostly responsible for health

inequities - the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries (WHO: Social Determinants of Health, 2010).

On that note, numerous Aboriginal youth are known to journey between their rurally situated community to the urban centres; two places that are radically different from each other. The socio-economic reality of northern, Aboriginal communities is often compared to that of developing countries. Many rural Aboriginal communities are often plagued by one or more of the social issues: poverty, critical housing shortages, violence, high unemployment, low levels of educational attainment, increasingly high rates of HIV/Aids, and/or very limited access to social and health professionals (Loppie & Wien, 2009; Spittal, Craib, Teegee, Baylis, Christian, Moniruzzaman, & Schechter, 2007). Woven together, these factors affect the quality of life for these peoples.

Aboriginal health and wellness is best understood in a broad context. It is not simply the absence of illness in its physical or social forms; it is the inclusion of spiritual, cultural, community, mental, physical, emotional, and environmental factors. Promoting health in this sense means nurturing cultural, social, spiritual, and mental growth and providing opportunity for self-determination. Tsey et al. (2003) examined the phenomena of 'control' and stress that the concept is inextricably linked to social determinants of health through dynamics related to resources, participation in decision-making, community engagement, and collaboration. They assert that:

The social determinants of health are complex and multilayered and so addressing them needs to involve multilevel thinking and action. The control factor is only one element, albeit an important one... as [health and social] practitioners it is vital we consider our work within this broader context, creatively seek to enhance linkages between services and programs, and support processes for change or intervention at other levels. (p.32)

Social Work in Northern Aboriginal Communities

Regrettably, child welfare systems have not always acted in the best interest of First Nations peoples. The apprehension of Aboriginal children following the closure of many residential schools across Canada furthered the colonial agenda where many social workers in various parts of Canada were intimately involved in the mass scooping of children beginning in the 1960s. These acts of cultural genocide ultimately generated a trickle-down effect of intergenerational trauma seen today (Bombay et al., 2009). As previously noted, Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child welfare system across Canada, for issues primarily concerning neglect and poverty (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). Indeed, many Aboriginal peoples would affirm, even years following the 60s scoop, that there remains a level of distrust with the State, particularly with respect to the child welfare system and social workers, as a result of historical relations. Thus, the historical relationship of perpetuated injustices, beginning decades ago, has created a long-lasting uneasiness and resentment: a reality not only older generations can re-count, but also younger generations of today, some of whom have found themselves a part of the cycle of poverty, substance misuse, and/or violence.

The evolution of social work practice has changed over time, from one that was originally State and church-run charity work where providing for the poor was the focus to a profession that is dedicated to the self-realization of individuals and the empowerment of vulnerable and oppressed populations (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). Many schools of social work across Canada embrace anti-racist theory and anti-oppressive social work practice where students are immersed in theoretical knowledge that is steeped within a high regard for human rights and social change. Additionally, future social workers

are equipped with an understanding of First Nations issues. In First Nations communities today social workers are employed as mental health practitioners/therapists, community development professionals, generalist social workers, and child welfare social workers. Social workers are expected to be aware of the context of this history and the ways in which social work practises may further perpetuate racism and injustices.

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers and allies remain critical of social work practice and the policy that practice is framed in, specifically when it concerns child welfare practice. It is believed that child welfare social work practice across the jurisdictions in Canada has remained virtually unchanged given the disproportionate number of children removed from their families and their First Nations community, in contemporary times. Cindy Blackstock, a scholar, activist, and executive director of Canada's First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, has researched and written about the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in government care (Blackstock, 2011b). In addition to documenting this fact, she has held the Government of Canada accountable, as part of a Human Rights case, for their unwillingness to provide equal levels of funding (in comparison to provincially managed child welfare provision of services) to on-reserve children and families. At the broader level, Blackstock (2011b) asserts that this is an act of discrimination and racism which continues to be firmly manifested and entrenched in health and social policies.

A First Nations social work framework that can be applied to all forms of social work practice and at all levels of policy-making is known as the "Touchstones of Hope" reconciliation process: a notion that describes the transformation and revolution of (child welfare) social work practice with Aboriginal populations, as a process that begins at the

individual level. Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown, and Formsma (2006) state that this shift in thinking and practice, and unfolding of the reconciliation, embodies a shift in thinking much like the following:

Standing at the shoreline of professional change can be daunting and uncertain. The process of reconciliation can be difficult as it necessarily calls on us all to see with new eyes, to acknowledge responsibility for past wrongs, and breathe life into the commitment to optimize child welfare outcomes for Indigenous children, youth, and their families. (p. 7)

Certainly, acknowledging past injustices perpetuated by social work practice requires an awareness of First Nations peoples and the impact of colonialism.

Carrying out social work in First Nations communities that is based on an anti-oppressive framework, values, and principles begins with one's commitment and effort to unravel and de-mystify their personal values and beliefs, and directly challenge those beliefs and misunderstandings. One must recognize the ways in which stereotypes, preconceived notions, and unhelpful views and approaches hinder his/her capacity to relate and to work alongside First Nations peoples in a meaningful way (Borg, Brownlee & Delaney, 2012). The process involves shedding the 'power over' role and substituting it with a position that epitomizes collaboration and relationship building. The process of "de-colonizing" begins at the personal level and involves an investment and commitment to on-going critical reflection. Building trust with First Nations peoples through incorporating values of inclusion, equity, and community is a critical component of front-line social work practice with these populations (Borg et al., 2010).

Culturally appropriate social work requires prioritizing cultural safety, where cultural sensitivity remains at the heart of one's practice. Borg et al. (2010, p.15) introduce a model based on four principles which include a) the recognition of an Aboriginal worldview; b) the

development of an Aboriginal consciousness about the impact of colonialism; c) cultural knowledge and traditions as an active component of retaining an Aboriginal identity and collective consciousness; and d) empowerment as a method of practice. These values have increasingly been instilled in various levels of social and health care practice.

Social work in northern Aboriginal communities is not an easy task and, in fact, may require a different social work model and approach (Schmidt, 2000). These communities differ with respect to geography and climate in addition to economic prospects, education, and employment opportunities, and the availability of health and social resources. For instance, a community such as Kwadacha, located in the Rocky Mountain Trench in a vast and rugged region of BC (570 kilometers north of Prince George), accessible only by a gravel logging road or a small air plane, poses many challenges for social workers. Communities such as this are likely to have new, inexperienced social workers who stay for only a short period of time, for a variety of reasons which include culture shock, issues of personal integration into the community, and burn out, among other frequently encountered challenges (Schmidt, 2000). Recruitment and retention rates continue to be an issue, not merely for employers who are continuously hiring and training, but for community members who begin to develop a trusting and meaningful relationship with the social work professional.

Aboriginal youth who drift between their home (First Nations) communities and urban centres are at particular risk of falling through the cracks of society. They are highly susceptible to homelessness and poverty, and they find themselves living on the streets, engaging in high-risk activities. Many youth leave home and run away to the bigger city in hopes they will experience a happier life where opportunities are seemingly within reach.

Social work in rural First Nations communities requires fulfilling informal and formal positions of support in the young person's life. Mental health professionals, teachers, community leaders, family members, and Elders are persons to look to as experts. Persons who are available as mentors are also of importance, given the growing concern in the last decade with respect to Aboriginal youth organized gang involvement (Totten, 2009).

Aboriginal youth who escape the bleakness of their rural, home communities oftentimes do not have an established support system to tap into during times of difficulty. As previously mentioned helping professionals are usually scarce in these communities as they are faced with the challenges of northern social work practice in rural settings. In addition, the demanding nature of generalist social work roles they fulfill in these settings coupled with the lack of resources to compliment his/her practice creates for burn out. On the other hand, for Aboriginal youth who are in the midst of career and life planning, accessing high school and post-secondary education means that, in most cases, they must re-locate to the urban areas. Whatever the circumstances, when re-locating from a rural Aboriginal community to an urban area, these populations are subsequently faced with having to adapt to the dominant culture where they experience immense pressure to succeed in a competitive world.

Mark Totten, an expert in the area of gangs, mental health, and crime prevention in Canada, has devoted much of his career to exploring and examining gangs and the ever-growing phenomenon of Aboriginal gangs in Canada, as well as identifying evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies in addressing the matter. Totten notes in "Aboriginal Youth and Violent Gang Involvement in Canada: Quality Prevention Strategies" (2009, p. 136), that "there is an epidemic of Aboriginal youth gang violence in some parts of Canada

today, and young Aboriginal gang members are killing each other and committing suicide at rates that exceed those of any other group in Canada. He states in another report titled “Preventing Youth Gang Violence in BC: A Comprehensive and Coordinated Provincial Action Plan” that, “In 2002, the results of the Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs estimated the number of youth gangs in Canada at 434 with a total membership of 7,071. Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia had the highest percentage of jurisdictions reporting active youth gangs” (Totten, 2009, p.137).

Clearly, while there is progress being made in particular areas, on-going attention and commitment to prevention and intervention are required. Looking to and engaging incarcerated Indigenous youth in a dialogue that considers their opinions, wishes, and aspirations, as part of the processes surrounding planning, decision-making, and program delivery is vital and transformative. The way in which I begin the research process with this population takes into special consideration their social location and vulnerability.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Research With Indigenous Peoples

Historically, Aboriginal populations have been the subject of much research by 'outsiders.' In fact, there have been inexhaustible amounts of research conducted surrounding Indigenous cultures and lifestyles, where research has been intrusive and exploitative (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Smith, 1999). Generally, it has been found that, in the past, research was not carried out in an ethical and culturally respectful manner (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Smith, 1999). Further, Linda Smith, author of "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples" (1999) asserts that "The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" (p.1). In consideration of unjust historical practices, my research is grounded in principles that are ethical and non-exploitive. I acknowledge the ways in which research can be a vitally important tool and can serve the potential to empower individuals and communities. Therefore, the research I conducted emerged from a model characterized by story-sharing, the reclaiming of voice, and empowerment.

It is imperative that research with Indigenous populations flows from an Indigenous-centered holistic approach, which means acknowledging the mental, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual components of health and well-being – and the connection between these realms – as a source of healing and spiritual sustenance. Crooks, Chiodo, and Thomas (2009) developers of "Engaging and Empowering Aboriginal Youth: A Toolkit for Service Providers" speak to the value of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into (social work) research practices stating that holistic worldviews are an integral part of most Indigenous cultures. Crooks et al. (2009) assert that:

One way to make almost any activity or program more culturally relevant is to incorporate a more holistic worldview with respect to health and balance. Attending to intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs will make a program more consistent with traditional Aboriginal values in general... (p.17)

Thus, tapping into principles that are based on a holistic approach provides for cultural connectedness, balance, and the unifying of relationships within one's life. The process that will commence throughout the research will come to life through opportunities that allow for the transferring and sharing of experiences through the story-sharing.

The Initial Research Plan

I outlined in the original proposal that I would utilize a focus group narrative-centered inquiry as the method for data collection. I later found out, when it came time to complete the initial data collection processes, that employing focus groups was not practical given the logistics of the situation. The logistical issues that I was faced with included: the inability to carry out weekly workshops as the youth had other programming available at the time and/or were locked down for behavioural issues. I did not want to interrupt their valuable programming opportunities such as employment skills training, mental health services, and schooling amongst other activities. As such, I was forced to change the data collection method from focus groups to individual interviews.

Qualitative Research: Narrative Inquiry

Qualitative research emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. In general, it is usually characterized by research strategies that are inductive, constructivist, and interpretive. Essentially, qualitative research exemplifies a paradigm that allows for an exploration into how individuals interpret their social world. Working within a qualitative-based methodological framework, this study adopted a narrative mode of inquiry: an approach congruent with the underlying epistemological

assumptions of Aboriginal worldviews (Corntassel & T'lakwadzi, 2009). In honouring the youths' experiences and voices, I administered a narrative-centered inquiry by means of face-to-face interviews. Narrative inquiry is compatible with Aboriginal peoples' worldviews because it is synchronous with holistic Indigenous cultural lifeways and values (Corntassel & T'lakwadzi, 2009).

Research from a narrative perspective begins with shared stories of lived experience. Narrative research, in this context, involves exploring ways to transform the experience of understanding so that the researcher can better appreciate the experiences of incarcerated Aboriginal youth. Qualitative research is important as it attributes meaning to events and experiences. Of equal significance, "...many qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections on the social world" (Bryman & Teevan, 2005, p. 153). Colucci (2007) states that "Humans as social beings have long been gathering together and discussing important issues in groups. Researchers have used this naturally occurring behavior [sic] and refined it to make it a method of research" (p. 1422).

Moreover, using a narrative-centered method allowed me to honour the youths' stories as narrative research provides the opportunity to capture the essence of meaningful experiences by emphasizing the story being told (Creswell, 2009). Narrative research is unique in that it is able to portray a holistic picture of the human experience rather than a fragmented account given by quantitative data. Moreover, many Aboriginal cultures embrace the concept of story-telling as a vehicle for teaching, instilling profound knowledge

and wisdom, and relational significance (Cornthassel & T'lakwadzi, 2009). A narrative-centered inquiry provides a depth of rich stories as well as narrative and textual data.

Interviews allowed the participants to actively engage in dialogue and narrate their experiences through the telling of stories. It is a medium that is a far more personal form of research than questionnaires. I used an interview guide that consisted of 14 open ended questions. The first four questions were rapport building questions and the following 10 were general/broad questions. All of the questions included follow-up/probing questions. For example, the first question asks: Where is home for you? Where are you from? What does home mean or look like for you? Who do you live with? While the questions of inquiry were based on a semi-structured format, I allowed for flexibility and space for the youth participants to tell their story in relation to the general/broad questions. Accordingly, each individual youth attached detailed experiences to the answers.

Narrative-based research with Aboriginal populations is an empowering method, in that it allows participants the opportunity to share their story. It is ethical and respectful of Aboriginal peoples' ways of 'being and doing.' Storytelling, as a medium of Indigenous orality, is a crucial aspect of Aboriginal pedagogy. There are different types of narrative research; in this study the focus remained on personal accounts. In addition, qualitative research methods such as narrative-based research deconstruct the western positivist research paradigm, giving a voice to the oppressed and marginalized. It is for these reasons that I chose to use this research method with the Aboriginal youth population: a method that emerges from the qualitative research paradigm.

Research With Vulnerable Populations

In addition to being an incarcerated, at-risk, and highly vulnerable population as

indicated by their social location, the Indigenous youth population I interviewed were also minors as they were all under the age of 19 and as such, are by definition, children. As well, they were all within the confines of a secure custody institutional setting. Certainly, doing research with human subjects involves ethical considerations.

The age, social location, and level of vulnerability of the participant population implied that I, as a researcher, would need to become cognizant of any potential risks of my research project. Striving for ethically sound research involves assessing the probabilities at all stages of the research project. Moreover, it is noted in the TCPS2 Tri-Council Policy Statement Research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2011) that:

Research is a step into the unknown. Because it seeks to understand something not yet revealed, research often entails risks to participants and others. These risks can be trivial or profound, physical or psychological, individual or social. History offers unfortunate examples where research participants have been needlessly, and at times profoundly, harmed by research, sometimes even dying as a result. (p.7)

From birth through adolescence, today's young populations face a wide range of risks that change as they grow. Acknowledging potential risks as they pertain to the specific context requires a degree of risk analysis. Because the participants were all under the age of 19, it was mandatory to obtain parental/guardianship consent either in written or verbal form.

Interestingly, a majority of the parents/guardians I contacted observed our conversation as a time to voice their concerns about their child. As part of the telephone dialogue, I began the conversation with each parent/guardian by explaining that I was a graduate student-researcher of First Nations descent seeking to gain understanding about

what their son and/or daughter felt was important for them in order to be successful upon their release. Many parents/guardians expressed the frustration they were experiencing with the youth criminal justice system and also feeling as if they had exhausted all of their resources in helping their child. The mother of one First Nations youth, who resided on reserve, stated that her son has a very loving, stable family, plenty of family support, and is a traditional dancer; she could not understand how her son ended up on a path of self-destruction. Additionally, I had conversations with grandparents and aunties of the young persons, who mentioned that their niece or nephew was simply angry due to not having any connections with his/her parent(s). Out of respect, I took a moment to listen to their concerns and stories.

The second part of the conversation I had with each youth participant's parent/guardian included providing them with information about any potential risks. I outlined the initial plan to use a focus group/workshop format as a vehicle for engaging the youth population and hearing their stories. Upon my attempt to organize the focus group/workshops which was unsuccessful, I then acknowledged that this format would have compromised confidentiality between group members. Conversely, carrying out interviews with each participant provided no foreseeable risks.

The research project was not imposed on the participants. Additionally, the research did not include the use of deception. Treating the participants with respect and concern was prioritized. The research with the youth participants entailed: informing each youth participant of a) the intent of the research; b) the option of participating; c) the option to withdraw at any point which would not influence their sentence or probation; d) having to obtain parental/guardianship consent; e) confidentiality; f) digitally tape recording the

interview and the destruction of the data; and g) my contact information if they were interested in having a copy of the final thesis. Obtaining consent from PGYCS and MCFD was also required prior to beginning the data collection process.

Historically, children and other vulnerable populations were exploited and harmed in various ways as a result of unethical research practices; however, practices in Canada today are based on codes of good practice. Studies where children are participants involve polarized views surrounding two sometimes conflicting health and social goals, which are a) protecting children from harm and exploitation while b) simultaneously attempting to increase the body of knowledge regarding a population in order to develop appropriate prevention and intervention practices. Equally important, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's (2011) "Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People" state that "The inclusion of a gender perspective and the participation of Aboriginal women are viewed as essential, as is the participation of children and youth when deemed appropriate..." Furthermore, there has been increasing recognition that children and young people should be involved in the decisions that affect them (United Nations: Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 2012). More specifically, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2009, p. 7) acknowledges that "The views expressed by children may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and/or measures as well as their evaluation."

When including young people as participants throughout research processes, it is imperative that young people are engaged and are provided the opportunity to communicate their views to those involved in making the decisions and policies that affect them. On that account, this project is intended to create a channel between the incarcerated Indigenous

population, service providers, and those who make policy recommendations.

Research Participants

The participant sample was drawn from incarcerated Indigenous youth at PGYCS. I located participants who fit specific criteria. All of the youth participants were between the ages of 12 and 17 and a) self-identified as being of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit descent and b) either currently reside or at one time resided in a northern, rural Aboriginal community. I used purposive sampling which allowed me to reach 6 youth participants.

This particular population was chosen because the phenomenon of the incarcerated Indigenous youth experience has been understudied, particularly by means of a purely qualitative research approach. This study provided a unique window into the experience of this specific population. Meeting with the youth within the confines of the Centre allowed for the expression of their experiences during a time when they were in a different frame of mind. All of the youth mentioned they used illicit drugs and/or alcohol. Being provided the opportunity to meet with them during a time when their thoughts were not clouded or altered by the effects of substances was essential. Additionally, while in the Centre they had plenty of time to reflect on their personal situation and participate in programming at the Centre which may have provided a different frame of mind and thinking. For instance, some of the youth had the opportunity to participate in sweat lodges, healing circles, and formal mental health services.

Procedure

The processes of data collection took place during the months of March through June 2012. The sampling procedure entailed meeting with the program coordinator to first determine which youth self-identified as being of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit descent.

Once I received the name of a potential participant, I was provided with their parent/guardian's contact information. The second step involved contacting their parent/guardian to obtain verbal consent. Once I obtained verbal and/or written consent, I arranged a date and time to meet with each youth. The pre-interview meetings were between 20 minutes and 45 minutes in length. This provided me with the necessary time to introduce myself, provide them with information about the research project, explain the terms of confidentiality and the aspect of concealing their identity, develop rapport, and obtain their consent (see Appendix B and D). I also provided all of the youth participants with an informational sheet as a hard copy format version of our discussion at the pre-interview meeting. Once the individual made the choice to partake in an interview I arranged to meet with them a second time for the purpose of completing the interview. I conducted semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Method

Interviews.

The interview is the most widely employed method in qualitative research. It is a technique that is useful for obtaining a story behind a participant's experience. In most cases, the interviewer is able to acquire a sufficient amount of information based on the stories and topics provided by the participants. Face-to-face interviews generally provide for a more personal experience, compared to the use of questionnaires.

For my research, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews. A semi-structured interview uses an interview guide, but also allows the interviewer to be flexible, informal, and conversational in order to adapt the style of the interview as well as the sequencing and wording of questions for each particular interviewee. An interview

guide identifies the list of topics or questions that a researcher plans to explore during the interview process. My interview guide (see Appendix C) consisted of 15 questions with additional probing questions.

The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions. The first two questions were general followed by four questions designed to build rapport. Once initial rapport was developed I used a series of probing questions to encourage and support conversations about the participant's experiences. The six interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 45 minutes in length. The interviews took place in various locations at PGYCS including in the library, the Four Rivers Room, and in the visiting area. During the interviews the youth participant and I were not accompanied by a PGYCS Youth Supervisor; however, to ensure my security, I was provided with a panic button security device. All interviews were audio-recorded in the effort to capture, verbatim, the exchange in dialogue. To ensure confidentiality I transcribed verbatim each audio-recorded interview.

While some participants found it easy to speak about their experiences, others struggled to know where to start. On more than one occasion, I sensed the participants getting somewhat frustrated with the open-ended nature of the question. On these occasions I would ask participants to explain what they had mentioned so that their narratives were opened up. As I expected, the story-sharing dialogue that I had with each participant was to a degree, limited. I believe this resulted from not developing an adequate level of rapport and trust with the participant. Developing a meaningful relationship with each participant, where they were completely comfortable, may have taken a lengthy period of time. It is my presumption that this population does not easily trust others and, in this case, I had only met

them on one occasion prior to engaging in the story-sharing process.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique. Braun and Clarke (2008, p.81) emphasize that “thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’.” The narrative data obtained through discussions and shared stories during the interviews were interpreted, analyzed, and systematically coded, based on words and concepts. As such, I used an inductive approach that allows semantic themes and patterns to emerge from the data (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). This approach is synchronous to exploratory, content-driven research as opposed to a confirmatory hypothesis-driven approach (Kirby et al., 2006). More specifically, codes are derived from the data and were not pre-determined beforehand. I chose the purely exploratory approach as it is a fitting approach, consistent with the ethical conduct of research with respect to carrying out research with Indigenous populations.

Inductive thematic analysis involves several tasks which include a) the careful reading and re-reading of the data, b) the identification of themes and sub-themes, c) the categorizing and classifying of data, and d) the building of a set of themes to describe the phenomenon of interest (Bryman & Teevan, 2005; Kirby et al., 2006). I began the data analysis by first familiarizing myself with the text. Once I transcribed all of the interviews I carefully listened to the audio recorded interviews once more where I took notes about ideas that stood out as they related to the research question.

The latter phases involved the formal coding process where I completed a second read of the text and systemically coded using coloured highlighters to mark the separate themes while organizing the data into meaningful groups and potential patterns (or broad

themes). Part of this process involved coding for as many themes as possible and later on organizing the themes where some of the themes were very similar and essentially a theme within a theme. As a result, I combined the sub-themes that were closely related under one individual overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2008). I attempted to avoid the overlapping of themes while maintaining consistency. Refining the themes also entailed re-visiting the research question and considering the overall story that was being conveyed (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

Once I completed the coding process, I provided an unmarked copy of the interview transcriptions to a fellow graduate student to complete the member checking process (for validity and reliability purposes) where he used the same step-by-step coding process. In safeguarding the participants' identity I used pseudonyms when referring to their stories in text. His coding results were nearly identical to mine.

Chapter Five: Research Findings

The desire to visualize a life setting conducive to achieving growth and success, for vulnerable youth populations such as this one, is what inspires me to want to hear the stories of these young people. The yearning to understand more fully, by means of this exploratory project and engaging in the spirit of inquiry, how we can nurture and acknowledge the strengths and contributions of this population, was truly an enlightening and gratifying experience to embark on. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to articulate the youth participants' thoughts and stories. As a method for understanding others and ourselves (through critical reflection and resulting awareness of social matters), the stories and words elicited significant information surrounding their realities.

Overall, the findings reveal the significance of relationships. Youth emphasized the roles that families, grandmothers, and peers played in their lives. Furthermore, this population of youth, despite their present circumstances, possess educational and life goals. Their accounts were clearly bounded by emotions of anger, sadness, and desperation. This chapter will present the research findings collected from six face-to-face interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to understand what Indigenous youth believed they needed to be successful upon their release from PGYCS.

Profile of Participants

The six youth participants had all, at one time or another, resided in a rural, Northern First Nations community. Of the six participants, five were male and one was female. Their Indigenous cultural roots included: Carrier, Cree, Blackfoot, Tsilhqot'in, Gitksan, and Métis ancestry. All of the youth were in custody at PGYCS and were either on remand (awaiting a court date and/or sentencing) or were in the midst of serving a sentence. The youngest youth was 14 years old and the oldest was 17. Prior to being placed in-custody at PGYCS, the

youth lived in residential group home care, in a two parent household with their mother and father, with a family member (auntie or grandmother), or in a single mother family.

Participants were in custody from two to six times.

Below is a general demographic profile for each participant. A majority of the youth were male and lived with either their parent or a relative.

Table 2

Youth Participants General Profile

Pseudo Name	Cultural descent	Gender/Age	Family Arrangement
Amy	Cree/Carrier	F/16	Lived with grandmother
Adam	Cree/Blackfoot	M/15	In gov't care
Michael	Cree	M/14	Lived with aunt
Ryan	Tsilhqotin	M/16	Lived with mom/dad
David	Carrier/Gitxan	M/14	Lived with mom/dad
Kyle	Carrier	M/17	In gov't care

The categorized themes provide a snapshot of a web of interconnecting experiences.

Table 3

Research Themes

Themes	Sub-Theme 1	Sub-Theme 2
Substance Use	Acknowledging the impact of substances and incarceration	Quitting
Misplaced Anger	Racism	Uncertainty
Family	Connections	Grandmothers
Aspirations	Education	Goals

Substance Use

Two important areas (or sub-themes) of substance use were identified: (1) the personal insight youth held surrounding the cause and effect relationship of their substance use and incarceration and (2) a majority of the youth participants stated that they wanted to quit using drugs and alcohol. The sub-themes are woven throughout the section as part of the prominent theme.

When striving to genuinely understand the experiences of this population, it is important to keep in mind the challenges unique to this particular population and the survival strategies or coping mechanisms these individuals inherently resort to in times of emotional and psychological distress. All of the youth I interviewed stated they used substances. The three substances that were mentioned included: alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine. One youth mentioned that drugs were “everywhere” in his home First Nations community. Early exposure to substance use by other people in the youth’s home setting, family, and/or in the community was a common experience for all of the participants.

Amy, a smiling and seemingly full-of-life spirit, went on to say that “...everyone does drugs. It’s always been there; my mom does it, my dad, my brothers and sisters, and my friends...my mother drinks alcohol and used coke.” She went on to speak about the fact that she was eleven years old when she first began “smoking weed.” Undoubtedly, this young person was socialized into a lifestyle of substance use at a young age.

Adam, a quiet 15 year old youth who spent most of his life residing in a First Nations community, mentioned to me that one of his favourite things to do when not in custody was “smoke weed and drink.” He also stated that, “...on the rez it’s hard to do more of the things you really want to do.” When I prompted Adam to elaborate on what he meant by this he

dismally turned his head to the floor and chose not to speak further about his thoughts.

Adam's non-verbal cues portrayed an unexplainable kind of sadness. As previously noted, many First Nations people on-reserve live in poverty where the conditions on many First Nations communities do not provide for luxuries and opportunities that other children and youth may otherwise receive and benefit from. When asked about any short-term goals that he had, Adam mentioned that he was proud of his brother for being the first one in his entire family to finish grade twelve. Adam's eyes lit up and he appeared to be on the edge of becoming emotional as he spoke about this aspect. He stated that his brother now had a job but then explained that he became angry when he learned that his brother lost his job as a result of "drinking." He explained that his brother, who he once lived with in the same foster home, was able to maintain his own place and live independently; however, his brother's place soon became a "party house." Adam appeared frustrated with his sibling. When asked about his family and how often he visits or is able to spend time with them, he did not respond but instead quietly noted "my family is screwed up." Adam explained that the first time he was incarcerated, at the age of twelve, he robbed a liquor store. He went on to state that he began drinking before this happened and he ended the conversation by saying:

...I'm screwing over my life at this point. Sometimes I just don't give a f---, but do, if you know what I mean. I drink and do drugs and it messes me up, and I do things that I probably wouldn't do if I wasn't on that s---. It helps me kind of, but then I make stupid choices, because it messes with my head. And, this is where I'm at now. If I was to do it all over again, I wouldn't give in to things. I would just pretend that everything was okay.

Whereas a majority of the participants articulated a level of awareness regarding the link between alcohol and drug use and the ways substance use has influenced their decision-making leading to their incarceration, one youth openly expressed that he had no intention of escaping his high-risk lifestyle of drugs and crime. Ryan, a 16 year old, came across as a

content, easy-going, and intelligent individual. However, his shared words and stories portrayed a deeply angry person. Ryan had been in conflict with the law numerous times which resulted in incarceration. Based on information provided to me by concerned community members from one First Nations community I have close ties to, Ryan was either a member of an organized gang or was closely affiliated with a gang. Ryan openly spoke about continuing on the path of drug use and selling drugs, seemingly unconcerned about the impact of his actions. He went on to speak about his experiences of living on-reserve amidst the chaos of "...gun shots, violence, and drinking." When asked where he sees himself a year from now, Ryan states:

...in a crack shack, in PGR [Prince George Regional Correctional Centre/adult facility], dead... I'm gonna be with my homies. I don't ask the community for s--- because they don't do nothing for me. Counsellors and mental health services aren't worth it... gang life got me here.

Like many youth who are incarcerated, pent up anger and frustration as a result of underlying emotional and psychological distress leads to carelessness and bad decisions. Many helping professionals who work with these children agree that so-called bad behaviours and bad decisions do not necessarily equate to a "bad" person. For those involved in high-risk activities that are associated with the gang culture and lifestyle, the pathway to success once released is easier said than done. Once released, youth have to re-navigate the open waters of poverty, substance abuse, and unstable home situations. When asked where home was for him, fourteen year old Michael stated that he re-located numerous times between his rural home First Nations community and Prince George, in an attempt to escape family issues of alcoholism and violence. Michael states that:

Home is where my family is, and I miss it there. A lot of kids who are in school look forward to moving to the city to do their high school. It's a break away from all the

s--- on the rez. Stresses the f--- out of me to be there, not all the time, but sometimes. You just want to focus on what needs to be done in order to make it to the next day. That's why I went back and forth. I missed my family on the rez. I started high school in town as there's no high school on the rez but then I ended up getting in trouble. I don't care sometimes. Drinking and smoking weed keeps me sane.

When asked "since your time in here, have you thought about things that perhaps you never thought about before?" Michael stopped fidgeting with his snack wrappers and made eye contact with me, and said "Thinking about going back to school. I want to quit weed, and quit drinking."

Kyle, the eldest of all the youth, who had been incarcerated 4 times altogether by this point in time, stated that he "...just want[ed] to learn from [his] mistakes and not make the same mistakes again...drinking is what's caused all of this." When I asked Kyle where he hopes to live once he is released he stated, "Probably in a good place...a peaceful place...no alcohol that's for sure. Probably not here [in Prince George] because I don't want to end up selling drugs."

Misplaced Anger

The second prominent theme, misplaced anger, is grouped into two sub-themes: (1) racism and (2) uncertainty about the future, which are woven throughout the section as part of the prominent theme. Anger, in the most general terms, is an emotional reaction to events or life-circumstances. Anger is also, in a deeper sense, a surface reaction of one's sense of helplessness; the lack of control, or influence over one's personal circumstances. It is an emotion often linked to hopelessness and despair; the belief that things in life will never change. Adolescence is the developmental stage of storm and stress, where young people typically experience anger for having to adhere to rules and expectations in their fight for freedom. Aboriginal adolescents, who drift between First Nations communities and the city,

have likely experienced additional stressors combined with the usual developmental challenges. Individuals, who have been socialized in an environment where they were not taught appropriate coping mechanisms, by their parents or family members, resort to anger to express themselves – sometimes it is the only emotion they feel comfortable conveying or know how to convey for that matter. Understanding their anger is often not really about anger. It is vulnerable emotions that are concealed underneath anger's aggressive cover. The words and stories revealed by the youth I interviewed lead me to curiously wonder about the debilitating effects of internalized oppression and the shared common experience.

When youth participants were asked questions along the lines of “what (if anything) has changed for you while being in PGYCC?”, “what (if anything) is different about your experiences of being in a place such as the city and living in your First Nations community?”, “what do you think led to you having to spend time in PGYCC?”, or “what are your plans upon your release back into the community?” all of the youth participants expressed that it was a combination of drug and/or alcohol use, anger, and experiences of racism which added to the layers of emotional-social-psychological factors they were confronted with. It was revealed that substance use combined with underlying anger further amplified existing levels of anger and sadness, leading to a higher potential for violent tendencies. One youth stated that “violence is everywhere.”

Kyle, a 17 year old who spent most of his life residing on-reserve, said that his experiences of being on-reserve and off-reserve in the city were different given off-reserve “...people are racist...sometimes I flip out and sometimes I just let it go.” Kyle noted that in his home First Nations community, he felt emotionally secure as there were people he trusted to talk to about “all that emotional stuff” as opposed to not having anyone to talk to

while in the city and in PGYCS. Many youth are in Kyle's situation and have difficulty trusting people.

On the surface, Amy appeared to be a happy-go-lucky individual with a positive attitude. She smiled and giggled and made jokes throughout the story-sharing interview. However, certain pieces of her story-sharing led me to believe that below the surface she was experiencing some emotional stress. This was made evident when she noted on several occasions that she was "just angry." More specifically, when I asked her "Is there anything that's different since your time in here first began? Perhaps you've thought about things that you never thought about before..." Amy paused, looked me in the eyes, and said,

I just hate things sometimes: I hate not having a normal family that I can go home to when I get out, and it bothers me. I hate having to think about all the f----- up shit when I'm in here. This place just makes you think way too much...

Individuals who have been socialized in an environment of family and community violence, poverty, substance misuse, and crime - or so-called dysfunction - from the time they were young children, may not see past this reality. This appeared to be the case for Ryan given the information I was provided by helping professionals at PGYCS. Ryan came across as someone who was confident and inquisitive. Upon meeting him, he initiated the handshake to introduce himself followed by asking me a couple of questions related to my First Nations background and why it was I was focusing my research on this particular population. As the story-sharing proceeded, the manner in which Ryan responded to the questions led me to believe that he was angry though he laughed and smiled. His answers were coloured with an indescribable level of rage. For example, when I asked Ryan the probing question "If you were able to change your circumstances, what changes would you like to see ... what would this look like?" Ryan stated:

There's nothing I can change...it's not something I thought about before. [pause]...there's things I want to do for myself, and things I wish I could change, but why think about that s--- when you know that it's never going to change -- it's just the way it is. Some days I just live for the day; I don't think about tomorrow or the next day. I do what needs to be done. Time passes and sometimes I care and sometimes I don't give a f---. Why do people want me to be this person I don't feel like being? Pisses me off 'cause it's not my blood. When I get out I'm gonna be gangsta-ing.

Two of the participants who shared some of their experiences with anger, as part of their story-sharing, also mentioned that they are highly knowledgeable about their cultural background. Both of these youth mentioned that prior to their involvement in the youth justice system they practised traditional dancing, sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, and sun dances, and have plans to continue doing so when they are released. Adam, whose family resided in the Edmonton area, stated that he attended an all First Nations Cree school during his elementary school years. Michael stated that he learned much about the Carrier culture from his grandparents and his mother and father. He was very proud of the fact that he was a Native dancer and said that he had a picture of himself in his regalia in the unit and asked me if I would like to see it. When I asked Michael "what, if anything, has changed for you since your time began in PGYCC" he stated "knowing that I have to control my anger."

Because these two youth were on remand they were unable to take part in Aboriginal programming at the Centre. This resulted in frustration and anger. Michael then stated that,

it makes me angry when I'm not given options to do s---... I wasn't given the option of not having to attend high school in town when I wanted to stay on my rez, but then I got involved in the wrong crowd and made bad choices.

Family

Two sub-themes emerged as part of the prominent theme of family: (1) connections (2) the significance of grandmothers. The sub-themes flow through the prominent theme. Children and young people crave a sense of belonging as a member in their family group or

community, to feel valued, loved, and to learn their role as contributors. As stated in the literature review, one's sense of belonging to family and the community is a contributing factor to one's positive overall (mental) wellness, and thus is a protective factor for healthy growth and well-being. Of the six youth participants I interviewed, two said they were in government care with one residing in a residential group home and the other in a foster home. Two lived in single parent households headed by their mothers, one resided with his auntie, and another resided with his grandmother. Five of the six youth participants mentioned they had little connection with their biological fathers and that their family consisted mainly of themselves, their siblings, and their mother. Family instability is generally defined (Baker, 2005) as the degree to which children are not provided with continuity, cohesiveness, and stability within their family and community setting. Many of these youth have experienced a number of changes in a relatively short period of time. For instance, fifteen year old Adam who got transferred from a facility in Edmonton to be closer to a side of his family he has never met states,

I've been trying to contact my social worker to get things set up... I don't have a placement in Prince George yet... I've been in care my whole life. I don't know my parents that good; they are in Edmonton somewhere. I want to live with my family; my uncle, aunt or kookum [grandmother in Cree] who live here. My family [in Edmonton] is nothing but drugs and I don't need that right now. I'm only 15 years old. I don't mind visiting them and stuff but look where it got me. I don't like it at all. I still want to be with my family but I also need to be away from them.

Surely, the emotional and social ties to family members are not, in some situations, necessarily in the young person's best interest. Youth who are faced with circumstances such as the above may experience a level of confusion, anger, sadness, and a sense of disloyalty for distancing themselves from their family members. David went on to explain to me that his wishes were to remain in contact with his family but to also "go somewhere"

goal-wise. Resisting and escaping an intergenerational cycle of substance misuse, violence, poverty, and crime is not an easy task for some.

Amy states that her family is “messed up.” When meeting with Amy, she relaxingly laid herself down on the small sofa in the Four Rivers room, put her feet up, and stared at the ceiling and explained to me that she never lived in a family where they sat at the dinner table together to eat meals so she does not know how that feels or what it looks like. She went on to state “my real dad was never around much. He used to beat my mom and so my mom would take off.” She said that her mother had many boyfriends and that she was never home; that she and her siblings spent a lot of time together without parental supervision. She did however go on to express a positive experience linked to the time she spends with her kookum. She notes that the only time things felt normal was when she was at her kookum’s.

The words and stories shared concerning family instability were merely a fragment of their experiences. It is important to acknowledge that for many, family consists largely of biological relations; however, in the social world of young people family also consists of peers. All of the youth described the significance of their peers as persons of support; who, in the words of one youth, they can relate to as “brothers.” Undoubtedly, a sense of identity and sense of belonging can be established through one’s peer circle or sub-cultures such as organized gangs.

Traditionally, First Nations women were leaders in their communities and possessed a great deal of power in spiritual forms – they played central roles in many important ceremonies. Grandparents had many responsibilities and places of honour within their families and communities. Today, elders continue to be influential persons in the lives of young people; they are described as teachers, and keepers of knowledge and of community.

They are known for fulfilling roles of social/emotional and spiritual support, for their generosity, and for promoting wellness in their families. Aboriginal grandparents are known to provide care giving roles of nurturance and security in their families. This was made particularly evident upon interviewing the youth participants who expressed to me that they felt a natural inclination for a close relationship and connection to their grandmothers.

For all of the youth participants, the relationship and connection with their grandmothers is significant. Specifically, Amy's eyes lit up with joy and she smiled and laughed as she spoke about the connection she had with her kookum. Amy expressed a special kind of warmth and security when in the presence of her grandmother. I had the chance to meet with Amy's grandmother as part of the process of gaining parental/guardianship consent. I recall Amy's grandmother exhibiting a deep care and concern for her granddaughter. Upon leaving Amy's grandmother's residence, her grandmother said "tell [Amy] I love her and miss her." Amy's grandmother had small children in her place whom she was caring for at the time. Indeed, grandmothers have a special place in the hearts of their grandchildren and vice versa.

Likewise, when I asked Chris "What is different about being in PGYCS as opposed to being out? He responded with:

I'm locked up. Sometimes all I wait for is to go to sleep... so that I can dream and see everybody's face...my kookum, my aunts, and my cousins. I miss them all. They're always there when I need someone. Being in here has me to worry about them. I wonder what's going on... I can't see my family whenever I want to. I don't want to live in a group home when I get out; I want to live with my auntie again.

Additionally, when I asked Ryan who his main supports are he responded by saying “my mom, dad, family, friends.” Michael responded by saying that his mom was his main support.

Aspirations

Two sub-themes emerge from the prominent theme, aspirations, which include: (a) education and (b) goals. The sub-themes are merged together and flow from the prominent theme. While it is common for many Aboriginal youth to find themselves tagged with stereotypes that can potentially damage their self-esteem, their involvement in the justice system adds to the layer of labels. Once they become involved in the justice system they are perceived as an offender, a delinquent, or a “troubled youth, that many would assume are “lost causes” or lifelong criminals. Despite these challenges, all of the youth noted they had goals and envisioned themselves completing school. It was evident that while in the face of the aforementioned negativity which inevitably becomes internalized, weakening one’s capacity and overall self-esteem and self-worth, that a majority of the youth participants envisioned themselves completing high school.

Students who have social/emotional and behavioural issues and/or who do not attend school on a regular basis are then streamed into an alternate education program where there are additional supports available to provide educational and social/emotional support. One of the youth stated that they attended an alternative education program indicating that they were not a student in a mainstream school. The others mentioned they dropped out of school however were glad to be back in a school program. It is mandatory that youth attend school five days a week as part of the programming at PGYCS. In many cases, youth are also mandated as part of their probation orders to attend school when they are released from

custody. There are many youth who complete their adult dogwoods during their time at PGYCS, and in some cases begin college courses.

One youth recognized during his time in PGYCS upon completing an abundance of school work that he possessed a strength that he was not aware of. He said that he was glad to be doing school work and was visibly proud of his accomplishments. Accordingly, when I asked Adam what his wishes were if he was released tomorrow his response was, "...I wasn't in school when I was out of here but that's one thing I want to do for sure, being in school in here helped me realize how smart I am from all the school work that I've done in here." I pointed out to Adam some of my experiences as a young person which included dropping out of high school and returning. Adam smiled and said "I can be in your position one day!" The accumulation of stress experienced by these young people who have faced a myriad of struggles understandably reach a point where they de-prioritize or completely lose sight of their goals. Perhaps their goals become clouded by drug and/or alcohol use, and the struggle to "survive" and high-risk behaviours.

Additionally, when I asked Amy the question: "Where do you imagine yourself in ten years from now? What will you be doing?" Amy's response was:

I don't always think about the future. Sometimes I never do. Nobody ever asks me these kinds of questions. I have to think about this one. [pause]. I hope to not be in jail and I really want to be doing something positive.

She stated that she wanted to be a social worker when she finished school. The research findings revealed that all six youth participants interviewed had a desire to pursue their educational goals. More specifically, they all stated they wanted to complete grade 12. One youth mentioned that he would rather focus on one goal for now to avoid feeling overwhelmed. This particular youth also said that he was afraid of failure and "screwing up"

in which case, focusing on one goal at a time provided a level of confidence in being able to attain that goal.

When I asked Kyle how school was going for him in the Centre, he explained that he “...dropped out of school in grade 7...[and] just got up to grade 8-9.” Upon asking him “If you could change anything to change where things are at in your life, what would you change?” He responded with:

I’d change myself to be a role model for the younger generations...I want to finish grade 12. I want my family and those around me to be proud of me....I want to stay healthy. I want to be living on my own one day, and work as a mechanic. And start a family. I want to have a happy life.

Ryan, who had responded to all but one of the questions with answers that revealed anger and abhorrence for the law, answered the last question of the interview by stating that success to him means “...winning... to succeed, to maybe finish my grade 12.”

The federally funded on-reserve First Nations education program is not comprehensive, and in many cases does not provide educational opportunities in which youth are able to benefit in comparison to schools in urban areas. In these situations, students must re-locate to an urban setting in order to complete grade 12. Some northern remote communities, such as Tsay Keh Dene, establish a residence in the urban setting managed by an appointed community member, providing a place for the community’s youth to live while they are attending high school. Preparing youth for the adjustment and change in social and cultural realities from that of living in a rural community setting to that of an urban setting is critical.

Though I was not in a position where I had established a trusting relationship with the youth I interviewed, the stories they shared painted a portrait. Many of the youth associated their goals and success with completing an education, obtaining a job, living

independently, and “quitting weed and drinking.” Upon completing the interview phase of my research, I reflected on the matter of if/when the last time anyone took the time to engage the youth on a personal level. I then wondered how often their strengths are pointed out, and if those who work with them provide a meaningful ‘presence’ to hear their stories.

Chapter Six: Concluding Discussion

The first-hand perspectives of incarcerated Indigenous youth in the north offer a different kind of awareness of their reality. Engaging youth, on a one-on-one level, allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation of their experiences. This study was undertaken to honour the participants, a central aspect of the research. Moreover, to better understand the participants' needs, it was important to capture their experiences relative to living in the north. The research indicates that incarcerated Indigenous youth, who have experienced living in a northern rural First Nations community and who drift to and from the urban centres grapple with substance use issues, have difficulty around externalizing their social-psychological emotional problems through aggression and other behaviours, and look to family (namely grandmothers and friends) for a sense of connection and support. Although the youth were not in a positive 'place' at the point in time in which the interviews took place within the confines of PGYCS they envision the goal of furthering their education. In this chapter I will begin by revisiting the findings and provide a contextual explanation and interpretation of the themes and what those themes imply. I will then discuss implications for policy and practise followed by suggestions for future research.

Youths' Overall Experiences: Connecting the Dots

Altogether, the information shared by the youth shed light on a variety of factors related to the experiences of this population. Individually, the stories shared a powerful portrayal of the participants' strengths, the significance of post-custody support, and coping mechanisms. In spite of the youth's hardships and struggles; their shared stories are indicative of their individual strengths and capacities. Firstly, it is apparent that youth who engage in self-destructive behaviours do so for many reasons: they have not had the

opportunity to live in a family or a community that is reflective of a positive and healthy environment; furthermore, individuals are known to resort to survival (or coping) mechanisms in times of emotional and psychological distress. The use of illicit substances and/or alcohol allows the individual to become numb, in a sense, in order to endure and protect themselves in times of distress. The effect of drugs eases the pain and elevates feelings of well-being. Moreover, drug and alcohol use is oftentimes an expression of hopelessness and despair. Certainly, coping styles are learned and if a youth has been exposed to alcohol and drug use in their family and community setting, there is a heightened likelihood those behaviours become normalized and modelled. In many northern rural First Nations communities, there is a high prevalence of substance use. Communities continue to struggle with the social and cultural aftermath of colonial policy and have fewer resources, compared to the urban centre, to alleviate the issues. In essence, this research confirms the considerable amount of work and transformation that needs to take place, on many levels, in order for some of the rural First Nations communities to return to a state of wellness.

At a Crossroads Point

At a point in time where the participants are navigating the seemingly rough and unpredictable waters of adolescence, they expressed the desire to quit using drugs and alcohol. The participants acknowledged the linkage between their behaviours and being under the influence of drugs/alcohol which led to their incarceration. One particular youth mentioned that he robbed a liquor store. Other youth mentioned that they were in a 'state' of carelessness, with respect to their actions, when under the influence, which led to their bad decision-making. Likewise, all of the youth stated that in order to avoid returning to custody (upon being released) they needed to stop drinking and/or using illicit substances, and go

back to school. This aspect presents itself as a strength, as the participants acknowledged the adverse impact substance use has on their life.

Clearly, as presented in the review of the literature, it is critical to examine the First Nations youth experience using a broad micro/macro analysis. The relationship between this particular population of youth and some of their commonly shared struggles in conjunction with an examination of prevention strategies and resiliency is essential to ensuring their long-term success and wellness.

A finding that is particularly noteworthy, an age-old practice known to many First Nations peoples, revolves around the aspect of the valued relationship with female Elders. The participants spoke of the people in their lives who are meaningful to them and with whom they feel comfortable turning to in times of difficulty; one being their grandmothers. Nourishing the relationships and bonds they have with persons who provide them with a sense of security, comfort, guidance, cultural awareness, and unconditional acceptance is imperative. As helping professionals it is important to keep in mind the role of informal supports in the youths' lives and make every attempt to support the youth in connecting with their respective Elders.

The research casts light on the significance of belonging and acceptance. Five of the six participants' recollections of their parents involved family violence, addictions, negative guidance, and lack of connection and relationship. A majority of the participants mentioned that they did not have a relationship with their biological father. Subsequently, these youth turned to their friends for a sense of belonging and acceptance. Peer support, connection, and a sense of belonging are especially critical during this developmental stage and, accordingly, adolescents will look to alternative sources for belonging and support. This is

especially true for youth who have not acquired a healthy level of self-esteem at a critical point in their lives, and as a result, are at a heightened risk of marginalization, alienation, and engaging in negative and unhealthy behaviours.

The stories they shared suggested they were all at a crossroads in their lives where suitable intervention and prevention services are key to helping this population traverse the risks of adolescence. The questions posed to the participants elicited a response that was indicative of an alternative method and approach to reverse the trend of Aboriginal youth incarceration.

Research Question: Framing the Findings

In re-visiting the research question “What do Indigenous youth in-custody believe they need to be successful upon their release from the PGYCS?” and the sub-question “What does this population need for support from mental health professionals, school professionals, and so forth?” this research ultimately sheds light on protective factors that would facilitate healthy development and success. More specifically, highlighted are the presenting themes which altogether reveal a) a correlation between one’s personal experiences (stressors) related to being a young person residing in rural, northern Aboriginal communities b) the continuity and fluidity of one’s sense of belonging and security provided by their family, community; and peers and c) the significant role grandmothers play in the lives of this particular population.

Indigenous youth require healthy and positive role models. It is also known that a meaningful therapeutic relationship with at least one adult based on trust and genuineness – principles that are core to relational centred practice – leads to a long-lasting positive impact in the life of a vulnerable, at-risk young person (Bellefeuille & Jamieson, 2005).

Garfat (2005) states the principles of relationship centred practice with children and youth as:

- Doing with;
- Engagement and connection;
- Flexibility/individuality of approach;
- Interventions focused on the present
- Attention to meaning-making
- Being there/in relationship
- Meeting them where they are at;
- Interacting together;
- Discovering and use of self;

As such, Bellefeuille and Jamieson (2005, p.52) inform us that, “Authentic relationships between children and adults in service programs are more important than the specific techniques employed. The authentic relationship is what holds the opportunities to learn.” Formal and informal support persons who are devoted to mentoring young people during such a critical developmental period in their lives are important.

The helping relationship also requires a unique approach where persons who belong to a youth’s support system are mindful of the broader context and have an understanding of the legacy of the residential school system and its impact on generations thereafter. Helping Indigenous youth who are faced with hardships such as poverty, family violence, and family addictions issues, understand their circumstances as it is framed within the legacy of colonization is critical in preventing the individual from personalizing his/her life situation. More specifically, Indigenous youth who do not understand the impact of colonization and

inter-generational matters, such as family and/or community issues of addictions, violence, and poverty, become angry and despondent; thus, taking it personally. Instilling awareness, by means of story-sharing regarding the roots and dynamics of the Indigenous struggle, could potentially empower an individual.

A report conducted by the McCreary Centre in British Columbia entitled, “Voices From the Inside: Next Steps With Youth In Custody” (2007), in the ‘Future Goals and Staying Out of Custody’ section (p.24), makes clear, based on youth feedback, that effective planning for release from custody is critical. Youth highlighted that planning for release would aid them in smoothly pursuing a positive path (McCreary Centre Society, 2007). Promoting social-emotional connections by identifying persons who are able to fulfill a mentoring role for vulnerable youth is critical to their success and healthy development. Connecting youth, who plan on residing in a rural First Nations community upon their release, to informal support persons in the youth’s home community, such as Elders, esteemed community leaders, and peer support networks, is valuable and should be considered as part of a release plan.

In addition, youth stated that the opportunity to establish the needed life skills and the capacity to establish positive relationships with family and support systems was vital. The same report conducted by the McCreary Centre (2007), noted above, states that the feedback provided by youth in-custody led to a social worker in one facility being hired to assist youth with release planning. It was also noted that, apart from discussing their day-to-day experiences and needs while in-custody, it was difficult for youth to discuss their long-term goals and plans. With that in mind, one must question how one could work toward short and long-term goals if they do not have an ultimate vision of themselves and their

future. It was noted that, despite their current difficulties, youth in-custody “...still remain optimistic about their future; many plan on getting a job, an education, and hope to have a family of their own” (McCreary Centre Society, 2007, p. 6). This quote echoes the stories shared by the participants I interviewed. However, without appropriate support that would facilitate one’s ability to navigate their goals and journey within the Centre and beyond, these particular youth may find themselves slipping through the cracks once again.

Overall, the findings raise some important questions/issues. Firstly, the literature tells us that the incarceration of Indigenous youth has not succeeded in producing healthy and productive young citizens, given the high youth-to-adult recidivism rates (LaPrairie, 2010). The contrast between development theory, which defines and supports the quest of all adolescents to become healthy adults, and the realities of youth incarceration, is concerning. Developmental theories emphasize growth and expansion. However, youth justice in general is too often characterized by an institutional setting. In some communities, incarceration facilities are simply the anticipated first stop on a road leading directly to the “graduating to” adult prison. Confinement in youth justice facilities may fail to deter criminal behaviour because the experience becomes normalized. Not only do these youth expect to spend time in custody centres, some think of it as a rite of passage. Exposure to other high risk youth can potentially place youth at further risk of becoming socialized into a culture of crime where their needs for a sense of belonging are subsequently met.

Success, health outcomes, and well-being are intimately and intricately connected to the social world within which each youth is expected to spend a majority of their time. Mapping the stressors in an at-risk/high risk youth’s life entails examining community capital, resources, and the policy frameworks which frame and shape their personal lives

within their families and their home rural First Nation community. This includes an analysis of their immediate surroundings: their communities, school, the availability of social and health resources, and the multi-systemic supports that are required during a critical point of human development.

Taking Action: From Policy to Practice

The study led me to a place of personal reflection and insight concerning the vision I have for the future of youth services. My vision of a new paradigm aimed at shaping the landscape of youth justice initiatives begins with collectively shifting the dialogue in how communities and society as a whole view “youth delinquents” or “troubled (Aboriginal) youth.” Of equal importance, the responsibility and blame that is directed at youths’ parents also needs to shift from one of a micro/‘blame the parent/family’ focus to an understanding and consideration of the broader landscape and structural conditions that construct and reinforce issues such as incarcerated Indigenous youth, Indigenous youth gangs and poverty, to name a few.

Aboriginal youth crime across Canada constitutes a major concern of First Nations leaders, advocates, and policy-makers. There is debate about how to best approach this concern and whether punitive sanctions versus restorative justice measures represent an effective way of approaching the matter. Identifying the factors underlying youth engagement in criminal activity is key to managing and reversing contemporary trends of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal persons in conflict with the law. A study made possible by Public Safety Canada entitled “Examining Aboriginal Corrections in Canada (LaPrairie, 2012) explains some of the factors that contribute to Aboriginal over-representation:

Three factors are most conducive to a crime problem. The first is the large group of marginalized in communities because of the uneven distribution of resources; the

second is that reserves are not generally integrated into mainstream Canadian society (because of historical practices of exclusion and the second class status ascribed to aboriginal people) and the resulting alienation is most prominent in those with the fewest connections to mainstream society; and the third is that exposure to dysfunctional family life and childhood abuse (in addition to other factors conducive to criminal behaviour) have profoundly negative effects on individual development. The most marginalized groups in communities are most affected by these factors. When these groups leave reserves they have few tools for survival or for gaining status or integration into mainstream society. In the urban setting, the lack of education and employment skills, coupled with substance abuse problems and histories of family violence and dysfunction, lead to negative peer associations and the adoption of anti-social and pro-criminal attitudes. There is a growing problem of marginalized people leaving reserves to live in urban areas. p.3

That said, public perception and the eliminating of deeply entrenched stereotypes and labels in contemporary times takes place when societal values shift to viewing social issues like youth crime/delinquency as a symptom of something that is much broader and complex. Once a youth has been categorized as a criminal/delinquent, often a self-fulfilling prophecy is set in motion. Inevitably, in many situations, the label becomes internalized. On the topic of labeling, at one end of the spectrum, criminogenic behaviours are understood as being an individual issue commonly associated with psychiatric disorders, such as conduct disorder or anti-social personality disorder. These medicalized terms and diagnoses are practical in understanding human behaviour and treating the individual; however, further useful explanations as presented by developmental theorists shed light on a much broader explanation of the phenomenon. This explanation, as presented in the literature review, holistically examines the individual's social contexts and the interplay between various social contexts.

In the context of public policy, this shift from a reactive approach to a preventative approach would then become indicative of broader social policy measures. Ideally, myself and many other helping professionals and concerned community members alike would like

to see an approach where children and youth are valued and honoured, with their perspectives, knowledge, wisdom, and experiences being appreciated and valued as insightful and valuable contributors to our community. Thus, I visualize a shift in the way adults (policy makers, educators, community members) support vulnerable, at-risk young people. In essence, this would mean inviting youth perspectives and engagement in decision-making processes.

Indigenous social activists and allies assert that policies and insufficient resources today are not addressing the health and wellness needs of Aboriginal peoples and communities (Academics in Solidarity, 2013). This is reflected in the recent 'Idle No More' demonstrations: A collective movement of social and political unrest that continues to sweep across various locations throughout Canada and around the world. Steeped within a neo-liberal ideological framework are policies reflective of an overarching political stance that involves the belief that the individual must take control of his/her life-conditions if they desire to live a quality, healthy, successful life of opportunities. Neglected within this ideology of competition and materialism, are the issues of structural inequalities that exist and even more so for particular groups of people.

A question that I reflected on at various stages of this research project, where I was continuously reminded of my experiences as a young Aboriginal person, is: what has changed over the period of the last decade and a half since the time I was a youth? Personally, I would say that much has changed. While practice and policy have progressed since the closing of the last residential school in the 1990s, there are periods where social and political advances are stagnant. I then wonder about the ways people are to become aware of existing social atrocities such as systemic racism, poverty, and the marginalization

of particular populations. I believe that awareness gained through education at the individual level would cultivate a shift in personal, cultural, and social values.

On the micro-practice level, there is a concentration on family strengths and the capacity for change rather than on individual problems and deficits. It is critical that there are community supports and resources that are available to prevent individuals from entering the justice system. While broader policy measures continue to emerge from a paradigm consistent with 'survival of the fittest' values influenced by a neo-liberal agenda, the focus tends to remain on intervention and post-vention strategies to address social issues (as opposed to preventative resources).

As part of a National Crime Prevention Strategy initiative, Public Safety Canada has increased funding through the Northern and Aboriginal Crime Prevention fund for the availability of prevention-based programs, which can be seen as a start. Many of these programs are geared toward preventing Aboriginal youth from joining gangs as Aboriginal youth organized gang crime has, in recent times, been on the rise (Public Safety Canada, 2011). Programs like Carrier Sekani Family Services' Walk Tall Youth Prevention Program (Prince George) and Punky Lake Wilderness Camp Society (Williams Lake) are two programs in the North-Central region of BC that attempt to address this concern.

In an ideal world, many helping professionals would like to be able to prevent Aboriginal youth populations from resorting to gang cultures, crime, and other self-destructive behaviours. With appropriate prevention and/or intervention services that aim to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal youth populations, many are hopeful that solutions today are helpful in alleviating present-day trends. Guidance, support, and traditional teachings are a few of the ingredients woven throughout many programs. A multi-level

approach to reversing adverse conditions is necessary. Programs that meet the cultural needs of diverse populations represent one important piece of the puzzle, as part of enhancing and promoting the well-being of Aboriginal youth. Although interveners are sincerely devoted to addressing this issue through taking various approaches, it is important to explore the underlying causes, which have and further continue to drive Aboriginal youth to the margins. The personal lives and experiences of these populations must be examined within the social and political context they live in and are exposed to.

Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, and Hughes (2009) state in their article entitled “Strengths-Based Programming For First Nations Youth in Schools: Building Engagement Through Healthy Relationships and Leadership Skills” that,

A strengths-based approach recognizes that there are developmental assets that universally promote positive outcomes and reduce negative outcomes, including violence. A strengths-based approach is especially important for First Nations youth, because it takes the Canadian historical context into account. By placing the high rates of violence, substance abuse, and poverty experienced by First Nations families into the appropriate context of colonization and assimilation policies, it shifts the perceived deficits away from the individual and allows us to focus instead on the resilience many of these youth have demonstrated. p.2

Although it is difficult to quantify direct effects, the long history of cultural oppression and marginalization have contributed to high levels of social, emotional, spiritual, and mental health problems in many Aboriginal communities, and as we know – the Indigenous incarcerated youth experience.

Recommendations for Further Research

The growing Aboriginal youth population represents a turning point for Canada. As previously mentioned, Aboriginal youth under the age of 25 represent more than half of the Aboriginal population today. However, government officials have not yet prioritized their social, health, and educational needs to the fullest degree. More research should be

conducted on Indigenous youth where Indigenous youth are engaged as part of the research processes. Topics for further study include focusing on the youth experiences' upon their release back into the community, and further identifying the levels of support they receive, and whether release planning and reintegration into the community is prioritized by youth justice professionals.

The current studies on the general topic of incarcerated youth have yielded varying results, especially in the different fields of study, most of which emerge from criminological and psychological schools of thought. Many of the young people in conflict with the law are facing serious mental health and substance abuse issues. More inclusive studies need to be conducted on the services and program efficacy and the developmental impact of placing youth in institutional settings as opposed to therapeutic treatment-based programs.

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Appendix A: Letter Requesting Agency Support

Kim Fogtmann, Director
 Prince George Youth Custody Services
 Bag 10,000
 1211 Gunn Road
 Prince George, BC V2N-4P2

Dear Ms. Fogtmann,

Greetings, my name is Janine Cunningham. I am a School of Social Work graduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia working under the direct supervision of Dr. Glen Schmidt, Associate Professor and Acting Chair of UNBC's School of Social Work. I have a background in Child and Youth Care and First Nations Child and Family Services Administration. My roots lie with the Tsilhqot'in First Nation of BC's central interior.

I am writing to you because I would like to obtain a letter of permission for the successful implementation of my thesis research. The target population is: Aboriginal youth in-custody at the Prince George Youth Custody Services Centre. The project will comply with all the requirements and policies established by the University of Northern British Columbia's Ethics Committee for the protection of human subjects in research. It must be noted that confidentiality will be assured in all aspects of the research processes where pseudonyms will be used and in the case that this does not suffice; all other possible identifying information will be protected by modifying the individual's shared information accordingly.

The title of my proposed thesis is, "Dreams, Perceptions and Realities: The Visions of Aboriginal Youth In-Custody," which will attempt to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of this population through shared stories and dialogue where data collection will occur through an educational focus groups setting on the premises of the Prince George Youth Custody Services Centre.

The focus of my thesis is to, through educational and consciousness-raising dialogue; facilitate goal-setting (short and long-term vision) with this population. I would begin by examining their personal experiences of residing in a rural, Aboriginal community to understanding what contributed to their actions and behaviours. The discussion will subsequently flow into a meaningful exchange in dialogue regarding how this population views their incarceration and will lead into there-framing of their beliefs surrounding personal capacity and overcoming barriers. This will further lead into discussions and questions surrounding goal-setting (educationally, socially, emotionally, and culturally/spiritually). The educational components of my project will include topic

discussions and activities that are pertinent to: First Nations peoples and historical matters, identity and culture, the significance of education and goal-setting, 'shedding' the label, and the value of mentors and role models. The information sharing regarding their journeys upon their departure from the Centre will be captured through their personal expression, either through written, oral or artistic formats.

In essence, the aim of my project is to facilitate personal planning, steered by the youth, surrounding their departure from the Centre, and the ways in which they are envision themselves succeeding in the "outside" world. Through opportunities for meaningful discussions, knowledge acquisition, short and long-term goal planning, and visualization promotion activities; it is hoped that my project will, on a personal level, pave a path of intention, desire, and success.

Upon obtaining permission from all of the required individuals I would like to begin this research project as soon as I am able. If you require any additional information or would like to meet with me, please contact me at 778.890.2131 or cunningj@unbc.ca. Thank-you for your time.

Kind regards,

Janine Cunningham

Appendix B: Parental Consent Form

Greetings,

My name is Janine Cunningham and I am a Master of Social Work student at the University of Northern BC. You are receiving this letter because I would like to include your son/daughter along with 5 – 7 others in a research project that focuses on Aboriginal youth in-custody, I would like to identify what they view as important factors they feel would facilitate their success in the community. This project will take place in a group format setting at PGYCC through 6 sessions with the youth. Throughout these sessions youth will have the opportunity to not only voice their ideas while developing a plan based on goal-setting, but to take part in an educational-based, interactive project. Woven throughout this project will be topic discussions about: First Nations peoples and historical matters, identity and culture, the significance of education and goal-setting, and the value of mentors and role models. If your child requires debriefing or counselling services, this will be organized accordingly. I will ensure that the mental wellness/health needs of your child are safeguarded. As such, risks to your child will be minimized to the best of our abilities.

All information that is obtained during this research project will be kept strictly confidential. Any sharing or publication of the research results will not identify any of the participants by name. Your child's participation in this project is completely voluntary. In addition to your permission, your child will also be asked if he or she would like to take part in this project. Only those children who have parental permission and who want to participate will do so, and any child may stop taking part at any time. You are free to withdraw your permission for your child's participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. This decision will not affect your child's programming at PGYCS and/or probation order.

This research, as part of a written thesis, will be vital for understanding the needs of Aboriginal youth in-custody and will be used by Youth Justice in helping to better meet the needs of this population. In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether you want your child to participate in this project.

Sincerely,

Janine Cunningham
cunningji@unbc.ca
(778) 890 - 2131

**I give permission for my child _____ to participate
in Janine Cunningham's research project described above.**

(Print) Parent's name

Parent's signature

Date

Appendix C: Information Sheet

Dear Youth Resident,

You have been selected as someone who meets the criteria for participation in a worthwhile and meaningful project which will take place here at PGYCC. There is a research project being conducted to better understand your needs as an Aboriginal youth in-custody involved in the youth justice system. The goal of this project is identify factors, based on your experiences, that might potentially help future youth who in similar situations upon their return to the community.

Your participation in this study should take 2 ½ hours (on the weekend) as part of a series of 6 workshops that will be carried out in a group setting with a few (5-7) other residents. It will involve an interview at the beginning in which I will meet with you individually at PGYCC to introduce myself, discuss the project, and answer any questions you may have. I will be providing a list of workshop themes/titles during this brief meeting. Your participation is entirely your choice, so if you choose not to be a part of this project or would like to withdraw at any time, you may do choose to do so. This will not affect your sentencing or programming at PGYCC. The benefit is that, as a person who has lived the real life experience of being a young person in-custody, you will be able to voice your thoughts which could lead to the needs of other youth involved in youth justice system being met in the future. At the final workshop you will offered a \$20.00 gift certificate.

The feedback you provide me will be kept strictly confidential and your identity will not be revealed. Your name or any other identifiable information will not be utilized in the final report. The information you provide will be reflected in the final thesis and anonymity will be maintained. The data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home in a locked room, and only she will have access to your responses. Once the research is complete, all data will be destroyed by means of a wood-burning fireplace.

The final report will be available after completion of the research (July 2012). You can request a copy of the research report after this date by contacting Janine by email at cunning@unbc.ca. If you have any complaints about this research, please direct them to the UNBC Office of Research at 250-960-5820 or reb@unbc.ca.

As part of this process, a copy of your consent form must be given to you. Whether or not you choose to participate in this project, I would like to thank you for your time spent in reading over the above information.

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Rapport Building Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where is “home” for you? Where are you from? What does home mean or look like for you? Who do you live with? 2. How long have you been in-custody for? Is this your first time? 3. If anything, what is different for you since your time here at the Centre began? 4. What are your favourite things to do in/outside of the Centre? What are some things you’d like to do more of/or new things you would like to try/learn?
General Broad Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe your home community? What is it like? How do you travel to/from? What are your best experiences of being at home? What are your not-so-great experiences like? 2. How long have you lived there for? Describe your home/First Nations community. What is it like there? 3. What is different about being in-custody as opposed to being in your home community? 4. Tell me a bit about your cultural background. What do you know about your culture? Who has talked to you about it? What would you like to know more of? 5. In regards to living arrangements upon your release (community and residence), what are your wishes here and why? If this is a part of your probation how do you feel about this? If this is a change, are you prepared for it? What would you rather do? 6. What has changed for you (if anything) while being in PGYCC? Are you required to think about things you have never thought about before? 7. What is different about being in a place within a city as opposed to what life is like living in your home Aboriginal community? 8. Do you travel to and from the city to the reserve? How often. Tell me about your experiences here.

9. Tell me about your plans for release. Who is helping you? What has this process been like?
10. If you could do anything to change where things are at for you, what would this look like? What are your short-term and long-term goals? Where do you go in your community to get help when you need it?

Appendix E: Participant Informed Consent

Dreams, Perceptions and Realities: The Visions of Aboriginal Adolescents In-Custody:

I understand that Janine Cunningham, who is a graduate student in the School of Social Work at the University of Northern BC, is carrying out a research project about the personal experiences of those involved in the (youth justice) system. I understand that she wants to learn about personal wants and needs as youth involved in the (youth justice) system which would help me with my release planning, in hopes that I when I exit PGYCC that I will remain on a pathway of success and healthy choices.

I understand that I was chosen because of my experiences of being in-custody, living in northern BC, and my personal experiences of living in a First Nations community. I will be a part of group workshops or interviews conducted by the researcher where there will be 11 main questions asked about my experiences. The questions will be integrated throughout a series of 6 interactive, fun and educational-based (2.5 hours in length) workshops. I will be a part of choosing the themes of the workshops which will be selected based on group consensus.

1. This consent is given with the understanding that Janine Cunningham will protect my identity where all information that is provided to her will be kept strictly confidential. There is the exception that Janine Cunningham has the legal obligation to report disclosures if I state that I am going to harm myself or others. She is also legally obligated to report any disclosures of abuse that I discuss.
2. I give my consent freely and understand that I choose to not participate in the workshops at any point in time throughout the process. The decision to not participate once I begin the workshops will not affect my in-custody term (sentencing) and programming at the Prince George Youth Custody Centre.
3. I understand and agree that the information I have provided Janine Cunningham within our group workshops will be treated in the following manner:
 - a. The workshops will be tape recorded during our discussions. Any personal journals which I keep to write about my personal experiences that I submit to Janine will not be shared with anyone else and will be given back to me after 2 weeks of handing it in.
 - b. For confidentiality purposes, when referred in written format, I will be provided with a fake name (pseudonym) to conceal my identity.
 - c. This data will be securely stored in a locked room in a locked filing cabinet in her private residence where only Janine Cunningham will have access to the information. Electronic data it should be password secured or encrypted so that only you have access.

- d. The data will be used only by Janine Cunningham.
 - e. The raw data will be burned in a metal fire pit at the end of the thesis project.
4. I hereby waive any claim against Janine Cunningham, Dr. Glen Schmidt, the University of Northern British Columbia, its employees, administration, and Board of Governors with respect to the use of said information, provided it is used in accordance with this agreement.
5. I understand that if I have any concerns or complaints, I can contact the UNBC Office of Research at 250-960-5820 or reb@unbc.ca.

PARTICIPANT: _____ SIGNED _____ DATE _____

RESEARCHER: _____ SIGNED _____ DATE _____