CLOSING THE GAP:
REFLECTIONS ON SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK AND DECOLONIZING PRACTICE

by

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ABSTRACT

This report explores the role social workers can play in closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada. Aboriginal students in Canada receive less funding and are less likely to be successful in school when compared to non-Aboriginal Canadians (McMahon, 2014). As a result, Aboriginal students graduate at a much lower rate than non-Aboriginal students. The lower graduation rate experienced by Aboriginal students is often referred to as the Aboriginal education and achievement gap. Aboriginal students who are at risk of not graduating face a number of environmental barriers that make it difficult for them to be successful in the classroom. Therefore, support services, including social workers are integral to the success of Aboriginal students within the school system (Joseph, Slovak, & Broussard, 2010). This report outlines my practicum experience with the Aboriginal Social Work Program of School District 57 in Prince George, British Columbia and highlights the importance of culturally safe social work support in schools. Included in this document is a detailed description of Aboriginal social work and reflections on the importance of decolonizing our practice as social workers. This report is a synthesis of deliberative reflections, participation, and research that highlights hands-on learning in school social work.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal students in Canada receive less funding and are less likely to be successful in school when compared to non-Aboriginal Canadians (McMahon, 2014). As a result, Aboriginal students graduate at a much lower rate than non-Aboriginal students. The lower graduation rate experienced by Aboriginal students is often referred to as the Aboriginal education and achievement gap. Aboriginal students who are at risk of not graduating face a number of environmental barriers that make it difficult for them to be successful in the classroom. Teachers and school administrators are often unable to adequately address these barriers. Therefore, support services, including social workers, are integral to the success of Aboriginal students within the school system (Joseph, Slovak, & Broussard, 2010). Additionally, support for Aboriginal students should be provided in a way that is culturally safe[1] (Battiste, 2013; Duran, 2006).

The province of British Columbia (BC) has developed a model for Aboriginal education that mandates culturally safe support services (Aboriginal Education Department, 2015). School District 57 in Prince George, BC has dedicated an entire department to Aboriginal Education and support for Aboriginal students. As a part of the Aboriginal Education Department, the Aboriginal Social Work Program aims to support Aboriginal students by providing wrap around services including clinical counselling, support work, and advocacy. Using a generalist model of social work encompassing both Aboriginal and trauma informed approaches to practice, the Aboriginal Social Work Program supports Aboriginal students both inside and outside of the classroom (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014).

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[1] This paper uses the term "cultural safety" to refer specifically to the experiences of Aboriginal people in Canada. Cultural safety is about paying attention to the importance of culture as a pathway to healing. Culturally safe practices also recognize the impacts that colonization, residential schools, and historical trauma have had on Aboriginal populations. Therefore, creating cultural safety is about decolonizing healthcare, education, and helping professions (Waters, 2009).

By drawing on my experiences in the Aboriginal Social Work Program, this report will explore the role that social workers can play in closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada. The choice of my practicum site was motivated by my desire to gain a broader understanding of the role of a generalist social worker within an urban Aboriginal setting. Throughout my practicum learning experience with the Aboriginal Social Work Program I was able to reflect on the importance of decolonization in practice and gain a better understanding of Aboriginal social work practice. Overall, my practicum experience was extremely beneficial to my experiential learning in the field of social work.

My past and present work experiences with Aboriginal agencies have taught me about the challenges faced by Aboriginal youth in both urban and remote settings. Many of the youth I have worked with face barriers both inside and outside of the classroom and often struggled to get to school let alone graduate. As a social worker, I have noticed that trauma, the legacy of colonialism, and structural barriers often result in Aboriginal children and youth falling through the cracks of the education system. Therefore, more culturally safe and trauma informed support is needed to ensure the success of Aboriginal students in schools. Throughout my journey as a social worker and as a learner, I have come to understand that Aboriginal social work is an important lens to improve my practice. My practicum experience helped me to better understand Aboriginal social work and translate these experiences into my current practice with Aboriginal communities. Upon completion of my practicum I intend to continue to work with Aboriginal communities and use the skills I have learned from the Aboriginal Social Work Program.

This report will summarize my experiences working with the Aboriginal Social Work Program. Woven into each chapter are moments of deliberative reflection and processes of learning and unlearning that have shaped my outlook as a social worker and as a human being.

This report is divided into six chapters. In Chapter Two, I will outline the structure of the Aboriginal Social Work Program. This chapter will provide an overview of the program structure and mandate, the services provided, and the population served. Chapter Three will outline the theoretical foundations of the Aboriginal Social Work Program. In this chapter I will also situate myself as a practicum student. Chapter Four will provide a review of the literature relevant to my practicum experience. Three main bodies of literature will be explored: the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada, school social work, and Aboriginal social work practice. Chapter Five will summarize my learning goals, practicum activities, and reflections on my practicum experience. Chapter Six will outline the broader contributions of my practicum experience to the field of social work.

CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW OF PRACTICUM SITE

When I was exploring options for my final practicum placement I knew I wanted to work with an organization that provided services to Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal Social Work Program was a good fit for me because of its emphasis on community, Aboriginal approaches to social work, and trauma informed practice. Additionally, the Aboriginal Social Work Program exists within a larger power structure and I was interested to learn more about working within the education system.

In order to situate my practicum learning experience, I must first explore the Aboriginal Social Work Program. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the structure and mandate of the Aboriginal Social Work Program, the client population served, and the services provided.

Program Structure and Mandate

The Aboriginal Social Work Program is a department of the Aboriginal Education Department that exists within School District 57 in Prince George, BC. This section will outline the governing structure and mandate of the Aboriginal Social Work Program.

School District 57

School District 57 is located on the Traditional Territory of the Lheidli T'enneh, McLeod Lake Indian Band (Tse'khene), and shares territory with the Simpcw First Nation. The school district services the communities of Prince George, Mackenzie, McBride, and Valemount. There are 31 elementary schools, 8 high schools, and one Centre for Learning Alternatives (which includes: Continuing Education, Distance Education, and Community Alternative Programs) within the district. In the 2016-2017 school year, there were approximately 13, 000 students enrolled in the school district (School District 57, 2016).

In addition to delivering education, School District 57 has a specific mandate to provide integrated support and resources for all students. This model incorporates a number of in-school services including resource and special needs teachers, counsellors, youth care workers, support workers, and Aboriginal Education workers (School District 57, 2014). In order to provide support that is specific to Aboriginal students, the Aboriginal Education Department was created.

The Aboriginal Education Department

Aboriginal education and support services have long been a priority for School District 57. In 2002, the BC government formalized Aboriginal education across the province by introducing targeted Aboriginal dollars (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). In addition to targeted funding, boards of education and local Aboriginal communities were required to collaborate and create Aboriginal education programs that provided targeted support to Aboriginal students (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). This enhanced the delivery of Aboriginal Education in School District 57 and has fostered the growth of the Aboriginal Education Department to what it is today. The Aboriginal Education Department of School District 57 is one of the largest and most successful in Canada. Many school districts across Canada and the United States use Aboriginal Education in Prince George as a model when developing their own programming (S. Niemi, personal communication, December 2016).

The Aboriginal Education Department consists of 75 staff members who provide support to Aboriginal students within the school district. The majority of the Aboriginal Education team is made up of Aboriginal Education Workers who exist in each school across the district. In addition to this, there are a number of staff that work out of the Aboriginal Education office and provide cultural support to schools across the district. The purpose of the Aboriginal Education Department is to close the education and achievement gap experienced by Aboriginal students,

infuse Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum, and provide direct wrap-around support to Aboriginal students and their families (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014). Due to the hard work of the Aboriginal Education Department graduation rates for Aboriginal students in School District 57 have increased substantially (S. Niemi, personal communication, January 11, 2017). This is a huge success for Aboriginal Education and proves that cultural safe support services both inside and outside of the classroom are imperative to closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada.

The Aboriginal Social Work Program

As mentioned previously, the Aboriginal Social Work Program is a part of the Aboriginal Education Department of School District 57. The Aboriginal Social Work Program consists of a coordinator and four full-time Aboriginal Social Workers (ASWs). ASWs are trained professionals; at minimum ASWs must hold a Bachelor's degree in social work or a related human services degree. Aboriginal Social Workers provide services in five elementary schools and one high school within the district. In order to address gaps in service delivery, the Social Work Coordinator takes in referrals and works with schools to determine the best avenues for support. Aboriginal Social Workers receive on-going education and training through professional development events (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014). Overall, the Aboriginal Social Work Program works within the mandate of Aboriginal Education policy to provide wrap around support for Aboriginal students within School District 57.

Services Provided

The Aboriginal Social Work Program works closely with all schools within the district in order to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal students are being met. ASWs use a generalist model of practice that incorporates both an Aboriginal and trauma informed approach to social work.

ASWs provide a myriad of direct and indirect services to Aboriginal students and their families. Direct services help students meet personal goals, and usually occur in a clinical setting. Indirect services are usually done on behalf of the student. This might include advocacy, collaborating with community agencies, attending case management meetings, and connecting with families or guardians. ASWs provide social emotional support to students and typically address issues of: (a) self-harm, (b) suicidal ideation, (c) conflict resolution, (d) anger management, (e) addictions reduction, (f) substance use education, (g) self-esteem, (h) anxiety, (i) food security, (j) sexual health, and (k) psycho-education (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014). In addition to this, ASWs work closely with a number of community agencies. Aboriginal social workers often provide support for students and families as they navigate systems like the courts, child and family services, probation, and the school district itself. Finally, ASWs provide transportation and often conduct home visits with children and their families (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014).

Aboriginal Social Workers work with students both formally and informally. Formal referrals include students with on-going presenting issues that require long-term support. Informal referrals are crisis based and require short-term intervention. Each ASW holds a formal caseload of up to 25 students. These cases are generally referred to the ASW following the process established by Aboriginal Social Work Program. However, ASWs also see students informally whenever a crisis may arise. In any given month, ASWs receive more informal referrals than they do formal referrals (A. Hendrickson, personal communication, March 15, 2017). In addition to this, ASWs facilitate groups and classroom workshops at the request of teachers and administrators.

The Aboriginal Social Work Program receives referrals directly from teachers, administrators, and support staff within the school district. Referral forms are available through the Aboriginal Social Work office. Referrals often go directly to the ASW at the assigned school. If there is no assigned ASW, the referral goes directly to the Social Work Program Coordinator. Once the ASW has obtained consent they will meet with the student and create a plan of support. The goal of this process is to meet the needs of the student where they are at and work collectively to help the student achieve their goals. A monthly progress report is then sent to the school Administrator (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014). If a crisis arises (ie. suicidal ideation), ASWs work collaboratively with administrators and school based support teams to resolve this issue. Overall, the Aboriginal Social Work Program provides generalist support to Aboriginal children and their families as they navigate the school district.

Client Population

The mandate of the Aboriginal Social Work Program is to provide support to all Aboriginal students and their families within School District 57. Of the total number of students in the school district, approximately 3, 654 students or 30 percent of the total population identify as Aboriginal (S. Niemi, personal communication, October 24, 2016). As per the guidelines of the Aboriginal Education department, students must self-identify as Aboriginal at the beginning of each school year (Aboriginal Education Department, 2015). The term Aboriginal refers to the ethnicity of the client population served by the Aboriginal Social Work Program. This term is used to represent the first inhabitants of Canada and is often considered to be an umbrella term that refers to all people who identify as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada (University of British Columbia, 2009). According to the BC Ministry of Education, an Aboriginal student is defined as “a person in public school that has self-identified (or is identified by parents) that he

or she is of Aboriginal, Métis, Inuit, or First Nations ancestry. Students may or may not belong to a First Nations Band. Ancestry is indicated on the school enrollment form" (Aboriginal Education Department, 2015, p. 30). Based on this definition, the Aboriginal Social Work Program services the needs of students who have self-identified as Aboriginal. ASWs work primarily with individual students. However, using an Aboriginal model of social work practice requires a collective approach to service delivery (Duran, 2006). This means that in addition to working with the individual student, ASWs work with the entire family or system that supports the student.

Conclusion

The Aboriginal Education Department in Prince George is one of a kind in Canada. While Aboriginal Education departments exist across British Columbia and in other parts of Canada, the Aboriginal Education Department in School District 57 is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the country. This is due entirely to the hard work and dedication of the entire Aboriginal Education Department. The Aboriginal Social Work Program is a crucial part of the overall service delivery that ensures Aboriginal students are successful in the school environment. In Chapter Three I will explore the theoretical foundation of the Social Work Program in more detail.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

In the field of social work, developing one's practice through theory and methods helps social workers to better service the populations we work with (Mullaly, 2007). As Payne (2014) reminds us, "we build both practice and theory through our experience operating in the real world" (p. 3). Therefore, theory is socially constructed through interactions between service users and social workers in their agencies and in broader political, social, and cultural arenas (Payne, 2014). Theory and practice are not separate; instead they constantly evolve and influence one another. Social work theory provides the foundation for practice and allows social workers to create change in a meaningful way (Payne, 2014).

With this in mind, this chapter will outline the theoretical and practical orientation of the Aboriginal Social Work Program. Additionally, I will situate myself as a practicum student by reflecting on my journey as a social worker.

The Aboriginal Social Work Program

The Aboriginal Social Work Program uses a generalist model of social work practice (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014). However, because the program provides services to Aboriginal youth, an Aboriginal approach to practice and a trauma informed lens is an important part of service delivery (A. Hendrickson, personal communication, February 2016).

The Aboriginal Social Work Program uses a generalist approach to practice to provide a myriad of services to Aboriginal students within the school district. Generalist social work practice is different from specialized approaches to practice because it is diverse and can be applied to a broad range of human problems (Collier, 2006). The generalist practitioner approaches each problem or issue by considering the problem holistically, across a spectrum of approaches and systems, and pursues the avenue that would be the most effective (Collier, 2006).

A professional problem solving process is used to engage, assess, broker services, advocate, counsel, educate, and organize with and on behalf of clients (Mirzrahi & Davis, 2008). Therefore, a broad understanding of a number of social work theories and practice models is needed. A strengths-based approach is often used in order to recognize, support, and build upon the uniqueness and capabilities of each client (Mirzahi & Davis, 2008).

Aboriginal social work practice pays attention to the distinctiveness of Aboriginal worldviews and traditions. At its heart, Aboriginal social work seeks to decolonize (Sinclair, 2004). This means that social workers should develop a consciousness about the process and effects of colonialism on Aboriginal populations. Aboriginal social workers also seek to empower Aboriginal people through healing the mind, body, and spirit (Morrissette, McKenzie, & Morrissette, 1993). Because my practicum site works primarily with Aboriginal students, an understanding of Aboriginal issues and an Aboriginal approach to practice was central to my practicum work. In Chapter Four of this report, I will explore and unpack Aboriginal models of social work in more detail.

Trauma informed practice (TIP) is an important part of the Aboriginal Social Work Program. TIP is grounded in and directed by an in depth understanding of trauma. This approach looks at the neurological, biological, psychological, and social impacts of trauma. Trauma informed practitioners pay special attention to the adverse impacts of trauma (Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre, 2013). This practice model places a large emphasis on safety and trustworthiness. Providing physical, emotional, and cultural safety is extremely important because trauma survivors often feel unsafe or might be currently living in a situation that is unsafe (BC Provincial Mental Health & Substance Use Council, 2013). The overall aim of trauma informed practice is to provide safety and stabilization so that trauma survivors can begin

to heal (Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre, 2013). This lens is particularly important in mental health work with Aboriginal populations (Menzies, 2007). However, scholars argue that TIP needs to be taken one step further to include an understanding of the impacts of colonialism (Linklater, 2014; Menzies, 2007). This includes understanding the historical trauma caused by contact with European settlers, the legacy of residential schools, as well as past and present policies and practices that continue to traumatize Aboriginal people (Linklater, 2014).

Positioning Myself as a Practicum Student

As social workers, we have a responsibility to engage in on-going critical reflection in order to further develop our practice (Monk, 2011). Reflexive practice is something that is important to me as a practitioner. Therefore, it is imperative for me to also reflect on my position as a practicum student with the Aboriginal Social Work Program. Additionally, when working in Aboriginal communities it is protocol to identify yourself, your ancestors, and your territory before beginning your work (D. Frank, personal communication, March 2016). In this section I will position myself as a practicum student with the Aboriginal Social Work Program.

My name is Rebecca Tallman. I was born and raised on Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario. I am a settler with ancestral roots in England, Scotland, and Belgium. I am a trauma survivor on an on-going journey of healing and personal growth. As a practitioner, I truly believe that we cannot help others heal if we are not doing our own work and healing ourselves.

I have been a student in post-secondary institutions for the past decade. My academic background includes work in political science, international development, and feminist security studies. I came to the field of social work because I wanted to move away from the academy and instead work to create social change from the bottom up. In addition to this, I firmly believe in

the values of social work and upholding social justice. Social work became a natural avenue through which I was able to combine my passion for working with people and my knowledge of policy and social change. I currently live in Prince George, BC and work as a counsellor in a remote First Nations community. In my personal practice I engage in generalist social work practice that incorporates Aboriginal approaches to healing and trauma informed care. As a social worker, I use a client-centered approach to practice that is anti-oppressive, structural, and intersectional.

As a white woman and a social worker working with Aboriginal communities, I recognize that I have been awarded certain power and privilege. Because of this, I am very mindful of the space that my privilege holds. When working with Aboriginal populations I am careful not to take up Indigenous space. This requires that I unpack my power and privilege and focus on unlearning the structures and practices of colonialism that have been engrained in my upbringing. This process requires unlearning in order to become a more authentic ally to Aboriginal communities (Bishop, 2002). To me, being an ally means having a good heart (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2000). Having a good heart is about being authentic, humble, and respectful in practice (Bishop, 2002). Becoming an ally is a process of unlearning that requires constant on-going reflection about our role in oppression and colonialism (Sinclair, 2004). Working with Aboriginal communities is important to me; I believe that this work must be done in a way that is culturally safe and respectful of Indigenous space. Therefore, building relationships, engaging in reflexive practice, and unlearning are central to the work that I do.

When writing this report I was especially mindful of my power and privilege as a scholar. This report is meant to share my reflections on working alongside Aboriginal populations. It is not my intention to take up Indigenous space. Instead, I hope to share my journey of

decolonization and unlearning. It is my hope that this report will contribute to important conversations and self-reflection about decolonizing social work practice.

Finally, I enter my practicum space as a student and a learner. I am in the final stages of my Masters of Social Work (MSW) and used this practicum to further develop my skills as a social worker. As mentioned in Chapter One, when I complete my MSW I hope to continue to work with Aboriginal communities. Therefore, working with an Aboriginal agency for my practicum was central to further developing my skills as a social worker and as a human being.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarized the theoretical orientation of the Aboriginal Social Work Program, and my position as a practicum student. The theoretical orientation of my practicum placement is very similar to how I approach my personal practice. This is in part why I chose the Aboriginal Social Work Program for my placement. I also chose this placement because it is an urban-based agency that works within a specific system – the public education system. Because a majority of my work focuses on rural and remote social work, working in an urban Aboriginal setting allowed me to compare and contrast my experiences. This challenged me and further deepened my practice. In addition to developing my own personal practice, this practicum placement taught me a lot about structural social work and how to be strategic in my practice. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Five of this report. In Chapter Three I will review the literature relevant to my practicum experience.

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW

An important starting point when discussing Aboriginal Education in Canada is the Aboriginal education and achievement gap which generally refers to the difference between education outcomes and opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Canada (McMahon, 2014). This gap is the outcome of a long history of education policy in Canada that has actively discriminated against Aboriginal children (Nguyen, 2011). In order to address the Aboriginal education and achievement gap a more equitable approach to education is needed. Culturally safe support for Aboriginal students is vital to their success both inside and outside of the education system (Battiste, 2013).

In order to understand the importance of culturally safe social work practice, this chapter will provide a review of the literature relevant to my practicum placement. Without such an exploration it would be difficult to consider how my practicum learning experience contributes to the broader field of social work practice. The literature revealed three central bodies of research: the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada, the role of school social workers, and the importance of Aboriginal social work practice. Each of these bodies of literature will be explored below.

The Aboriginal Education and Achievement Gap in Canada

The Aboriginal education and achievement gap has also been referred to as the need for more equitable education in Canada (McMahon, 2014). The gap is often measured in terms of graduation rates. However, the funding allocated to Aboriginal students has also been a focus of many of the studies around Aboriginal education in Canada (McMahon, 2014). While the education gap typically refers to all levels of education from pre-school to post-secondary

education (Richards, 2008), this report will focus on the education gap experienced by Aboriginal students from kindergarten to grade 12.

The difference between education and achievement varies greatly between Aboriginal students living on and off reserve. Across Canada, off-reserve Aboriginal students attending public schools have made tremendous gains in education while those attending federally funded schools on reserves have stagnated. In 2011, more than 70 percent of Aboriginal students in urban centres graduated from high school compared to 45 percent on reserve (McMahon, 2014). One of the biggest factors contributing to this gap is funding. Presently, the federal government of Canada provides funding for education on reserves, while provincial and territorial governments fund education off-reserves (McMahon, 2014; Richards, 2008). Overall, off reserve schools receive more than double the funding than that of schools on reserves (Laboucane, 2010). The significant gap in funding for Aboriginal education across Canada makes it difficult for Aboriginal students to be successful in the classroom, further widening the achievement gap.

In the province of British Columbia, the provincial government made a commitment to address the education and achievement gap experienced by Aboriginal students. However, as of 2015 Aboriginal students still remain 20 percentage points below non-Aboriginal students when it comes to high-school completion (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015). In School District 57, sixty-one percent of Aboriginal students graduated from high school in 2015. This number has increased from 2009 when only thirty-nine percent of Aboriginal students graduated from high school (S. Niemi, personal communication, September 20, 2016). Despite the increase in graduation rates for Aboriginal students, there is a significant gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. In the province of BC the graduation rate for non-Aboriginal students is 86 percent. In School District 57 the non-Aboriginal graduation rate is 79 percent (Wright Allen,

2016). While there have been some increases in graduation rates for urban Aboriginal youth, there is still a significant gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Canada. However, Aboriginal Education programs have played a significant role in the increase of the overall graduation rate of off-reserve Aboriginal students within the province of British Columbia.

The History of Aboriginal Education in Canada

Aboriginal education in Canada has long been entrenched in the colonial agenda. This agenda is especially evident in the policies and legislation governing Aboriginal education across the country (Battiste, 2013; McMahon, 2014; Nguyen, 2011). Historically, the British North America Act of 1867 and the Indian Act gave the federal government complete jurisdiction over Aboriginal education (Nguyen, 2011). Perhaps the most notorious era of Aboriginal education in Canadian history was from 1870 to 1996 when Aboriginal children were removed from their homes and forced to attend residential and day schools. Approximately 150,000 Aboriginal children attended these schools, of which an estimated 6000 students never made it home. The ultimate goal of the residential school program was to "kill the Indian in the child" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 131). This was achieved by separating children from their families for long periods of time, forbidding the use of traditional language or culture, and subjecting children to horrific counts of physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b).

The forced assimilation of Aboriginal children during the residential school era has had deep and lasting influence on how Aboriginal people view education in Canada. Today's Aboriginal youth are the first generation to grow up without experiencing the residential school

system (McMahon, 2014). However, the legacy of residential schools still impacts children who are growing up as victims of the residential school legacy. As author Richard Wagamese writes,

> "I am a victim of Canada's residential school system. When I say victim, I mean something substantially different than "survivor". I never attended a residential school, so I cannot say that I survived one. However, my parents and my extended family did. The pain they endured became my pain, and I became a victim." (Wagamese, 2012, p. 153).

The intergenerational trauma caused by the residential school experience is a contributing factor to high rates of mental illness, substance use, violence, and abuse in Aboriginal communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). Because of this, the legacy of residential schools is still very present in Canada today.

In the education system, the legacy of residential schools lives on in the fact that many Aboriginal youth living in remote communities are often forced to leave their communities to attend high school in larger urban centres (McMahon, 2014; Richards, 2008). Additionally, the federal government's on-going control of funding for Aboriginal education in Canada perpetuates colonialism (Battiste, 2013). Decolonizing education is a crucial part of closing the education and achievement gap in Canada and creating more equitable education and support for Aboriginal children (Battiste, 2013; Munroe, Borden, Orr, Toney, & Meader, 2013). Decolonizing education will require change in policy and practice at all levels of government. In the sections that follow, I will unpack present day Aboriginal education policy.

Federal Aboriginal Education Policy Today

Federal education policy continues to address the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada (Nguyen, 2011; Richards, 2008). Aboriginal leadership has been involved in discussions surrounding policy and the allocation of funding for Aboriginal education. In 2005 the Government of Canada, provincial, and territorial leaders, and the leaders of five First Nations organizations met for 18 months of roundtable discussions in Kelowna, BC entitled First

Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders Strengthening Relationships and Closing the Gap. The meetings were later referred to as the Kelowna Accord (Patterson, 2006). The Accord sought to improve the education, employment, and living conditions for Aboriginal people through funding and program development (Government of Canada, 2007). In 2006, Prime Minister Paul Martin introduced Bill C-292, which sought to implement the Kelowna Accord. The goal of the Accord was to provide funding that would ensure that the high school graduation rate of Aboriginal Canadians matched the rest of the population. Overall, $450 million dollars was committed to implementing the Kelowna Accord (Government of Canada, 2007). Bill C-292 was passed in 2007 by the Liberal government, however the succeeding Conservative government did not uphold the bill (McMahon, 2014). In addition to this, in 2014 Prime Minister Stephen Harper tabled Bill C-33 dubbed the First Nations control of First Nations Education Act*,* which promised $1.9 million dollars to be rolled out over several years for secondary education and developed a framework for First Nations education (Sayers, 2014). Bill C-33 was met with significant criticism from Aboriginal leaders who saw the program as not meeting the needs clearly identified by the Kelowna Accord in 2005 (McMahon, 2014). Ultimately, Aboriginal leadership rejected the bill.

In December 2015, the final report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) directly addressed the education and achievement gap. The report, which explored the legacy of Canada's residential school system, included 94 calls to action directed at the federal government. Of these calls to action, seven recommendations specifically addressed the education gap experienced by Aboriginal people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a). These calls to action include: (a) developing a joint strategy with Aboriginal groups to eliminate the Aboriginal education and achievement gap, (b) improving federal

education funding for First Nations children on and off reserves, (c) publishing annual reports on funding and achievement, (d) developing new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples that acknowledges the history of First Nations people in Canada, (e) providing adequate funding for First Nations students who are seeking post-secondary education, and (f) developing culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families (TRC, 2015a). The federal government has yet to respond to these calls for action.

With the election of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2015 a new relationship between the federal government and Indigenous nations was promised. During his election campaign, Trudeau promised $2.6 billion dollars to support Aboriginal education and close the gap widened by the previous Conservative government (Mas, 2015). When the federal budget was released in March 2016 the money originally promised had been cut short. Instead, $824 million dollars has been tabled to "implement transformation" of Aboriginal education. The money promised for Aboriginal education is also contingent on the Liberals being re-elected in the 2019 election (Barrera, 2016). Despite policy recommendations and funding promises, Aboriginal students continue to be at a disadvantage when it comes to education in Canada causing many advocates to call out Prime Minister Trudeau on failed promises. In order to close the education and achievement gap, the Federal government needs to step up and provide funding that will allow Aboriginal students to be at the same baseline as non-Aboriginal students.

Provincial Aboriginal Education Policy

At the provincial level, Aboriginal education is governed by the Ministry of Education, which has dedicated an entire department to the enhancement of Aboriginal education in BC. Aboriginal education has long been a priority of the BC government. By providing targeted

funding dollars to school districts across BC, there has been an increase in the supports available to Aboriginal students. As a result of targeted funding, Aboriginal education workers exist in schools across the province. In addition to targeted funding, the Ministry of Education supports Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EAs). EAs are working documents between school districts and local Aboriginal communities. The purpose of EAs is to establish a collaborative partnership in order to better support Aboriginal students. Finally, in 2016 the Ministry of Education rolled out a brand new curriculum for all schools in BC. The new curriculum places a large emphasis on Aboriginal history and culture. As a result, Aboriginal education workers will play a key role in supporting teachers and administrators as they navigate the new curriculum (BC Ministry of Education, 2016).

While, there was not a lot of literature available on the history of BC's relationship with Aboriginal education, the Ministry of Education does provide a number of resources and reports about their policy development in the past fifteen years. Because of their commitment to Aboriginal education, the province of British Columbia has one of the most supportive policies towards Aboriginal education in Canada (Meissner, 2015).

Closing the Gap

A review of the history and policies impacting Aboriginal education in Canada reveals significant gaps in how education is delivered to Aboriginal students both on and off reserves. Aboriginal students receive less funding and are less likely to graduate from high school when compared to non-Aboriginal students in Canada (McMahon, 2014). While funding and legislation seems to be the focus of most of the literature on the Aboriginal education and achievement gap, many scholars argue that ensuring the success of Aboriginal students requires wrap around social and cultural support both inside and outside the classroom (Battiste, 2013;

Friesen & Krauth, 2010; Monroe et al., 2013). The literature suggests that beyond government level interventions the Aboriginal education and achievement gap can be addressed in two ways.

First, education for Aboriginal students must be delivered in a way that creates cultural safety. Cultural safety is the first step to decolonizing Aboriginal education (Battiste, 2013). Many Indigenous scholars argue that in order to improve the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal people the education system must be reformed (Battiste, 2013; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Munroe et al., 2013). Education in Canada is based on Western models of teaching and learning, which has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal populations for generations (Battiste, 2013; Munroe et al., 2013). Therefore, current education policies and practices must undergo reform. In order to create change, the inherent racism in colonial systems of education must be rejected (Battiste, 2013). Education should incorporate Aboriginal knowledge, culture, and history and be delivered in a way that is holistic in nature and attentive to the needs of Aboriginal students (Battiste, 2013; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Munroe et al., 2013).

Second, adequate social support is needed to close the education and achievement gap. Beyond teaching and learning, Aboriginal students require specialized support services (Aboriginal Education Department, 2015). For students who are at risk of not graduating, a number of barriers make it difficult to be successful in the classroom including: learning differences, socio-economic factors, trauma, chaotic home life, health, addictions, and mental health (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2012). Teachers and school administrators cannot adequately address a majority of these barriers. Therefore, support services like school counsellors, youth workers, and school social workers are integral to providing support to students (Joseph, Slovak, & Broussard, 2010). However, support services must also be

decolonized in order to provide support in a way that is culturally safe and attentive to the unique needs and history of Aboriginal students (Battiste, 2013; Duran, 2006).

Overall, closing the education and achievement gap involves more than just increasing funding dollars and creating legislation. In order to decolonize education in Canada, schools need to be safe and healthy spaces where Aboriginal children and youth can engage in their culture and history in a meaningful way.

School Social Work

As discussed previously, effective support services are integral to closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap. This section will explore the role of school social workers. For many families, the point of entry into social work services is through the school system (Vroom, Stanfield, & Brazone, 1997). Elementary and secondary schools have an important location in the lives of children, youth, and their families which has led to the placement of social work, mental health, and other support services and programs on site in many urban based schools (Vroom, Stanfield, & Brazone, 1997). The purpose of these services is: to decrease the likelihood of children dropping out of school, to support adaptive academic performance and social functioning, to prevent or provide interventions for mental health issues, and to provide a range of services to improve and maintain effective functioning of children and their families (Altshuler & Reid Webb, 2009; Lynn, Mckernan Mckay, & Atkins, 2003; Vroom, Stanfield, & Brazone, 1997). The overall aim of school social work is to address the environmental barriers that negatively affect the ability of students to succeed academically (Altshuler & Reid Webb, 2009). School social workers may provide the following services: individual and group counselling, bridging the gap between parents and schools, referrals to community agencies, and community development programming. In addition to these services, school social workers work

collaboratively with school administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2002).

School social workers help students with issues that occur in school, in their family, and in their community. Therefore, school social workers practice primarily from a systems perspective that acknowledges the child within the context of their personal environment (Pardeck, 2015). In this context, school social workers practice within the school system to help students succeed (CASW, 2002). School social workers also use a generalist model of practice to provide direct and indirect services to children, youth, and families. School social workers have expertise in assessment of behavioural concerns and treatment, working with children with special needs, sensitivity to difference, and crisis prevention and management (CASW, 2002).

School social work began in Canada in the late 1800s when truant officers were hired to ensure that children attended school (CASW, 2002). In many school boards across Canada school social workers continue to be responsible for students attendance. Presently, there are an estimated 750 school social workers across Canada (CASW, 2002). School social workers are located in every province, with the exception of Quebec and Prince Edward Island (CASW, 2002). The Canadian Association of School Social Workers and Attendance Counsellors (CASSWAC) promotes and encourages the development of quality school social work in Canada. Additionally, school social workers must have professional degree in social work (CASW, 2002). Therefore, school social work has emerged as a specialized field of practice within the discipline of social work. Overall, school social workers play an important role in ensuring the success of children and youth within the education system. School social work is central to closing the education and achievement gap in Canada.

Aboriginal Social Work Practice

In addition to school social work, an Aboriginal approach to practice is needed in order to support Aboriginal students and families as they navigate the public school system. An exploration of the literature on Aboriginal social work practice revealed three central themes: decolonizing social work practice, the relationship between Western models of practice and Aboriginal social work, and proposed models of Aboriginal social work practice. Each of these themes will be summarized below.

Decolonizing Social Work Practice

The most prominent theme in the literature was decolonization. Decolonization is about unlearning systems of oppression and colonization (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2000). Decolonizing our practice starts with knowing who we are and where we come from (Duran, 2006; Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). Having a sound understanding of who our ancestors are, the places where we are from, and how we connect to our community and our family are very important in understanding who we are as individuals (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). For non-Aboriginal social workers decolonizing practice involves paying close attention to our own whiteness and privilege (Walter, Taylor, & Habibis, 2011). We must also have an understanding of who we are in the context of colonialism (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). Understanding our place in colonialism requires that we acknowledge the colonial history of our profession as social workers (Sinclair, 2004).

Decolonization requires authenticity. Authenticity simply means that as social workers we are responsible to walk our talk (Sinclair, 2004). Being authentic in practice is about being humble and having a good heart (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2000). Humility is closely connected to the idea of being an ally, which involves a deep exploration of who we are and what our role in

oppression has been (Bishop, 2002). Respect is also central to authenticity and is demonstrated toward Aboriginal communities by valuing the diverse knowledge of culture, healing, and wellness (Duran, 2006; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

Cultural safety is imperative to decolonizing social work practice (Morrisette, Mckenzie, & Morrisette, 1993). Paying attention to culture as a tool for healing is important to creating a practice that is culturally safe (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). Cultural safety is about building relationships, respecting community protocols, working alongside people, and working from a position of humility (Benett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). Engaging with Elders, knowledge keepers, and community members is an important part of creating culturally safe practice.

Overall, the literature emphasized the importance of self in social work practice. The importance of self is something that is not often taught in social work education (Sinclair, 2004). In our training we are reminded of the dangers of transference, the importance of boundaries, and the ethical issues surrounding self-disclosure. However, we are not often taught the importance of healing and decolonizing our practice. Aboriginal social work practice starts with the self. Once we know who we are and why we are doing this work we can begin to work towards decolonizing our profession and better support Aboriginal populations.

Bridging the Gap: Indigenizing Social Work Practice

Western social work theory does not fit into an Aboriginal worldview in part because social work has long been considered an extension of settler colonialism (Sinclair, 2004). For Aboriginal peoples the concepts of healing and wellness demand a strategy that is different from Western responses to mental health problems, violence, or trauma (Baskin, 2005). Therefore, as practitioners we have a responsibility to reflect on how our Western training and models of

practice relate to, or differ from, Aboriginal concepts of healing. This practice will allow us to decolonize our practice and ourselves.

The literature revealed that a number of social work practice models share similarities with Aboriginal worldviews. One of the challenges of Western social work practice is that it focuses entirely on the individual. In order to decolonize social work practice our work needs to encompass communities, families, and collectivities (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). As a result, community development theory has been identified as one of the key areas where social work practice can be useful in Aboriginal communities (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). Systems theory and ecological approaches are also useful because of their emphasis on community, relationships, and resources (Bennett, Zubryzcki, & Bacon, 2011; Collier, 2006; Sinclair, 2004). When combined with strengths-based perspectives, social workers have the opportunity to address social policy, advocacy, and social action in ways that enables communities to identify their own strengths and resources (Bennett, Zubryzcki, & Bacon, 2011). The strengths-based approach is person-centered and non-invasive. Strengths-based practice has helped non-Aboriginal social workers to maintain cultural safety in practice (Bennett, Zubryzcki, & Bacon, 2011).

Sinclair (2004) suggests that post-colonial practice is also important. Post-colonial practice, "integrates Indigenous knowledge and therapies with Euro-American models of therapy" (p. 55). While the profession of social work struggles to meet the needs of Aboriginal populations, post-colonial approaches to practice help us to bridge the gap between our Western training and Aboriginal healing practices (Sinclair, 2004). Therefore, we need to ensure that we maintain a strong awareness of self and remain attentive to culture and history in our practice.

Towards an Aboriginal Model of Social Work Practice

Many authors have asked: is there an Aboriginal model of social work practice? In their exploration of the experiences of Australian social workers, Bennett, Zubrzycki, and Bacon (2011) established a practice framework for social work with Aboriginal people and communities. The framework incorporated four central themes: (1) the journey of self, (2) knowledge, (3) values, and (4) skills. Central to the framework is the importance of culturally respectful relationships and cultural courage. The authors argue that cultural respect and cultural courage are core elements of social work with Aboriginal people. It is through the development and maintenance of culturally respectful relationships that social workers are able to undertake meaningful work with Aboriginal people. Additionally, cultural courage is the process whereby the social worker recognizes that social work is about "being with" instead of fixing (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011, p. 34). For non-Aboriginal workers, this means having an ability to understand how our cultural background, privilege, values, and assumptions impact how we relate to people (Benett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011).

Morrissette, McKenzie, and Morrissette (1993) also defined an Aboriginal model for social work practice. This model included three key principles. First, as workers we must have a full understanding and appreciation for the distinctiveness of Aboriginal worldviews and traditions. The second principle is the importance of developing an Aboriginal consciousness about the process and effects of colonialism. In other words, addressing the soul wound of intergenerational trauma as a result of colonialism (Duran, 2006). Morrissette, McKenzie, and Morrissette (1993) argue that addressing colonialism in practice is the first step to empowerment. It is important to recognize that Aboriginal people may identify and understand colonialism and culture in different ways so it is important to unpack this experience and use a client-centered

approach to practice (Morrisette, Mckenzie, & Morrisette, 1993). The final principle of Aboriginal social work practice is the emphasis on participation and empowerment. Empowerment is about regaining power and finding balance between mind, body, and spirit (Morrissette, McKenzie, & Morrissette, 1993). Both of these models apply the same themes that are common in the literature around decolonizing social work practice. Therefore, creating space for an Aboriginal approach to social work is ultimately about decolonization.

An exploration of the literature revealed that an Aboriginal model of social work involves decolonizing the self and the profession of social work. Decolonizing involves challenging or indigenizing the mainstream assumptions of social work practice. Finally, adopting an Aboriginal model for social work practice is important, especially for non-Aboriginal social workers that work with Aboriginal communities. By using an Aboriginal approach to practice we can begin to decolonize our work and better serve Aboriginal communities.

Conclusion

A review of the literature revealed that there is a distinct need for specialized support services for Aboriginal children and youth in Canada. At the micro level, school social workers have an opportunity to work towards closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap by decolonizing their practice and providing culturally safe support to Aboriginal students and their families.

At the macro level, Aboriginal educators and allies continue to lobby for more equitable education that better supports Aboriginal students and families. However, policy and funding for Aboriginal students has not been a priority for the federal government. In order to move forward, government policy must be attentive to the history and trauma caused by historically oppressive systems such as the education system is crucial (Battiste, 2013; Sinclair, 2004; Wallace, 2016).

Additionally, policy and funding must focus on reconciliation and cultural safety (Battiste, 2013; Munroe et al., 2013). As social workers, we have a responsibility to uphold social justice through our work. Social justice work includes advocating for an education system that provides equitable support to all students and creates culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal children and their families.

CHAPTER 5: THE PRACTICUM LEARNING EXPERIENCE

As discussed throughout this report, it is my overall desire to work with Aboriginal communities that led me to the Aboriginal Social Work Program. Throughout my practicum learning experience I engaged in on-going deliberative moments of reflection. By engaging in reflective practice I was able to identify my learning goals, evaluate my progress, and further develop my practice as a social worker. Reflective practice enriched my overall learning experience and allowed me to develop important skills at personal and professional levels.

In this chapter I will reflect on my overall practicum learning experience. I will begin by outlining my practicum learning goals. In the sections that follow I will unpack my learning experience and reflect on each of my learning goals.

Learning Goals

The overall goal of my practicum experience was to further develop my skills as a generalist social worker and apply these skills in an urban Aboriginal setting. I also wanted to further develop my clinical social work skills through formal and informal support. I was particularly interested in learning more about the barriers faced by Aboriginal students and their families within the school system and how to best support students using an Aboriginal approach to social work practice. My practicum learning goals and activities were initially formulated through my experiences from my first MSW Practicum and discussion with my current agency supervisor. When I was developing my learning contract, I focused on three broad themes that helped me to shape the direction of my practicum. The first theme was developing my own personal social work practice. These goals were focused on developing my skills as a generalist practitioner, using Aboriginal and trauma-informed approaches in my work, building upon my clinical skills, and engaging in advocacy and community work. The second theme was to

understand the role of a school social worker. I set goals that included understanding school district policy, engaging in ethical practice, maintaining professionalism in practice, and increasing my understanding of what it means to be a school social worker. These goals helped me to learn more about how social work fits into the education system. Finally, the third theme was reflective practice and self-care. Woven throughout my learning goals are specific outcomes that addressed my own health and wellness as a practitioner. A more detailed breakdown of my learning goals can be found at the end of this report (see Appendix A). Drawing on the three themes discussed above, for the rest of this chapter I will reflect on my overall practicum learning experience.

Developing My Practice as a Social Worker

The first theme of my learning contract focused on developing my personal practice as a social worker. During my time with the Aboriginal Social Work Program I worked at four different elementary schools across the district. I had a formal caseload of 11 students and facilitated two groups on a weekly basis. In addition to this, I also saw a number of students informally as needed. I facilitated workshops in classrooms on conflict resolution, healthy friendships, and creating safe boundaries. I also attended a number of community events as a representative of the Aboriginal Education Department. Two days a week I worked out of the Aboriginal Education district office where I had the opportunity to de-brief with my agency supervisor, catch up on paperwork, and plan for sessions. Each of these activities kept me busy and allowed me to further develop my practice as a social worker.

Guided by my learning goals, my practicum work focused on six areas of social work practice: generalist practice, trauma informed practice, Aboriginal social work practice, clinical

social work skills, crisis intervention, and collaborating with community agencies. In this section I will reflect on my learning within each of these areas of practice.

Generalist Social Work

The Aboriginal Social Work Program uses a generalist approach to social work practice (Aboriginal Education Department, 2014). Although school social workers represent a specialized field of practice, service delivery is quite diverse and so they often use a generalist approach to practice (Vroom, Stanfield, & Brazone, 1997). Generalist social workers also have strong problem solving skills because they have to evaluate the best course of action for each client they work with (Mirzahi & Davis, 2008). In my practicum I was able to provide a wide range of social work services that addressed the needs of each school in which I worked. In order to do this, I needed a broad understanding of various social work theories and practices. Having a smaller caseload meant that I had more time to evaluate the needs of each student I worked with and spend time planning activities for our sessions together. Overall, I felt that my practicum experience helped me to develop strong problem solving skills. Maintaining a small caseload meant that I had time to be thoughtful in my work. Additionally, I spent two days a week with my practicum supervisor where I was able to access case consultation and discuss different approaches to support students. I found regular de-briefs to be very helpful in developing my skills as a social worker.

As noted in Chapter Three of this report, generalist social work practice requires that social workers have a broad understanding of a number of social work theories and practices (Mirzahi & Davis, 2008). Overall, I felt that I had a wide range of experiences in my practicum that allowed me to develop my skills as a generalist social worker. Throughout my practicum activities I engaged with students one-on-one, in groups, and in classrooms. I conducted risk

assessments and contributed to safety plans for students. I advocated for students needs by providing recommendations to administrators. I provided individual counselling support both formally and informally. I conducted group sessions that provided safe spaces for students to interact. I also facilitated educational workshops in classrooms and in the community. Each of these experiences contributed to my knowledge of generalist social work practice and allowed me to develop a spectrum of social work skills.

Trauma Informed Practice

Trauma informed practice was a big part of my work within the Aboriginal Social Work Program. Having a sound understanding of trauma was imperative because a number of the students that I worked with had adverse childhood experiences. As a result, most of my work focused on creating safe spaces so that students could thrive. Additionally, I spent a lot of time educating teachers and administrators about the impacts of trauma on children and how this affects social and emotional learning.

One of the challenges I faced in my practicum was the expectation from teachers and administrators that the individual problems faced by students could be fixed almost instantly. The school environment is based on outcomes that are measured and achievable. Throughout my practicum I observed that support services were also viewed with this mentality. On my caseload, the most common issues I witnessed included trauma, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, food security, and emotional regulation. All of these issues required on-going support and stabilization. However, in some cases I found that school staff expected a quick turnaround as if behavioural issues could be solved immediately. I tried to mitigate these expectations by having conversations with administrators and teachers about trauma, the importance of safety and stabilization, oppression, and the challenges of navigating the school system for Aboriginal

families. As an ASW I focused my work on "being with" instead of fixing (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011, p. 34). By integrating Aboriginal social work and trauma informed practice into my work I was able to create a space that was culturally safe for each student. I focused on meeting each student where they were at and being attentive to their needs. Relationship building was central to creating safety for students, as was using cultural tools when necessary.

Another challenge that I faced was time. From a trauma informed lens, building safety requires long-term support (BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Council, 2013). Therefore, building relationships and working with clients for a long period of time is imperative. Because my practicum only lasted five months I often found it difficult to create safety and provide the long-term support that each child needed. In order to address the limitations of my practicum, I was honest with each student so that they were aware of our short-term relationship. I prepared students for the termination of our relationship and ensured that each student had a voice in developing recommendations for further support. Finally, I ensured that all professionals involved with each student were aware of the support plan in place after my departure.

In the first month of my practicum I had the opportunity to attend the Healing Through Learning Trauma Conference hosted by the Prince George Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The purpose of the conference was to create a trauma informed community of practitioners and service providers in Prince George (Prince George Citizen, 2016). My experience attending this conference taught me the importance of trauma informed practice in social work. When I reflect on the challenges that I faced in my practicum I recognize the inherent need for trauma informed schools. It is exciting to know that the school district is taking steps towards trauma informed practice by hosting professional development events on trauma (D. Watt, personal

communication, September 2016). However, as school social workers I believe we have an important role to play by educating administrators, teachers, and staff about the importance of safety and stabilization both inside and outside of the classroom. As noted throughout this report, the school system plays a very important role in the lives of children. When children don't have the safety they need to thrive at home, schools become a safe haven for children struggling with adverse experiences (Vroom, Stanfeild, & Brazone, 1997). Therefore, teachers, administrators, and social workers have an important role to play in helping children reach their full potential. Overall, professionals within the education system should have a sound understanding of trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

Aboriginal Social Work Practice

Working in an Aboriginal agency taught me the importance of incorporating culture into my practice and challenged me to reflect on my own power and privilege in practice in order to build authentic relationships through my work.

One of my learning goals was to engage with knowledge holders like Elders, mentors, and cultural instructors. I appreciated working out of the Aboriginal Education office two days a week because it allowed me to connect with a number of different professionals working in Aboriginal Education. I was able to engage in conversations about incorporating culture into practice and reflect on my role as an Aboriginal Social Worker. Additionally, once a month I attended Aboriginal Education department meetings, which fostered conversations around weaving Aboriginal culture and history into school district policy and practice.

I learned the most about incorporating culture into my practice from the students that I worked with. In urban settings, there are diverse populations of Aboriginal people who have varied connections to culture and identity (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000). Additionally, School

District 57 requires families to self-identify as Aboriginal (Aboriginal Education Department, 2015). Therefore, I worked with children from various nations and backgrounds. The students I worked with had different connections to their culture and history. Some had no connection to their culture while others were fully immersed in their traditions. The fragmented connection to culture and identity is a direct result of hundreds of years of colonization and intergenerational trauma (Duran, 2006; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000). As a practitioner, I recognized that I needed to be mindful of how I approached culture in practice because it looks different for everyone and in some cases could be a reminder of a painful history. As a social worker, I actively asked my students questions about culture, family, history, nation, clan, and relationship to the land. Asking these questions helped me gain a better understanding of how each child connects to their culture. For students who had a strong connection to culture, I would use cultural tools in our sessions together. For students who did not have a close connection to their culture I would let them direct conversations around culture and tradition. If they had questions I would do my best to find the answer for them and support them in their journey.

As discussed in Chapter Four, one of the most important aspects of Aboriginal social work practice is to decolonize our practice. As a settler, I spent a lot of time during my practicum reflecting on my position as a social worker and my privilege as a white woman. My journey of unlearning and decolonizing my practice is on going and requires constant work. Throughout my practicum I spent a lot of time listening and having conversations in order to gain a better understanding of Aboriginal worldviews and traditions. One particular conversation stood out for me. During a professional development event I had the opportunity to engage with a respected Lheidli T'enneh Elder. Throughout our conversation I shared my concerns about working with Aboriginal communities as a settler. Often I am fearful of re-traumatizing or perpetuating

colonialism through my practice and taking up space that should be filled by Indigenous people. The Elder reminded me of the importance of humility in practice. Ultimately, his advice was to go to the Elders, follow protocols, ask questions, and build authentic relationships. My experience reminded me that it is important to decolonize our systems, our practice, and ourselves as practitioners when working alongside Aboriginal populations.

Overall, my experience at the Aboriginal Social Work Program taught me the importance of incorporating Aboriginal worldviews into social work practice. Having support for Aboriginal children that is culturally safe is important because it helps create safety and empowers students. Cultural safety is particularly imperative in an urban setting where students come from a variety of different cultures and nations.

Clinical Social Work Skills

Using a generalist approach to practice meant that I drew on a number of different clinical modalities. As discussed above, trauma informed practice and Aboriginal approaches were woven into my entire practicum experience. Therefore, the majority of my work focused on creating cultural safety. However, I found that I also used elements of dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), solution focused brief therapy (SFBT), and strengths-based approaches throughout my practicum.

The most common issues addressed by the Aboriginal Social Work Program are food security, poverty, adverse childhood experiences, and emotional regulation (A. Hendrickson, personal communication, September 19, 2016). A majority of the referrals on my caseload reflected these same issues. However, I would say that most often the referrals that I received were for social, emotional, and behavioural support. Therefore, a lot of my work in the

Aboriginal Social Work Program focused on helping students developing coping strategies and tools to manage emotions.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is a short-term, goal-oriented approach to treatment that takes a practical approach to problem solving. The goal of CBT is to change thought patterns and behaviours in order to change the way people feel (Harms & Pierce, 2011). In my practicum I used elements of CBT to help students develop skills to manage emotions and behaviour. I used a number of different worksheets and activities to teach children the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

Dialectical behaviour therapy combines elements of CBT with mindfulness practice (Herbert & Forman, 2011). I often combined elements of CBT with teachings on mindfulness to help students develop tools for emotional regulation. I worked with a number of students who struggled with anger and anxiety as a result of adverse childhood experiences. Therefore, teaching coping strategies and tools for emotional regulation was very important.

Emotional regulation became a huge focus of my work throughout my practicum. The new British Columbia curriculum has placed a greater emphasis on social emotional learning at the elementary school level (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Therefore, many of the referrals I received were for students who required one-on-one support for emotional regulation. Additionally, both of the groups that I facilitated taught students emotional regulation and coping skills using CBT and mindfulness approaches. One of the benefits of this experience is that I was able to learn a lot about resources like the Zones of Regulation and Mind-Up curriculum, which are used by many schools throughout School District 57. These programs are implemented school wide to teach children emotional regulation. Both programs use CBT and mindfulness approaches to teach children the connections between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours

(Kuypers, 2011; The Hawn Foundation, 2011). Overall, as an ASW I was able to reinforce these programs through individual and group work.

One of the challenges of using CBT in my practicum work is that it does not address the social, structural, and cultural causes of human problems and oppression (Harms & Pierce, 2011). Therefore, CBT does not align with Aboriginal approaches to social work because it does not take into consideration the historic trauma of colonization. Additionally, many of the students I worked with experienced food insecurity, poverty, and trauma outside of the classroom making it difficult to use CBT as a stand-alone modality in sessions. Finally, social emotional learning programs used by the schools that I worked in did not include an Aboriginal component. Therefore, I had to adjust many of the activities that I used in order to make them relevant and accessible for the students that I worked with. Indigenous knowledge and social emotional learning complement each other very well (Wallace, 2016). In fact, there are many components of social emotional learning that are similar to Indigenous knowledge. By incorporating aspects of Indigenous knowledge into social emotional activities I was able to provide support that was attentive to Aboriginal values. In order to decolonize social emotional learning and CBT activities, they should not be attached to time or rigorous assessment. Instead, delivery should be organic. Learning should focus on mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical balance. There should be an emphasis on relational connectedness, cultural safety, and multiple ways of knowing. Therefore, incorporating Indigenous knowledge into practice should not be imposed as some students may prefer Western approaches like CBT (Wallace, 2016).

I also found that I used elements of Solution Focused Brief Therapy and a strength-based approach throughout my practicum experience. I used these approaches most often in the questions I asked and the language I used in sessions. For example, I often used scaling-

questions, exception seeking questions, and coping questions to get an idea of the student's strengths and abilities (Harms & Pierce, 2011). SFBT was also used to help students solve problems. Many students would come to session with a specific problem they were facing (ie. bullying, conflict on the playground, problems at home, etc.). In order to support the student I would use solution-focused questions to determine the best outcome. Using strength-based language was a big part of supporting each student as they navigated their problems. I spent a lot of time reminding students of their strengths and supporting them through the challenges they faced both at home and at school.

Overall, I felt that my practicum experience helped me to further develop my clinical social work skills. As mentioned previously, having time to reflect, de-brief, and discuss best practices helped me to further enhance my skills as a generalist practitioner. One of the biggest challenges I faced was learning emotional regulation curriculum and adapting emotional regulation tools to my practice. However, in the end I am grateful for this opportunity because I learned a lot about decolonizing clinical practice by incorporating Indigenous knowledge into my work.

Crisis Intervention

In addition to developing my clinical social work skills, I was also able to further develop my skills in crisis intervention. On a number of occasions I was asked to provide informal support for students experiencing crisis. The most common issue I saw was self-harm or suicidal ideation. In each case my priority was always to create safety for the student. Often I was a stranger to them so we would spend some time building rapport. I was also very transparent with students by letting them know why I was there and what my professional obligations were. Often with self-harm and suicide ideation there can be feelings of shame and embarrassment (Laye-Gindhu & Schonert-Reichl, 2004). Therefore, I would explain to students that I had an obligation

to report to their principal but tried to give them some power and voice in this process. Using my suicide intervention training and the agency risk assessment form, I would begin by conducting a risk assessment to determine the level of risk and what the next steps should be. In all of the cases that I worked on, the risk was determined to be low. I would then work with the student to create a safety plan. Next, I would report to the administrator and all school based support staff who were identified in the safety plan. In each case I followed up with the student until they felt stabilized.

When engaging in crisis intervention I used a trauma informed approach that focused first and foremost on the safety of the student. As apart of ensuring safety, I would assist the student in developing a safety plan. Additionally, if Aboriginal culture and healing were important to the student I would work with the Aboriginal Education worker to find a way for students to engage in cultural practices as a way of healing.

I have worked in high stress situations and crisis intervention in the past. However, in the school district I felt very supported in my role, because I was working with such a large team of people who were available to support the student. Nonetheless, it was apparent that school district staff should have a strong understanding of trauma informed practice. Because of the fix-it mentality previously discussed, many staff minimized the experiences of students and failed to recognize the needs of students during incidents of suicidal ideation and self-harm. My experience reminded me of the importance of having trauma informed social workers in schools in order to provide support to students and educate staff about trauma, healing, and recovery.

Collaborating with Community

In addition to working with school-based teams, I also had the opportunity to engage with the broader community during my practicum. One of the things that separate ASWs from other

school supports is that we provide off-site support and work with community agencies (A. Hendrickson, personal communication, September 2016). Throughout my practicum I had the opportunity to work off-site and connect with a number of community agencies.

I conducted home visits for a number of my students in order to build relationships with families and help them navigate the school system. Conducting home visits taught me the importance of decolonizing my practice. When entering people's homes I was mindful of my own power and privilege as a social worker and a representative of the school district. In order to address my power and privilege, I paid attention to what I wore to home visits so that I presented myself in a way that made the family feel comfortable. Additionally, I would call ahead to make sure the family was prepared for my visit. Finally, I worked hard to build relationships with families in order to provide wrap around support for each student that I worked with. Throughout this process it was imperative that I followed agency policy and ensured that I conducted my home visits in a safe manner.

I also spent some time connecting with community agencies. Some of the students on my caseload required support from agencies outside of the school district. As a result, I had to connect with agencies and often provided transportation for students. Working with the broader community allowed me to gain a better understanding of services available in the Prince George area. Additionally, I was able to educate community agencies about the services available through the Aboriginal Social Work Program.

Finally, on a number of occasions I had the opportunity to volunteer at School District 57 events within the community. I participated in Orange Shirt Day on September 30th, to raise awareness about the residential school experience. I co-facilitated a workshop during the Winter Wellness event at the Prince George Native Friendship Center and I provided counselling

support at a student screening of an anti-bullying film. These events reminded me of the presence that the Aboriginal Education Department has within the community of Prince George.

One of the things that I enjoyed most about my practicum learning experience was that it was diverse. I was able to build upon a number of different skills that allowed me to further develop myself as a generalist social worker. I also appreciated the opportunity to work with diverse people and gain new insights into social work practice. By connecting with families and community agencies throughout my practicum I learned the importance of collaboration and professionalism in practice. These experiences helped me to gain a better understanding of the support services available in Prince George. By providing informal crisis intervention I learned about the importance of working with a supportive team of helpers. Through engaging in clinical social work I had the opportunity to learn more about mindfulness and social emotional learning and further develop my communication skills. Finally, because my practicum focused on trauma informed and Aboriginal approaches to practice, I learned the most about the importance of decolonizing practice and creating safety and stabilization. In the end, all of these experiences helped me to develop my personal practice as a social worker.

Understanding the Role of a School Social Worker

A big part of my practicum learning experience and the second of my learning contract themes was shifting my mindset from that of a community-based social worker to working within a specific system as a school social worker. School social work involved learning an entirely new agency structure and understanding a new set of policies and best practices. Working in a setting that was new to me was a goal of my practicum experience.

Reflections on Structural Social Work

I spent the first few weeks of my practicum reviewing agency policy and processes. During this time I also had the opportunity to shadow two experienced ASWs to see how school district policy is put into practice. Through conversations with the ASW team I began to reflect on the importance of structural social work in the school environment. After all, the school district is a specific system that exists within the larger education system. Additionally, school social workers work primarily from a systems perspective in order to understand the student in their personal environment (Pardeck, 2015). Working from a systems perspective requires a broad understanding of the education system in order to assist students as they navigate the school system. Therefore, structural social work plays an important role in school social work. I began to pay closer attention to structural social work throughout my practicum experience and reflected on the importance of structural approaches for school social workers especially when working in Aboriginal education. These moments of reflection led to some important insights about incorporating structural social work into school based practice.

At the heart of social work practice is the importance of promoting social justice (George, Coleman, and Barnoff, 2010). Structural social work seeks to fundamentally transform our current inequitable and unjust society by ending all forms of oppression (George, Coleman, and Barnoff, 2010; Mullaly, 2007). By challenging the belief that the cause of individual problems lies only with individuals, structural social work recognizes that larger systems of oppression are the cause of personal problems (George, Coleman, and Barnoff, 2010). Therefore, structural social work endeavors to create transformative change within oppressive systems (Dominelli, 2003). Mullaly (2007) argues that structural social work is an important model for social workers to challenge oppression and create structural change by working inside or outside of the system.

Early on in my practicum I recognized the importance of using a structural social work lens in school social work. Structural social work is especially important when working in Aboriginal education because the education system has historically oppressed Aboriginal people (Battiste, 2013). The education system continues to perpetuate oppression today as evidenced by the large education and achievement gap that exists between Aboriginal and other students across Canada (McMahon, 2014). Therefore, school social workers require a nuanced understanding of how the education system continues to oppress Aboriginal students who experience the intergenerational impacts of colonialism in Canada.

As discussed throughout this document, one of the ways that we can begin to create change within the education system is to provide culturally safe support services to Aboriginal students and families as they navigate the education system (Battiste, 2013). Throughout my practicum experience, I began to recognize the importance of having a team dedicated to Aboriginal education within School District 57. By attending monthly department wide meetings, I was able to see the immense impact that the Aboriginal Education Department plays in challenging the oppression that exists within the education system. For example, a large focus of our meetings was taking a look at the new BC curriculum as a group and reflecting on how the Aboriginal Education Department can work with teachers and students to further indigenize the curriculum. Discussions often focused on how we can better support Aboriginal students and create more cultural safety within schools. The Aboriginal Social Work Program plays a key part in Indigenizing the curriculum by providing culturally safe social work support to Aboriginal students within the district. Within my own work, I practiced from both an Aboriginal and trauma informed lens. The purpose of practicing from this perspective was to address systemic

oppression and the barriers faced by Aboriginal students in order to support Aboriginal students in way that was culturally safe.

One of the challenges that I faced in my practicum work was using the title of social worker when working with Aboriginal families. As discussed in Chapter Four, the field of social work has a colonial history (Sinclair, 2004). Social workers have removed Aboriginal children from their homes and communities for generations causing trauma and attachment issues for many Aboriginal people (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). Many would argue that the field of social work continues to perpetuate colonialism due to the alarming number of Aboriginal children in care of the government (Trocme, Knocke & Blackstock, 2004). As a result, for many Aboriginal families the term social worker can be triggering (Sinclair, 2004). In order to address colonial histories in our work, it is important to acknowledge oppression and the impact of colonial policies on Aboriginal populations. Therefore, in my practicum work I spent a lot of time in the referral process talking with families and explaining what my title, Aboriginal Social Worker, meant. These conversations helped families understand that I do not work in child welfare and instead provide in-school support. However, in some cases families were resistant to support simply because I was labeled as a social worker. My experience taught me that as social workers we still have more work to do in order to decolonize our profession and create cultural safety for Aboriginal populations.

I also found that it is important to be mindful of our own position and power as professionals working within the education system. Reflecting on power is an important way to address oppression and be structural in our own practice (Bishop, 2002). Working within the school district was sometimes difficult because I felt like I was an agent of the system and that many families were not willing to engage with me because I represented a larger oppressive

system. During phone calls and home visits I worked hard to develop authentic relationships. Developing relationships with families was difficult because I needed to maintain professional boundaries and uphold the policies of the school district while still listening to the barriers faced by Aboriginal families within the school system. Therefore, building relationships with families was imperative in order to provide culturally safe support services. I entered these relationships in a humble and respectful manner. Building authentic relationships required on-going reflection of my own power and privilege (Bishop, 2002). Furthermore, because I was working with Aboriginal populations I also had to pay attention to my own whiteness and ensure that I was creating culturally safe spaces for families to feel supported. Through building these relationships I was able to learn why families did not trust the school system and help them navigate their experience. Additionally, I was able to use my experience to educate administrators and teachers about the barriers faced by Aboriginal families within the school district.

When I began my practicum I did not expect that structural social work would become the foundation of my work with the school district. As I wrote this report and reflected on my learning experiences it became clear that structural social work was essential to the work that I did. Using structural social work in my practice reminded me that even when we work inside the system, school social workers have the opportunity to create meaningful social change.

Working Collaboratively with School Based Teams

Part of being a school social worker is working with a multi-disciplinary team. Throughout my practicum I interacted with principals, administrative assistants, Aboriginal Education workers, teachers, educational assistants, and resource teachers. Working collaboratively with many different professionals was challenging. However, the challenges that

I faced helped me to develop my skills as a professional social worker and taught me a lot about working with different leadership styles.

Working with school-based teams taught me the importance of collaboration in practice. It was helpful to know that I was not the only professional involved with each student; there were often many people there to support the student. Working for the school district meant that we weren't working in silos and we could communicate regularly to ensure that wrap around support was available for each student. Occasionally, I was asked to see students informally to do suicide risk assessments or crisis intervention. It was during these times that I was able to witness the benefits of school-based teams in action. Reporting to administrators and following specific procedures meant that safety plans were established in a timely manner to ensure that the student was safe. With so many professionals involved it is harder for children to fall through the cracks of the system. Although I only worked with elementary schools, I was able to observe how information is shared between professionals in order to ensure high risk students are identified for support as they transition from elementary to secondary school. Wrap around support is crucial when we consider the high drop out rates for Aboriginal students as they enter the high school system (Auditor General of BC, 2015; McMahon, 2014).

Working with school-based teams was helpful when collecting collateral information and establishing support for each student that I worked with. As a new social worker in the school district, it was helpful to talk with teachers and principals to get background information on new referrals. Finally, when I concluded my practicum and closed my files I was able to establish recommendations for on-going support, because I was familiar with the student's support network. As a result, Aboriginal Education workers, educational assistants, and teachers were very helpful in determining continuing support for some of my files.

Working with school-based teams had its challenges. Each of the schools I worked in throughout my practicum had very different expectations and understandings of Aboriginal social work. Each school had its own institutional culture, which was often established by the administrator and their leadership style. I noticed early on that each administrator had a different perspective on what social work is and what support for each child should look like. As a result, I had to be flexible in my practice in order to navigate the different expectations of each administrator. I learned a lot about navigating different leaderships styles and how to communicate effectively in order to advocate for my needs as a social worker as well as the needs for the students that I was working with. Additionally, because there many different support workers within schools I had to spend a lot of time with administrators and teachers explaining how my work as an Aboriginal Social Worker was different from resource teachers and Aboriginal Education Workers. These conversations became an important avenue to discuss cultural safety and Aboriginal social work support and provide some education to teachers and administrators.

The only learning goal that I did not meet throughout my practicum was attending School-Based Team meetings. I was unable to attend these meetings because they were scheduled at times when I was unavailable. However, I still feel that I had a great experience working with multi-disciplinary teams in order to provide wrap around support for each student. Working with school-based teams taught me a lot about maintaining professionalism as a social worker and being collaborative in my practice.

The school district has an important location in the lives of Aboriginal children and their families. As a school social worker I learned the importance of having social work support located directly in schools. My learning experience taught me that school social work is a

specialized field of practice, which requires the ability to work collaboratively with multidisciplinary teams. Furthermore, because school social workers aim to reduce the environmental barriers that hinder students from being successful in school it is very important to practice from a structural social work perspective that seeks to create systemic and social change.

Reflective Practice and Self-Care

The third theme of my learning contract was reflective practice and self-care. It was important to me to be intentional when shaping goals around self-care and social work practice. As social workers we have a responsibility to take care of ourselves in order to be present in our own practice (Monk, 2011). Additionally, my overall learning experience was rooted in decolonizing my practice. The process of decolonization begins with the self (Sinclair, 2004). Recognizing the importance of decolonization, I spent a lot of time reflecting, unlearning, and healing myself in order to engage in my practice in a meaningful way.

Over the course of my practicum I engaged in reflective journaling as a way to keep track of my practicum activities and make sure my goals were being met. However, reflective journaling also helped me to further develop my practice as a social worker. Ultimately, journaling helped me to become more ethical in my practice because it allowed me to step back and reflect on ethical dilemmas that I faced and solve each problem. Additionally, I was able reflect on both the challenges and successes of my work. As social workers we are often so busy dealing in darkness that we forget to celebrate the small successes in our practice. I ended each workday with journaling, which helped me to let go of the darkness and celebrate the good things that happened each day. Ultimately, engaging in reflective journaling became a form of self-care because I could process and let go of difficult sessions.

In addition to journaling, regular de-briefing and case consultation was very important to my practicum experience. I spent two days a week working out of the Aboriginal Education Department where I had the opportunity to de-brief with my supervisor. My supervisor was in charge of evaluating my practicum learning, therefore we did not engage in formal clinical supervision because it was a conflict of interest (Sloan, 1998). Instead, my supervisor and I de-briefed about high stress incidents such as crisis intervention. We also engaged in regular case consultation. These conversations helped me to gain a broader understanding of generalist practice and gain new insights into my own practice. A big focus of these discussions was on self-care and checking in to make sure I was sticking to my self-care plan. Conversations around case consultation helped me to better serve my clients because I was able to problem solve with my supervisor and determine the best way to support the students I was working with. Because I was unable to do formal clinical supervision with my supervisor, I did peer supervision with another ASW in the department. We met regularly and our discussions focused on how our work was impacting us at a personal level. Peer supervision helped me to connect self to practice and reflect on the challenges I was facing in my work.

Throughout the five months that I was at my practicum I was also working part-time. As a result I was very busy. In order to maintain balance in my work I had to be purposeful in my own self-care. I engaged in regular self-care activities that included physical activity, mindfulness, and spirituality. One of the things I appreciated about the Aboriginal social work program was the opportunity to engage in smudging ceremonies. By practicing smudging, I learned more about Aboriginal traditions and was also able to engage in these practices as a way to cleanse my spirit. Additionally, because I used a lot of mindfulness in my work with students I also found myself engaging in mindfulness practice as a form of self-care. As Sinclair (2004)

reminds us, when working with Aboriginal communities we must be authentic in our practice and walk our talk. Therefore, I spent a lot of time using the same tools I was teaching students in order to build mindfulness into my own self-care plan. I regularly engaged in meditation, breathing activities, and yoga as a way to take care of my mind, body, and spirit throughout my practicum experience. Without these activities I do not believe that I would have been able to do my job as a social worker. In the field of social work, there are high rates of burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2009). If we don't take care of ourselves we will be harmful to the people that we work with (Monk, 2011). Working in an agency that is trauma informed and engages in Aboriginal practice taught me that self-care is an integral part of social work practice.

Perhaps the biggest lesson that I learned by engaging in reflective practice and self-care is the importance of compassionate detachment. Compassionate detachment is drawn from Buddhism (Chodron, 2000). It occurs when medical professionals can sit with deep suffering and trauma and feel compassion and empathy and then walk away from the session and move forward without carrying the weight of the client's trauma (Coulehan, 1995). It is about setting boundaries at the personal and professional levels that allow us to take care of ourselves and still make appropriate judgments in our work (Coulehan, 1995). As a new social worker, compassionate detachment has been one of the most difficult skills that I had to learn. It is important to set boundaries in our work so that we can take care of ourselves and prevent burnout. Overall, engaging in reflective practice and self-care strategies helped me become more compassionately detached throughout my practicum work. However, I recognize that learning to be compassionately detached is on going and requires engaging in clinical supervision and maintaining a solid self-care plan.

Conclusion

The overall goal of my practicum was to further develop my skills as a generalist social worker and apply these skills in an urban Aboriginal setting. By maintaining a caseload and working at four different schools within the district I was able to achieve all of the learning goals that I set out for myself. The only activity that I did not engage in was attending school-based team meetings. However, I was still able to collaborate with school-based supports on a regular basis. In this chapter I summarized my learning activities and reflected on my overall experience working with the Aboriginal Social Work Program. The diverse nature of my practicum provided me with the opportunity to work with many different people in a variety of environments. I learned a lot about the role of school social workers and the importance of culturally relevant support services. Working in schools allowed me to further develop my skills as a generalist social worker. I was able to build on my skills in the area of clinical social work, trauma informed practice, Aboriginal social work, and crisis intervention. Additionally, I had the opportunity to work off-site and engage with the broader community. Working with the ASW team allowed me to engage in regular case consultation, de-briefs, and peer supervision. Overall, my practicum experience taught me the importance of reflective practice and self-care in order to maintain compassionate detachment in my practice.

Throughout my work in the school district, I learned about the barriers faced by Aboriginal children and families within the education system. Observing these barriers taught me the importance of practicing from a structural social work perspective in order to advocate for social change. In addition to this, I learned the importance of creating cultural safety in practice. When working with Aboriginal populations social workers must be attentive to Indigenous values, historic trauma, relational connectedness, and the challenges that come along with

walking in two worlds (Wallace, 2016). Therefore, in order to engage in Aboriginal social work practice decolonization is imperative. Decolonization must occur at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice.

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Drawing on my practicum learning experience with the Aboriginal Social Work Program, this report explored the role that social workers can play in closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada. The overall goal of my practicum was to further develop my skills as a social worker and apply these skills in an urban Aboriginal setting. I achieved my goals by working with the Aboriginal Education Department in School District 57. Working with Aboriginal students taught me about the barriers faced by Aboriginal families within the school system. Working in the school district taught me the importance of being structural in practice and providing culturally safe services. Ultimately, my practicum experience taught me the importance of practicing decolonization.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize this report and reflect on the broader implications of my learning to social work practice. Throughout this discussion I will explore the practical and theoretical value of this report and suggest areas for further exploration. I will begin by discussing the role that social workers can play in closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice. Next, I will explore the contributions my practicum learning experience has made to the field of social work. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by summarizing this report and reflecting on the importance of decolonizing practice.

Closing the Gap

As has been seen throughout this report, a significant education and achievement gap exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Canada (McMahon, 2014). In order to work towards closing this gap, social workers have an important role to play.

The micro level of social work is the most common site of practice. At the micro level of practice social workers engage with individuals and families (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). In order to address the Aboriginal education and achievement gap at the micro level, social workers must focus their practice on providing culturally safe support and decolonizing social work practice (Battiste, 2013). Cultural safety includes being attentive to Aboriginal values, historical trauma, the importance of relational connectedness, and the challenges of walking in two worlds (Wallace, 2016). Therefore, an Aboriginal approach to social work practice is imperative in order to address the barriers faced by Aboriginal students in the school system. School social workers have a responsibility to decolonize their own practice and reflect on how they can create cultural safety in their work. If cultural support is available Aboriginal students will have a greater chance of succeeding in school.

Mezzo social work practice deals with small to medium sized groups, communities, and systems (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). Mezzo practice offers another opportunity to work on closing the education and achievement gap in schools. School social workers can advocate for better support for Aboriginal students within schools. They also have an opportunity to educate administrators, teachers, and support staff about the barriers faced by Aboriginal populations. The mezzo level is where social workers have an opportunity to create social change. One of the biggest challenges that I faced in my practicum was working with teachers and administrators who did not understand the value of Aboriginal social work and trauma informed practice. In order to create safe environments for students both inside and outside the classroom schools need to become more culturally safe and trauma informed. Ultimately, cultural safety will create an environment where Aboriginal children can thrive.

Macro social work intervenes at a much larger level (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). At this level social workers have a responsibility to advocate for social policy change. The literature revealed that in order to close the Aboriginal education and achievement gap government policy must address the barriers faced by Aboriginal populations. Addressing these barriers includes developing more comprehensive policy and providing equal funding for Aboriginal students. As social workers we have an opportunity to advocate for change in education policy at the macro level. Ultimately, education policy should be more attentive to the unique needs and history of Aboriginal students (Battiste, 2013; Duran, 2006). Therefore, we must remain structural in our practice at the micro and mezzo levels in order to push for change at the macro level.

Throughout my practicum I learned that importance of having social workers present in schools. School social workers provide a myriad of different services that support students as they navigate the education system (CASW, 2002). Having social workers in schools is important because for many families their first connection to social work services is through the school system (Vroom, Stanfield, & Barzone, 1997). The relationship between social workers and families is especially important when working with Aboriginal populations. Throughout the duration of my practicum I learned about the importance of cultural support for Aboriginal students and their families. Providing culturally relevant support at the micro and mezzo levels of social work will help close the Aboriginal education and achievement gap. The closing of this gap has been evidenced by the increased numbers of Aboriginal students who are graduating from high school in School District 57. By creating change at the micro and mezzo levels we can begin to influence change at the macro level of social work practice. Ultimately, in order to close the Aboriginal education and achievement gap social workers must practice from a structural social work perspective that seeks to create social change both inside and outside of the system.

Contributions to Social Work Practice

My experience in the Aboriginal Social Work Program helped me to develop my skills as a generalist social worker. However, it was through reflective practice, de-briefs, and peer supervision that I was able to reflect on the broader contributions of my practicum report to the field of social work. By grounding my work in theory, policy, and practice I began to recognize the important role that Aboriginal social workers play in closing the Aboriginal education and achievement gap. This practicum report provides key insights into social work practice. This section will summarize the contributions of my work to the field of social work.

First, my practicum contributed social work practice by providing key reflections on generalist social work, Aboriginal social work, and trauma informed practice. A majority of my report focused on the importance of decolonizing social work practice and providing culturally safe social work support from the perspective of a non-Aboriginal social worker. It is my hope that these reflections will challenge non-Aboriginal social workers to be more attentive to power, privilege, and colonial histories in their work. Still, more space needs to be created for Indigenous knowledge in social work. Cultural ceremonies, stories, songs, and dances need to be valued in the same way evidence based practice is. If we fail to incorporate Indigenous knowledge in our work we continue to perpetuate colonialism in our practice. Additionally, my practicum experience revealed the need for social workers in schools not only to support students, but also to provide education to staff. Finally, this report highlighted the importance of structural social work practice when working inside the education system.

Second, this report has contributed to a growing body of literature that examines the importance of an Aboriginal approach to social work. Throughout my practicum experience I was able to reflect on the importance of providing culturally safe support to Aboriginal students.

It is clear that there is a need for an Aboriginal approach to social work because Aboriginal populations have a much different experience in systems like the school district than the rest of the population. Consequently, culturally safe support is imperative. Additionally, social work is a colonial discipline (Sinclair, 2004). Therefore, more work needs to be done to decolonize social work education and practice. The field of social work must create space for Indigenous voices in the development of policy and practice.

Third, this report has contributed to Aboriginal education policy at the local, provincial, and federal level. Throughout this document I provide key insights about the importance of culturally safe support services located directly in schools. It is my hope that this report will contribute to on-going conversations about the need for more equitable education in Canada.

Finally, my experience working with the Aboriginal Social Work Program has contributed to my personal development as a social worker. I was able to further develop my skills as a generalist social worker by engaging in clinical practice, group work, community work, and crisis intervention. I increased my understanding of Aboriginal social work practice and trauma informed care. I gained important knowledge about school social work and structural practice. I also had the opportunity to better develop my self-care and reflective practice skills. All of these experiences challenged me, forced me to unlearn, to decolonize, and to grow as a social worker.

Conclusion

The overall goal of my practicum was to further develop my skills when working with Aboriginal populations. My entire learning experience taught me the importance of decolonizing myself. I shared my journey throughout this practicum report. Overall, I learned that when working with Aboriginal populations social workers have a responsibility to create cultural

safety. Creating culturally safe spaces is impossible without unlearning and unpacking colonization and oppression. Cultural safety must happen at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice. If we are going to change the system we must first change ourselves. Therefore, as social workers we have a responsibility to decolonize our systems, our practice, and ourselves as individuals. As Justice Murray Sinclair stated, “education is what got us here and education is what will get us out” (KAIROS Canada, 2016). Therefore, in order to close the Aboriginal education and achievement gap in Canada we must first unlearn and reeducate ourselves.

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Appendix A

MSW Practicum II: Learning Contract

Student: Rebecca Tallman

Practicum Supervisor: April Hendrickson

Academic Supervisor: Heather Peters

Agency: Aboriginal Social Work Program, Aboriginal Education Department, School District No. 57, Prince George, British Columbia

Length of Placement: September 19, 2016 to February 1, 2017

Hours of Work: 8:30am – 4:30pm

Learning Goals	**Objectives & Activities**	**Monitoring/Evaluation Criteria**
Gain knowledge about School District 57's protocols, policies, procedures, programs, and interventions.	- Review policy and manuals regarding service delivery. - Become familiar with documentation used by the Aboriginal Social Work Program. - Develop effective working relationships with clients, co-workers, and supervisors.	- Follow agency policy and use proper forms and paperwork. - Ensure all monthly reports are completed and submitted on time. - Attend all required Aboriginal Education department meetings, and social work team meetings.
Increase understanding of the role of a school social worker.	- Review policy manuals and attend agency meetings. - Work directly in schools to provide services to children and families. - Work collaboratively	- Shadow ASWs and AEWs in order to learn process of service provision and how each school connects to the broader community. - Engage with school personnel and work collaboratively.

	with Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), teachers, school administration, and community agencies.	- Provide social work support in three schools within the district. - Attend School Based Team (SBT) meetings when available.
Identify as a professional social worker and conduct myself accordingly.	- Attend practicum during agreed upon hours. - Connect and collaborate with team members and community agencies. - Understand agency policy. - Maintain professional boundaries.	- Attend practicum during agreed upon dates and hours. - Meet with my practicum supervisor regularly to ensure practicum goals are being met. - Review agency policy and procedures.
Engage in ethical practice.	- Engage in on-going critical reflection of practice. - Apply ethical principals to my practice. - Attend clinical supervision.	- Maintain a journal to document my practicum experience and engage in on-going critical reflection of self and practice. - Attend regular clinical supervision. - Review BCASW Code of Ethics/apply to practice as needed.
Develop practice skills in the area of generalist social work practice.	- Review theories and practice models and how they can be applied in the context of my practice. - Attend clinical supervision. - Work directly in schools to provide support to	- Manage a supervised caseload that involves intake, assessment, treatment planning, evaluation, and closing cases. - Use effective problem solving skills to determine appropriate interventions for children and families.

	children and families.	
Effectively engage in Aboriginal social work practice by connecting with teachers, Elders, and community members.	- Collaborate with AEWs, FOCI facilitators, Elders, community members, and families to deliver services that are culturally safe. - Gain a better understanding of Aboriginal healing in social work practice. - Attend clinical supervision. - Work directly in schools to provide cultural support to children and families.	- Engage with the broader community (Elders, FOCI facilitators, AEWs) - Maintain a holistic approach to practice that incorporates the child, the family, and the community. - Provide services that include cultural components (engage with supervisor and FOCI facilitators to ensure services are delivered in a culturally safe manner). - Attend professional development to increase understanding of local culture and how it can be woven into social work practice.
Effectively incorporate trauma-informed practice into my work.	- Attend clinical supervision. - Gain a better understanding of how social issues like poverty, trauma, or food security is impacting the children I am working with. - Increase knowledge and understanding of trauma and how it impacts children.	- Attend workshops and professional development to increase understanding of trauma-informed practice. - Pay attention to impacts of trauma on children. Ensure that children are being supported both inside and outside of the classroom. - Provide education and support around trauma and its impacts on families/children.

Improve and build upon clinical social work practice and effective communication skills.	- Develop effective relationships with children and their families. - Develop effective communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal). - Increase understanding of various counselling approaches and their effectiveness in both groups and individual settings.	- Work with children formally referred to me by providing individual counselling and support. - Provide crisis intervention for informal cases as needed. - Facilitate groups grounded in clinical modalities based on school/community needs.
Work collaboratively with community agencies to provide support to clients.	- Review community resources and agencies in Prince George, BC. - Develop an effective relationship with community agencies.	- Attend case management and SBT meetings as needed. - Refer children and families to outside agency supports as needed. - Advocate for children and families as they navigate systems like RCMP, MCFD, courts, probation, etc.
Develop self-care and coping strategies to maintain mental and emotional well-being in my practice.	Engage in self-care activities regularly in order to maintain balance.	- Engage in reflective practice through journaling. - Engage in self-care activities (yoga, exercise, nature) - Engage in regular de-briefs with my supervisor particularly after a stressful case.