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Cross-Government Collaborative Approaches to Supporting Youth Transitioning From Care: Key Considerations for the Development of a Collaboration Model

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Abstract

This research study was completed in partnership between the Ministry of Children and Family Development (“MCFD”) Strategic Priorities Branch and the University of British Columbia (“UBC”) School of Social Work. The two research questions were: (1) Which jurisdictions within Canada, New Zealand, and the U.K. are taking an intra-agency collaborative approach to provide supports and services to young adults leading up to and after they transition out of the child welfare system, and (2) What can British Columbia do to leverage existing best practices or implement practices from other jurisdictions. Transitioning out of care is known as a risky and vulnerable period (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). As outlined in the report Ministry of Children and Family Development 2019/2-2021/22 Service Plan, MCFD has committed to improving “collaboration and communication across government, with communities, external organizations and contractors to better support youth and young adults” to successfully transition into adulthood (Ministry of Child and Family Development, 2019, p. 6). This is a qualitative research study that utilized a Qualtrics survey to collect qualitative data. Recruitment of prospective participants was completed in consultation with MCFD Sponsors, where MCFD internal contacts and Child Maltreatment Research List were used as platforms for recruitment. The participants were asked to share their knowledge of the development and use of collaboration groups to support youth transitioning from care. There were three research participants that participated in this research study. The responses from participants were transferred into datasets and were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis methodology (Braun and Clark, 2006) in NVivo 12. Following the data analysis, researchers established five themes: transition, extended care support, advisory group, strengths of collaboration, and challenges. These themes inform recommendations for future research and for the development of a collaboration model for MCFD to best support youth transitioning from care. This research study has limitations related to the use of purposive non-probability sampling, limited sample size and lack of representation from all identified key informants. Limitations are detailed further in the report. The research presented four recommendations for future research: (1) additional research is necessary, (2) change participant inclusion criteria to allow for larger sample size, (3) gather a larger sample size, (4) use of interviews to gather detailed information. The research also presented three recommendations for practice: (1) Collaboration models need to utilize an inter-agency approach, (2) Need a platform to allow for open information sharing, (3) the use of technology to enhance collaboration. Despite the lack of literature related to the functional foundation of cross-government collaborative advisory groups, the data contributes to an understanding of how communication, use of technology and fostering working relationships, through collaboration, has played a role in delivering services more relevantly and efficiently to youth.

Keywords: Children in Care (CIC), Youth Transition, Supports, Collaboration, Cross-government



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Introduction

The Provincial Perspective on Governmental Collaboration

MCFD has committed to strengthening transition services and supports for youth and young adults ageing out of care, as outlined in the report, *Ministry of Children and Family Development 2019/2-2021/22 Service Plan* (Ministry of Child and Family Development, 2019). MCFD has recognized a need to “improve collaboration and communication across government, with communities, external organizations and contractors to better support youth and young adults” (Ministry of Child and Family Development, 2019, p. 6). A successful transition requires the collaboration of multiple governments and community agencies/programs to support youths' needs in the areas of financial assistance, continued education, housing, and life skills (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). Thus, the research study will reflect on reviewing existing collaboration models through a systems lens.

This research seeks to explore current methods of collaboration utilized in governmental child welfare agencies, in order to understand the development of an intra-agency collaborative approach. Findings from this research are intended to support British Columbia's efforts to facilitate support for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system. This project has two primary research questions: 1. Which jurisdictions within Canada, New Zealand, and the U.K. are taking an intra-agency collaborative approach to provide support and services to young adults leading up to and after they transition out of the child welfare system? 2. What can British Columbia do to leverage existing best practices or to implement practices from other jurisdictions?

The scope of the present study is limited to survey responses from key informants, as the student researchers did not explore the community or youth's perspectives. Based on the key informant responses, the research findings provide recommendations and key considerations for a collaboration model in The Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) in British Columbia.

Youth Transitioning Out of Care

The Province of British Columbia has outlined that the primary goal of child welfare agencies is to provide children with permanency (2019). Permanency assumes that youth leave the foster care system and have a long-lasting, safe, and stable living arrangement and connections with their guardian (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). Regrettably, many youths in foster care do not attain permanency (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). According to the Child, Family and Community Service Act (1996), youth transition out of care once they reach the age of majority, at 19 years old in British Columbia. The period of youth transitioning is known as a risky and vulnerable period because it requires youth to cope with complex developmental tasks with minimal support, guidance, and monitoring from a parental figure (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). Unfortunately, youth formerly in care have a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness, addictions, mental health concerns, unplanned pregnancy, unemployment, lower education, and involvement with police (Brown & Wilderson, 2010).

Literature Review

Beneficial Services for Transition Age Youth

Stoner (1999) compiled a list of necessary services that should be made available to foster care alumni to support their success post-care including: transitional housing and independent living skills, substance use services, disability services, and health care and support for youth involved in probation services. Woodgate, Morakinyo, and Martin (2017) list similar suggestions in their research findings and found mentorship programs to be helpful, but there was a need for interventions that “aim to enhance existing relationships rather than creating new ones” (p. 295). Stoner (1999) identified essential services for youth leaving care and divided it into tangible and intangible skills that are necessary to improve life outcomes for former youth in care. Tangible skills are locating housing, education, money management, housekeeping, personal hygiene, understanding law, job seeking, parenting, emergency, and safety capacities (Stoner, 1999). Intangible skills include

decision-making, problem-solving, planning, and interpersonal relationships (Stoner, 1999). Several Canadian provinces have adapted extended care and maintenance (ECM) agreements, which allows youth to continue in care until their 21st birthday (Flynn & Tessier, 2011). Hook and Courtney (2011) found that each year, the youth remained in care from age eighteen to twenty-one was positively associated with employment and higher wages, as a result of youths' positive education attainment. ECM is utilized in Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and the United States of America and provides youth transitional living and allowances to meet needs in attaining employment or attending post-secondary education (Flynn & Tessier, 2011). The ECM agreement is in response to the number of youths leaving care ill-prepared to transition into adulthood, and ECM agreements have positive influences on youths' ability to practice life skills, expand knowledge, and rapid access to resources if problems present (Flynn & Tessier, 2011). Jones (2019) indicated a reduction in potential risks to youth through this extended agreement since it is associated with the supervision of youth and the ability to connect youth to resources if problem presents.

Collaboration Methods

In their report, *Improving Outcomes for Children Programme*, the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG), in Wales, consists of senior membership stakeholders from critical agencies that are involved in the care of children (Ministerial Advisory Group, 2019). This group reports to the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services with recommendations as to how to improve outcomes of services (Ministerial Advisory Group, 2019). One of the priorities of the MAG is regarding youth in care transitioning into adulthood. Under MAG, one example of an outcome is a new joint Social Services and Housing Group has been established to develop accommodations for youth leaving care to prevent homelessness (Ministerial Advisory Group, 2019). Gaetz (2014) calls for strategic government responses to youth homelessness to have clear objectives, targets, and use of evidence-based information. The evidence base would inform the information and data

management systems for service integration/collaboration purposes (Gaetz, 2014). Gaetz (2014) further posits that the purpose of these collaborative systems would be to support "service integration, case management, and monitoring progress" (p. 100). Unfortunately, even though Gaetz's study is showing a need for this service, such a process is not currently available.

Hudson et al. (1999) identified various barriers to overcome intra-government collaboration through the development and use of information systems. These barriers include structure, financial, procedural, professional, status, and legitimacy. These barriers emphasize the need for clear structure meaning boundaries and purpose for collaboration, adequate funding, and for teams to strive for the same mission, values, and priorities.

Larson (2011) discusses insights gained when working with two organizations collaborating together, in two different cultures and time zones. Gratton and Erickson (2007) provided an outline of eight factors that can enhance the success of a collaboration. The eight factors include: "encouraging collaborative behaviour through investments like open floor plans, senior management demonstrating collaborative practices, mentoring and coaching to build networks, building a sense of community, incorporating team leaders who build relationships and are task-oriented, building relationships within the teams, clearly defining roles and tasks to enable cooperation, providing employees the right skills in building relationships, communicating, and resolving conflicts that impede collaboration" (Gratton & Erickson, 2007, p. 213-214). The collaborative teams in the organizations used technology to their advantage and thus data sharing "was simple due to the same standards and formats being used" (Gratton & Erickson, 2007, p. 219). Larson (2011) cited areas that attributed to the success of the collaboration, integrated teamwork was one of the areas. Within the integrated teamwork, roles and tasks were clearly defined, management strived to create a sense of community, and, lastly, an emphasis was placed on creating relationships among the teams (Larson, 2011).

Theoretical Positioning

Two main theories inform the research study: the systems theory and structural social work theory. Systems theory was initially conceptualized by Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim in the 19th century (Schirmer & Michailkakis, 2019). It had two main assumptions: a variety of interrelated systems influences individuals and all systems connect and influence change with one another due to this connection (Schirmer & Michailkakis, 2019). Systems theory informs this research study as it addresses the interrelated system structures in place regarding youth transitioning out of care. A systems theory approach to this research produces an analysis of the impact of functioning interrelated systems and the effectiveness of the collaboration between the systems supporting youth transitioning out of foster care.

An additional foundational theory for the present research study is the structural social work theory. Maurice Moreau conceptualized structural social work, it addresses the socio-economic and political aspects of society that have created unequal relations, distribution of resources, and oppression of various groups (Mullaly, 1997). This approach focuses on the interplay between individuals and structures, and how they create barriers and limitations for those who are disadvantaged; based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and religion (Mullaly, 1997). Structural social work theory influenced the development of our research questions, as youth transition out of foster care faces a multitude of systemic and socio-economic barriers. The research study utilizes this lens to acknowledge the socio-economic and political aspects of society that impact youth transitioning out of care.

Goals of Research

The research explores critical components of collaboration in order to understand how intra-agency collaboration can mitigate multiple level systems issues faced by youth while transitioning out of care. By exploring existing collaboration models through systems and structural lenses, this research aims to establish a comprehensive understanding of the range of necessary elements to create a systemic

collaboration model. This evaluative research aims to establish a knowledge base of existing models of collaboration within Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, which will help inform MCFD on how to create an effective structural governmental collaboration model to support youth transitioning from care.

Methodology

The research was conducted by three UBC Masters of Social Work student researchers. The researchers utilized a semi-structured questionnaire facilitated through Qualtrics to generate data to answer the research questions. The research collected qualitative data through purposive non-probability sampling in order to reach the identified informants. The informants in the field were contracted by the MCFD Sponsors.

Sampling and Recruitment

The present study used purposive non-probability sampling. The research study population consisted of key informants who were selected through consultation with MCFD Sponsors and student researchers and were located within Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. The key informants were primarily recruited from MCFD prior contacts. In an effort to gain a larger sample size the student researchers also recruited through the Child Maltreatment Research List (CMRL). This is an international and interdisciplinary online community network of researchers and scholars in the area of child maltreatment. Additionally, student researchers utilized their personal contacts to recruit eligible key informants from Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan. A course based Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) approval was obtained by the University of British Columbia in addition to receiving approval from MCFD Research Ethics, Privacy, and Security, facilitated by Melissa Nauta.

The inclusion criteria for the research study are (1) Currently employed by a Child Welfare Organization as Regional Manager or equivalent position, and (2) English speaking. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the research. Participants were contacted according to the "MCFD Sponsored Research Courses - Facilitated Contact:

For Students” protocol. Student researchers provided an electronic *Invitation to Participate* letter and a UBC Qualtrics Survey link, which included a research information letter, consent form and survey questions to Clare Whelan-Sadike, Manager, Strategic Initiative Branch. Clare Whelan-Sadike sent the Invitation to Participate letter and Qualtrics link directly to prospective research participants through an internal MCFD directory. Additionally, in an effort to recruit additional participants, Dr. Barbara Lee, Principal Investigator sent the Invitation to Participate letter to the Child Maltreatment Research List. The research sample size was three participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The student researchers invited prospective participants to participate in a semi-structured telephone interview within an outlined time frame or complete a UBC Qualtrics survey. Participants interested in completing a phone interview were to contact the researchers directly via email, however, no participants responded within the designated time frame to complete this method of data collection. The three participants completed the UBC Qualtrics online survey that was provided in the initial invitation to participate in an email from Clare Whelan-Sadike. The primary data collection tool is the Qualtrics online survey where participants were asked to share routine information and knowledge associated with their agency. The survey was formatted to be completed using the data collection instrument: Questionnaire (Appendix A), to allow for validity and consistency in the data collection.

The data collected from participants' responses obtained in this research study was utilized to generate a qualitative data set. The participant's responses were assigned an ID of the province or country in which they are employed. The data sets were then transferred into Nvivo to complete coding. Researchers created an inter-coder agreement, to triangulate analyses and strengthen the student researchers' analysis. In order to triangulate the analysis, each student researcher first read all participant responses and conducted thematic coding independently. After the first round

of independent coding, researchers met and reviewed each researcher's thematic coding, collectively developed shared codes and coded participant responses with the agreed-upon codes to ensure inter-rater reliability. The student researchers completed a total of three rounds of coding, where each participant data set was reviewed and coded three times by each student researcher. Through this methodological approach, researchers identified themes that emerged from the dataset to analyze the results.

Results

Thematic Analysis

Five themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) Transitional Support, (2) Extended Care Support, (3) Advisory Group, (4) Challenges, and (5) Strengths and Lessons.

Transitional Support. The participant in Manitoba indicated that youth transition out of care at the age of 18, the age when they become adults. The youth are eligible for an Agreement with Young Adults (AYAs) from the ages of 18 to 21, which provides individuals with financial and emotional support. The participant noted two main programs are offered to youth while in care to provide support towards transitioning into adulthood: (1) a Youth Employment Mentor Program and, (2) Youth Engagement Program. The Youth Employment Mentor program is “funded through the Children Aid Foundation and RBC” as an effort to support any youth age 16 to 29 who are in care or were previously in care “to work on life skills necessary for employment and independence.” Additionally, youth in Manitoba who are currently on AYA's become eligible for the Youth Engagement program.

The participant in New Zealand noted that youth transition out of care at the age of 18 and planning for transition begins at the age of 15 if the youth has been in care for a continuous three months. The services offered to support the transition in this jurisdiction are divided into three stages, (1) prepare to transition, (2) respond to the transitional needs and, (3) post-transition support. The participant indicated youth begin to transition from the age of 15 to 18 and provide services, assessment and support

through a holistic lens. This jurisdiction uses a model where one social worker becomes the main contact for the youth. The youth is either transferred to a transition worker that continues to support the youth from age 16-21 or the primary social worker is asked if they would assume the role of transition worker and continue to support the youth until they reach age 21. The support provided includes continuous check-ins, delivering a transition plan and strengthening relationships with family, family group and indigenous communities. The participant indicated youth can be transferred to a transition support worker who will provide support to the youth until the age of 21. The participant shared “young adults with higher needs may require more proactive support for longer periods of time”, thus “young adults can access advice and assistance through the Transition Support team in the National Contact Centre” until the age of 25.

The participant in Nova Scotia indicated that youth transition out of care at the age of 19 in the following ways: “reunification with family, an alternate family plan, adoption, and reaching adulthood.” In some circumstances, youth can be placed on a number of extended care agreements to provide additional support to the young adult. While youth are in care, “they will have a plan that is continually focused on their goal for permanency and brings together the child’s care planning team as often as required, but minimally on an annual basis to review objectives and associated tasks.” The support that is provided to youth in response to their transitional needs is completed by their primary worker and completed at a local level to support the successful transition of youth.

Extended Care Support. The student researchers also inquired if the participants’ agencies provided extended care supports or post-transition support to youth transitioning from care. Post transition supports are defined as “supports that prepare and support children and youth in care for adulthood” (Post Transition Supports, n.d.). Each participant provided a multitude of options available to youth in their respective service delivery areas.

In Manitoba, youth leaving care are eligible for an Agreement with Young Adults (AYA) from the age of 18 up to and including 21. Under an AYA, youth can access financial and emotional support in the form of a designated social worker, bus passes, and finances for housing, groceries, clothing and educational needs. Tuition waivers are also available for a number of universities and colleges in Manitoba for youth in and from care. Additionally, youth can access a Youth Employment Mentor that “can support any youth in or previously in care ages 16 to 29 work on the skills needed for employment and other independence goals”. Similarly, the Manitoba agency also has a Youth Engagement Program that offers activities for teens and young adults who are on AYA’s so they can “get together for support, learning and fun activities”.

In Nova Scotia, youth transition from care at 19 years old. Youth can have their “permanent care custody order extended beyond their 19th birthday only if they have been assessed as having a disability that requires the support of our Disability Support Program (DSP)”. The DSP program is available up until the youth’s 21st birthday and offers support and services that “respond to their assessed needs”. In addition to the DSP, this agency offers youth who are pursuing their secondary education the option to “enter into post-care and custody agreement” which covers living expenses and the cost of education up to and including 21 years of age. Youth previously in care and/or who are transitioning out of care at 19 years old also have the option of post-care and custody agreement which covers the cost of one post-secondary program as well as living expenses up to and including the age of 24.

The New Zealand participant explained that the final state of transition in their agency is called “Post Transition (21-25),” where proactive support ends but young adults “can access advice and assistance through the Transition Support team in the National Contact Centre.” New Zealand also provides an opportunity for “higher needs” young adults to access the additional proactive support they may need past the age of transition.

Advisory Group. Two of the participants (one from New Zealand and one from Manitoba) indicated that they do not have a committee/advisory/work group to support youth transition out of care, while the participant from Nova Scotia indicated they do have an advisory group.

The participant from Manitoba indicated there is an advisory group in the community that was initiated by a community agency, which includes representatives from community agencies, community programs for youth, RBC and the Child welfare agency. The advisory group “meets about 4-5 times per year to provide support primarily to the Youth Employment Mentor” program, however, the group “discusses other issues related to youth ageing out of care”. The participant indicated the child welfare agency has maintained “good working relationships with most of the community stakeholders that are working with youth.”

A participant indicated a Nova Scotia child welfare agency has an advisory group collaborating on methods of supporting youth transitioning out of care. This advisory group is currently internal and includes representatives of program coordinators, departmental members, front-line staff and subject matter experts hired for the purpose of this committee. This advisory group is in the developing stages and plans to engage stakeholders and community stakeholders. This advisory group has been able to provide assistance to issues that have arisen regarding care for youth by identifying a point person within each department as a means to support complex cases, and to be responsive to a young person’s needs. One of the outputs of this advisory group was the action of “contracting an organization to increase youth engagement and mobilization”. Thus far, this advisory group meets in person and through video conferencing approximately every two weeks, however, they are able to meet more frequently as needed. The method of disrupting the information presented and discussed in this group is still under construction, however, at this time, internal information is shared electronically.

Challenges. Two out of the three participants, Manitoba and Nova Scotia, expressed encountering challenges throughout the collaboration process.

A common theme among the two participants was the difficulty of a government agency collaborating with non-government agencies due to differences in each system.

Manitoba stated, “some of the government departments don't have enough flexibility to work in collaboration with community partners the way private agencies and groups are able to collaborate together.” They provided the following example, “we have not been able to do much collaboration with some of the government departments like Income Assistance which some of the youth need to transition to if they aren't able to gain employment to support themselves after their AYA agreement is done.” When an Agreement with Youth Adults is complete, some young adults are unable to obtain adequate employment to support themselves, so they turn to Income Assistance. Currently, collaborating with Income Assistance and similar programs in a smooth and efficient manner is a challenge for the Manitoba Participant.

In addition to staff changes, Nova Scotia reported there was “a difference noted in approach and expectation” by contracted agencies who “expressed a conflict in their style and fit for this work.” Nova Scotia reported that this is currently under review.

New Zealand did not report experiencing any challenges or barriers throughout the collaborative process between their agency and other agencies. The absence of challenges was attributed to legislation that requires the agency to “seek to develop strategic partnerships with iwi and Maori organizations to ensure we are working with our Indigenous groups.”

Strengths and Lessons of Collaboration. All three participants indicated that collaboration allowed for a better understanding as to how to best work together. It was also enhanced by sharing information and keeping departments and agencies informed to support alignments with their purpose.

One participant from New Zealand reported “joint funding bids” have helped support collaboration and understanding of each other as an agency. This participant stated, “understanding agencies culture

and risk appetites helps agencies understand how to best work together.”

The participant from Nova Scotia emphasized the importance of sharing information directly from the working group: “I would just highlight the importance of sharing information as possible across departments so the information is coming directly from us.” This participant also reported that information sharing “has been very well received and it has also allowed other departments to provide services/funding that aligns with the work.” This participant further indicated collaboration between departments allows for input from diverse perspectives and “the ability to identify barriers and elevate concerns in this regard.” Collaboration has expanded their ability to identify “point people within each department” to address complex cases as they arise.

The participant from Manitoba reported that working together “makes everyone's work easier and helps our youth clientele if various groups can keep informed and collaborate together on how to support a particular individual or to make services more relevant to the needs in the community.” The collaboration helped agencies to understand how to support a particular individual or to make services relevant to the needs in the community.

Discussion

In this research study, we sought to understand what intra-agency collaboration models exist and are utilized by other jurisdictions in their work to support youth transitioning out of care into adulthood. Furthermore, this study intended to identify best practices found in the data to answer the second of the two research questions – what B.C. could do to leverage or implement best practices from other jurisdictions. There is minimal literature available related to how cross-government collaboration is accomplished with relevant stakeholders to facilitate programs and services between the child welfare and adult welfare systems, in order to support youth transitioning out of care. This study, while limited in its sample size and data saturation, has endeavoured to fill this knowledge gap.

Each of the three participants indicated transition planning occurs prior to the youth aging out of care in some capacity. Through the process of transition, each jurisdiction engages in a plan for transition and facilitates a response to the needs in transition differently. The two models presented in the data were utilizing the youth's primary worker as the main contact to support youth's transition, or the use of additional programs and workers within their ministry to respond to the youth's needs of transition. The participants in this research study spoke to the methods of facilitating support for the youth and did not speak to the services and type of support necessary for youth transitioning out of care. Thus, the literature review presents information related to the common barriers youth experience when transitioning but does not speak to the best method to facilitate support in order to respond to youth's transition needs.

All of the participants report their jurisdictions offer youth aging out of care extended care agreements or alternative programs to respond to transitional needs. The literature indicated there are positive links between longer time in care, post-care supports and higher standards of life for youth who have transitioned out of care (Rome & Raskin, 2019). The programs and extended care agreements highlight the use of government agencies, without or minimal use of non-government agencies. These programs are crucial to ensuring youth and young adults are adequately supported up to and past the age of transition; therefore, doing so in collaboration with other agencies could further ensure the youth attain the support they need and deserve after transitioning out of care.

The participants of this study referred to two advisory groups that were collaborating to provide additional support to youth transitioning out of care. The two groups were developed in two different contexts, one was created in the community and the other was developed in the government ministry. Despite the differences in these groups, all of the advisory groups emphasized the importance of collaboration between community and government organizations to provide effective support for youth

transitioning out of care. Although literature does not reflect the importance of an intra-agency collaboration model, it does indicate that youth experience complex barriers in their transition out of care (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). In addition, Stoner (1999) notes a comprehensive list of necessary services that should be available to youth leaving care, including transitional housing, substance use services, health care support, and independent living skills. The services that Stoner (1999) notes incorporate support from both community and governmental organizations, as such it could be interpreted that the use of government and community resources are effective in supporting youth transition successfully out of care. The literature and research findings support a notion that intra-agency collaboration will provide an avenue to respond to the needs of youth transitioning out of care and the use of this approach will create easier access to support for the youth.

The participant from Nova Scotia noted the use of different technology in their advisory group enhanced their collaboration. The participant reported the advisory group who supports youth transitioning from care currently meet approximately every two weeks either in person or through video conferencing. This group is also able to meet more frequently if a complex case arises. Additionally, the information related to the advisory group's discussion and decisions is shared internally through their electronic platform. Larson (2011) discussed enabling the use of technology as an integral part of effective communication in groups. Thus, it can be interpreted that collaboration models should consider the use of technology, including online video calling platforms and an electronic information sharing portal to enhance a group's collaboration.

Two of the participants, the ones from Manitoba and Nova Scotia, referred to challenges that arose during collaboration to support youth transitioning out of care. The data collected from the participants suggests there are a few distinctive challenges in the collaboration between government agencies and non-government agencies. The participant from Manitoba indicated that government agencies do not

have the flexibility to collaborate afforded to non-government agencies. The participant from Nova Scotia's response provides further insight into the barrier in collaboration, stating the two agencies contracted to work together encountered a conflict with the rightness of fit for the type of work. Hudson et al. (1999) states barriers to intra-government collaboration include professional values, including ideology and values. Thus, the challenges presented in the research findings from Nova Scotia and Manitoba are associated with differences in professional ideologies and values as outlined in the literature. These challenges warranted further research and analyzes of the barriers created due to differences between approaches, ideologies and expectations of intra-agency collaboration. Two of three participants responded with similar challenges, this leads the researchers to believe this is a persisting barrier impeding collaboration between government and non-government agencies. However, the participant from New Zealand shared that no challenges have been encountered in the collaboration process due to legislation that mandates the agency to work collaboratively with one another. New Zealand does not provide details on exactly how and why the collaboration runs smoothly but the lack of presenting challenges may indicate collaboration is a useful and effective model to work from.

Each participants referred to positive outcomes of working collaboratively, which were themed in this study as "Strengths and Lessons of Collaboration." Through the process of collaboration, teams and agencies were able to learn about the other agencies' cultures and understand how to best work together. Collaboration also highlighted the importance of information sharing directly from the collaborative working group. The direct sharing of information and keeping each other informed was valuable for the respective teams and departments in aligning their services and funding with their noted priorities, thus utilizing their resources more effectively and having services be more relevant to the needs of youth. Gratton and Erickson (2007) also indicated important factors that enhanced the

success of the collaboration include building a sense of community, building relationships within the teams, clearly defining roles and tasks to assist cooperation and communicating. Additionally, Lasron (2011) indicates the success of collaborating is attributed to integrated teamwork within a group. The research findings indicate there was a sense of team building and open communication within the participants reported collaboration groups. Therefore, the research findings and literature present successful collaboration required elements of connection and team building within the group to facilitate open communication and integrated work essential to successful collaboration.

Furthermore, the participant from New Zealand cited collaboration in regard to youth transitioning out of care was a legislative mandate. This mandated collaboration was found to aid in facilitating with external Indigenous groups and was seen as a positive measure to ensure collaboration among identified groups/stakeholders. The student researchers were unable to attain additional information about how mandated collaboration facilitated positive collaboration. Thus, this presents an interesting perspective to be explored in additional research.

The two theories informing this research study are systems theory and structural social work theory. Systems theory assumes all systems are interrelated and changes in one system will influence a change in another (Schirmer & Michailkakis, 2019). When youth transition out of care, they face multiple complex situations without the guidance of a guardian or parental figure (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2018). A few complex situations youth must navigate independently are pursuing education, employment, housing, managing finances, navigating the healthcare system, and obtaining mental health or substance use support. These complex situations identify the multiple systems youth leaving a care are impacted by. It is essential to recognize youth transitioning out of care face barriers from multiple systems and since systems are connected, barriers in one system will subsequently create barriers in another system.

Furthermore, Stoner (1999) found that youth who transition out of care experience additional negative outcomes when compared to their counterparts who did not transition from care. Thus, the outcomes for youth transitioning out of care could be improved if they receive the proper support to mitigate the challenges they experience in transition (Stoner, 1999). The findings of this research study indicate child welfare agencies are providing extended care support through programs and agreements to mitigate the systemic barriers youth experience when transitioning from care. The findings of this research study aligned with the recommendations in the literature to support youth transitioning from care through a system's theory lens in order to mediate possible adverse outcomes later in life.

The second theory informing this research study is the structural social work theory, which emphasizes how socio-economic and political aspects of society influence the oppression, marginalization and unequal distribution of resources (Mullaly, 1997). Youth transitioning out of care are at a disadvantage as they are more susceptible to oppression and marginalization by society. The findings of this research study indicate legislation can have a positive effect on facilitating collaboration for youth as a disadvantaged population. The participant from New Zealand reported no challenges or barriers to the collaboration process as it is mandated through legislation to collaborate with additional organizations to support youth transitioning out of care. Thus, legislation enforcing additional, positive support for a historically disadvantaged population has influenced a reduction of oppression and marginalization of this population. The findings indicate structural social work theory is essential in the analysis of collaboration models to ensure youth transitioning out of care have an improved quality of life and support system.

Although the data set is limited in the present study, the findings present four main implications for research. Firstly, collaboration models need to be created through an intra-agency approach, where

representatives of the ministry and representatives of community organizations and programs have a seat in the advisory group. The research shows that the involvement of the community and governmental agencies may be able to better support youth transitioning out of care. Secondly, advisory groups need to maintain open communication with all organizations involved in the collaboration. It is essential to have an open channel of communication outside of this advisory group to ensure the information shared and decisions made are easily accessible to all the departments within the ministry and to the community agencies involved in the collaboration.

Thirdly, the advisory group should be flexible in the matters presented for collaboration. It is important that the advisory group is able to discuss issues that transitioning youth commonly experience, and discuss single complex cases experienced by youth to facilitate the support needed for each unique person. The final implication of this research is the need to use technology efficiently to enhance the collaboration model. Since the advisory group should be flexible in the content that is discussed for problem-solving, technology should be incorporated into this group to enhance this flexibility. The use of an online video calling platform is the main important piece of technology to utilize as it provides a platform that will create flexibility in the frequency of meetings and the ability to meet urgently to address urgent matters.

Limitations

Student researchers identified four evaluation limitations in the course of this research study: 1. Impact of purposive non-probability sampling, 2. Small sample size, 3. Lack of representation from all identified key informant jurisdictions, 4. Qualitative research data collection tools.

These limitations impact the generalizability of our research findings and will be detailed further in this section. In this research study, the student researchers utilized purposive non-probability sampling to identify potential key informants which has impacted our findings. Student researchers and MCFD Sponsors collaborated on the jurisdictions to be represented in this study and the *Invitation to*

Participate letter was sent to contacts that MCFD sponsors had developed prior to this research study. This purposive sampling technique may have led to a sampling bias, which is a threat to the internal validity of this research study.

The small sample size may also impact the validity of this study. The initial recruitment phase included contacting nine potential key informants from the agreed-upon jurisdictions. In an effort to increase validity through increasing the sample size, the student researchers attempted additional recruitment through the CMRL and by facilitated contact through co-student researchers within the 554c Program Evaluation Course, to Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador. An additional component of the limited validity is the lack of representation from all jurisdictions. Of the original identified key informants and additional recruitment efforts, only three participants responded within the data collection time frame. Within the participating jurisdictions, each jurisdiction only had one respondent, thus, further limiting representation.

While the initially intended data collection method was to engage with participants in a semi-structured telephone interview with a questionnaire (the data collection tool), time constraints impacted the student researchers' decision to create an optional online Qualtrics survey, to provide text-based responses to the data collection tool. Unfortunately, there were no requests to conduct telephone interviews within the identified available time frame. The participants that engaged in this study did so through the online Qualtrics survey response option. The benefit of this method was to allow for an extended period of data collection through the online survey and more flexibility in terms of the participants' time to complete it. However, this posed limitations on the student researchers' ability to clarify, ask follow-up questions to the responses provided, and to clear potential misinterpretations in the data.

Recommendations for Future Directions

This research has identified recommendations for future research and methodologies to create a model for intra-government collaboration. Further research of this topic will address gaps in current

knowledge as to how other child welfare jurisdictions collaborate across government and with relevant stakeholders to support youth transitioning out of care.

Recommendation 1: Further research to gather additional information regarding this topic

The literature review has indicated that there is little to no existing research for models of intra-governmental collaboration with respect to youth transitioning out of care into adulthood. Therefore, it is recommended to undertake further research to expand the existing literature regarding this topic for purposes of enhanced collaboration for all jurisdictions striving to support positive transitional outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood. It is suggested to continue with exploratory qualitative studies to gather additional contextual information as there is little evidence regarding this subject.

Recommendation 2: More participants are needed

The limited number of participants in this research study creates barriers in interpreting the data and creating recommendations. In future studies, the research population should be greater in size to improve the validity of the results. The student researchers recommend MCFD establish additional connections with external jurisdictions to designate and identify key informants who are able to share knowledge with respect to the topic of this research study, if they wish to participate in such a study in the future. The student researchers were also contacted by additional participants who met the inclusion criteria from the identified jurisdiction(s); however, they did not express interest in the data collection phase of this research study. This indicates that there is continued interest in individuals participating in a research study similar to this one. More participants in future studies will further expand on the research questions of this study and expand the understanding of existing models of intra-government collaboration.

Recommendation 3: Inclusion criteria should be inclusive of a larger prospective sampling frame

The limited number of prospective participants in this research study negatively impacted the research study response rate. The inclusion criteria should be reviewed in any following research study to

encompass a larger prospective sample size. The inclusion criteria were broad in this research study however, purposive sampling was completed in consultation with the MCFD Sponsors and their prior contacts in different jurisdictions. A review of which positions in child welfare organizations should be included in a study such as this one should be completed to create new inclusion criteria.

Recommendation 4: Telephone interviews are ideal to allow for clarification and more detailed information

There were benefits and challenges to conducting an online survey for the collection of data in this study. In future studies, telephone interviews are recommended as a way to collect information with the added flexibility to gather additional context and clarification of the information received. Not only does this allow for added context and clarification, but it also facilitates communication between the researcher and the participant. This allows the participant to clarify their understanding of what is being asked and allows the researcher the ability to verbally clarify any misconception or understanding of the research purpose, study, and survey tool/data collection method.

Recommendation 5: Collaboration models need to utilize an intra-agency approach

As previously identified in the discussion section, collaboration models need to be created with an intra-agency approach. It is essential that members in a collaboration model include representatives of the important departments in the ministry, and representatives from community organizations and programs. The research shows that the involvement of the community and governmental agencies may be able to better support youth transitioning out of care.

Recommendation 6: Platform to allow for information sharing

It is essential for advisory groups to share information discussed and decisions that have been made with all employees in the child welfare agency and the community organizations involved in the collaboration model. Unfortunately, the data obtained from the participants did not discuss a platform that was utilized to share information

across government and community agencies. This should be further looked at in additional research.

Recommendation 7: Use technology to enhance collaboration in the collaboration model

The advisory group should be flexible in the content that is discussed for problem-solving, therefore technology should be incorporated into this group to enhance its flexibility. Specifically, using online video calling services is important to ensure all parties have the ability to join in the collaboration model which will provide flexibility in meeting if an urgent matter arises.

Conclusion

The research study explored current methods of collaboration utilized in governmental child welfare agencies, in order to understand and implement the development of an intra-agency collaborative approach. The data obtained through the qualitative Qualtrics survey established five themes: transition, extended care agreements, advisory groups, strengths and lessons of collaboration and challenges. A preliminary literature review found information on collaboration strengths and challenges, but the student researchers were unable to directly link this literature to the research questions regarding collaboration between child welfare agencies and other governmental and non-governmental agencies. Although limited in the richness of its data, this study has filled a current gap in knowledge for an understanding of how communication, use of driven. These practices are particularly important to reduce power imbalances when the relationship between the CPSW and family is contentious and highly conflictual. This recommendation was informed by the strength-based theories and trauma-informed social work approaches that guided our research.

Effect of Research on Policy and Practice

In terms of potential impacts, our team is hopeful that the recommendations will be a useful guide for MCFD to improve the use of Family Plans. Further, we hope that our research affects policy by creating an increased awareness regarding the use of the Family Plan and the need for collaboration with families when technology and fostering working

relationships, through collaboration, has played a role in delivering services more relevantly and efficiently to youth transitioning from care. The literature indicates that needs youth have after they have aged out of care. In terms of structural and systems social work theories, it is imperative to address the negative outcomes that youth who have transitioned out of care experience. A willingness to collaborate is required of all agencies and stakeholders, to create a collaborative system/model before implementing the programs, plans, and services which youth need when transitioning out of care.

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Appendix A

Data Collection Instrument: Interview Questions

Questions:

1. How are services to youth in care/foster care delivered within your jurisdiction?
2. At what age do the youth “transition out of care” into adulthood?
3. Is there a committee/advisory/working group for the purpose of collaboration between government stakeholders to support positive transitions for youth leaving care? **Yes/ No**
 - a. If Yes,
 - i. How did this group come into existence?
 - ii. Which organizational role is a member of this collaborative group?
 - iii. How is the group structured? Are there specific members assigned to specific areas or tasks?
 - iv. In what manner (i.e. in person, video conferencing, etc.) does the group meet?
 - v. How often does the group meet?
 - vi. How is information shared? Example: a shared database or information system?
 - vii. Are support staff hired specifically for the function of this group?
 - viii. Is the purpose of the collaboration temporary or time-limited? Y/N?
 - ix. Does the collaboration between support all youth transitioning out of care?
 - x. Does the collaboration process only focus on one group of youth transitioning out of care? If so, what specific population is the primary focus?
 - xi. What were the strengths that arose from working together?
 - xii. Were any structural challenges present that disrupted the ability to collaborate as a working group?
 - b. If No:
 - i. In the past, has there been such a group for the purpose of intra-government collaboration?
 - ii. Has your agency/organization considered this approach to collaboration before?
4. Are there barriers present to collaborating with government and non-government stakeholders?
5. Is there any advice or lessons learned from cross government collaboration you wish to share?