

RE-IMAGINING CHILD WELFARE WITH SERVICE USERS:
WHAT CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS NEED TO BE TAUGHT IN
SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

As social workers we understand that service users are the most impacted stakeholders involved in service delivery models at various agencies. When it comes to the field of child welfare, there are added barriers and complications that impact a worker's ability to develop relationships with service users. What do child welfare service users consider to be "good" social work practice, and what do they expect from their workers? This thesis will focus on the voices of those who have been most impacted by the system: those who are or have been in the care of a child welfare system. At McMaster University, a program is being initiated in partnership between the School of Social Work and various local Children's Aid Societies in Hamilton and the surrounding areas, which will explore how child welfare service users can be incorporated into the education of social work students who plan to work in the field of child welfare. This thesis will explore what individuals who are or have been youth in the care of an Ontario Children's Aid Society want to teach the students of this program before they become child welfare social workers. This expert feedback will then be incorporated into the curriculum of McMaster's program, entitled: "Preparing for Critical Practice in Child Welfare" (PCPCW), which will be carried into practice by the students who graduate from the program to become child welfare social workers.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

“... everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head... That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”

- Patrick Rothfuss

“Storytelling is about connecting to other people and helping people to see what you see.”

- Michael Margolis

The story of my path towards this thesis

I knew I wanted to be a social worker when I was eight years old, largely due to experiences that I had leading up to, during, and following that year of my life. My teenaged parents divorced seven months after I was born, and a custody battle that still occasionally seems to flare up periodically to this day ensued. I lived with my maternal grandparents for a time, until the court battle was settled and my dad was granted custody of me. My dad picked me up from my grandparents home to take me to live with him.

During access visits, I witnessed some of the dark and violent paths unhealthy relationships can take for women through my mom, and I was exposed to angry fights and another divorce between my dad and ex-step-mother (mother of my two half-brothers) while I was in their custody. Ultimately, both divorces were for the best. My parents' personalities were not compatible, and my ex-step-mother, though loving towards her own sons, was not ideal as a caregiver towards me. My dad worked away from home for days at a time, and things could get pretty dismal while I was alone with her. The only downside to this second divorce was that I'd spent years in their house, was familiar with it, and this transition would take me away from two little brothers who

I loved very much. I feared that I wouldn't see them again, and I remember that fear haunting me in the days (and years) to come.

After that divorce, there was another legal battle that ensued on the heels of the last one. I became a very hot commodity as my dad, my mom, my maternal grandparents, and my ex-step-mother were all vying for custody of and/or access to me. By this time, I was eight-years-old. I was given a children's lawyer, and he asked me to list the people I wanted to live with, in rank-order, so that he could approach them each in turn to determine where I would live. In the end, I went to live with my maternal grandparents. I felt guilty because both of my parents were heartbroken that I hadn't requested to go and live with either of them.

I learned to identify hierarchies of need between the adults in my life. Who seemed the saddest? Who seemed the most comfortable in life? I ranked these things in an effort to cope with the guilt I felt whenever I visited any of my caregivers, and to prioritize who should be given my time as things like weekends, holidays and birthdays came up.

After the legal determinations were made about custody of me, things seemed to move very fast. One second I was in a lawyer's office writing names on a piece of paper, and the next I was dropped off at my nana and poppa's house by my dad with the clothes on my back and a couple bags of personal possessions. My ex-step-mother refused to allow me to take the vast majority of my personal items (books, toys, clothes, stuffed animals - things that, as a child, I loved like they were friends) as a bargaining chip to persuade me to choose to live with her after the divorce. I was leaving a home,

my dad, my little brothers who I feared I might not see very much (if at all), my school, my friends in that neighbourhood, and nearly every possession I'd ever owned.

Things seemed to come full-circle as my dad dropped me off at my maternal grandparents' home to live with them. I developed a compilation of weird childhood illnesses such as stress-induced nosebleeds and sprints to the bathroom to be ill whenever I felt any emotion that even resembled guilt. I used to break out in cold-sweats at the idea of being left alone for any brief periods of time and put my nana through some turbulent emotional times, demanding every night that she swear she wouldn't die in her sleep and that she'd still be there in the morning. This was a nightly recitation, and was a fear borne of my sense of insecurity based on the things I'd seen and the lack of stability in my living situation which made me terrified of abandonment. It took a long time, but eventually I began to trust in the stability I had at my grandparents house, and was able to settle into normal routines.

Although I have never been in the care of the child welfare system personally, I have found many similarities between my experiences and the experiences of youth who have been in foster care. The literature features youth who have spoken out about their experiences in foster care, describing feelings such as: loss of control over their own destiny, a loss of personal possessions, a loss of connections to friends and schools, fears of abandonment, loss of siblings, and a loss of trust in relationships due to the constant turmoil of being regularly moved around (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). The more research I did for this thesis, the more I realized how much the experiences of these youth resonate with me.

Understanding this made me realize several important facts. The first is that I want to explore the voices of those who have been through similar situations as youth in the care of an Ontario Children's Aid Society (CAS). Second, I want to emphasize in this thesis that I am fully aware that my experiences and the experiences of these youth have key differences. I had a voice within the process of being moved around between family members via the family legal system, and I only moved between the homes of people who already loved me. I have never had to experience moving into the home of a stranger, and I never had to rely on a bureaucracy to fill the role of a parent. As my plan for my research is to ask youth to share pieces of their stories with me, I shared a piece of my own as well to demonstrate that I understand how challenging childhood can be without stability, without a voice to change things, and without knowing where you might end up.

My experiences are the driving force behind my decision from an early age to become a children's social worker. As I aged, this passion to work with children led me to decide that I would someday work in the field of child welfare. I completed my Bachelor of Social Work degree at McMaster, and shortly thereafter I was hired into the field of child welfare. Since I'd been planning to enter into this field for a very long time, this felt like a professional dream come true. I spent three years as a child protection worker in the intake department (the one that goes out to respond to the calls of concerns made to the agency, for those unfamiliar with the system), and I gained extremely valuable experiences that helped me to develop my confidence as a social work practitioner. Eventually, however, I started to feel that child welfare felt more like

a professional nightmare than a dream, and it has taken me some time to understand why.

I came through my Bachelor's degree with a very soft and rose-coloured vision of what it would look like to "help" people. My vision did not line up with the responsibilities I had as a protection worker in this job. I held what felt like overwhelming power over people's lives - the ability to remove children from all they had known (albeit only as a very last resort, and only when absolutely necessary for the safety of the child(ren)), and to dictate what parents had to do in order to get them back. Having been fresh out of school and not a parent myself, this grated against the families I worked with, who shared that they felt humiliated to be dictated to by trained professionals who were younger than them and had no personal experience as parents. This, coupled with the feelings of total loss of control in their own lives, made building relationships with families very complicated.

In three years, I had to apprehend children twice. In both cases, this was absolutely necessary for the safety of the child (in one case, an extreme concern regarding drug-use and criminal activity, and in the other, a very complicated case of suspicious inflicted injuries and no idea who the perpetrator was). Despite the fact that these situations were far from ambiguous in terms of needing to protect the children, the weight of having to take a crying child from all they have known while they and their families beg to remain together can cause conflicting emotions. In both cases, if there had been an option for parents to be taken into care at the same time as their children just to stay together in a safe place, I think they would have taken it.

What made the conflict I felt more challenging was the impact that individual discretion had on the outcome of a case. Differences in judgment and opinion between workers could lead to the same situation being given a different response, depending on who was looking at the file information and which supervisor was consulted. Some situations I found totally normal based on my own upbringing were viewed as terrible and awful by co-workers looking at the same information I was, and vice-versa.

The complaints I heard from service users I worked with were often the same or similar: they felt fearful of the agency's power; they felt they had no control over their situations; they felt they were not being listened to; and they felt their feedback with concerns or complaints did not matter. Families that I worked with shared that the worker they had could make the difference in whether they felt heard or not. Families described that in their experiences with the agency, some workers were good, and others were not so good. Sometimes I was told I was on the side of being not very good, and others told me I was "one of the good ones." What was it about these interactions that made my style as a social worker good to some and not so good to others? What had I done differently with these families? I began seeking feedback from service users in an effort to improve my practice: what are they looking for from me as a worker that will help them, and what do I do as a worker that makes them feel afraid of the power I have and my own professional competence?

Some families were forthcoming, and others were not interested or were fearful of the consequences that sharing their opinions might have. After all, they could tell me all the things they did not like about my practice, but they still had to work with me. The stigma of being involved with a children's aid society seemed to silence those who did

not want to speak up about their negative experiences with the system, and made it easy to disregard service users' complaints as not valid. Was there not some legitimate way that service users could have a say, a way to influence our practice, that would improve the ways we worked with people?

I started exploring returning to McMaster to complete my Master of Social Work (MSW) degree. I wanted to write about the fact that families involved with the child welfare system were given limited opportunity to actually express their opinions about child welfare workers and what good practice ought to look like from their perspective. I wanted to explore whether there was a place that service users could have a say, a chance to really influence the child welfare system, *before* students enter the field as new workers. I wanted to hear from families, but more importantly, I wanted to hear from those who had been children living in these situations. As I said, I had to apprehend two times during my three-years at the Children's Aid Society. I often wonder what those children will remember, and what they might have to say about what I could have done better, or what I might have done right, during the process of having to remove them from all they'd ever known.

This brought me to social work education and the ways in which service users voices can be incorporated into the education of social workers before they enter the field. After being accepted to the MSW program, I found that my interests were in line with an existing research project currently underway at McMaster University. Dr. Gary Dumbrill and colleagues are in the process of developing a program that will be called "Preparing for Critical Practice in Child Welfare" (PCPCW). This will be offered to undergraduate social work students at McMaster as a full-year course to teach about the

demands of child welfare. This program was initiated by the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton, and then gained support from other local agencies in Hamilton and surrounding areas, including: the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton, Brant Family and Children's Services, the Children's Aid Society of Haldimand and Norfolk, Family and Children's Services Niagara, and Family and Children's Services of the Waterloo Region. In partnership with McMaster, these local agencies are trying to address issues in service delivery that they have identified, starting with the education of new workers. The agencies are making efforts to collaborate with the school of social work at McMaster to help better prepare new workers prior to entering the field. This will include members of child welfare staff to be involved in the education and assessment of social work students in the PCPCW program, alongside academics and, ideally, child welfare service users.

Through the PCPCW research project exploring what the curriculum for prospective child welfare workers should include, focus-groups are being run for a variety of past and present service users of Children's Aid Societies to share their thoughts on what they want social work students to be taught about being protection workers, and how these students might be measured in terms of success or suitability to the program. The voices of the service users involved in these focus groups will shape the development of the curriculum and therefore influence the education of future child welfare social workers.

In starting this research, I have learned that McMaster is far from the first school to be seeking service user involvement in social work education. My literature review will go into detail regarding the history of this practice, and how service user

involvement is being incorporated into other schools of social work around the world. McMaster seems to be innovative in the fact that it is focusing on the education of *child welfare* social workers specifically, whereas most schools of social work integrate service users in a more general sense, not specific to any field of practice. Further, the schools of social work globally involved in this process do not seem to specifically recruit participants who have been in the care of a Children's Aid Society. These are two gaps in the literature that have shaped the development of my thesis topic and research focus.

McMaster's larger research questions focus on how to better prepare students for child welfare social work, seeking input from a variety of child welfare service users. For my own research, I will interview only those who have been or are youth in the care of an Ontario child welfare agency. I will ask them what experiences they have had with social workers during their time in care, and what they want social workers to know about being good social workers before they enter the field of child welfare. The term "good social worker" will be defined by the service users based on their personal opinions and experiences. The goal of hearing from these youth is to incorporate their voices into the curriculum of the PCPCW program, to shape the education of new workers, and to influence change from education to practice.

As this program is developed, it is important to consider and reflect upon the experiences of those other schools of social work around the world that have begun to incorporate this practice, and what benefits and challenges they have faced. Let this literature review be a guide for how this practice developed around the world, and draw

attention to areas that need to be explored in the development of McMaster's PCPCW program.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

The involvement of service users in social work education at the university level is not a new idea, although it is newer in a Canadian context. As such, there is little available in terms of Canadian research regarding service user involvement in academia, and therefore this literature review focuses primarily on research generated from within the United Kingdom (UK).

This literature review will be divided into four parts. The first (Part 1) will focus primarily on the global context of this practice, including its origins and the various ways this practice has been implemented, and the strengths and limitations identified within the literature regarding this practice. The second (Part 2) will focus on literature that exists regarding the study of service user feedback on what it means to be a good social worker, including what qualities and characteristics are valued most by service users, in particular service users who have been youth in the care of a child welfare agency in Ontario. The third part (Part 3) of this literature review will focus on the local efforts made by Children's Aid Societies to incorporate youth voices into changing and improving practice child welfare. Finally, I will conclude my literature review (Part 4) with a discussion of how the literature review has shaped my own research and the contributions my research will make to the existing literature.

The purpose of this literature review is to understand a) what opportunities and risks need to be considered from other schools' experiences of involving service users in

academia, and b) what service users feel social work students need to be taught and how this feedback can be incorporated into the development of the PCPCW curriculum. This will help me to shape my own research questions and objectives in completing my own interviews with service users in Ontario.

PART 1

Service user involvement in education: a brief history

The involvement of service users in social work education seems to have originated in the United States in the form of the disability rights movement: “Nothing About Us Without Us,” which began in the early 1970s and steadily gained global attention throughout the 1980s (Wikler, 1979, in Engelbrecht, Pullen-Sansfacon & Spolander, 2010). This movement triggered global change regarding the ways in which service users expected to be involved in social service development and delivery. The movement held several key values that formed the basis of their demands for change: “empowerment, human rights, independence and integration, and self-help and self-determination” (Charlton, 1998, p. 130, in Brzuzy, 1998). These principals were the motivation that led the movement against systemic oppressions that marginalize people with disabilities around the world, and the demand that any policies that would impact service users must be created with the full participation of the service users themselves (Brzuzy, 1998).

As this movement gained international attention and support, the United Nations acknowledged these demands for change by way of designating 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons (Brzuzy, 1998), and further efforts to address this oppression took place in the form of changes to various policies and legislation. Though similar

shifts likely took place globally to respond to this movement, information regarding the United Kingdom's advances towards change are predominant in the literature. As the UK seems to have been the primary global trendsetter in terms of involving service users in social work education, this literature review focuses on the development of UK policies in particular.

The first notable shift in governmental policy towards service user involvement in practice in the UK took place in 1989. The federal government of England regularly produces pre-legislative documents referred to as "White Papers," which are presented to the public to highlight the government's various plans for future legislation. These documents often include proposed Bills that the government intends to move forward at some point. In 1989, one such White Paper entitled "Caring for People" was produced by the government outlining plans for ensuring that social service agencies collaborated with service users on the delivery of services that affected them (Langan, 1990). This White Paper policy was reflected in subsequent changes made to legislation in the UK.

In 1990, the National Health Services (NHS) of England implemented the Community Care Act, which made it mandatory for the providers of social services to consult the people who seemed most likely to be impacted by the services that were provided, which included both direct service users, as well as carers who accessed services on behalf of service users. In 2001 further legislation was implemented in the form of the Health and Social Care Act, which expanded upon the ways service users were to be involved in decision-making processes, mandating that service users be "involved in and consulted on" issues that impacted the development of services and

delivery, any changes to these services, and any changes to the bodies that operated these services (Section 11, (1)) (Langan, 1990).

The Department of Health in England took this further in 2002 by mandating that universities responsible for training and educating helping professionals (ie. social workers and clinical psychologists) also comply with these changes. Beresford and Croft (2004) outlined that beginning in 2002, every institution in England that offered a qualifying program in social work was required by the Department of Health to involve service users in every aspect of their course delivery. This became an expectation that needed to be upheld in order to receive and maintain accredited status at the universities.

These legislative changes continue to have a ripple effect on the development of social work curricula globally. England's response to the disability rights movement's demands appears to have been a catalyst for changes made throughout much of the world. Service user involvement in social work education is seen in various ways in numerous countries, including (but not limited to): Sweden (Wolmesjo, 2008), Croatia (Urbanc, 2008), Australia (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2008), Ireland (Dill, Montgomery, Davidson & Guffy, 2016), Scotland (Levy, Auton, Doig, Dow, Brown, Hunter & McNeil, 2016), Canada (Watters, Cait & Funke, 2016), and South Africa (Engelbrecht, Pullen-Sansfacon & Spolander, 2010). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) has funded research regarding a holistic involvement of service users in social work education in Croatia, Slovenia and Macedonia (Radovic, Urbanc & Delale, 2008, in Engelbrecht et al., 2010), further expanding the reach of this globalized system of progressive change.

Challenges to involving service users in social work education

Although government policy and legislation rank service user involvement as a top priority, the details of how, when, which service users and why are less accessible. This limitation in terms of clarity seems to have resulted in little consistency between various schools of social work regarding how to involve service users and at what level of the education process (Levy et al., 2016; Schon, 2016; Watters, Cait & Funke, 2016). Some schools of social work involve service users at the admissions level wherein service users sit on a panel with professionals and academics to determine students' suitability for acceptance to the program (Baldwin and Sadd, 2006; Matka, River, Littlechild & Powell, 2010). Other schools involve service users in the direct in-class education of social work students, (Dill, Montgomery, Davidson & Guffy, 2016; Humphreys, 2005; Smith, 2013; Stevens & Tanner, 2006; Tyler, 2006; Waterson & Morris, 2005). The benefit of this ambiguity is that it allows schools of social work to be creative in their development of programs. The consequence includes inconsistency between the rights or responsibilities of service users within these programs, and leaves more room for issues to arise in the recruitment of service users and the specifics of program delivery within each program.

In their work, Engelbrecht et al. (2010) caution that the recruitment process of inviting service users to participate in the academic sphere can become problematic if the recruitment process is tokenistic. Gupta and Blewett (2008) consider that service users may be selected only from within groups that already reflect the values and beliefs held by the schools of social work and those staff responsible for the recruitment process. Service users who are fluent in English and are easily accessible to recruiters

may be chosen over those who are not as easy to understand or locate. Tokenism may occur if recruiters seek out individuals from marginalized groups to give the appearance of inclusion and diversity in the recruitment process, but do not provide equal opportunities between these participants and those without language barriers.

Matka et al. (2010) suggest that this form of tokenistic inclusion may be a result of government and professional bodies wanting to have control over social work education at all levels. Branfield, Beresford and Levin (2007) discuss this concern, suggesting that institutions do not always support user involvement in academics when they impose “overly strict regulations” for the sake of “setting quality standards as to the use of people from outside the institution in the teaching of students” (as paraphrased by Engelbrecht et al., 2010, p. 6). In other words, the regulations of the academy regarding lesson content and how courses are taught may cause the academic institutions and professionals to restrict or control the content being shared by service users who are invited to participate. This process of bureaucratic control and regulation is made easier when the service users involved already fit into these bureaucratic values.

The concern regarding tokenism in service user involvement in the literature has been discussed by several researchers (Brkic & Jugovic, 2009; Burrows, 2011; Campbell, 1996; Carey, 2009; Sadd, 2011), and needs to be considered in the Canadian context in terms of how recruitment will be carried out. There are several researchers who caution that those responsible for recruitment in this context must ensure that the service users most marginalized in society do not become equally marginalized in the academic sphere (Engelbrecht et al., 2010; Fitzhenry, 2008; Robinson & Webber, 2013). Engelbrecht et al. (2010) speculate that service users most likely to rely on social

services may be the hardest to reach in the community, and therefore less likely to be invited to participate in the education process. Matka et al. (2010), describe the efforts made by the University of Birmingham to address worries regarding tokenism or exclusive recruitment processes, hiring a recruiter to assess where any gaps in service user recruitment existed, and implementing strategies to diversify the range of participants to be more inclusive.

Important to note is that the university remains accountable for the education of new social workers, and the academic sphere continues to be regulated by neoliberal ideals and values regarding what education looks like and where knowledge comes from. As such, these accountability processes and a lack of increased funding may restrict the reach schools of social work have to engage a diverse range of service user participants in academics. Regulations regarding accountability and accreditation will ensure that the academic leader of social work courses remains in control of decision making processes regarding the program, which may “mitigate against true empowerment” (Humphreys, 2005; paraphrased in Robinson & Webber, 2013, p. 935). Academics will therefore be challenged to find creative ways in which to truly share power with participants in order to soften the inevitable power imbalance that will occur between academics and service users.

Partnership or censorship - can there be both?

There is little in the literature I have read providing any clear description of what service users are being asked to share with students in the classroom. Some researcher indicates that service users are asked to share their “personal experiences” of using services with students (Dill et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2016; Smith, 2013), however the

literature lacks data to suggest whether the experiences being shared are positive (where social services have helped the service user), negative (where services have failed to adequately help or created further problems for service users), or a balance of both.

There is insufficient data to formulate a clear understanding of what students are being taught by service users, or whether any bias exists in the stories being shared with students (ie. pro-social work only versus stories that present a critique of social work as a field).

The concern regarding the perpetuation in education of a binary view that social work is wholly good was raised by Margolin in her book in 1997. Margolin (1997) shares her view that social work is a field developed by social workers for social workers, each generation perpetuating the belief in social work's essential goodness as a field. This rhetoric prevents scrutiny of the means and motives of social workers, as it ensures social workers are rarely questioned as being anything but necessary and for the good of the people we serve (Margolin, 1997). There is no literature available that shares the details of what service users are asked to "teach" students from their personal experience, and therefore no indication as to whether a range of opinions are being reflected in this practice, or if students are only being taught, as Margolin (1997) suspected, about the goodness of social work and how necessary we are to service users. The voices of these service users who have a negative or angry view of social work are silenced in the literature by nature of being left out entirely.

Another form of censorship of service users discussed in the literature is with regards to feedback that service users provide to students in their role as assessors. Some research indicates that some students feel service user's use of sharing personal stories

“too personal” (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006), and others have expressed feeling that that the service users are “too harsh” in their feedback of students during evaluations (Smith, 2013). Researchers describe that this feedback can at times be devastating for students, and that the academic staff intervene in the provision of feedback to soften criticisms of students presented by service users (Dill et al., 2013; Shennan, 1998). In some ways, this is another form of monitoring and censoring the voices of service users, and reconstructing their opinions to fit with the academic’s view of what is appropriate or not. On the other hand, it can be argued that overly critical feedback of students may result in them becoming discouraged from social work as a field despite other strengths they may have. In this context, reframing service users’ voices to be delivered as constructive critiques as opposed to negative criticism may be more successful in creating a change in behaviour within the student that will benefit their developing skills. The question is whether or not this form of censorship is being exerted only in the case of service users, or if the academics and any agency professionals involved in the assessment process are open for the same monitoring and scrutiny. This is not discussed in the literature.

Given that the schools of social work and the professors they hire to run programs are ultimately responsible and held accountable for student well-being, it is expected that some level of censorship will take place. It will be a complicated process to ensure that the voices of service users are not silenced or excessively manipulated to fit the academy’s values while also ensuring that students are receiving constructive support and encouragement to improve within each course.

Cautions of service user involvement within the literature

Concerns have been posed in the literature regarding the ethics of involving service users in the education of new workers in terms of the emotional impact this may have on service users and the lack of direct benefits of involvement for the participants (Dill et al., 2016; Engelbrecht et al., 2010). Duffy, Das and Davidson (2013) also explored the ethical considerations necessary regarding the possible distress service user may experience in the re-telling of personal details before a room of students. These researchers are concerned with the emotional toll this involvement will take on service users for the enrichment of social work education and the improvement of social work as a field, despite little evidence that this involvement has any clear benefit for the service users themselves.

Some literature hails service user involvement in academics as a way to bridge gaps and create partnerships between service users and social work professionals (Gutman, Kraiem, Criden & Yalon-Chamovits, 2012; Shor & Sykes, 2002; Smith, 2013; Taylor & LeRiche, 2006). However, there are also those who caution against using the term “partnership” in this context. Baldwin and Sadd (2006) argue that there can be no true partnership between service users and academics because of the inherent power imbalance that exists within the hierarchal structure of the academy. Beresford (2013), who writes as both an academic and as a service user, feels that there continues to be an issue in academia wherein service user knowledge is not as highly valued or esteemed as traditional forms of knowledge, and therefore service user participants are not offered the same respect that social work professionals or academics may receive. The same value systems that create various forms of oppression are used to maintain

what is regarded as “expert knowledge,” which is reflected in the hierarchal structures of the academy (Beresford & Boxall, 2012). This leads to power imbalances that make true empowerment of service users impossible due to the strict parameters around education (Humphreys, 2005).

Levy et al. (2016) suggest that service user involvement in social work practice, social work education, and the field of research, continues to be shaped by neoliberal values such as managerialism and consumerism. These researchers are concerned that schools of social work are trying to fit service user involvement into neoliberal frames which value austerity and market-driven innovation over genuine empowerment and the development of authentic relationships. In the context of the UK, this is seen in the way that service user involvement is mandated by the government for accreditation, making it “a bureaucratic requirement rather than a meaningful redistribution of power” (Levy et al., 2016, p. 867). This makes genuine empowerment impossible, given that “the scope for individual service users to achieve a voice and responsibility in decision making has been within narrowly defined boundaries” (Levy et al., 2016, p. 867). These boundaries are determined by the schools of social work, and the neoliberal governments that hold power over their accredited status.

Matka et al. (2010) argue that service user involvement should be meaningful, although there is little agreement between researchers regarding what “meaningful involvement” looks like and for whom (Robinson & Webber, 2013). Robinson and Webber (2013) found that discussions of what “meaningful” means in the literature varies from an outcomes-focused lens exploring the effects of service user involvement on improving social work practice (Beresford, Lowes & Hulatt, 2005), to the

meaningful redistribution of power at the academic level to benefit service users (Beresford & Croft, 2004). Taylor and LeRiche question whether this practice has any impact on social work practice (2006), given a lack of evidence supporting this claim in the literature. Some universities focus “meaning” on encouraging one-on-one relationship development between students and service users as part of the education and evaluation process (Levy et al., 2016). Even if a standard for measuring meaningful involvement was developed, there is the question of whether and how meaningful involvement can be authentically generated within academic programs.

In terms of learning what students and service users identify as meaningful involvement, little feedback exists, and what does exist is mainly limited to the student point of view. Some students describe that the involvement of service users in their education helped them to further develop skills such as empathy for the service users (Anghel & Ramon, 2009). In the instances where service user feedback has been gathered in the literature, these are limited and one-sided, as the stories reflected are only the positive experiences of being involved at the academic level, and not negative experiences. Service users who have discussed the benefits of involvement tend to describe individual benefits such as increased self-esteem and pride in being involved. There is no literature reflective of whether service users in the field feel there has been an improvement to social work practice.

Benefits of service user involvement within the literature

The practice of involving service users at the academic level is often regarded as a means of promoting democracy, empowerment and accountability of the field of social work on an international scale (Munday, 2007). The overall assumption in much of the

literature is that service users educating social work students will enhance students' future skills in practice in a variety of ways (Branfield, 2009), and that this is an opportunity for "a new generation of social workers to gain a thorough grounding in service users ... experiences and expectations from the very start of their training and careers" (Levin, 2004, p. 2).

It is generally thought in the literature that involving service users in education teaches students early on in their careers about the importance of inclusivity (Dill et al., 2016); of building partnerships with service users (Gutman et al., 2012); and of valuing many diverse forms of knowledge (Trevithick, 2014). Rose (2009) speculates that integrating service user experience into social work education will teach students that the field accepts that "knowledge" comes from a variety of locations, each equally valued and respected, and that this will provide the foundation on which students stand as practitioners as they begin to interact with service users in the field.

Some authors feel that involving service users in social work education will "shape and cultivate an empowering and collaborative understanding of how service users ... deserve and demand the best-quality service" (Dill et al., 2016, p. 5), which students will hopefully retain and carry with them into their future practice as an ingrained sense of accountability to those they serve. Students themselves have reported that they felt they benefitted from the involvement of service users in their education, remarking that learning directly from service users of their lived experiences bridged the gap between theory and practice, helped students to understand what service users expect from their workers (Smith, 2013), and helped them to empathize with service users on a deeper level (Anghel & Ramon, 2009).

In the few cases in the literature where service users were directly involved in providing feedback about their experience of educating new social workers, the feedback was either positive or non-existent (that is, participants refused or were unable to provide feedback regarding their experiences). Between two separate studies, twelve service users reported feeling valued, heard, appreciated, and experienced increased self-esteem in connection to being involved in this process (Matka et al., 2010; Smith, 2013), which suggests that there are individual benefits to this practice for service user participants.

Gaps within the literature

The most oft-mentioned gap in the literature regarding the outcome-oriented goals for service user involvement in education is the lack of hard evidence “proving” that service user involvement in social work education results in any change in terms of practice in the field (Levy et al., 2016). Some authors have already sought to begin addressing this issue (Tanner, Littlechild, Duffy & Hayes, 2015) by conducting longitudinal studies that will gather the data needed to fill this dearth in outcome-oriented knowledge. Until more research becomes available providing such evidence, it remains unclear whether service user involvement in educating social work students results in any benefit or improvement to practice, in particular for service users who are consulted with the least in the literature regarding this process.

With regards to service user involvement at the academic level, the most noteworthy gap in the literature is the lack of substantial research that focuses on *service user feedback* of their involvement in the academic sphere. Is this a benefit to them? Does this process exploit them further? So little data exists reporting service users’

feedback of involvement that the numbers reflected in the literature cannot be taken as representative of service users as a broader population (Engelbrecht et al., 2010).

Robinson and Webber (2013) argue that schools of social work in the UK (where most of the data providing feedback comes from) are mandated to involve service users in education for the purposes of continued accreditation of the programs. Therefore, Robinson and Webber (2013) caution other schools of social work hoping to adopt this practice to consider this research from the lens that it does not provided a balanced view of this process from the service user participant's perspective.

PART 2

What service users have already told us about being good social workers

Literature that seeks service user feedback of social work practice is focused on the experiences service users have had with social workers in the field regarding what constitutes good social work practice. This form of feedback is rich in the literature, and incorporates the voices of service users who have utilized a broad range of social services. The literature highlighted in the table below (Table 1) will feature the feedback provided by adult service users of various social services. Some of this feedback incorporates the voices of those service users who have been involved with the child welfare system, but this is not the focus of much of the literature. This feedback is important to the development of the PCPCW program in understanding the expectations regarding good social work practice from a broad range of service users.

a) Adult feedback: what is good social work practice?

For the larger PCPCW research project, a broad range of child welfare service users are being interviewed, as I mentioned before, regarding their feedback about good

social work practice. Although my own research is focused on the youth perspective of this feedback, it was important to me to include a small sample from the literature regarding what service users in general want social workers to know about good social work practice. This will help me to understand if the feedback from adults and youth are similar regarding what they expect from their social workers, or if the youth feedback is unique from the feedback provided by adult service users.

I selected these studies to review in particular for several reasons. The article by Matka et al. (2016) was completed by British researchers who conducted this study to ask service users who had been involved in the education of new social workers what constituted good social work practice at the University of Birmingham, which collaborated with service user participants to determine the qualities that would be assessed in applicants to the social work program. These qualities are reflected in the table. The other articles were all pieces of research conducted by Canadian researchers. The literature review by Watters et al., (2016) was completed by researchers at Wilfred Laurier University for a similar research project seeking service user feedback in the development of the Master's level social work program curriculum. Watters et al., (2016) completed a literature review in the same areas of interest that I had been exploring and seemed appropriate. Watters et al., (2016) also completed a direct study seeking feedback from service users regarding "effective" qualities in social workers. These are both indicated below. The final two studies were completed directly with child-welfare involved service users, which is important to my research with child-welfare involved youth. Although this is by no means an exhaustive review of the available literature on service user feedback, this has helped to give me a basic

understanding of what adult service users expect from their social workers in order to compare this to the findings that come of my own study, without detracting from my research focus on youth feedback.

Table 1

Author(s)	Service user feedback
Direct research by: Matka, River, Littlechild & Powell (2016)	The best experiences were with workers who demonstrate warmth, empathy, were self-reflexive (aware of their power/impact on people’s lives), and aware of their attitudes towards the job; workers who were burnt-out knew when to leave the field and did so.
A literature review by: Watters, Cait & Funke (2016)	<p>“Service users recognize the centrality of the helping relationship in their experience with social workers (Beresford, Croft, & Adshead, 2008; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002), and attribute the success of the intervention to both the personal characteristics of the social worker, and the nature of the relationship itself” (p. 30).</p> <p>“Characteristics of effective social workers include attributes like respectfulness, flexibility, kindness, caring, empathy, and warmth; capacity for self-awareness; ethics; attitudes aligned with social work values; and strong interpersonal and communication skills (Beresford, Croft & Adshead, 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2006; Drake, 1994)” (p. 30).</p> <p>“... service users value close, comfortable, authentic, and equal relationships where social workers engage with them in a less formal or professional manner, and are often willing to go beyond their traditional role (Beresford, Croft, & Adshead, 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2006; Ribner & Knei-Paz, 2002)” (p. 30)</p>
Direct research by: Watters, Cait & Funke (2016)	The best worker qualities were: to demonstrate kindness, empathy, and compassion; to be warm and friendly; to be interested in each family and the job itself; to be passionate about helping people and know when they need to leave the job due to burn-out. Workers need to be: non-judgmental; view every story as unique; keep a positive attitude; be patient and understanding, and be respectful towards families. Workers need to: understand and appreciate barriers people face; have cultural awareness; see each new client as unique; respect service users knowledge and wisdom of systems and barriers and

	<p>use this knowledge to help them in developing and implementing plans that will impact the family. Workers need to: be honest and fair (don't select some clients to help and some to not help); be trustworthy; keep promises (even if it's just "I'll call you tonight"); and keep confidentiality.</p>
<p>Direct research by: Dumbrill & Maiter (2004)</p>	<p>Parents want to be: listened to and heard by their workers; to be invited to participate in developing plans that impact them; to be given choices and options regarding plans and interventions; and to be kept informed of what is happening with their case and with their children.</p>
<p>Direct research by: Dumbrill (2006)</p>	<p>Parents did not value: workers who used power over them rather than with them by not including them in decision-making; workers who did not listen to their opinions or concerns; workers who viewed any challenges the parents posed to the plans or the worker's methods as confrontational and a cause for increased concern about the family; workers who came into their homes with plans already formed about the family without having met them, taking away from any chance at being involved in developing plans for their children.</p> <p>Parents did value: workers who used their power to help them in various ways (accessing services, advocating, etc); workers who were encouraging and supportive of the families; workers who worked with them to develop plans; workers who demonstrated genuine interest in keeping families involved in the plans for their children.</p>

b) Themes from this literature

The value of inter-personal relationships seems to be the highest priority for service users involved in any social work field, including child welfare. When workers demonstrate traits we might look for in friends, such as friendliness, compassion, genuine caring, active listening, understanding and warmth, the cold and bureaucratic nature of the professional relationship seems to relax to the benefit of rapport and cooperation between workers and service users. These are traits that can be taught to

any social work students in order to enhance their understanding of the importance of relationships.

Of particular interest to the PCPCW program, which as mentioned before is designed to target students who plan to become child welfare social workers, is the distinction of the tone of feedback provided by child welfare involved service users. Parents within the child welfare system seem to experience a unique set of complex challenges in forming relationships with social workers in this field. The language used to describe experiences with child welfare workers was compelling, including terms such as “frightening” and “inhumane” (Dumbrill, 2006). Parents involved with child welfare social workers who did not engage them using the friendly qualities described as important by service users felt that the system was not acting in the best interests of their children (Dumbrill, 2006). This would be particularly alarming for families involved in this system given the authority workers have to remove children from the care of their families.

The fact that this sort of terminology was not used to describe social workers by individuals involved with other forms of services is interesting to note, as it sets child welfare service users apart from others. The article written by Dumbrill (2006) focused specifically on child welfare-involved families in Ontario, Canada. Service users in Dumbrill’s (2006) research indicated that the social worker’s personality determined whether or not they used power over or with families, and how the families responded to them. In addition to the importance of personality traits in good social workers, child-welfare-involved families face unique problems, including the extreme presence of power imbalances in the professional relationships between workers and families. This

suggests the importance of focusing on child-welfare-involved service users' feedback in developing programs to educate child welfare social workers, as the responsibilities of these workers and the complex power dynamics impacting professional relationships are unique to this field.

Another interesting theme from the literature is that worker burn-out is consistently discussed as an issue by service users (Matka et al., 2016; Watters et al., 2016), who are able to identify workers who are burnt-out based on their level of interest and passion in the family's lives and in their ability or willingness to help families in a timely manner. This is important because worker burn-out is separate from practice style or personality, and is indicative of agency-related issues within the workplace. This matters in the sense that burn-out is less a personality trait, and more a symptom of larger systemic issues, and therefore needs to be considered not as a fault with individual social workers, but as an area of responsibility for social service agencies who need to recognize the correlation between worker burn-out and poor social work practice, and actively try to address this.

c) Youth feedback: what do foster youth say about good practice?

In order to better understand what youth who have been or are in the care of a child welfare agency look for and expect from their workers in terms of qualities and characteristics, I explored studies that exist featuring such feedback. There were several studies that were easily accessible that provided feedback from youth that were relevant to my research, wherein youths described their experiences with their social workers while in care. However, the majority of studies exploring youth's experiences in foster

care are limited to youth’s reports on foster families in particular, and are focused on youth’s experiences of success (outcomes) after transitioning out of care.

As such, I have selected to review only those studies that provided relevant details important to my understanding of what youth expect from those individuals involved in their care. Though not an exhaustive review of all literature that seeks out the voices of foster youth, these were the few studies that specifically described the qualities and behaviours youth expected to see from staff during their time in care. These will help me to understand what themes exist in the literature that might compare to the research I conduct. The studies I reviewed are listed in order of publication date in the table below (Table 2). Please note that recent studies exploring youth feedback of their social workers while in care were not easily accessible in my literature searches, and as such the age and relevance of these studies should be considered.

Table 2

Author(s)	Youth feedback
Blueprint for Fundamental Change (2013)	Workers need to help support youth to maintain contact/relationships with family and siblings they have been removed from; workers need to have ongoing, culturally sensitive and age-appropriate conversations with youths about what is happening for them and answer the questions they have honestly; youth need to be provided with information about their lives (and in a timely manner); every agency should have an internal staff who will genuinely listen to youth’s complaints about workers and/or situations, and this feedback needs to be used in the development of policies.
Randle (2013)	Youth value certain personality traits and characteristics of those involved in their care, including being “open-minded and accepting of child’s background, tolerant, flexible, easy going, organised, consistent (enforcement of rules), deep love or concern for children, realistic, warm, child oriented, respectful, show love and affection, stable, caring, loving, fair, persistent, committed, trustworthy, able to provide reasonable discipline and set limits” (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Cameron & Maginn, 2008; Crum, 2010; Sinclair & Wilson,

	<p>2003; Whiting & Lee, 2003; in Randle, 2013, p. 5).</p> <p>Youth expect those involved in their care to have the right motivation for being in the job, including: “having the children’s welfare as the central motivation, not being motivated by the monetary allowance provided, because of a genuine love for children and young people” (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003 in Randle, 2013, p. 5-6).</p>
Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar & Trinkle (2010)	<p>Good workers spent time with them; demonstrated that they cared by checking-in with youth regularly; answered the youths’ questions honestly; introduced them to new workers prior to a sudden transition; kept youth informed about coming changes so that it was not a shock.</p>
Tilbury, Osmond & Crawford (2010)	<p>Some youth felt safer outside of their home of origin but emphasized the importance of maintaining relationships with biological families; building new relationships in foster care also important; youth have a strong desire to be “properly included” in any form of decision-making regarding their care by the workers (Delfabbro, Barber & Bentham, 2002; Fox & Berrick, 2007, as paraphrased in Tilbury et al., 2010).</p>
Unrau, Seita & Putney (2008)	<p>Workers need to learn each individual child as unique and work with them from where they are at; need to give youth time to mentally and emotionally prepare for transition (being brought into care, moving to a new foster home, transitioning out of care); workers need to understand impact of trauma of being removed from homes even when those homes were not safe; workers to be sensitive to the layers of loss youth experience (home, school, family, siblings, belongings).</p>
Morris (2007)	<p>Good social work would include keeping youth informed of all decisions regarding their care (before they are taken into care, if they have to be moved while in care, and as they are exiting care); being taught life skills such as budgeting, cooking, cleaning, banking, etc.</p>
Hochman, Hochman & Miller (2004)	<p>The best workers gave their time and attention; sat with youth to review legal/official documents regarding plans for the youths’ care; involved youth in making decisions that would impact their lives; workers respected youth and informed them of what was happening to them.</p>
Whiting & Lee (2003)	<p>Good social work should include giving youth clear information about their rights; not falsely reassuring youth about what will happen to them (eg. “everything will be fine” or, “you’ll be home soon”); youth value honesty from workers and need to have their worries and feelings validated by workers who are genuinely listening to them.</p>

d) Themes from this literature

From these studies, there are several themes that seem to emerge from many youth who have been involved in the foster care system. In particular, youth seem to describe a need for regular, consistent time and attention as well as engagement from their workers (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013; Hochman et al., 2004; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010; Unrau et al., 2008; Whiting & Lee, 2003); the need for the workers to involve youth in the decision-making processes that impact the rest of their lives (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013; Delfabbro et al., 2002 and Fox & Berrick, 2007 in Tilbury et al., 2010; Hochman et al., 2004); the need for age-appropriate and honest information to be shared with them by workers regarding why they are being brought into care, what they can expect to have happen while they remain in care, and what to expect afterwards as they transition out of care (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013; Hochman et al., 2004; Morris, 2007; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010; Whiting & Lee, 2003); as well as the need to be taught skills relevant to life such as budgeting and financing, accessing housing, and how to navigate relationships (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013; Morris, 2007).

Youth also described wanting social workers to have an understanding of the loss and trauma associated with being removed from their family and home (even if this was in their best interests), and the subsequent experiences of loss and trauma associated with frequent moves between foster homes, and frequent changes in social workers due to turnover (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013; Unrau et al., 2008). Youth described the importance of being allowed to maintain contact with their families, or at the very least to be given information regarding what is happening within their families

(Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013; Delfabbro et al., 2002 and Fox & Berrick, 2007 in Tilbury et al., 2010; Unrau et al., 2008).

Within the theme of information sharing, the youth describe that they are not told why they are brought into care, what their rights are while they are in care, any information about foster homes and caregivers prior to being dropped off at the home, and are not given information regarding why they are remaining in care or being moved between foster homes. While in care, youth described that they are not given information by caregivers or social workers regarding difficult life questions (puberty, sexual health and identity, healthy relationships, etc), and found that they were not given advance notice to mentally, physically or emotionally prepare for being moved between foster homes. This resulted in youth being moved without understanding why, and without having had sufficient time to pack any belongings that they had, resulting in them being moved without their personal possessions. As they transitioned out of care, they found a continuation of this pattern in that they were not given vital information about life skills (eg. cooking, cleaning, finding housing, budgeting), nor adequate information regarding services that they might access for support in lieu of agency and familial supports. Beyond that, youth describe that information they request regarding their childhoods, including the reasons for being brought into care and details of their time while in care, are either not accessible, or not delivered in a timely manner.

Youth described that workers who had the most positive impact on them spent physical time with the youth and paid genuine attention to them in that time. These workers helped youth to maintain relationships with biological families, and to develop relationships with child welfare staff and foster caregivers. The best workers provided

youth with honest information about what was happening to them and why, included them on decision-making processes such as reviewing court documents and service plans, and shared information with them regarding outcomes of court proceedings and the wellbeing of their biological families if direct contact was not possible. Many youth described their best experiences to be with workers with whom they could rely upon, and with whom they had developed a genuine human connection (Hochman et al., 2004). The importance of personal traits such as openness, genuine caring, warmth, etc were valued highly among youth describing their expectations of those responsible for their care during their time in the foster system (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Cameron & Maginn, 2008; Crum, 2010; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Whiting & Lee, 2003 in Randle, 2013).

Once again, themes of agency and workplace related issues arise from the feedback provided by youth, in particular the issue of worker turnover. Youth described that frequent turnover of workers resulted in further loss of relationships, and occasionally resulted in inconsistent and delayed case management on their files (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). The study completed by Randle (2013) also emphasized the importance of consistency for youth in terms of being able to feel comfortable and settled in the foster care system. This is an issue that will be discussed further in the sections below, however it is important to note the continuation of the theme that service users also hold agencies accountable for poor experiences with social workers, rather than individually blaming workers in isolation.

PART 3

Local efforts: engaging youth to create change in child welfare

Throughout the literature review, I have discussed the document called the *Blueprint for Fundamental Change* (which will be referred to thus throughout this thesis). This document was created by the Youth Leaving Care Working Group, which was established in July 2012 by the Minister of Children and Youth Services in conjunction with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013). The purpose of this document was to respond to demands for change by youth in care which were received by the Provincial Legislature in May 2012 (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013). From the findings received by the Provincial Legislature, a determination was made that: “The province of Ontario should recognize that the current system needs to fundamentally change to better prepare young people in care to succeed” (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013, p. 1). In an effort to accomplish this, it was determined that the province would “work with young people in and from care and other stakeholders to complete an Action Plan for Fundamental Change by November 2012” (Blueprint for Fundamental Change, 2013, p. 1). The Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group came in the form of the *Blueprint for Fundamental Change*. Within this document, youths (and other stakeholders) were invited to share their experiences within the child welfare system, and make recommendations based on these experiences for changes that would benefit the current and future generations of youth in care. Some of the findings of this report were discussed above.

The CAS in Brantford (Brant Family and Children's Services) utilize a series of DVD's in the training of staff, including new workers, that incorporate the views of youths who have been in the care of an Ontario child welfare agency. These DVD's include both positive feedback regarding good experiences youth have had with the agencies and social workers they have worked with, as well as critical views of the agencies and their experiences in care. Within the context of training, social workers are provided with a balanced view of both the positive and negative aspects of being raised within care in the Ontario context.

In 2005, a National Film Board (NFB) documentary was released entitled *Wards of the Crown*, following the experiences of four youth raised in the foster care system. The film is described as "a critical exposé of a system that couldn't meet their needs" on the NFB's website (accessed on June 14, 2017). This in itself was not produced by a child welfare agency, however it is a film used in the training of new workers as developed by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) in an effort to shape the education and training of new workers in the field of child welfare. According to Dr. Gary Dumbrill, the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton was responsible for organizing an event wherein the writer and director of the documentary (Andrée Cazabon) was invited to present the film to all of the local Children's Aid Societies (personal communication, 2017).

These instances serve as local examples of the ways in which the Ontario Children's Aid Societies are making efforts to ensure that new workers are trained to have a nuanced and non-binary view of the child welfare system in which they work. Margolin's (1997) argument regarding the actions of social workers to perpetuate a

wholly good self-image as a field seems to be contradicted in the context of these recent local efforts. This does not detract from the fact that social work education is not necessarily as transparent in terms of its efforts to provide a nuanced view of social work in the literature. However, these examples are indicative of the changes that local agencies are trying to make within the child welfare system, relying on service user feedback to shape the way in which the field needs to evolve, and their efforts to embrace critical perspectives of child welfare services in order to improve.

PART 4

The focus of my research

An objective of my research is to bridge the gap between service user feedback in the field and feedback in social work education. As discussed above, child welfare service user's feedback is being incorporated to some extent at local agencies in order to influence positive changes in practice. This also needs to take place in social work education. Through the PCPCW larger research project, my research will contribute to bridging this gap by seeking specifically child welfare involved service user's feedback on the child protection system, and incorporating these voices into the development and implementation of the PCPCW curriculum. As the larger PCPCW research project is seeking the feedback of a broad range of service users, inclusive of anyone who has been involved with the child welfare system in any capacity, my research is individualized in the sense that I sought only the voices of those who have been in the care of an Ontario Children's Aid Society.

My research questions include asking participants what experiences they have had with workers that were positive or negative, and what about these experiences

made them positive or negative. My questions include what traits or qualities social workers have exhibited that contributed to a positive or negative experience with them. Ultimately, my primary research question for participants is what they want social work students to be taught before they become child welfare social workers. In the sections below, I will discuss the development of this research question through my theoretical and methodological frames, and the steps taken to collect this data.

CHAPTER 3 - THEORETICAL FRAME

About the theory

Given my interest in the lived experiences of participants who have been in the care of an Ontario Children's Aid Society, rather than in the assignment of a numerical value to an issue or topic, my research is qualitative in nature. A qualitative researcher believes in the inherent value of each individual's story, including what they have experienced, how they understand these experiences, and what their stories can tell me about the topic I am interested in. There are numerous qualitative theories that can be used to shape and understand a research aim. This thesis has been shaped in particular by interpretivist theory. Within the context of an interpretivist frame, the researcher "must be deeply aware that other people's stories are of worth in and of themselves" (Seidman, 1998, p. 78). Interpretivist researchers seek a deeper understanding of a particular topic through each story shared, understanding that a variety of input from multiple participants "offer[s] something to the interviewer's experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 78), and recognizes that "no set of meanings are better or superior to others" (Neuman & Kreuger, 1997, p. 70). In other words, each participant's feedback is

important to the holistic understanding of my area of interest, and no one story has value over another. Each story contributes to the development of my understanding of the whole as a researcher.

Another important element of interpretivist research is the social construction of reality and meaning, with “the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998). As Schwandt (1998) discusses, interpretivism explores how meaning is created through the language and actions of those with lived experiences of a phenomena. As such, to understand a phenomena, one might observe and analyze the meanings generated from the interactions between members of a specific group. One way to do this may be within focus groups. In the context of my research, although focus groups were utilized, an analysis of how the participants interacted was not the focus. Rather, the participants’ collective discussion of similar experiences was intended to generate their individual responses to the research questions. Each participant’s journey was valued independently, each story contributing to my understanding of what students need to be taught and why it is important based on each individual’s experience. The shared language of the participants was analyzed to gain an understanding of themes and patterns emerging from each subjective experience to contribute to the collective understanding of what social workers need to be taught. This will be discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter.

Whiting and Lee (2003) believe that “the meanings we attach to our past events shape our present and future” (p. 289), which is why the context of each participant needs to be considered when reviewing and analyzing data. While two people can have

the same experience, the context of how they were raised, the environment in which they live, and any number of other factors, can cause them to understand the experience in very different ways.

An interpretivist researcher asks questions such as: “What do people believe to be true? What do they hold to be relevant? How do they define what they are doing?” (in Neuman & Kreuger, 1997, p. 70). Interpretivist researchers believe that “the creation of meaning and the sense of reality is only what people think it is” (Neuman & Kreuger, 1997, p. 70), which is why a diverse collection of experiences is important for a balanced interpretation of participant feedback. Neuman and Kreuger (1997) explain that the interpretive approach to research is “concerned with how people interact and get along with each other” (p. 68), and how they understand each social interaction. Therefore, this theory is most relevant to my research as it will help me to understand the meanings assigned to relationships between workers and service users, what experiences hold positive value to participants and what experiences hold negative value.

Using interpretivist theory allows researchers to gather data in areas about which not much is known through the use of qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, in Morris, 2007). Although there is existing research that outlines what service users, including foster youth, find to be positive or negative qualities in social workers in practice, there is little known regarding what these youth want to teach social work students. As such, this frame seems fitting to address this gap to understand which of the qualities outlined in the literature and by participants of my research are the qualities that need to be taught to students.

Limitations of the theory

Limitations of the interpretivist theory include the fact that it focuses perhaps too heavily on individual experience, and not enough on the environment that contributes to the situations people exist within (Neuman & Kreuger, 1997). As discussed above, a primary component of interpretivist theory is the generation of *social* construction of meaning. In the context of this thesis, the focus groups that were conducted generated rich discussion between participants as each individual's experience led to conversation between the participants about their shared experiences, the meanings that they attributed to those experiences, and the solutions they collectively believed in to address negative experiences that they had in common. However, within the context of this thesis, the focus was not on the social construction of meaning, but rather the specific input of each individual participant based on their unique journey and the practical suggestions that each participant wanted to share to contribute to the education of future child welfare workers. This inattention to the social aspect of these focus groups is a limitation in that the process of social construction in and of itself is a rich source of data which may have yielded findings regarding each group's understanding of child welfare social work and how they collectively attribute a positive or negative value to some qualities over others. These elements are captured within the thesis, but from each individual story as opposed to the collective narrative, which eliminates a discussion of the social aspect of interpretivist theory from this research.

Failing to directly challenge or attempt to change structural and systemic barriers that create oppression does not change the situation, even if the person within it may change. Critical theorists challenge that it is not enough to simply describe the

experience of a population, and that more must be done to intervene in instances of oppression to change systems and the world (Neuman & Kreuger, 1997). For example, although I am inviting service users to be heard within the context of my thesis and therefore their voices will be reflected in the development of the PCPCW curriculum, this may not create lasting systemic change in the academy or in the field if stereotypes and societal oppressions continue to exist.

A critique of interpretivism as presented by Williams (2006) is that this form of research is typically conducted by an “outsider” looking for “insider” knowledge. The very fact that I as a researcher am outside of the group the participants are part of means that regardless of how deeply I explore their accounts of their experiences, or how similar I believe my childhood situation to have been to theirs, I am not truly an “insider” and can never “know” them; therefore, I can never truly help them (Williams, 2006). Williams (2006) believes that interpretivist research is best conducted by an insider who understands the culture, language and context of the group, and therefore appreciates through shared experiences the construct of that group’s reality. Given the experiences I described in my own childhood, these provide me with a unique insight into the experiences of youth in care, despite never having been in care myself, which puts me at an advantage as a researcher on this subject.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

Within this section I will discuss the data collection process, including the sample I drew from and the reasons behind my methods of generating and analyzing the data. This section also includes a discussion regarding reflexivity during the writing of

this thesis, and some of the barriers I faced as a researcher and as an individual in completing my literature review and research.

a) Data collection

The original plan for the collection of data for this thesis was to recruit individuals to one-on-one interviews via posters that I put up at local agencies, and through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling as a result of these posters. I originally obtained approval through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) to conduct said interviews with participants who were eighteen years of age or older, who had been or currently were youth in the care of an Ontario Children's Aid Society. Unfortunately, this method of recruitment was unsuccessful, likely due to the nature of the questions being asked and the fact that there was no incentive to participate in the form of an honorarium.

Given my connection to the larger PCPCW program through my thesis supervisor, Dr. Gary Dumbrill, I was incorporated into the PCPCW research project and was added as a researcher to this larger research project. Through this connection, I gained access to the focus group interviews that were being conducted by PhD researcher Allyson Ion. I was ethically approved to review and utilize the transcripts from focus groups that had already been conducted, which included some participants who fit the requirements of my individual research criteria. In connection to this program, I also facilitated one focus group with Allyson Ion as co-facilitator, and therefore generated all of the data needed to complete my thesis. One amendment was made to the MREB approval that allowed a small number of seventeen-year-old participants to be involved in the focus group that I facilitated. Given these youth met all

other criteria, and were to turn eighteen within the year following completion of this thesis, MREB approval was granted to include these participants.

Despite the original intent to complete individual interviews, there are those who argue that focus groups are found by to be “preferable for allowing the expression of participants’ priorities” (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010, p. 48, paraphrasing Kreuger & Casey, 2000). This certainly proved to be the case, as participants were able to brainstorm with one another to generate extremely rich discussion and fantastic insight regarding what social work students need to be taught in the PCPCW program.

b) Sample

In total, my data sample consists of the voices of nine (9) participants between the ages of seventeen (17) to thirty (30), and all of whom either had been or were currently in the care of an Ontario child welfare agency. In total, three (3) participants identified as male, and the remaining six (6) identified as female. In terms of diversity, specific questions regarding the ethnic, cultural or racial backgrounds of participants were not asked, and any details shared by participants that were unique in nature to their personal lives (such as country of origin) were omitted from this thesis in order to protect the identities of each participant.

A total of three focus groups were conducted which are analyzed within my thesis, although the PCPCW larger research project will likely continue to conduct further focus groups beyond the scope of this thesis. I personally facilitated one of these three focus groups, and within that group were seven participants, all of whom precisely met the criteria for participation within my thesis aims. The two focus groups I was not involved with consisted of two participants each. One participant in each of these focus

groups met the criteria I was seeking for my specific thesis research as former or current youth in the care of an Ontario child welfare agency. Given my role as a researcher for the PCPCW project, I was able to access these focus groups, and analyze the data generated from these focus groups. I did this by identifying which participant within each focus group fit the criteria of my research as a former youth in care, and isolated the responses given by these participants within these two focus groups. As such, although their feedback was provided in the context of a focus group, these were analyzed as individual responses to the research questions. These individual responses were coded using the same analytic methods described below, and as such were enveloped into the findings within the thematic categories with the feedback from the focus group I personally facilitated.

c) Analysis

My data was analyzed following the careful review and coding of transcripts of each focus group. Common themes and patterns were identified on a story-by-story basis wherein each participant's story was carefully reviewed by myself. Key issues or descriptive language from each story was then compared with the stories of other participants in each focus group. Through this process, patterns emerged and were extracted for closer examination by categorizing these patterns into themes. As a result, several particular themes were identified from the compilation of feedback generated.

These themes were then compared to the themes identified in the literature to cross-reference whether these were reflective of what other service users have shared in the past, or if the findings from this research were unique in nature. These comparisons are discussed below in the discussion section of this thesis. This process was important

because if the findings of my research were similar or the same as those within the literature, then it would seem that the findings from my research are somewhat generalizable to the general population of service users in similar situations as the participants in these focus groups. If this is the case, it may contribute to a broader generalizability of my findings despite having only drawn data for this research from 9 participants.

d) Methodological limitations

Due to the large size of one of the focus groups and the fact that some of the topics discussed inspired passionate conversation amongst participants, there were times that the voices of each individual were indistinguishable to the transcriptionist. As such, there are no specific codings (eg. "Participant 1") assigned to each of the participants in the findings. This may have resulted in some participant's responses being included more than once in any given section, although using my own memory of the focus groups and who was speaking at which time, I have tried to eliminate this as much as possible to avoid some voices being given more time than others. In order to avoid censorship of the youth, I have altered their exact words only minimally for the sake of reader understanding by providing context for their statements. I have also included lengthy quotes from participants rather than shortening them for aesthetic reasons because it is important that the full intent of their messages are communicated to the readers in their own words.

e) Reflexivity - the making of this thesis

Initially, the introduction to this thesis was a dry statement of facts regarding McMaster and the PCPCW program, and my experience as a protection worker. I

decided to make the introduction more narrative for several reasons. I believed that this would be more interesting and engaging for readers to start out looking at something relatable, rather than immediately providing quotes and statistics. I also believed that this would better explain why I was particularly interested in concentrating my research not on the broad population of service users connected with a child welfare agency, as the PCPCW larger research project is doing, but on the specific sub-population of individuals who have been or are youth in care of such an agency.

As I have mentioned, I had hoped to complete one-on-one interviews with participants who met the criteria of my research, however this generated no interest. At first I was frustrated, wondering why nobody wanted to share their experiences for the sake of changing the education system to (hopefully) improve social work practice in the child welfare field. Then I realized that the questions I asked may be triggering, as sharing the details of positive and negative experiences with past social workers may bring back sad or frustrating memories for participants. I decided that if I was asking participants to be transparent for the sake of research, I would be equally transparent in my sharing of my own experiences, as this seemed fair.

I brought several assumptions into my research with me. The first was that I assumed that the findings from this research would correlate with those findings from the literature. As such, some of the questions that I asked participants were reflective of what I had read and already understood from the literature review. This has indeed been the case, however what surprised me was that these correlations were generated naturally in discussion. I asked participants clarifying questions regarding statements

they made that reminded me of the literature, however the themes themselves came up from the youth themselves.

The second assumption I brought with me was that the participants would discuss only their interactions with their social workers, especially since this was the specific question being asked of them. I was surprised when the participants shifted focus from “blaming the social worker,” to holding management at agencies equally accountable for negative experiences the participants have experienced. I did not expect the participants to integrate into the discussion any agency responsibility, and so this disproved my own assumptions that the findings would focus only on social workers rather than agencies.

I struggled with several considerations while writing this thesis. The first was questioning how I could share participant’s voices without appropriating their knowledge for the benefit of the school of social work. It is important to me that the participants of this study be reflected in the findings of the larger PCPCW research project, and that their voices be incorporated into the curriculum to ensure that they have had a direct influence on the education of new workers. This does seem to be the plan for the PCPCW program, and as such, I hope that what these participants want students to know will be the focus of their education, so that their courage in speaking about their experiences contributes to genuine change in the education of new workers.

Another struggle that I faced was remembering that my experience as a child protection worker is not reflective of the experiences of all workers. Although I experienced burn-out in the job due to my internal struggle with the power I held as a worker, my sense that I was not helping anyone, and the internal politics of a toxic work

environment, this is not the case for all workers. It was a challenge for me to temper my own bitterness towards my experiences and to separate this from my research. I feel that I have learned a great deal from the participants of this research, and wish that I could have had the privilege of hearing from these extremely bright, insightful and courageous individuals before I entered the field as a new worker, as I feel that their guidance may have helped me to understand that my accountability was to them, not the agency, and may have shaped my practice with their voices in mind. As one participant says (spoiler alert): “If you don’t love it, you shouldn’t be doing it.” I hope that the new generations of students will learn as much from the voices of these and other participants of the PCPCW research project, and that learning from service users will have as great an impact on their understanding of their practice as it has for me.

CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS

After the focus groups were completed and the data was collected, I reviewed the content from the transcripts of the focus groups. Through the coding process described above, I found several primary themes that emerged from the feedback provided by participants of these focus groups. One theme that is not discussed in the primary findings is the participants experiences of stigma as youth in care. This was not included as a primary theme because it emerged from within only one focus group, and was specific to youths’ experiences with peers, teachers and principals at various schools. Although this particular theme was not relevant to the overall research, it is relevant to the participants experiences as past or current youth in care, and will therefore be discussed prior to the presentation of the primary themes.

The primary themes will be presented and discussed as follows: a) access to their stories: past, present and future, b) care from and engagement with workers (care and engagement), c) involving youth in decision-making, and d) workplace and agency-related issues. These themes are listed in order of the amount of discussion generated on each topic, but should not be understood as a ranking system, as the topics discussed for the least amount of time were not necessarily seen as less important to participants.

Following a discussion of the primary themes are two additional areas of significance: the positive and negative qualities attributed to social workers by the participants of each focus group (Table 3), and what the participants want to teach students about good child welfare practice.

Youths experiences of stigma

The participants of one focus group described that as youth in care, they found that staff at schools (including principals, vice-principals, teachers, etc) asked them extremely personal questions about their lives, including why they were in care and what the agency's plans were for the youth while in care. This was met with extreme discomfort from the youth who felt that these adults were inappropriate in their questions, seeming to believe that because they were school staff they had a right to ask youth for personal information simply because they were in the care of a child welfare agency:

“[At] my old school, the principal...the vice-principal, he was really asking a lot of questions – why I was in [Agency], why I moved from [school name] public school to a Catholic school. He was keep asking, and he didn't want me to get in that [other] school. So I told him I'm in [Agency] because I didn't like want to be with my mom and everything. He was like, 'How long have you been there,' and everything. I was

like, ‘Okay, are you racist?’ I told him, ‘Are you racist because I’m black or something. You keep asking.’”

“Because although I might have a social worker, if I go to you and you’re an adult and you’re the principal or the vice-principal, I don’t want you to sit there and ask me, ‘Why are you in care?’ because that’s none of your business. If I don’t want to tell you why I’m in care, you have no right to ask me. And if you’re going to judge me based on the fact that I’m in care, that’s even worse because I’ve already had a traumatic experience, and you’re making it worse.”

“And like they just don’t care. They just go and ask like that, not thinking.”

The participants described that once they became *teenagers* in care, adults tended to assume that they were involved with risk-taking behaviours including drug and alcohol use, and the youth sensed from adults questions and comments that it is generally assumed that teenagers who are in care were brought into care due to their own difficult behaviours, resulting in them being removed from the family home:

“When other people hear kids in [Agency], they automatically think we did something bad or like we’re a drug addict or whatever. So it gets really difficult trying to like talk to teachers and stuff like that too, especially trying to talk about your foster homes or whatever. Because then they have that idea that we’re bad kids.”

Participants described that this also took place in their peer settings, causing them to feel as though they needed to explain to everyone that the families they lived with were not necessarily their biological families:

“I had to explain, oh, that person I’m living with isn’t necessarily my family. Because the last foster home I was in, she was an elderly woman. Like it’s not my grandma, it’s not my mom. This is a foster home. This is where I’m living for the time being. And then you get that stigma attached to you that you’re that kid in care. And what do you do, right?”

“Like yeah, it was like really bad. And like I moved from 3 schools. And a lot of people kept asking me, ‘Why are you moving? Are you moving with your family everything?’ I’m like, ‘It’s okay. Yeah, I’m living with my aunt,’ or whatever.”

“I had to move schools because I didn’t want to be that person who’s like, oh, yeah, I told everybody I’m leaving and now I’m not. You know, this is awkward... I had to. I was terrified that people were going to judge me because I told them I was going to move back in with my family. ”

Participants above describe that the embarrassment they felt at having to explain their care situation to adults and peers within schools was so great at times that they moved schools simply to try to start fresh without the stigma of being known as a youth in care. The only reference made to the experience of stigma in relation to the child welfare system was provided by one participant in particular, who stated the following:

“I think they, they being the families, the legal system, the organization, in general puts a lot of emphasis on the fact that we’re kids in care, not just kids.”

This participant described that the experience of being a youth in care labelled them as separate from other children and youth, and that the importance of being “in care” seemed to take priority over the fact that they were still children within the agency. Just as a mental or physical health diagnosis needs to be separated from the individual, so too do we need to separate the fact that youth are in care from the fact that they are still children within that system. The participants seemed to be asking for courtesy from school staff to respect that being “in care” does not mean that their lives are the school’s business, just as youth not living in care would not expect a principal to ask them to the office to ask them personal questions about their lives and family dynamics. We as professionals in every field need to remember that these are children, first and foremost.

Primary themes from youths experiences with social workers

a) Access to their stories: past, present and future

One of the primary issues participants described facing in their relationships with their child welfare social workers was a lack of consistent information sharing. This took shape in several different ways. Participants described that they valued a bureaucratic sharing of information from their workers regarding the details about available programs, bursaries, events, trips, etc. The provision of these details allow youth to make decisions about their own interests and what they wish to become involved with, to engage with community service activities, and to participate in services that, as some participants describe below, lead to life-changing experiences:

“[My worker] sent me the advertisement for the [leadership program] here because she knew I was doing well. She sent me along something that changed my entire life. It’s why I’m sitting here right now.”

“[My worker] sent me on a trip to Italy for 2 weeks [through a program for foster youth].”

These experiences of feeling that their lives were changed for the better would be impossible if they were not provided with the necessary information in a timely and efficient manner.

This was coupled with a much deeper discussion of the youths’ need to have the details of their personal stories made accessible to them by the agencies. Youths are not only eager to receive up to date and relevant information about their present choices through the agencies, but to fill the gaps they may have regarding where their personal stories began, how they came to be in care, why they remain in care, and what their

stories mean to them in terms of their future supports and any considerations they need to make as they transition out of care.

While the participants above described that their workers were forthcoming in providing information on exciting opportunities through the agency, others described that their workers often failed to provide them with the information they needed to know about and therefore access programs they qualified for. In the example above the participant had been fortunate enough to travel to Italy through the agency, however other participants in the focus group expressed that they were not provided any information on the trip despite meeting the same criteria for participation. Others expressed similar sentiments regarding other missed opportunities (such as trips, programs, bursaries, etc):

“I’m still waiting on my information [about certain programs].”

“Mine never did. Even tell me, nothing.”

“Like they have a bursary every year for when you go to school... It’s like, ‘Yeah, I called my worker 2 weeks ago and said, hey, you know, [another youth in care] got the information. Can I get that?’ And he didn’t get an answer. And so he called again...”

Some participants described that the information they failed to receive from their own social workers, they received through other workers in their agencies with whom they had developed a relationship:

“My workers always told me. But that’s not... Just like it’s not my personal worker. It’s usually like the [other workers]. That are like, ‘Hey, there’s a new scholarship. Do you want to apply for that?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, I do. It’s money, it’s school.’”

“But the fact that nobody...that’s the back-up worker who calls you and be like, ‘Oh, this opportunity is up. I know that you’re not on my original caseload but just so you know...’”

“It’s the fact that like we have workers like that aren’t even our worker that do more for me than I’ve had most workers do.”

One of the participants expressed that the challenge to this lack of consistent and forthcoming information is that the youth who are not being told about certain opportunities will never know they have missed them:

“How am I going to call [a worker] and say, ‘Hey, can I go to Italy?’ [The worker] is going to be like, ‘Are you crazy?’ If the opportunities are available and [we] don’t know about [them], that’s where we’re talking [about].”

Another issue regarding the sharing of information is what youth are told by social workers as they are being brought into care. This is a particularly tumultuous and confusing time for youth already, and some describe that this is made more so when social workers provide them with little or no information regarding why they are being brought into care. Participants described that there were often times that they needed to rely on their own guesswork to determine what they thought the agency planned to do regarding their care due to a lack of clear or consistent information being shared by their workers:

“It all depends on your legal status. So that when you’re a Crown Ward and you’re a permanent ward of the court, it’s not like you...you’re 90% sure you’re not going home.”

“Like my biological mom was telling me I was moving back in with her. No one was giving me any information. I’d be like, ‘Oh, what’s going on?’ Like I was a little kid. I wanted to know. And like the only information I knew was that I was moving out. So I went and told all my friends. And then like, you know, summer came by and [the workers] were like, ‘Oh, yeah, you’re not moving out.’ And like [the worker] never like told me...”

“I was kind of confused. But like for the longest time, and even like when I was really little, like there’s still a lot of stories that I don’t know. And like so if I walked up to my worker one day and went, “I want to see my file,” they’re not just going to go walk into a filing cabinet and

hand it to you. There is some preparation. They've got to go black list stuff, and they've got to figure out [what to take out]..."

Several of the participants described that their need for information about why they are being brought into care is vital for their emotional and psychological health. Participants emphasized that the stories of who they are and how they came to be in care are important pieces of information that they should not grow up without. These stories help them to understand what they have experienced and about their place in the world:

"When you're dealing with kids who are doing drugs and running away, we're just being lonely and go, 'I have no idea what's going on with my life legally. I don't belong anywhere.'"

"Like we have a file with all of our information in it. You're not allowed to see it until a certain age. I still don't know half the stuff that's in there. My worker's like, 'Oh, yeah, I'll show it to you,' hands it to me. I read some of it. And then they're like, 'Oh, yeah, that's it. That's all you get to see.' I'm like, 'But that's my story and that's my life. You can't pick and choose what I get to know.' Like it might be upsetting but that's why you're sitting with me while I'm reading it..."

"Yeah, there's a lot of information that like... I know hidden sounds like a bad word. But like it is from us... So like that bits of information when I'm asking, especially when I'm asking. Like I understand you can't tell me everything because like whatever, privacy and everything. But like you know, help me out a little bit. I'm not asking for much."

"You know, you can avoid the questions like the specifics of, oh, your mom is doing this, and blah-blah-blah. But just hey, you know... So you don't... Kids won't be so confused and they won't be as hurt. Because if a kid's just sitting in his room crying alone and going, 'Well, I'm not at my mom's anymore, and I don't know what happened...'"

Participants acknowledged that there is a need for workers to be discreet with regards to the details they share and feel that there are ways worker can share vital information in age-appropriate ways:

“I think information should be provided to us but at a simpler level. Like still tell us what’s going on. Like you know, you don’t live with your mommy because, you know, there’s stuff going on that right now you just wouldn’t understand. Just tell us. Let us know. Like you have the power to one day make us happy, and the next day like ruin our lives. So telling us that tidbit of information can make it so that like you grow up knowing what’s going on...”

“Like on one side of things, it’s I’m a kid. [But] I still want to know what happened. Like I understand you’re trying to protect me. But especially like at 17, 18, 19, 20, if you tell me, you know, oh, my mom was doing this when I was 4, it’s not going to emotionally scar me... I get it when [kids are] 4 and 5 that you need to just make those decisions [to bring them into care]. But at 11 or 12, or even like kids are coming in at 14 or 15, they’re very capable of at least having a basic understanding of how they feel and what’s going on.”

From one participant was the concern that this lack of information sharing often occurs not only throughout the duration of a youth’s file, but at the conclusion as well. One youth described the shock of being informed suddenly that her file had closed, despite feeling that she had not been given the support she needed to prepare herself for this sudden transition:

“Like yeah, she didn’t do anything. She just literally closed my file. Like without even telling me. She was like, ‘I will tell you when the court is going to close it,’ blah-blah-blah. The next time I know it, she would just bring the other workers from [community agency to meet me]... Yeah, they closed it.”

b) Care and engagement

Under this theme, participants described looking for regular time with their workers in the form of phone or text or email contact to check-in, not only when workers needed something from the youth, but just to see how youth were feeling or doing. Participants also described seeking attention from their workers, not simply by being present in the same physical space as the youth, but devoting their attention to

youth in a way that demonstrates their care for that youth, and directly interacting with and engaging with the youth in a genuine and meaningful way. There were some workers who were described by the participants to be extremely helpful in this way, and the participants found their relationships with the workers to be extremely positive as a result of their efforts to stay connected with the youth:

“Like you don't know what that little bit of time that you're spending with that person can actually do to that person... they've made such an impact that I want them to still be there. Like they're not there to work, they're there because they cared enough about me to be that important person in my life.”

“[A]ll of the workers [I've had] both like connected with me like this. You know, friendship kind of level. But also been there to like kind of guide me when like if me and my foster mom weren't getting along. So that like second support, to be like, 'Yeah, everything's going to be okay. It's life. We're going to go through it together.' So having that helping hand through life is a big...”

“So the first worker I had, like I really trusted her. She helped me a lot.”

“Like I have a worker that I have right now, and she's been there for me for God knows how many years now. And I can talk to her about anything. If something's going wrong, she was there every time I was down. If something was wrong, she'd be there in a heartbeat.”

“[Worker] actually goes with me to get lunch sometimes. And just like just for lunch. We don't talk about anything related to [Agency]. Just about life and just sitting down like friends. So there are workers like that. [Another worker] took me out for my birthday. If I move out somewhere, she'll always text me back, 'Everything's okay?' So they've been really, really great people.”

The participants above make reference to the fact that sometimes the social worker is the only person they have with whom they can form these meaningful relationships, have these important conversations. Having been removed from their families and growing apart from them results in the youth having few supports aside

from the staff of the agency that is their legal guardian. The importance of these relationships is paramount to the youth. Unfortunately, some participants did not feel quite as privileged in the attention they received from workers as those above, and described workers with whom they felt no connection, resulting in the participants feeling disappointed, isolated and frustrated with the worker:

“So I’ve seen the ones who show up, they want to be there, they listen, they care. And the ones who are like, ‘No, you’re an appointment, you’re a number... and then I’m gone.’ So like you need to want to be there. Because we can see that you don't want to be here.”

“That’s my worker right now in [community agency], she just goes and sits there and... [mimes typing]. And I’m like... Yeah, I’m just looking at her, and she’s just looking at me. I’m like, ‘I’m not saying anything.’ She’s like, ‘Um-hum.’ So that’s a problem.”

“[My] other worker I had would sit there and basically make me feel judged for whatever is going on. Which is not okay because I’m telling you something that I’m concerned about and that I’m opening up to you about. That I wouldn't do for anybody else. So if you're going to turn me down for that then how am I going to be able to open up to somebody else when I need it? Or how am I going to get help later on in the future if something’s wrong? So just the way they approach it...”

“Like I don't want to sit here and have you writing in your book while I try and tell you, you know, oh, like I’m sad this week, or this is going on. I don't want to be like that kind of person that like I’m just another case. I want to be like, yeah... Like you know, I have a worker who tells me sometimes like about her life.”

“So I want my worker to reach out sometimes and be like, ‘Hey, I know I have my own personal stuff going on right now but I wanted to make sure you’re okay,’ kind of thing. Because that is their job. That’s what they’re there for. They're there to make sure that my interests and my welfare is being taken care of. I’m not asking them to give me more money, I’m not asking them to... I’m just asking them to talk and communicate, that’s all.”

“Because with me, like every time I try to get a hold of my worker, he’s either not in the office or he’s on vacation. So it’s really hard for me to go to my appointments. And there's been times where the only time I

hear from him is when he wants something or I have an appointment. That's the only time I hear from him.”

Several participants discussed that workers tended to give more time and attention to youth who have more direct, hands-on needs, such as court-involved youth or youth who were frequently running away from foster homes. This seems to result in youth who did not exhibit risk-taking behaviours in these ways being given less time and attention from their workers:

“Like for example, my one worker who I didn't really see a whole lot, and, you know, it's because I was doing well, whatever. That's great, thanks for reassuring me I'm doing fine...”

“And in all honesty ... I'm not doing anything crazy, I don't have court dates, I'm not... Like I understand that my worker sometimes has kids who are coming in, kids who are going out, she's got to go to, you know, the other end of the province to go see a kid. I'm not... Most of the time I'm fine. I just want to know... And I understand that they're busy. But I definitely think it's important that you know...”

“If you have a lot of less issues and they have kids with more concerns, they're going to focus on those kids. Because like if I'm excelling in school, they're not going to be like, 'How's school going?' They're going to ask the kid who's not excelling in school how school's going.”

Participants described some of the benefits to having workers who were engaged, as well as the repercussions of having workers who did not seem to genuinely care about them. In addition to the emotional impact of what they have experienced being brought into care, the realization youth have that their social worker is their point of contact to their past and access to resources and information relevant to their present and future, there is an additional impact on youth who do not feel that they have any form of connection with their worker, which is expressed in particular as a sense of feeling alone and having nobody to talk to:

“You’re already going through crap. You’re already living with people you really don’t know. And then to have somebody else come into your life and just quickly do what they need to do and then take off, it’s just like, ‘Okay, hi. Like thanks...’”

“I think a big thing is that like social workers are such a big part of our lives. Like my social worker was like my mom for most of my life. And like having that big of a role in someone’s life, if you do one wrong thing, that could mess their life up for the rest... Like they’re done. Like there’s no second chances, especially with some of the ages that we come into care.”

“And as a worker, you might be the only person that a kid is coming to tell you something. Because if you’re not seeing your biological family, and you don’t get along with your foster parents, and you’re going to see your worker, and you go, ‘Hey, you know, this is on my mind,’ or, ‘Hey, this happened to me,’ even if it’s not a big like legal issue, it’s just this is how I feel, if you’re just going to shut that kid out then they’ve got nobody else to talk to.”

“And she goes on vacations a lot. She either takes vacations a lot or she goes on sick days a lot. And it’s just like if I get upset or whatever, if I have a bad day, like I can’t text her... So it gets really difficult to try to talk to someone. And not actually have a worker to be able to talk to because she’s always away.”

“They don’t realize that that once a month to me means the world. Because then if I have an issue, and I haven’t been able to get a hold of you for the past however long because they’re gone, I can tell you what’s going on, I can ask you for the things I’ve been waiting to ask you.”

“You don’t know how much that half an hour could help someone.”

Some participants shared that when their worker was tuned-out or not actively listening to them, the youth would shut down and no longer trust in that worker to share important details about what they might be experiencing inside unsafe situations.

Participants described the importance of both active listening and confidentiality.

Participants described that often workers who did not connect with them one-on-one would interview them about important details in front of parents or foster parents, resulting in the participants feeling that they could not always trust the worker to

maintain confidentiality. One participant in particular had these things to say about the importance of confidentiality:

“They always sat in our kitchen. And it would be my mom, my sister, my brother and myself. And they’d say, ‘How are things going with your brother?’ ‘Oh, they’re good.’ What am I supposed to say? I know for a fact that you’re not going to take me out of here when you leave, and you’re not going to take him out of here when you leave. So you’re leaving me here after telling you stuff? I’m going to tell you a lie. I’m going to tell you nothing has happened.”

“Or like something as simple as maybe instead of sitting at the table in front of my foster mother and asking me how things are going in this house, maybe you suggest, don’t make me suggest, you suggest we should go into a different room or go for a walk somewhere so that I’m not being look at as a bad person. I have to live in this house.”

One participant in particular described that they understand clearly defined boundaries between a worker and a friend. The participant shared their expectations with their workers with regards to their understanding of an appropriate relationship:

“They’re not a buddy, they’re not a homey, they’re not a friend. To just pick up a phone call whenever we feel like, whenever we feel lonely or feel upset, my girlfriend broke up with me. That’s not... When I look at it, that’s not what a worker is all about. Because there’s other people’s life on the line as well here that they need help and everything.”

“So like it’s a big... It’s not looking for someone to raise you, it’s looking for someone to be there when you need them. And not for like inappropriate things like, oh, yeah, I broke up with my boyfriend. It’s more like stuff that’s actually going to like seriously affect my life.”

“But I just never actually expect them to be like my mom or my dad and just give them a call and be like, ‘Hey,’ and say I’ve got this or I’ve got that. So I feel as kids, we need to understand that too, that they don’t have all the time in the world for us. They’re not our friends. So I feel like we can’t just put the burden of a friend on a worker as well, right.”

c) *Involving youth in decision-making*

The participants described that the need for information sharing does not stop with simply discussing details with them (though this is clearly an important first step), but continues in engaging and actively involving youth in decision-making processes that shape and impact their lives in care:

“[W]hen [children are] younger, you’re not going to understand a million legal terms, you’re not going to know what’s going on. But I still think it’s important to involve kids in a certain extent, to explain to them what’s going on. To ask them how they feel, is the most important. They might not have a valid opinion on how homes should move and, you know, legal things. But they should know...”

“Actually keeping us involved in what’s going on instead of just talking about it right in front of us and then writing a shit ton of stuff down, and then not having us involved, not having us understand what’s going on.”

One participant described feeling so left out of the loop on their own file information that they were unaware that they were even permitted a degree of access to their personal history:

“I didn’t even know that we had a file [about our lives in care] that we were allowed to read.”

Participants described that being involved in these vital processes will not only help them to develop an understanding of the system they live in and important life skills such as problem-solving, but that this will also help workers to understand what they want and need, and to help youth feel as though they have a voice that is heard and recognized as valid in the process:

“Like for the longest time, I heard the term, you know, in the child’s best interest. And I would read, you know, memos and, you know, ‘in the child’s best interest.’ And I’d go, ‘I wasn’t there. Nobody asked me what was in my best interest. You just assumed because you see me once a month that you know what I want? And then you make a decision and

it's not what I wanted.”

d) Workplace and agency-related issues

In the discussion regarding negative experiences with workers, issues that came up often related to workplace issues, such as high turnover rates in workers, lack of consistency in who was covering for workers while away on leave, not being informed of leaves of absence, and issues regarding high caseloads that limit the time and attention youth have from their workers. Participants acknowledged that these agency-based issues impact the connection, or lack thereof, that they have with their social workers. This should raise awareness for agencies of the fact that changing the education of social workers will not be sufficient to create significant changes to practice in the field. It is extremely important that workplaces also change to facilitate relationships between workers and service users. The responsibility lies not only in social work education but within social work agencies to ensure that service user's needs for genuine engagement with their workers are met by prioritizing relationships between workers and service users.

In the case of worker turnover, many participants described having multiple workers throughout the course of their time in care. The participants described this to be a confusing and often frustrating process:

“I grew up in care. And I had... I think was in care for like 8 years. So I had roughly like 25 different workers. A little excessive.”

“Like I have so many workers...”

“I've had 3 or 4 workers...”

“This is my third foster home and my fourth worker. Just changing for legal administrative reasons. Not like I hated them or anything. Just because when you go from, you know, coming into care, you've got a

family worker, and you've got like a short term and you've got long term workers."

"And then when [my first worker] like changed, I don't know if she finished working [at Agency], I don't know, if she finished, so then I got another worker. She didn't do anything... Then she stopped being my worker. Then another one came in like for 3 weeks. And then I had another one. I don't know why they were changing so much. And then the last one, she only helped me find...to move with [community agency], and then she disappeared."

An important subject that was discussed was communication between the worker and the youth in care. There were several participants who described frequently being unable to get a response from their workers, and rarely knowing when or for how long their workers were going to be away from the office for vacation, sick days or other various leaves of absence. There was also the issue of whether or who they should contact if they needed support or assistance during their worker's time away. These issues were shared in the following ways:

"My worker is really bad with communication. Like I texted her like one time... Three weeks ago, I texted her. I haven't heard back from her until like last week. So she's really bad at communicating."

"No, I honestly don't [know when my worker is going to be away]. Or you get an answering machine that says, 'I'm away on leave,' and it doesn't tell you how long they're going to be gone."

"My workers had a lot of personal leaves. And that's understandable. But what irritates me is when someone doesn't contact me and be like, 'She's gone. This is who you can contact.' I have to call and wait for an answering machine to tell me that they're gone. So then you have to call the back-up worker and be like, 'Hey, are they coming back any time soon or do I have to deal with you now?'"

"Like my worker, her voicemail was a week old. Didn't even tell me they went away."

"Then communicate with each other – 'This person's gone, and they don't know when they're going to come back. So when this happens, I'll be there for this many kids, and you be there for that many,' whatever the case may be. So that way I have a direct person to go to. And that's

between the workers themselves and the agency. But the workers can work through that together as well. So it's not just the agency doing the work, it's them as well.”

Another issue visible within the topic of communication was not only how workers articulate their schedules to the youth, but to one another so that when the youth call to speak to a covering worker, there is a clear and consistent plan regarding who they can talk with for each of the days that their primary worker is away from the office. This was also reflected in the ways in which workers communicated with internal departments that had an impact on youths, such as the Drives departments (note: these are teams of volunteer drivers who transport children and youth to and from important visits):

“And that’s because I think the drive department kind of gets left behind in all of it because everyone’s worried about the kids and the workers. The drivers are kind of like, “Well, I thought I was getting this kid, but you didn’t tell me it wasn’t. That’s a whole different issue that they can work on within management.”

“Because it’s not the worker’s fault that the drive department didn’t... The drive department can mess up a lot but I think the confusion is within whatever information they’re given. And I’ve had people come to the wrong address for me before because they were given the wrong address. And I’m like, ‘That’s not where I live. If you didn’t call and ask me where I live, I can’t tell you you’re wrong. And now you’re going to sit there for like 20 minutes, leave, and not get me.’

From one focus group, one participant described that their workers were extremely organized and meticulous in notifying them regarding any planned or unexpected absences, their planned return date, and what the youth should do while they were gone. The participant had this to say about their worker:

“You see, I’ve been lucky. Like my worker gives me a text before she’s leaving. Like she’ll give me a week in advance...”

“Because I mean people talk about organization and information and communication and all other important things. I don’t have those problems because my worker is super organized. And like she’s not even on desk duties this month because she had some important thing to do higher up. That she had everything prepped like a month in advance. If I have an event going on then she’s sending me an email a month before, 2 weeks before, and the day before saying...”

“Because my worker religiously follows that regimen. Like she bugs me all the time, like a week ahead, like, ‘Hey, where are you? What’s going on? Can I come see you?’”

“And so I can always get a hold of [my worker]. Even if she’s busy that day like she’ll get back to me the next day. And I hear people like, ‘Oh, I talked to my worker once this whole summer. And I tried to call them and I said I needed money and I need to go to this event.’”

“I mean for me, all the time because I have a great worker. Like absolutely no problem for the past 6 years. I can absolutely always reach her on her cell phone, her personal house phone, on the fax number, and I can reach her supervisor... I kept my own worker and I request personally that she stays my worker until I’m done with everything.”

In the final example above, the participant is describing a situation that is not always possible. Youth may request that their worker remain the same throughout their time in care, but whether this actually occurs depends on the agency’s policies and practices and whether or not that worker remains employed at the agency within the same department. It is important to note that this seems to be a unique case, and it should therefore not be assumed that every youth would be granted the same opportunity to keep the same worker if requested. Unfortunately for the other participants, the examples shared above by this one participant were met with responses of envy and disappointment, indicating that this is not the typical experience that the participants in this particular focus group:

“You see, I don't have that. And then I have to ask other workers to do things for me. And I always have to go to a different worker.”

“I wish my workers were like [that]. But they were like, ‘Okay, bye.’”

Within the topic of communication, one participant in particular made a strong argument for the importance of keeping the youth informed of any leaves of absence from the office:

“If you’re an adult and you have normal kids outside of the agency, and you’re going on vacation because your work needs you in Toronto for a week, you’re going to go, ‘Well, hey, kids, I’m going to Toronto for a week. Here’s your aunt’s phone number. Here’s some groceries. Here’s some money for everything you need to do.’ And it’s not... We’re not being sheltered, we’re not being protected, you’re just being told what’s going on, and you’re acting accordingly.”

Just as parents and caregivers who are not social workers with a caseload of children to care for inform their children when they will be away, youth in care expect the same courtesy. This participant offered a suggestion as to how to improve this, understanding that workers cannot necessarily contact each youth on their caseload by phone every time they go away:

“Even if it’s just an email. Like we’re all competent adults... But like if you shoot me an email and go, ‘Hey, you know, I’m out of the office these days, here’s your covering worker, here’s the extension.’ Or even, ‘Hi, I’m your covering worker for this week because your worker’s out of the office.’ Like we’re not dumb.”

Several participants described their feelings about high caseloads that workers carry and the impact that this has on their relationship with their workers. Not only does a high caseload divert time and attention away from each individual youth, but the wide range of needs each youth on that caseload has impacts the social worker’s ability to meet the needs of each youth:

“But I don’t think [student social workers] realize... how stressful the job is, especially with the number of kids on a caseload. Like I’ve talked to people who are like they have 30 plus kids on their caseload, and they’re not... And they’re all over the place. I mean you’ve got to go all over the province to go see these kids.”

“But I feel... Like since every caseworker’s got a lot of kids on their case, I would never expect a worker to have the time to just [I] give them a call, [and they] pick up...”

“Well, it’s tough on the worker too, right. Because if I have 30 kids and I have to reach out to all 30 kids...”

“[T]here have been times where like I have asked her to set up a meeting, and she’s like, ‘Oh, I’m too busy.’ And you see, I understand that because they are workers, they do have a lot of other caseloads. But it’s just the whole factor of they’re workers. Like they can’t... Like they shouldn’t just be like, ‘Oh, no, I can’t.’ They should be like, ‘Well, I can probably do it next week,’ or something like that.”

“And I don’t know why there’s... 30 kids on a caseload... So I don’t understand why there’s that many kids on a caseload in general.”

“And I understand that it’s not all [the worker’s] fault, between, you know, management. And when you have 30 kids on your caseload, you could be driving all day, all night trying to talk to all your kids, and you just can’t get there.”

One of the participants above also provided a suggestion for improvement regarding the issue of high caseloads with a diverse range of youth, suggesting that there be a split between low- and high-risk caseloads:

“But ... why are we as ‘low key’ kids on the same caseload? Like I mean there are workers who are definitely equipped to be dealing with kids who are running away and have all these higher risk things and just need more attention, even though they’re not bad kids. They just need somebody to look after them and help them with what they’re doing. But realistically, I don’t need somebody who’s calling me 24/7 because I don’t have a lot going on. But I just need somebody that I know that when I call them, they’re not busy or not able to call me back soon enough. So I don’t understand why we’re all on the same caseload...”

Several participants discussed a sense of frustration with regards to the importance of worker responsibility and accountability, and where the line is in terms of

what they are expected to do as mature youth, and what their workers are expected to do as paid employees:

“But we shouldn't be the ones always reaching out, saying, ‘Oh, I need to make an appointment.’ Like there are times where we should be like, ‘Oh, hey, I need to make an appointment.’ But then there's times where our workers should be like, ‘Hey, how's everything going? Can I come out to see you?’”

“I can't drive all the time to the agency to go pick up my cheque. I'm poor. I can't afford gas all the time to go out to see you. So if you can come out to see me once in awhile to pass it on, that would be great. And we can talk and we can see how things are going. But it's not my responsibility to always go there. And I'm tired of going to a worker and being like, ‘I need this,’ and they go, ‘Then you have to come get it.’ But that's not always my responsibility.”

“I shouldn't have to chase my worker to get something when they're getting paid to do that for me... I shouldn't have to go above you when you get paid to do that for me.”

“They shouldn't be given leeway to [tell youth to track down information themselves] when like they're getting paid. Like they know what they have to do. It's not my responsibility. I'm the kid. Like I have my life to worry about. I have my job to worry about. I don't have to worry about their job too.”

“Because like actually it's their responsibility. And I am in school. I don't have time to meet up with you whenever you're free. I have work, I have responsibilities I have to follow, I have bills to pay. If my cheque is not coming in on time, trust me, I'm calling absolutely everyone. So if I'm reaching out and I don't get a hold of my worker, and I have to go through someone else to get my cheque, I want my worker to follow up with me to make sure, ‘Hey, did everything go okay? Your bill's good? Are we okay? Do you want to meet sometime?’ Because they're supposed to meet us. They're supposed to talk to us.”

“She's supposed to come and be like, ‘Is your financial situation okay? Is this okay?’ At least once a month, that's all I'm asking. I'm like I don't care when it is. We can plan it, we can set it up. But if you're not willing to sit down with me or talk to me about it to plan it then how am I supposed to get an appointment?”

An important theme that emerged from discussion was the responsibility of management at the agency level to ensure good practice, and to be held accountable for ensuring good and consistent social work practice:

“I just don’t want to blame the social worker because they work so hard, most of them, on different things. I just feel like the agency is getting paid to set up these social workers. Not all the blame and the burden comes on their shoulders. Why we’re not blaming the agency for not preparing something else for her to be supported in the way that she would like to be supported?”

“But it all comes back to the management. And not putting pressure on the social workers. But the management doesn’t do their job properly and now all the burden goes to the social workers, right. So I feel like the management needs to pick up. Just get up and be like, ‘Yeah, I’m going to do this today. I’m going to do it properly.’”

“It’s better not to blame the worker, and blame the agency not being prepared and capable enough to let all the kids that are involved, let them know that, hey, this is what’s going on, if you need to apply.”

The qualities of social workers

Each participant shared some of the experiences they have had with social workers. Although the feedback they provided was clearly concentrated on the not so good experiences they have had with workers in the past, within their feedback were words and phrases that captured the qualities that they found to be helpful in workers, as well as those they found to be a hinderance to them in connecting with a particular worker. Important to note is that the positive qualities valued by service users seem to be based on the personality of the individual workers. Alternatively, many of the negative qualities described by participants seem to be specific to time constraints on the part of the worker, which suggests a workplace issue more than a personality issue. Although some of the negative qualities highlighted below are undoubtedly personal (judgmental,

etc), it is key to note that an individual social worker is assessed by service users as good or not so good based on circumstances often out of the worker’s control (time constraints, deadlines, necessary documentation, etc). The qualities discussed by participants are outlined in the table below:

Table 3

Positive Qualities	Negative qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patience. - Actually answering youth when they call or send a message, even if it seems like it is not important. - Personalizing conversations with youth. - Engaging youth. - Actively listening. - Non-judgmental. - Being understanding. - Sharing personal information that normalizes youth’s experience (eg. I’ve been through that, too/my kids are going through that). - Actually connecting with the youth on a personal level. - Be adaptable. - Accept each youth as an individual. - Advocate for youth. - Respect each youth. - Build relationships with the service users. - Have empathy. - Be culturally sensitive. - Appreciate what the youth have experienced and understand they are “products of their environment” at times, not “bad kids.” - Understand that youth are lonely and confused and want someone to show that they are cared about. - Being transparent with youth about file information. - Involving youth in decision-making processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unreachable by phone or otherwise. - Does not return calls/contact in a timely manner. - Does not listen. - Does not have regular contact with youth. - Judgmental body-language (facial expressions, etc). - Insensitivity with the questions that are asked of the youth. - Failing to put yourself in their shoes to understand the experiences they have come from. - Bringing up negative qualities or features of biological parents (eg. discussing weight issues with a youth by bringing up the biological mother’s weight issues). - Not answering youths questions about life and what to expect while in care. - Not telling youth when they’ll be away. - Failing to meet with youth for the standard once-a-month visit. - Not talking to youth in a private and confidential area. - Treating youth like “just a case” and focusing on documenting notes rather than talking to youth.

Can it be taught?

The participants were asked not only what they would want to teach students about being good child welfare social workers, but about whether this can be taught to students, and how schools of social work might measure suitability to a program. These questions were asked in the larger PCPCW research project focus groups, but there were some recommendations for change provided even when measuring student suitability was not a direct question asked of participants. The feedback regarding these questions and some recommendations made by participants will be discussed in this section.

Some service users feel that personality traits cannot be taught to new workers, and that candidates to the social work program either have the characteristics to be good social workers, or they do not (Watters, Cait & Funke, 2016). This belief is reflected by some participants in the focus groups, who quite firmly expressed their thoughts about the state of human nature:

“It’s the personality as well. Like you can do all the training in the world, and some of you are going to suck.”

“Some people as people, regardless of what field they’re in, just suck as people.”

“You can’t be an absolute crap person and be like, ‘Oh, I’m going to go work with this kid.’”

“I think like certain skills and like traits can be taught. But some, like they have to come naturally. Like you have to be a decently good person.”

“Like there's definitely some things that like you can teach someone, and then there's just some things that like you can’t rule out. Like there's always going to be that like one person that’s not very good at what they do.”

“There's you're either really good or you're just like down below. So like there's very... I don't understand how you have 2 completely different levels when you're both in the same... Yeah, you're both in the same like education and everything, and you both have very different levels.”

“There's definitely like a lot of people that I've known that have gone through [social work] programs... and it's like wow, like you...I would not let you walk my dog. Like it's horrible. And they still go through because, you know, they're smart or they're good at faking.”

“I think the one thing I wanted to say about that is that you can't really teach people how to care.”

Some expressed the belief that all social workers have the capacity to be good workers and felt that poor practice was more indicative of a worker's motivation or interpretation of educational materials, rather than their personality traits:

“It just depends on how they see the situation that they're given, use the materials they're taught. Because we all get taught the same thing. Every worker gets taught the same thing. So if you take it differently, I don't know how to change that.”

“Yeah, they have it [the skill/knowledge to be good social workers]. They're just too lazy to... They're lazy.”

Others expressed a more optimistic view when asked if good social work practice can be taught, and that although personal experience with situations that you deal with as a worker may contribute to your reaction to the case, this personal experience is not necessarily needed to be a good worker:

“It's debatable. Because if I go in, I'm going to see things differently than say a worker who knows nothing about living in care. But that doesn't mean that I'm better off [as a worker] than they are. They might be better than I am.”

“Yes. There's always a way.”

Some of the feedback provided by participants was intended for the schools of social work themselves, in some cases offering recommendations for how the curriculum should be structured. One participant even suggested that there may be a change to the standard practice of schools of social work to do mock interviews between peers:

“[I]nstead of like teaching them about the job, framing it about how to have a relationship. Where all the relationship building stuff, most important. The cultural sensitivity, you can pick that up along the way. You can't teach them on how to care, basically... But ultimately I think if there's people scoring higher on the relationship, the skills can come after. As long as they have some idea as to what they are, good.”

“It's just getting them submersed in it. Like you've had all this education so you should be fine to do it. But then I think that's where the relationship part is getting thrown...or like not being considered. Because all these students are coming in and they're getting kind of bombarded with all these tasks, tasks, tasks that they're starting to miss the reason why we do what we do.”

“But then you were so focused on the skill that you didn't consider what it would be like to actually work with that person on the other side of the table. Because you were just seeing another classmate. You have your little piece of paper. It's not really a person. So I mean I always hope that when you go and do it, like do an interview in real life, that you wouldn't look at this person as that little piece of paper in class. But I'm wondering if that's maybe what some workers will do because they're nervous and they don't really know what...like they don't want to say the wrong thing. So they start to disassociate with the fact that they're with a person. So that they're sticking with their textbook skills.”

Other suggestions were made by some youth regarding how social work students should be assessed and evaluated regarding their suitability to the program, rather than what the students need to learn:

“But they shouldn't be allowed in. There should be a way to be like you don't seem to be interested in the interest of the children. You're just into the paycheque. And that should be where they're like I don't see you working well with children, you shouldn't be here. And I see you

working well with children, you should be here. There should be a way to tell. Because if I'm talking to someone, I can tell if you're mean, if you're someone, if I was a kid, would want to talk to. And I can also tell when I don't want to talk to you. So there's a way to tell."

"[Maybe a professor should meet with the students] one-on-one. Like I know it's going to take a while but like maybe before you get in the program, you have to do something."

Some participants specifically addressed the fact that certain skills, though important to the agency, are not the most important thing in the relationship between youth and their workers. There is an emphasis again on caring and connection and an importance for balance between completing tasks and maintaining relationships. The skills a social worker has (typing, etc) do not determine whether or not they are passionate and care about their jobs:

"I think for a social worker's job, it's easy to write a case note, it's easy to check a box that yes, this person has documents or has their immunizations, etc. But you can't teach people how to be...have a relationship with their clients and how to have a professional one at that but still let them know that your best interest...or you have their best interest in mind."

"Because I know the older workers, they're not very familiar with the new computer systems and all that. I know my worker is teaching the older workers how to use the computer. But it's very difficult because especially they type with one finger, and it's very frustrating. It doesn't really mean they're not passionate, it doesn't mean they don't care."

"[B]etween doing your job and connecting with your kids, and finding a healthy medium. Because if you're all job and no relationship, you might look really successful on paper but you're not going to get along with your kids, and they're not going to like you and you're not going to like them, and you're going to hate your job. But if you're all kids and no work, it's also hard. Like if you're calling kids and be like, 'Oh, are you still with your boyfriend,' then you're not going to be able to do your job."

One participant expressed concern that more youth in care have not experienced workers who demonstrate the caring and build the connections described above, and the fact that there are not more youth in care who are involved in focus groups like these to create change within the system:

“I think there's definitely a problem. I mean we're 7 [individuals] sitting in a room. But I mean there are, I don't know, I read in the newspaper... Well, I can't remember off the top of my head but there's a lot of kids just in [City] who are in care. I mean we should have 100 people in here who all go, 'Yeah, I came into care, I learned a lot of things, I want to change things.' But there's a lot of kids who are, 'Well, I don't know what to do. Nobody's giving me any help. So I'm just, oh, I don't know, I'll just figure it out.'”

An important concluding note from the participants is that the child welfare system can and does genuinely help youth. The fact that there is room for improvement does not mean the entire system is completely broken, simply that it is flawed and that together youth, workers, and the agencies upper management levels need to continue to collaborate to develop and implement solutions for change. The final message from participants is that there are positive experiences they have had with social workers that have shaped their lives for the better, and these should be shared with the students planning to become child welfare workers as well as the ways in which they can help to create change from within the agencies they work for:

“My experience in care is actually really good. Like I can definitely say that I am where I am because of my foster mom and my workers that I've had.”

“I had great social workers.”

“[I have had workers who took the time to teach me], like showing me things that like I would have never known.”

“My experience with care has been ... pretty good and bad. But they've helped me to become the person I am today.”

“[Agency] has been really, really good to me, and I’ve learned a lot of things. I think I wouldn’t have been the person that I am today without the involvement of [Agency] and people in [Agency]. And I’ve learned a lot of skills and lessons from life.”

“[Some workers], they always find a way to do everything. They’re not my worker, and they’re there for me.”

“I just feel like it’s not about the passion stuff because if somebody wants to become a social worker and go through it, it’s a very small percentage who does it for the money because they know there’s not a lot of money involved. And they just want to be there for somebody, probably for the experiences, probably they’ve got a good heart or something along those lines.”

What do youth want to teach students - the messages to take away

That was the million-dollar question for my thesis, the meat and potatoes of the research, and the above question yielded a wealth of information. So, what take home messages do the participants want the PCPCW program to integrate into the curriculum of future child welfare social workers?

Build relationships that demonstrate caring

“Be a human, not a robot. Like be human. You know, that means a lot to us. Whether it’s telling us about your cat or dog or something small like that. Personalize it, and you’ll probably get the best response.”

“Try to make time to talk to the youth. So like the take-home message is make more time for your kids.”

“Like if you want to be a social worker, you need to care about who you’re working with... And my one recommendation I guess would be to teach them not necessarily what the job is but what is required of them in that job. In the sense that they have to value diversity, and they have to value having compassion for others, they have to be wanting to look for the positives and things like that.”

“That’s the nature of this line of work, is you’re working with people. You’re not working with data, you’re not working with policies and programs. You’re working with people. ... So why not have the whole nature of the job to be about having a human relationship.”

“[T]hey need to try to put themselves empathically but then also like concretely in their mind. You know, what have I had happen to me that is somewhat similar to this person, and how can I start to work with this person because I know that I have some sort of common ground with them? And that I could see myself in their shoes at one point. So it’s my job to make sure that I could have them be the social worker at the end of the day. You know, like have it come full circle. You shouldn’t be looking at them like they’re lesser or that they could never make it.”

“You know your whole job is to meet with them, to talk to them, and to advocate on their behalf. It’s not a surprise... You’re working with kids. And you need to worry about those kids, and you need to communicate with those kids on a regular basis.”

“Do you think you could take like, you know, 5 minutes to text me back and just be like, ‘Hey, you know, I hope everything’s going good.’ Like it’s the little stuff. Like I’m not asking for you to be there when I have a nightmare. Like I’m not asking for that kind of stuff. I’m asking for the simple, you know, a text every 3 weeks or every 2 weeks, just to be like ‘Hey, like how’s things going?’ Like generally caring.”

Be there because you want to be there

“There’s people that literally go, ‘Oh, I chose social service work because it was my last ditch option, and I didn’t really care about it.’ And I’m like that’s the whole [point] people, I don’t want to be in this field because you’re dealing with, no matter what generation of age and differences, people who have gone through something, and they need help. If you don’t want to help them, you shouldn’t be in it.”

“But I think it really is about life skills and about personality and drive to be with kids and help kids more than anything, as in going into the social work field. If you don’t love it, you shouldn’t be doing it. If you don’t love it, you shouldn’t be doing it.”

“Actually know what you’re getting into. Like don’t just get into it because it’s a last resort or don’t just get into it because you want the money or whatever. Like actually get into it because you know you’re actually going to be there for the kids, and whatnot.”

“I personally feel like there’s absolutely no way to tell if somebody’s actually interested or not interested in social service work. I mean all of us, especially myself, I’ve lied in resumes and I’ve lied in interviews, and I’ve sat down with them straight in their face and I’ve said, yeah, I’m very interested to clean up the bathrooms.”

“You would think after 4 years of university... You’ve definitely signed up for something, you’ve gone through with it. If you at any point decided, hey, maybe this isn’t the job for me, you would have switched out of it... Well, I mean to transfer programs is pretty easy. If you went, wow, you know, I don’t feel like fighting kids at 3 am and going to court every day...”

“Actually like connecting with the youth. Because like for me, like there’s times where I feel really connected with my worker, and then there’s times where I feel like my worker is just my worker because that’s what she has to do. So it gets really difficult like trying to talk to them if you don’t really feel connected to them.”

Always be sensitive to youths’ experiences and be humble

“Don’t talk down on us.”

“But they should know this is how I feel, this is what I want. I just want to see my mom and my puppy.”

“And having empathy for the circumstances that [youth] come from and the fact that some of [youth’s] behaviours, attitudes, mentality, anything, is not necessarily them but only because of the product...because they’re products of their environment.”

“[Teach them] not to have judgement towards other people. Because we both had common experiences where you felt like you were just the downtrodden person, where the social worker’s coming in to save the day. Or if not, it’s not even that, just the fact that they look down on you because you’re in that circumstance at all. Which should not be anywhere in social work at all.”

“The same thing as when I was saying about if they don’t come in with an open mind then people are going to stop coming up if they have mental health and asking for help. Well, at that point, I stopped saying stuff because I’m like I’m just going to get it thrown in my face so why would I even talk about it?”

“I think it’s very important for sensitivity reasons. So if someone comes into care and they have some kind of mental issue in their own sense of whatever it might be, I feel like they should be trained a little bit better in how to handle that situation. Because I’ve had people say some horrible things to me, and I’m like, ‘And you’re a worker and you get paid for this, and you were trained. And I don’t understand how you have your job.’ So just that kind of thing. Sensitivity with youth in care is a huge thing. Because I’ve already come from a traumatic experience.”

Hold management accountable and advocate for relationships

“But I definitely think, especially when you’re dealing with the welfare of children, that that’s the most important thing. Is that when something’s going wrong, you need to speak up because things will only get better if anyone says anything. And especially when you’re the worker, because you’re an adult, you’re educated, you’re always going to be...your input is always going to be valid on a corporate management level than just a kid trying to find somebody and go, ‘I don’t know who I’m supposed to talk to.’ But it’s a lot easier when the professionals are communicating what’s being enacted. And their job becomes easier when they have a system and they all work together and their system works for them.”

“[I]f I had to say something to students who are coming in and learning, I would just say that they need to develop a more sophisticated or more proper and efficient relationship with their management so that they do have the time to establish those human connections, they do have the time to be there for their kids. But I feel like the most important thing that I would recommend and I would appreciate would be that they establish a good relationship with their management, and let them know like this is not working and you should follow a different path. I feel like that’s going to help increase the amount of time they have, and also establish the connection that the kids like to have with their workers.”

**CHAPTER 6 - DISCUSSION &
SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE**

In this section, I will provide a concise summary of the recommendations for change gathered from the literature and the participant feedback in two tables. The first (Table 4) will outline the take-away messages intended for social work education, to be considered by McMaster University staff in the development of the PCPCW program. Given that the suggestions from the literature and from the focus group participants provided many suggestions for improvement in the field as well, suggestions for change for the field of child welfare will also be reviewed in the second table in this section. In this table (Table 5), suggestions for future research related to the topic will also be provided.

Suggestions for the PCPCW program

Table 4

Suggestion for Improvement	Reason for Suggestion
Educate students on the importance of communication with service users in their practice.	Emphasis on the importance of information sharing with service users, including informing service users of time away from the office and about available programs in the community, is paramount to building trust in professional relationships with service users.
Incorporate interviews with service users as a form of educational assessment.	This allows service users to participate in the assessment of students directly as partners in determining whether their personality traits are suited to the program, and areas students can improve prior to graduating. Perhaps allowing service users to help create scenarios the students will interview about, rather than service users sharing their personal experiences if uncomfortable with this.
Focus education on building relationships rather than task-based skills.	The primary need expressed by youth in care is to have stable, consistent and genuine relationships with their workers. Structuring social work education to include relationship building may give students the advantage to learning how to develop and maintain these relationships despite administrative demands in the job.
Teach students about the importance of knowing about child development, forms of attachment, and how to recognize grief and loss in children and families.	This pre-graduate education may give students the foundation to understand the traumatic experiences children and families have had leading to and resulting from their involvement with the child welfare system. This knowledge may help to give students a basis of empathy for the experiences of service users.
Teach students how to stand up to management in professional ways.	New workers may feel that they cannot stand up to management to advocate for a shift in focus from tasks to relationships. The ability to develop relationships with

	managers and advocate for these relationships was a suggestion given in the feedback from this study, and might help students learn to navigate these complicated political relationships at work.
Remind students regularly of the importance of loving what they do.	Given the feedback from participants regarding demonstrating genuine caring, engaged listening, showing respect and forming connections with service users, it is important for students to learn about the importance of demonstrating these qualities with children, as well as with families that they work with in the field.
Educate students on how to demonstrate respect and caring even with difficult cases or “challenging clients.”	The importance of understanding that even “challenging” service users are deserving of respect and caring may help students as they enter the field to put themselves in the service user’s shoes to find common-ground and establish connections despite challenging barriers to engaging service users.
Incorporate service users feedback into education.	Ensure that when feedback is provided by service users it is incorporated into the curriculum to teach new workers about the expectations service users have of them, and which provides a balanced view of areas that the field of social work is successful, and areas in which room still exists for improvement. This may help to teach students that social work as a field is not infallible and each worker has a responsibility to contribute to the development of better practices on a continual basis.
Collaborate with service users on suitability requirements of students at the admissions level.	This allows service users to maintain partnerships with schools of social work to determine what skills and qualities are evaluated in social work programs, how to measure these, and to then be involved in the process as panel-members.

<p>Educate students to recognize the signs of burn-out in the field of child welfare and how to cope with this.</p>	<p>Given the importance placed on worker consistency, and the correlation between worker burn-out and turnover, equipping students with knowledge and confidence to identify and address issues within their workplace that might help them to alleviate experiences of burn-out may help to impact the rates of turnover in child welfare.</p>
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Suggestions for the field of child welfare and future research

Table 5

Area of Improvement	Recommendation	Reason for Change
Ministry of Children and Youth Services	Involve service users in the development of Ministry Standards.	Allow service users to express what their needs and priorities are to ensure the Standards are developed to benefit service users' needs.
	Focus on relationships rather than tasks.	A shift from focusing on administrative tasks and deadlines to the development and maintenance of relationships between workers and service users should be prioritized.
Agency	Concentrate on worker retention.	Worker burn-out is correlated to worker turnover. Frequent turnover can impact consistent case management which delays or hinders service user's ability to access timely services, and severs relationships formed between service users and social workers, which can impact the outcomes of

		individuals and families.
	Take responsibility for sharing information.	Ensure that all service users are provided with information on programs and services they may be eligible for through the agency. Individual workers may not know about all programs, and may not share information with all service users. Agencies are responsible for knowing all of the programs and ensuring all eligible service users are provided access to them (could be via email).
	Involve service users in the development of agency policies and practices.	This ensures service users priorities are heard and incorporated into creating change that will benefit them in the field, and allows them a space to express their concerns, questions and comments about policies and practices and whether these will be beneficial or effective for them.
	Involve service users in human resources processes.	Invite service users to assist with the interview process in the hiring of new managers and workers as a continuation of the collaborative assessment process being implemented at the student level of social work training. This will ensure management and workers continue to be accountable to the needs of service users.

	Educate community agencies regarding youth's rights and professional boundaries.	Agency-initiated education of community agencies (such as schools) regarding what information they need or do not need to know regarding the safety of youth in care, and who the appropriate people are to ask for sensitive file information (ie. not the youth themselves).
	Address high caseloads by establishing a case cap.	Service users receive less time and attention from their workers when workers are struggling to manage weighty caseloads, detracting from their ability to develop and maintain relationships with service users and manage the needs of each family effectively.
	Provide mandatory training for workers and managers.	Areas for mandatory training: greater focus on child development, grief and loss, complex trauma, attachment theory, and high conflict resolution for any worker who may have to remove children and youth from their homes during their careers, and the managers who oversee these workers.
	Involve service users in the mandatory training of workers and managers.	Inviting service users to participate in the training of workers and managers is a further continuation of the collaboration between social workers and service users to ensure their needs are being accurately

		conveyed and met in practice.
	Include upper-level management.	The upper levels of management should also be privy to and included in any training provided to workers and middle-management to ensure that those responsible for the trajectory of the agency are held equally accountable to service user's needs and expectations.
Agency & workers	Share youths stories with them.	Children and youth should be provided with immediate age-appropriate information regarding why they are brought into care, what will happen to them throughout care, and what they can expect for the transition out of care. This may help to reduce children's confusion, self-blame and sense of guilt around being brought into care.
Workers	Respond to service users.	Return calls back within one business day, reply to text messages, and answer emails - especially when you have promised to do so. This establishes trust and allows service users to feel heard.
	Keep in touch with service users (especially youth).	Whether by call, text, or email, service users (youth in care in particular) appreciate knowing that someone cares about their

		wellbeing enough to ask them how they are doing. Sometimes the only person they can rely on to do this is their social worker.
	Let service users know when you will be away.	If you are leaving for vacation or another form of prolonged leave, let service users know when you are leaving (or have a coworker do this if you are unable), when you will be back, and what the coverage process is at your agency. This way if an emergency happens when you are gone, extra confusion is avoided when service users call for help and do not know who to ask for.
Managers	Hold workers (and yourselves) accountable	Ensure that each social worker on your team is meeting the standards and expectations of the agency, and support them to improve their practice if this is not the case.
	Advocate to upper management.	Issues of worker burnout and toxic workplace environments should be monitored within each team, and worker's needs should be heard and advocated for to upper management. Do not contribute to toxic work environments or dismiss worker's concerns, as this may contribute to worker burn-out and turnover.
Researchers	Age differences impacting	Further research could be

	<p>the agency response for bringing children into care.</p>	<p>completed to determine whether a significant distinction exists between what young children brought into care expect of their social workers, compared to what older children/youth expect of their workers. If a distinction exists, this could shape a differential response based on the age of the child when they are brought into care, and may help with youth's outcomes as they grow up in care.</p>
	<p>Service user participant feedback study.</p>	<p>If possible, a study should be completed following the completion of the PCPCW program's pilot year that gathers feedback from service users who participated in this process.</p>
	<p>Outcome-based longitudinal study.</p>	<p>If possible, a longitudinal study should be completed that follows the students in the PCPCW program who do enter the field of child protection, and feedback should be gathered from service users who have had experience with other social workers (who did not benefit from PCPCW education) as well as a PCPCW child welfare worker, to determine any distinctions in practice between the two.</p>

Discussion: feedback and literature, and the importance of change

Workers as educators of rights and boundaries

Although the theme of stigma was not discussed as a primary finding, we can still learn from the experiences shared by participants. As social workers we are often also educators, and we can use this skill to educate schools on professional boundaries with children in care, and to educate the youth themselves regarding their rights to privacy. In the case of the participants in this study, they understood that it was not appropriate for the school staff to be asking them personal questions, however some still provided answers to these questions despite their feelings of discomfort. It can be intimidating to be sitting with an authority figure who is asking you questions that you feel obligated to answer. For the youth who experience this, sometimes simply knowing that they do not have to share the details of their personal lives with school staff can be the support they need to decline providing information.

In the case of the school staff, perhaps (giving them the benefit of the doubt) they are simply unaware of professional appropriate boundaries with youth in care, and might benefit from this education. It is important for workers to be clear with schools regarding what information they need to know in order to make safe and appropriate decisions regarding youth's safety (ie. who the appropriate caregivers are who may pick the youth up from school), and to emphasize that the details of why they are in foster care are not details that the school needs to be necessarily informed of. It may be an opportunity to educate schools that the social worker should be the one to take down their questions and determine what information may be shared with the school staff, rather than asking the youth directly given the uncomfortable position this puts youth in.

Sharing children's stories with them

With regards to information sharing, this seems to be an area that requires much improvement within the field of child welfare. As seen in Table 2, there is much emphasis placed by participants of other studies on the importance of keeping youth informed of why they are brought into care, their rights while in care, and what will happen to them as they transition out of care. This is certainly reflected by the participants of this research study as well. The two statements made by youth within this study that I found the most impactful were those discussed in the context of not being provided with information regarding their own files. As featured above, one participant stated "... that's my story and that's my life. You can't pick and choose what I get to know."

The importance of this statement is in the fact that youth feel that their own stories are being kept from them. As discussed above, as a qualitative researcher, I recognize that every individual's story is vital and important in understanding the meaning associated with a topic. Perhaps this is why it seems to alarming to hear from participants that they have never had the opportunity to know their own story. The participants discussed the fact that they understood the information within their stories may be unsettling or distressing. One participant said: "... it might be upsetting but that's why you're sitting with me while I'm reading it." There is a responsibility to the youth to share with them their story, and to be there for them as workers to help them process what they learn from that story.

As the participants described, there is a sense of confusion, a sense of feeling lost that comes with being uncertain about what led them to be in care, at a time in their

lives that is already confusing and distressing as they are placed in stranger's homes without knowing how long they will stay there or what might happen next. This is an issue also reflected in the literature by Whiting and Lee (2003) who said that "[l]earning about foster children through their stories is valuable because their reactions to the upheaval they experience throughout care are likely to be expressed in these stories" (p. 289). For those youth who do not know or remember the details of their own stories, their responses to the world around them may seem confusing or lead them to develop an internalized sense of blame. Whiting and Lee (2003) emphasize the importance of constantly reassuring children in care that they are not to blame for being in care, and to do this, pieces of their stories need to be shared with them immediately by the workers who place them in foster homes. McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt and Piliavin (1996) share that this immediacy is important so that children and youth can distance themselves from the guilt that is commonly experienced by children brought into foster care.

One participant described feeling that information is "hidden" by the agency regarding their own stories, which speaks to the sense of distrust in the agency which is reflected by participants in Table 1 as well, who shared experiences of feeling that the agency came into their homes with no intention to collaborate, their plans already formed for a family. It is interesting to see this reflected as well in the voices of the youth themselves. One of the parents in Dumbrill's (2006) study described a lack of faith that the workers were really involved with the child's best interests in mind. This was also stated by a participant within the findings who remarked: "I wasn't there. Nobody asked me what was in my best interest." This is an important theme, because it paints a picture of service user's perceptions of the child welfare system as both youth in

care and adults dealing with the system as parents. We need to be reflective as a field of what it is we are conveying to service users with the policies and practices we follow as child welfare workers. What are we doing that creates this sense of mistrust, fear and suspicion? How can we improve on this so that we can improve on outcomes for families and youth in care?

Building relationships, keeping connections

Under the theme of time and attention from workers, there was a discussion regarding parental expectations of social workers. An important note is that a difference was established between the expectations participants had of their social worker based on the age at which they came into care. While those who were brought into care at an earlier age felt that social workers have a responsibility to act in many ways as a parent, those youth brought into care in their teen years were adamant that they did not view the social worker as a parent. This is reflective of the concept of “family privilege,” which was introduced by Seita and Brendtro (2005), who presented this term as a way to highlight the “invisible benefits that individuals gain from permanent membership in a caring family” (paraphrased by Unrau et al., 2008, p. 2163). While teens brought into care may have had the benefit of being raised with a stable parental figure in their lives, those children who are brought into care from infancy through childhood may have to rely on the staff of an agency to fill the role of parent.

In the literature, the ages at which the participants come into care is not a primary focus, just as it was not a focus of my own research. However, this seems to be an important subject that would benefit from further research to understand what different practices need to be developed based on a child’s age when they are brought

into care. Unrau et al., (2008) also reference Cairns (2002) who states that foster parents need to “learn the child” as an individual to understand how each child understands and processes their experiences of the world, which is ought to be an expectation of workers as well. A better understanding of how children’s ages impact their needs and expectations of workers may help agencies to establish whether the one-size-fits-all model is truly effective, or if a differentiated response is needed for younger children as opposed to teenagers, and how this might impact a child’s outcome as they transition out of care.

Participants who described experiences with workers with whom they did or did not feel connected seemed to be coming to the same point: they simply want to be reassured that somebody in the world cares about them. Participants emphasized that even if the worker cannot call them, a text message or email is enough of a demonstrated act of caring and kindness that it can have a profound impact on the youth’s sense of connectedness with the worker - a connection which seems to be desperately needed.

Involving agencies and management

With regards to the need to workplace related issues discussed by youth, there is a need described by participants to involve agencies in creating change within the workplace for the benefit of social workers and youth. Although this research focuses primarily on what individual workers can be taught to improve upon their practice, there are many changes that need to be made at the agency level as well, in particular regarding worker retention to reduce worker turnover, and a decrease in individual caseloads so that workers have the time needed to establish the relationships so

desperately needed by youth and other service users.

As reflected in the literature and within my findings, agencies are also responsible for the improvement of working conditions that impact workers' ability to maintain consistent and healthy relationships with service users, given the theme of worker burn-out as impacting service users' experiences. As workers burn-out within the child welfare system, turnover rates increase, resulting in workers leaving the department or agency and triggering yet another relationship loss for youth who are already lacking stability and consistency (Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar & Trinkle, 2010).

Participants within the literature also suggest improvements to employment conditions for workers such as lower caseloads, increased pay, treating workers with more respect, offering increased support in terms of worker training, and focusing on worker retention within agencies (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). George (1990) provided findings that agencies that invested in worker retention and developed standards such as stability and experience of workers, low caseloads, and more direct contact with service users resulted in better outcomes for foster care youth (cited in Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). The Canadian youth participants involved in developing the *Blueprint for Fundamental Change* (2013) document emphasized the importance of worker retention, and ensuring that "whenever possible, [agencies need to] keep children and youth assigned to the same children's aid society worker if they move residences," and "make relationships between children and youth and their workers a priority when determining service delivery models and caseloads" (p. 8).

Mor Barak et al., (2001) emphasize that the primary predictors of whether workers leave an agency are not a matter of home-life balance, but are rather

organizational and job-based issues. These may include issues such as chronic stress, toxic work environments, consistently high caseloads, etc. Mor Barak et al., (2001) argue that managers and policy makers might therefore be able to prevent turnover by focusing on addressing workplace and organizational issues that contribute to burnout and turnover. As such, an increased emphasis on improving workplace conditions may lead to an improvement in youth's experiences with child welfare workers.

Sometimes it's the simple things

Participants of the research described that sometimes the little things social workers do have the biggest impact, such as informing youth when the worker will be away from the office, for how long, and who to reach if they have a problem while the worker is gone. The participants were adamant that even a text or email would suffice. One participant in particular described that as parents outside of the agency, adults would never leave for a week or more without telling their children that they were leaving and what to do in the event of an emergency while they are gone. The participants simply expect the same courtesy from their workers, who are their points of contact for information about their case, cheques and benefits they might receive through the agency, and their lifeline in times of emergencies.

The participants also emphasized that they respect their social workers time, even those with whom they do not feel a personal connection, and understand that they are very busy. However, just as they try to be understanding of a worker's availability and the fact that they may not be at their desk every time youth call, they expect to have their own time respected and valued by their workers, which includes getting a call back within one business day, especially when it is something urgent such as a late cheque

which is needed to pay rent and bills. Despite being busy and overwhelmed with administrative tasks, workers are expected to be respectful in providing youth on their caseload the same courtesy as they would extend to another adult. This can go a long way towards helping the youth develop trust in their worker's reliability.

Service user involvement in the field

The social work education system cannot absorb all of the responsibility of ensuring new social workers value and respect service users feedback. Dill et al. (2016) make a strong argument in their conclusion that resonated with me: "if it is important to assess and mark the practice of student social workers and involve service users in that assessment, then why not routinely utilize either of those processes with social workers in practice? The bar is set very high at the beginning of a student's social work career but, over time, expectations diminish or disappear altogether" (p. 8). Schools of social work may teach new students the importance of collaborative partnerships between workers and service users in theory, but if these ideals are not upheld within the field, there is little chance that this will result in any wide-scale change in terms of practice overall. Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2010) suggest that agencies "can seek the participation of [service users] during the selection and recruitment of child welfare caseworkers" (p. 52), allowing service users to evaluate potential workers and managers prior to being hired, thereby continuing a process of collaboration and partnership between professionals and service users from education to practice.

Service users should have access to, and input into, the development of Ministry standards, as well as the policies and procedures of their local agencies in a collaborative capacity that gives them a say in the processes which directly impact their

lives. Robinson and Webber (2013) identified that service user involvement may at some point shift from *university-based* to *employer-based training* (Social Work Reform Board, 2010). Further research into the benefits of this and implementation of training at the managerial level that holds mid- and upper-level management accountable to service users in the same way as students and workers should be explored further.

Training suggestions for child welfare workers

Youth in the *Blueprint for Fundamental Change* (2013) document recommend that workers are trained in conflict resolution, the expectation being that workers will be able to de-escalate situations to avoid drastic actions such as the removal of children, wherever possible. In terms of training to better support youth and children who are brought into care, there are several recommendations found in the literature. Some such suggestions include: training on child development and attachment theories, training regarding complex trauma and resilience, and theories on grief and loss as children are removed from homes and families - even if they are being removed from dangerous or unhealthy situations or environments (Unrau, Seita & Putney, 2008). Smith (2013) points out that when children are removed, grief and loss are also not considered as a barrier that impacts the parents and families they are removed from. Training regarding grief and loss may therefore benefit both children, and the parents that agencies are hoping to reunite them with.

CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, one theme stands out: the importance of our individual stories. Our stories are in everything we do. As researchers, we need to seek out and

share the stories of those who may not have other opportunities to be heard. As workers, we need to share with children and youth brought into care the stories that shaped their circumstances in life, and support them with processing that information. As educators, we need to teach these stories to students and hope that this shapes their own stories as practitioners.

This thesis demonstrates the strength of a movement to advocate for global change, and the evolution that can come as a result of advocacy work. The involvement of service users in social work education is only one form of collaborative partnership to dismantle hierarchical structures of privilege in the academy and in the field of social work. This partnership can and should be extended into the development of policies and practices at the agency level, and incorporated into the governmental level to ensure accountability to service users is a priority emphasized by every level of social work practice.

It has been my privilege to learn from the participants of these focus groups and to hear their feedback about what it means to be a good social worker. The voices of those involved in the research for this thesis, and for the larger PCPCW research project, demonstrate a level of insight and expert knowledge that we must value as social workers. Our responsibility as practitioners and researchers is to ensure that the search for service user input is continuously sought, and incorporated into evolving social work as a field. It is my hope that by incorporating the feedback of participants into the PCPCW program, a new trend is being set that will hold other Canadian universities to the same standard of seeking partnerships with service users.

I knew I wanted to be a social worker when I was eight years old. I hope that I can take the lessons taught to me by the experts, the former youth in care, and apply it in my practice to live up to their expectations of me as a social worker, regardless of which fields I enter along my career path, and I hope that others will do the same.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT FORM

Re-Imagining Child Welfare With Service Users: What Children's Social Workers Need to be Taught in School

Student Investigator: Samantha Terry
Graduate Student: Master University of Social Work
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
905-536-5322 (cell)

Student Faculty Advisor: Dr. Gary Dumbrill
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525 - 9140 ext. 23791

Purpose of the Study & Invitation to Participate:

The goal of this study is to learn from you about what you think social work students need to learn in school about being a good social worker before they enter the field of child welfare.

If you are over the age of eighteen (18) and are currently or have previously been a youth in the care of a Children's Aid Society in Ontario, you are invited to participate in a research project to help shape the education of social work students who wish to enter the field of child welfare.

Procedures involved in the research: What will happen during the study?

If you take part in this study, I will meet you in-person to conduct a 60-minute interview. If you are agreeable, I will meet you at either a public cafe in Hamilton, or a private room on McMaster campus or at one of McMaster's downtown locations.

With your consent, I will take notes by hand and I will audio-record the interview so it can be transcribed to accurately reflect your views. If you are agreeable, I will also hold a second interview when I have finished the interviews with all of the participants which will take about 30 minutes, and will occur at the same location as the first interview, or can take place by phone if you are comfortable with this.

This second interview will be an opportunity for me to share with you what information I have gathered from yourself and other participants, so that you can help me to make sure I have correctly understood what you were telling me during your initial interview with me.

I may ask you questions like the following: What would you want social work students to know about working with children and youths in care? What positive or negative experiences have you had with workers that shaped your relationship with them? What about these experiences do you think social work students could learn from to be good workers? What qualities do you think a good worker needs to have?

As we talk, the questions I ask may change slightly based on our conversation, and you will have an opportunity to provide any information that you feel may be relevant, ask any questions of me, or clarify any points that you make.

Potential benefits: What good things could happen if I participate?

A new program is being initiated at McMaster University beginning in the fall of 2017 that will offer education to social work students who wish to enter the field of child welfare. The benefit of this study is that you and other past or current service users will have the opportunity to shape the education of students before they become social workers in the field.

Potential harms, risks, or discomforts: Will anything bad happen during the study?

It is possible that while we talk about your past or current experiences with the child welfare system, that you may experience feelings of frustration, sadness, anger, or other emotionally triggering reactions depending on your experiences within the child welfare system. Some of the questions may make you reflect on situations or experiences that have created strong emotions for you. This may cause some upset or discomfort. You may worry about how others will react to what you say.

You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Your participation is voluntary and you can choose to skip questions or to end the interview at any time. You are in control of this process. If you decide that you need further support or assistance, I will provide you with contact numbers where someone will be able to help you. The information that you discuss will not be shared with your current or past child welfare worker(s). I describe below the steps that I am taking to protect your privacy in this study.

Confidentiality: Who will know what I said or did in the study?

Your identity will remain confidential and your privacy will be respected. If you request to have your name in the study, I will include your name. If you would prefer not to have your name in the study, I will be using pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the participants. Any detailed information that you share about your experiences that may identify you may be changed or omitted with your permission in order to protect your identity. When the study is completed, the notes and transcripts gathered during this study will be destroyed, although the completed thesis will remain on an online database through McMaster University.

Information about the study results: Study debriefing.

If you are interested in the study results, please let me know at the time of our interview, and I will forward an electronic PDF summary to the email address of your choice. I expect the study to be completed by September, 2018.

Information about participating in the study:

If you have questions or require more information about the study, please call or text me, Samantha Terry, at 905-536-5322, or email me at landrs@mcmaster.ca. You may also contact my research advisor, Gary Dumbrill, at 905-525-9140 ext. 23791.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142 or 26117
% Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT:

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Samantha Terry of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I acknowledge that I have been given a copy of this form (initial here):

I agree to participate in the research study by participating in the interview. Further, with respect to 1) Audio-taping the interview:

- a) I agree to the audio-taping of the interview _____ or;
b) I prefer that the interview not be taped _____

2) Note taking by the interviewer:

- a) I agree to notes taken during the interview _____ or;
b) I prefer not to have notes taken _____

Name of Participant

Date

Appendix B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Re-Imagining Child Welfare With Service Users: What Children’s Social Workers Need to be Taught in School

AS PART OF:

Preparing for Critical Practice in Child Welfare

**Researchers: Saara Greene, Gary Dumbrill, Chris Sinding, Allyson Ion
& Samantha Terry**

Introductory Remarks and Facilitation Instructions:

Introductions by focus group facilitation team (Allyson Ion, Facilitator)

Introduction of interviewer (Samantha Terry, co-facilitator)

Thank participant for attending the meeting.

Provide overview/purpose of focus group: to explore their perspective regarding the knowledge, skills and qualities that child welfare workers should have, and what they feel constitutes a “good” worker based on these qualities; as well as what they think constitutes “readiness” or “preparedness” to work as a child welfare social worker.

Review consent form with all participants. Discuss questions/issues as a group before inviting all participants to sign the consent form. Provide a copy of the consent form to all participants.

Confidentiality: (Facilitators to read aloud)

Before we begin our discussion, we want to talk about confidentiality and go over some basic ground rules:

Everyone’s views are welcomed and important and the information that we collect today is attributed to the group.

Your views are welcomed and important.

We may use your direct quotes, however, you as an individual will not be identified in any reports or study materials.

We will be hearing about each other’s experiences and opinions. To be respectful of each other we ask that anything that you hear today to stay in this room. Having said this, we cannot guarantee everyone’s confidentiality nor that what’s heard in this room will not be shared with others not participating.

If you are concerned about your privacy and confidentiality we suggest the following:

You do not have to use your full name or provide details that identify you when you talk about your experience, e.g. names of organizations, people, etc.

Perhaps only share information that you would be comfortable sharing in a public setting; and to hold back making comments that you would not say publicly.

We want to ensure that all voices are heard, so please be aware of speaking at the same time as others or speaking over others. We want to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. To facilitate this, we will use a talking stick / prompter that will serve as a visual when one participant has the floor/is speaking. This prompter will be passed from one person to the next in a respectful way.

We are here to guide the conversation. We have specific questions that we'd like to know about, but you are also welcome to share experiences and information that you feel contributes to the discussion.

We aim for the group discussion to last 1 to 1.5 hours. Each participant will be reminded that this is an approximate time, and that interviews may take more or less time depending on the direction of our conversation. Participants will be reminded that they may leave the interview at any time.

Use of Tape Recorder: (Facilitator to read aloud)

We now want to go over the details regarding the audio recording:

This group discussion will be recorded to increase the accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what anyone says.

All recordings and transcripts will be stored electronically on a password protected network that only the researchers have access to.

Names will be removed from transcripts as we do not need to identify you in any way.

No specific information that is shared during our interviews regarding unique experiences you have had will be shared within the thesis in order to protect your identity. Rather, the thesis will focus on specific worker qualities and themes that are discussed by each of the participants.

Let's begin:

We will begin our focus group with some introductory remarks. Please share:

Your name – first name only will suffice, or identify yourself however you are comfortable.

What brought you to this research study?

Why are you interested in the preparation of social work students to work in the area of child welfare?

What services you have provided/received through your local child welfare agency?

We are now going to talk about the knowledge, skills and qualities that you believe social workers should have or develop to effectively work in the area of child welfare (in any department or program).

How do you think social workers should work with or support clients and families involved with the child welfare system?

What values should social workers bring to their work?

Are there particular attitudes that child welfare workers should have or not have?

Have you had experiences with workers who demonstrated qualities that made you feel your interactions with them were positive or negative?

What made these interactions positive or negative?

What have these experiences taught you about what qualities social workers need to have or not have to be “good” workers?

What are the roles and responsibilities of social workers when supporting clients and families involved with the child welfare system?

What are the parameters or scope of a social workers’ practice when working in the area of child welfare?

Are there certain things that a child welfare worker should be responsible for, or not responsible for, when supporting clients and families involved in the child welfare system?

What kind of knowledge and experience should social workers have in order to work in child welfare?

Are there particular life experiences, training or education that are vital to working as a child welfare social worker?

How do you know when a child welfare worker has done a good job? Is there a way they acted or spoke to you that made you feel they had done a good job (or not)? That is, that they were ready and prepared to work with a client or family?

What does that look like from the client’s perspective?

What were the things they said that made you feel this way?

What were the behaviours they demonstrated that made you feel this way?

What does that look like from the worker's perspective?

What does it mean to be "ready" or "prepared" to work in child welfare?

What are the particular skills, abilities or knowledge that demonstrate "readiness" or "preparedness" to work in child welfare?

Do "readiness" and "preparedness" mean the same thing to you?
Or are they different concepts?

Can you think of any examples or experiences that demonstrate the issues and themes that we have just discussed?

Focus Group Wrap-Up:

Reminder to participants regarding confidentiality and "what is said in the room should stay in the room"

Thank all participants for attending the meeting.

Appendix C

RECRUITMENT POSTER

**Are you or have you been a youth in the care
of an Ontario Children's Aid Society?**

We are looking for your expertise!

I am a student at McMaster University conducting a research study on what adults who are or have been youth in care want to teach social work students about being a good worker before they become child protection workers.

How to qualify:

- If you are aged 18 or older,
- If you are or have been a youth in the care of an Ontario Children's Aid Society, and
- If you are interested in being interviewed, then you qualify to become involved!

I think I'd like to participate!

If you have questions about the research study and would like to know more, or if you would like to schedule an interview, please contact me:

Samantha Terry
905-536-5322 (call or text)
landrs@mcmaster.ca

I'd rather not participate!

That's okay, too - thank you for taking the time to look at my poster! If you know someone else who might be interested in this study, please pass on my contact information!