

# **Unveiling intersectionality: Healing opportunities and challenges in democratizing child welfare policy development process**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the opportunities and challenges of applying intersectionality as both an analytical lens and a practical guide for creating more equitable child welfare policies. Seven participants working in policy and practice roles at a local child welfare agency took part in two focus groups. Through descriptive thematic analysis, three central themes were developed: 1) democratizing policy development, 2) the healing nature of intersectionality, and 3) the politics of mainstreaming it. While participants shared a belief in the healing potential of intersectionality, their understandings of its implementation diverged. Practice consultants emphasized democratizing the system, whereas policy analysts framed its operationalization within a top-down, bureaucratic structure—dynamic, at times uncertain, yet offering potential openings. A key discussion centered on participatory policymaking as a path to restoring trust, addressing colonial harms, and enhancing accountability. Future research could further examine how intersectionality may support effective, context-specific reforms within child welfare systems.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Child and Family Welfare, Participatory child welfare policy development, child welfare, decolonizing child welfare



## Introduction

Since it was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality has emerged as a transformative analytical framework for understanding how different aspects of identity and social location intersect to produce both privilege and oppression (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015). In this paper, *intersectionality* is used in several ways: as a concept (Crenshaw's original formulation), as an analytical lens to examine policy and practice, and as a practical approach that may guide the development of more equitable policies in child welfare. When used as a critical approach of inquiry in the child welfare system, intersectionality has deepened our awareness of how child welfare practice and legislation have impacted marginalized families (Roberts, 2014). Research regarding intersectionality as an analytical framework has amassed to the point that it could become separate field of study (Cho et al., 2013). But intersectionality is not only an analytical strategy. Many front-line social justice practitioners are directly exposed to social justice problems, an exposure that positions them to naturally adopt intersectionality as a critical praxis when trying to do their work (Collins, 2015). Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to how intersectionality can be applied as a tool in the policy development process (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011). One attempt to mobilize intersectionality into action is the proposal of a child centered harm reduction framework which would aim to create a specialized area within drug policy that focuses on the overlap between harm reduction strategies and childhood issues (Barret et al., 2022). The authors argue that the application of an intersectionality approach can help harm reduction advocates and researchers identify the interventions that “may need adaptation to the sociology and psychology of childhood, including the interconnected relationship between parent and child, family-centred care, and attention to children's rights” (Barret et al., 2022, p. 3).

The Canadian child protection system is provincially legislated, allowing each province and territory to determine its own service delivery models. Except for Ontario, the provinces and territories have a centralized system led by the provincial government, which can either directly deliver services or delegate to other organizations to conduct this work. In British Columbia, a ministry within the provincial government is mandated to provide child welfare services (Buchner et al., 2022) and delegation notably occurs to organizations which serve Indigenous people. The profound impacts of colonization on Indigenous families are well known in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), and Indigenous mothers in particular continue to share how structural power imbalances and the lack of preventive measures impact their interactions with and outcomes from the child welfare

system (Buchner et al., 2022). With the passing of the Federal Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth and families in 2020, Indigenous governing bodies have a pathway to reclaim their inherent jurisdiction for their children and develop child and family serving systems which are separate from the provincial government. However, as this legislation is relatively recent, the majority of Indigenous families are still served by services led or delegated by the provincial government. Lonne et al. (2008) argue that child protection systems have been designed based on the socially constructed notion of *child abuse* in the 1960s, and “policy and practice have been changed primarily in response to failure and in a context of crisis” (p. 17). The Representative for Children and Youth (2023), an independent body that provides oversight of BC’s child welfare system, has acknowledged the importance of reforming the child welfare system through a cross-government process. The provincial child welfare system uses the Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework in policy development (Government of British Columbia, n.d.), mirroring a federal government practice (Women and Gender Equality Canada, n.d.). However, GBA+ tends to centralize gender, instead of analysing human experiences based on the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, and/or other intersected aspects of their identities. In the context of ongoing calls for policy and practice change from both within and outside the child welfare system, this project aims to explore if and how the policy development process in BC could benefit from the application of an intersectionality perspective.

## Literature Review

When Patricia Hill Collins (2015), an African American scholar notable for her work on gender, race, and class, was working with her students to define the concept of intersectionality, she recalled her surprise that “Despite our best efforts, by the end of the course my students and I both seemed stuck in Stewart's dilemma — we thought we “knew” intersectionality when we saw it but couldn't quite define what it was” (p. 2). Davis (2008) sees intersectionality as a “novel twist” (p. 72), that brought together modern critical feminist theory with postmodern feminist theory. She identifies an early tension between critical feminist theorists who put their attention on race, gender, and class, and the postmodern feminist theorists focused on deconstructing the notion that those categories are static and universal. An intersectional framework presents as a bridge to connect a presumed lack of ideological compatibility between one group that highlights the important ways historic categories of race, gender, and class impact people, and those who see the subjective, fluid, and contextual meanings that those same categories might have. It illuminates the social and economic consequences of oppression based on race, Pinderi, O'Kane & Lee: Unveiling intersectionality

gender, and class, but it does so by “employing methodologies compatible with the poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings of power” (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 74). For the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), which was co-founded by Crenshaw, intersectionality is “a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias” (AAPF, 2013, as cited in Kolivoski, 2020, p. 136). To analyze how intersectional frameworks relate to the notion of the family as a site that resembles and often perpetuates society, Collins (1998) conceptualizes it as an “emerging paradigm that explores how these systems (gender, race, class, and nation) mutually construct one another” (p. 62).

### ***Essentialism vs. Intersectionality***

Harris (1990) defines essentialism as “the notion that a unitary, "essential" women's experience can be isolated and described independently of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience” (p. 585). For Harris, the outcome of this tendency toward gender essentialism is the silencing of Black people’s voices. Other scholars insist on an ordering of identity categories. For example, Gillborn (2015) claims that “intersectionality is a vital aspect of understanding race inequality, but racism retains a primacy” (p. 277), and some propose to reframe existing theories like Family Systems Theory to allow race to have a central role (James et al., 2018). Contrary to these positions, Olsen (2018) argues that even the field of Indigenous studies with its understandable centering of Indigenous culture, could benefit from analyzing oppression and exclusion through an intersectional lens. Just like the idea that any system is greater than the sum of its parts, Crenshaw (1989) concluded that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 58) and envisioned an extra emergent property of intersectionality in “locating the discrimination discourse at the intersection” (p. 73). The journey of intersectionality as a concept since 1989 and the various layers of understanding that scholars have applied to it serve as a reminder of the travelling nature of theories which can depart from their original articulation and can be enriched with new nuances (Said, 1978, as cited in Saxena & Sharma, 2019). Intersectionality as a theoretical framework now appears in fields as diverse as health care (Kelly et al., 2021), sport research (Kriger et al., 2022), and marketing (Rosa-Sales & Sobande, 2022).

### *Intersectionality as critical inquiry in child welfare*

Intersectionality has shown potential to be used as a guiding paradigm in unraveling how gender, race, class, and other social constructs might have impacted families and children engaged with child welfare. Using a critical discourse analysis, Williams-Butler et al. (2020) relied on intersectionality-informed approach to understand how race, gender, and class have affected Black families exposed to child protection services. They argue that the current overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system is a direct result of the racialized, gendered and class-based marginalization of Black mothers and their children. Other scholars have examined how child protection has been instrumentalized as a surveillance mechanism of African American families (Roberts, 2014). In both the US and Canada, intersectionality has been applied as an analytical framework in understanding the needs of children and youth with mental health issues engaged with child welfare and criminal justice systems, known also as ‘crossover’ youths (Bergman, 2019, Kolivoski, 2020). It has also been used as a framework to identify some of the contributing factors for the overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care (Grooms, 2020).

### *Intersectionality as a tool in the policymaking process*

Two notable frameworks to operationalize an intersectional approach in policy development have been developed in North America: The Intersectionality Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011; Hankivsky et al., 2014) and a Policy-Making Toolkit (Hull et al, 2023). IBPA was proposed in public health policy development and contains two core components: a set of guiding principles and 12 questions that shape the policy. The guiding principles that inform the questions are intersecting categories, multi-level analysis, equity, social justice, diverse knowledges, time and space, reflexivity, and power. The questions that are designed to inform the policy development process are divided into those that are descriptive and those that are transformative (e.g., “What inequalities exist in relation to the ‘problem’? How will you know if the inequalities have been reduced? How are groups differentially affected by this representation of the ‘problem’?” (Hankivsky et al., 2014, p. 4). The Policy-Making Toolkit incorporates both an intersectionality-informed framework and critical race theory to ensure that “policy solutions are based on and center on the lived experiences of disadvantaged women, rather than the worldview or positions of the policy framers and developers from more privileged groups” (p. 632).

### ***Intersectionality, communities, and democracy***

Collins (2017) discusses the importance of using intersectional analysis to examine power and politics in relation to subordinated groups and that it “constitutes an important site for seeing the deepening commitment to participatory democracy as an alternative to technical agendas of the state” (p. 19). She argues that when people become aware of the intersecting nature of their oppression and when they recognize other people with similar obstacles, they develop a sense of community. Communities thus become a shelter where people can make sense of their lived experiences and can (re)emerge as citizens who hold political power and the ability to collectively contest oppression, supporting the notion that only those who are disempowered can truly understand their circumstances and claim justice-based resolutions (Wojciechowska, 2018). “Communities,” Collins (2017) argues, “constitute major vehicles that link individuals to the social institutions that organize complex social inequalities” (p. 27). Noting the strong link between participatory democracy, communities, collective actions, and intersectionality-informed inquiry, Collins (2017) states that, “building inclusive democratic communities requires rejecting permanent hierarchy in favor of intersectional understandings of solidarity that facilitate coalition-building” (p. 37).

### **Research Objectives and Questions**

The research was about examining the concept of intersectionality in a setting that aimed to enable research participants to safely explore through group interaction their subjective interpretations of the concept. The aim was to explore possible pathways for operationalizing an intersectional approach in a provincial child welfare policy development process. When operationalized in practice, this could mean any indicators, measures or instruments that might enable the implementation of intersectionality-informed lenses in policymaking. As there is little research on how to operationalize intersectionality during child welfare policy development it was considered appropriate to start by generating deeper understandings, tentative and subjective discoveries (Rubin & Rubin, 2020). While GBA+ is the current provincial policy framework and can be intrinsically related to and overlap with intersectionality-informed approaches, this research did not intend to evaluate GBA+ efficacy, compare the two, or explore ways to replace GBA+ with an intersectional framework. Instead, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges or opportunities might intersectionality pose if used in child welfare policy development?
2. What strategies and tools can the child welfare system use to successfully incorporate intersectionality in the policy development process? 0o99

### **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

The theoretical framework that underpins this research is critical postmodernism, aligning with what Drake and Hodge (2022) call the *Postmodern/Critical Theory (P/CT)* approach. This perspective challenges the notion of universal truth, recognizing that knowledge and reality are socially and culturally constructed. As Howe (1994) notes, “the truth” is “de-centred and localized so that many truths are recognized – in different times and different places” (p. 520). P/CT draws attention to how power shapes knowledge—legitimizing some voices while silencing others—and critiques dominant discourses as tools of oppression, including science itself when left unexamined (Drake & Hodge, 2022). This is particularly important in research addressing inequity and social justice. Within this framework, intersectionality is viewed as dynamic and context-dependent, not simply the overlap of identity categories but the shifting impact of these intersections on people’s lived experiences (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989). This approach centers marginalized voices and questions the structures that define what counts as valid knowledge.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The author’s university behavioural research ethics board and the child welfare agency’s privacy and security clearance were obtained. The research employed a qualitative approach to explore nuanced, subjective, and complex perspectives of participants through two focus groups, a method that is well documented in evaluating policy options (Krueger & Casey, 2015). A qualitative research approach aligns with the subjective nature of intersectionality. The fluidity of intersectionality as a conceptual framework has often been the reason why some scholars have questioned its empirical validity, sometimes describing it as a “messy subjectivity” (Nash, 2008, p. 8), but in this research the subjective



nature of intersectionality-informed thinking was seen as an opportunity to explore various nuanced (and subjective) perspectives.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The research explored the perspectives of seven participants who attended two focus groups, employing a homogenous sampling strategy (Krueger & Casey, 2015). One focus group was composed of policy analysts (n = 3) who were knowledgeable regarding how jurisdictions - either within or outside Canada - have conceptualized intersectionality-informed approaches. Another group was composed of provincial practice consultants (n = 4) who were knowledgeable about how to translate policy into practice, as their role involves providing consultation to front-line workers and teams (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). Voluntary response sampling (Stratton, 2023) was used to recruit participants. A group email was sent to all known practice consultants within the organization, and a snowball approach was used for policy analysts due to the smaller pool of participants from this group.

### **Data Collection**

The focus groups were organized in early 2024 and were conducted via MS Teams video conferencing. Research has shown that video conferenced focus groups can collect data as rich as in-person focus groups (Janghorban et al., 2014). Signed consent was obtained from the participants prior conducting 70-minute focus group discussions. A questioning route described in Krueger and Casey (2015) was revised based on the views of research team members to enhance content validity. Both focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

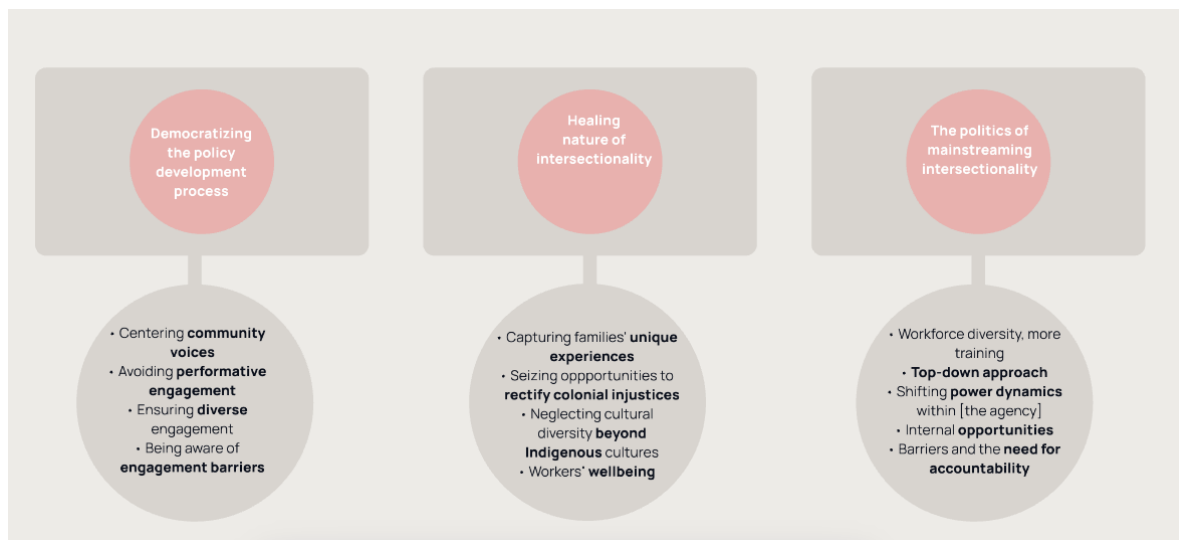
Descriptive thematic analysis was conducted over three phases. Using a similar process to that described by Braun and Clarke (2006), data analysis involved an initial familiarization phase, a first cycle of inductive coding using in-vivo, process, concept and versus coding (Saldaña, 2015) and then a second cycle of axial coding. The first cycle of coding aimed to identify higher meanings while remaining attached to the data, based on the guidance of Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019). Axial coding

was used to glue codes around a category based on their direct connection to the categorical description. This grouping of dynamic, often opposing descriptors helped to define the themes and construct a coherent narrative, by elevating the data into a reflective commentary, like an interpretive description (Thorne, 2016).

## Research findings

Three themes were developed from the data. The first, Democratizing the policy development process, captures discussions about centering community voices in policy development, and, as a research participant highlighted, “allowing everyone’s voice to be heard”. The discussions here underline the need for authentic engagement with different voices that does not replicate any form of tokenism, referred to by participants in both groups as performative engagement. Two underlying ideas which became sub-categories were the need to have proactive engagement and diverse representation and being mindful of barriers to engagement. The second theme, Healing in operationalizing intersectionality, addresses the potential of a healing effect originating from the implementation of an intersectionality-informed approach into a child welfare policy development process. Subcategories include the healing nature of seeing and capturing families’ unique experiences; seizing the opportunities to rectify colonial injustices; ensuring workers well-being; and the neglect of cultural diversity beyond Indigenous perspectives. This latter complex discussion centered on a shared concern among participants that cultural sensitivities applied to Indigenous families did not appear to be similarly enacted for other minority non-Indigenous cultures. A third theme, the politics of mainstreaming intersectionality, relates to perspectives on workforce diversity and training needs, and the child welfare agency’s top-down approach to change, with its sub-category of shifting power dynamics within the system. The categories in this theme relate to discussions about the hierarchical structure of a provincial government department, the challenges of obtaining “the buy-in of the top leadership”, and the opportunities to strategize around a growing political momentum of change. Figure 1 shows how the themes are organized.

**Figure 1** *Illustration of categories and sub-categories that form each of the three themes*



*Note:* The categories do not hold any hierarchical importance, but rather a non-hierarchical, sometimes opposing and/or complementary value for each of the theme they form together.

### Theme 1. Democratizing the policy development process

Participants' responses in the focus groups suggested that they viewed the notion of applying an intersectional lens as nested in a commitment to connect with communities, to gather unfiltered information about people's unique intersecting lived experiences, and to prioritize direct forms of engagement. Participants discussed the importance of strategically engaging with diverse voices, and representation was not only about reaching out to minority groups but also ensuring breadth within such groups. One participant said:

One of the groups that we use in [the agency] to engage with us is called the Youth Advisory Council. And they're awesome. They're a group of young youth in and from care. And we ask them all sorts of things. But there's only eight of them. And we ask them everything. And surely eight people don't represent the youth of [the province]. How do we get diversity in the groups themselves that we're interacting with and making sure that we get different voices? (Practice consultant)

Participants viewed the integration of an intersectionality-informed perspective in the policy development process as an opportunity to capture people's unique experiences. They envisioned

centering the voices of the community as a genuine form of engagement, contrasting it with what was creatively described as a performative engagement. They recognized both the promises of such proactive engagement and the barriers.

### *Centering community voices*

Participants viewed the implementation of intersectionality-informed approach as an opportunity to bring people together who both work for the system and who are impacted by it, and position them at the center of a transparent engagement process. As one participant said:

It is important to use the word *listen*. We often say, ‘we’d like to talk to you.’ I certainly say that all the time. But really what I want is ‘I want to listen to you.’ And if we are going to listen to people then we do something with what they say. (Practice Consultant)

Participants discussed the importance of creating an infrastructure of engagement that encourages the sharing of experiences. They pointed out the relevance of being both flexible and strategic in engagement processes and moving away from ‘one-size-fits-everyone’ approaches.

### *Performative engagement*

Taking part in the focus groups appeared to offer a safe opportunity for the participants - especially those in the practice consultants’ focus group – to discuss the importance of moving away from a tokenistic engagement. One participant observed that:

I think that we mean for it [the engagement] to be central, but I don’t know that it necessarily is. I feel that sometimes we go through a pantomime of engagement where we go through the motions of asking for input, but honestly, the decisions have already been made, which, I’m sorry, that sounds bad. But it’s just my observation. (Practice consultant)

Others raised similar points, reflected in comments about “asking for input, then ignoring it” (Practice consultant), “having good intentions but missing the mark” (Practice consultant), or “talk the talk vs.

walk the walk,” (Practice consultant).

### **Proactive and diverse engagement.**

Much of the discussion about the need to depart from tokenistic forms of engagement was related to suggestions about strategic and intentional choices to ensure diverse engagement and proactive outreach to clients and communities. One of the participants suggested:

We need to go to people. We can't be passive and then expect people to interact with us. First, we're horrible because this is the government, and we look scary to them. And second, people don't know we want to talk to them. (Practice consultant)

### **Engagement barrier.**

Participants were aware of the barriers and the challenges of engaging in the way they envisioned, with discussions about barriers re-emerging repeatedly and connecting with other concerns. One tenacious barrier outlined was the lack of trust that individuals might have in the government. Participants proposed partnering with community agencies in the engagement process to establish safer spaces for listening. As one of them pointed out:

People don't trust government and so people can feel comfortable maybe with those external agencies. We have external agencies that have very positive relationships with people in the Community like groups that work with parents, with kids with people with disabilities or community organizations that work with immigrants and refugees and community organizations that work with Indigenous people. (Policy analyst)

Despite identifying this significant barrier, engagement with children, youth, families, and communities was broadly seen as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

## **Theme 2. Healing in operationalizing intersectionality**

Intersectionality was often conceptualized as a practice that, if adopted by the child welfare system, could contribute to three key outcomes. First, it could allow the system to hear unique

experiences, and through this could enable individuals experience a sense of representation by seeing their own ways of living, values, and worldviews reflected in the systems that serve them. The second outcome lies in the opportunities that an intersectional lens may bring in addressing and rectifying colonial injustices, by recognizing and dismantling the intersecting layers of oppression and privilege. Thirdly, systemically internalizing intersectionality-informed thinking may also facilitate the child welfare system in re-examining internal injustices, like hiring practices, or the expectations it places on front-line workers.

### *Capturing families' unique experiences*

When advocating for adopting an intersectional lens, participants talked about better ways of *seeing* minority and/or overrepresented groups, identified as Indigenous people, people with disabilities, 2SLGBTQ+ people, and immigrant families. This *seeing* would contribute to “better outcomes for kids and future families” (Practice consultant), and “better work done with immigrant families” (Policy analyst). In doing this the child welfare system not only would be capable of capturing families’ unique experiences but it could also enable an increased sense of representation. One participant observed that:

If child welfare practice fits with someone’s culture, it fits with someone’s life experiences, they will be able to see themselves both reflected in the system and the processes. I think it would seem more aligned with a healing process than a damaging [one], otherwise they could feel like their family is wrong and this [what is being asked to do] is right. (Practice Consultant)

The idea that policy should align with people’s unique identities generated some excitement about what intersectionality lenses can bring in child welfare. By aligning policy with people’s unique identities and lived experiences there is a sense that the implementation of intersectionality might create a more inclusive and empathetic system. As one participant pointed out, “applying intersectionality lenses to our work would allow people to walk along this journey with us.” (Policy analyst)

An intersectionality-informed framework was seen as a strategic tool in facing the legacy of colonialism and an opportunity to rectify some past injustices. One participant noted that, “there’s a lot that needs to be unpacked and unravelled in order to really create a system or structure that is fair and

encompassing of all different walks of life” (Practice consultant). The discussion about intersectionality was seen in the context of reconciliation, related to a political notion of having *the power back*.

### ***Ensuring workers’ wellbeing***

An intersectionality-informed approach was seen as an opportunity to improve workplace policies and, hiring practices, and to revise the expectations placed on front-line workers. Participants felt that “recruitment and hiring practices aren’t inclusive” (Policy analyst). Although participants were not very clear on how an intersectionality lens would improve workers’ sense of wellbeing, they nevertheless insisted that if policy incorporated this perspective it would have to acknowledge the intersecting nature of the staff as well as service users. The clearest example given was that of staff being afforded time to think and reflect as whole practitioners rather than just acting.

### ***Neglecting cultural diversity beyond Indigenous perspectives***

Participants in the practice consultants’ focus group entered a discussion about how the child welfare system has been engaged in a process of aligning policies with the broader process of Indigenous reconciliation. While recognizing the ethical imperative and importance of this overdue shift, they noticed that there is a paradox, as moves to centralize awareness of Indigenous identity and rights seem to have left little space for recognition for other diverse migrant and settler groups. Participants observed the presence of a cultural hierarchy within the documentation system of the child welfare system, stating:

The reporting system that we use for children, for permanency, there are two different values for ethnicity, and one value is Indigenous, the other value is null. Null is everything that’s not Indigenous. There are 55% of children [in care] are Indigenous and 45% are null. (Practice consultant)

Participants saw in the operationalization of an intersectionality-informed approach an opportunity to increase the space held for seeing and understanding the needs of people who are both non-White and

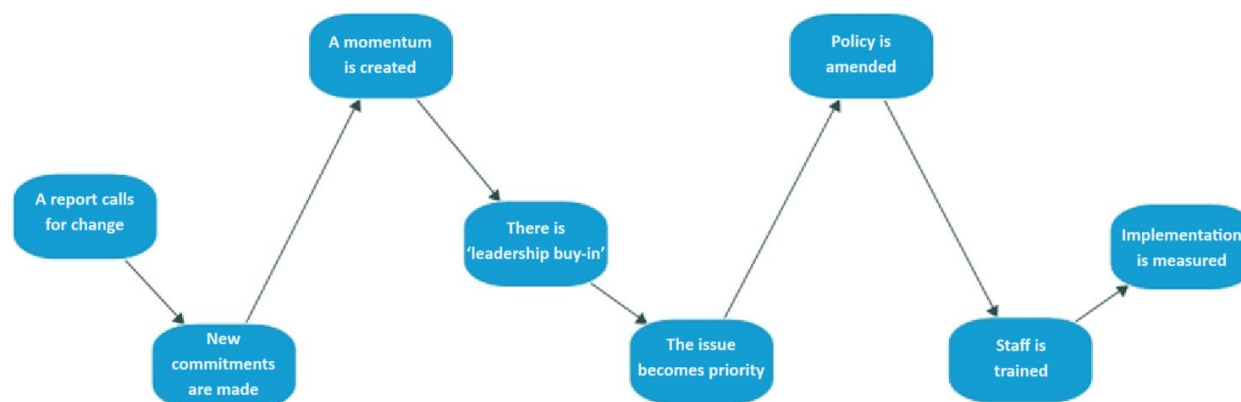
non-Indigenous, and therefore to recognize “that there may be completely different child welfare, child guardianship or other cultural norms” at play (Practice consultant).

### Theme 3: The politics of mainstreaming intersectionality

Participants discussed ways of navigating the complexities of policy development, especially in a top-down child welfare system. This was a particular focus for the policy analysts. Participants were diligent in acknowledging both opportunities and barriers while strategically leveraging political pathways. The opportunities related to identifying and capitalizing on favorable circumstances in the policy landscape to drive positive change. Participants spoke consistently about a sense of “living in an *era of change*’ (Practice Consultant), or “a moment in history” (Policy analyst). These moments - often triggered by a report that calls for action – provide windows of opportunity for policy change. Figure 2 maps this synthesized trajectory of policy change.

**Figure 2**

*An illustration of a possible map of policy changes conceptualized inductively from the data*



*Note:* The identified trajectory is neither ideal, nor linear. The ups and downs of a policy development process represent its complexity.

### *Tentative ideas to operationalize intersectionality*

Participants noted that “intersectionality can be central in campaigning for better child welfare” (Practice consultant). This viewpoint reflected the idea that opportunities for positive change could



come from applying an intersectionality lens, but another topic of conversation was how these opportunities to apply intersectionality could be identified. Practice consultants identified the process of engaging with families as being itself “a possible tool” for operationalizing an intersectionality-informed approach, by seeing the engagement as an important step in bringing awareness to the unique intersecting factors that shape each family’s situation. Policy analysts also acknowledged the importance of engagement but also highlighted other potential mechanisms for incorporating intersectionality-informed thinking in policy development, perhaps by capitalizing on opportunities presented by political or bureaucratic systems. One participant said:

When you’re submitting cabinet submissions, Treasury board submissions for strategic direction that require a high-level policy approval, there actually is a requirement to do a gender-based analysis. So, leveraging on that could be an opportunity. (Policy analyst)

Another suggestion was to “integrate intersectionality into the Service Plan” (Policy analyst), or to create a “guiding document to inform the policy development process” (Policy analyst). Participants – especially policy analysts – noted that “we are at a good time in our history, and adopting an intersectionality-informed perspective is not really a choice, but rather an obligation” (Policy analyst). Reports of the Representative of Children and Youth, that usually require specific actions and are expected to increase accountability, were identified as “windows of opportunities” to advance policy change (Policy analyst).

### ***Possible barriers and the need for accountability.***

While the GBA+ framework is required to be integrated into high-level policy documents, “when you get further down into operationalizing the policy, the use of intersectionality is quite dependent on the person (Policy analyst). This discretion was identified as a main reason for what a participant defined as “the weakening of implementing intersectionality principles down the road” (Policy analyst). Some participants proposed creating a “performance measurement framework” to measure the implementation of an intersectionality-informed policy lens.

### **Top-Down Approach to change**

The hierarchical structure of child welfare systems and the need to have “leadership buy-in” was discussed as both a challenge and an opportunity. One participant observed the following:

I don't think that it's going to make a really big change what we policy makers do here - which sounds really bad, as a policy maker - until there's a value shift in leadership, because so long as the leadership doesn't really value this, it's not going to happen, because the workers aren't going to get the support to do the real work they need to do. (Practice consultant)

This top-down approach to change and the importance of leadership buy-in was considered a prerequisite for resource reallocation and for measuring implementation, two important factors in an impactful policy change process. As one participant reflected:

I think there is opportunity, but I think it must be a holistic kind of approach where you have the leadership commitment, and then you need to have training. But I think we also need like some accountability and measurement in there too, right? (Policy analyst)

### **Shifting power dynamics.**

An opportunistic aspect of a top-down approach seemed to be for some of the participants, the very nature of hierarchy: its constant leadership change, and the change that the new leadership usually brings. The following observation captures this well:

I think we're also on the brink of a potentially good time for a change like that. A new minister is coming in, a new deputy minister is coming – yes, minister, deputy minister and assistant deputy minister – are all coming in and a lot of [older staff] are retiring. So, there are a lot of new people coming in. (Practice consultant)

### **Discussion**

This research aimed to explore possible strategies and/or tools that a provincial child welfare agency could use to implement an intersectionality-informed approach in a provincial child welfare agency's policy development process, and to examine potential opportunities and challenges. The research questions were:

1. What challenges or opportunities might intersectionality pose if used in child welfare policy development?
2. What strategies and tools can the child welfare system use to successfully incorporate intersectionality in the policy development process?

Participants identified a strong connection between intersectionality-informed thinking and participatory policy development. Centering community voices in the process of policy development was imagined both as a prerequisite for the child welfare system to be able to implement intersectionality, and as an outcome of the implementation. This cause-versus-effect thinking has been previously discussed by scholars when describing how an intersectional lens can aid the formation of identity-based or issue-sharing communities and then link these communities – in the form of collective actions - with the very systems that produced the oppressions that intersectionality lenses have shed light upon (Collins, 2017).

However, the trajectory for this latter process is usually bottom-up – not top-down as indicated by participants in this research - and requires grassroots leadership to be able to meaningfully impact any participatory process (Wojciechowska, 2019). Hull et al. (2023) advocated basing policy solutions on the lived experience of people whose lives are affected by those policies, and not on the worldviews of the policy developers. This understanding can be used to reframe the second research question, as it suggests that at this early stage of reimagining a policy development process, the focus should be less on the tools and more on the process - specifically how this can become a democratized, healing, and politically supported venture. Democratized child welfare policy is reimagined as inclusive and open to being shaped by the unique and intersected experiences of oppressed or marginalized populations. An intersectionality-informed approach becomes equally an analytical framework, a standard of practice, and a strategy to democratize the system.

When considering the opportunities and challenges in implementing intersectionality-informed approaches in a provincial child welfare system, participants identified that intersectionality may have a healing impact for communities, because of its analytical focus on seeing unique lived experiences. When those lived experiences are reflected in the child welfare system, individuals feel represented. Intersectionality was also related with front line workers' need for self-reflection. Participants saw an inherent value in allowing people to self-examine their biases and their locations, in line with the

Collin's (2015) suggestion that intersectionality can be understood as both an area of inquiry and practice. The potential healing nature of an applied intersectionality-informed framework was seen also as supporting the wellbeing of front-line workers. The responses between the two focus groups appeared to differ when it comes to the challenges that the implementation of intersectionality can bring. Participants in the practice consultants' focus group were more concerned with ensuring democratic and participatory policy making, while the participants in the policy analysts' focus group were more focused on the politics of this process, including the bureaucratic dynamics that can often appear as windows of opportunity for policy advancement. This nuanced approach to the same issue is also a reflection of the policy development process itself: complex, intricate, dynamic, filled with unforeseen factors, and often inherently uncertain.

### **Limitations**

This is a small sample within one child welfare agency and does not claim to be representative of all perspectives nor generalizable beyond the sample. The volunteer response sampling embodies self-selection bias (Stratton, 2023), which in turn can lead to data obtained by a relatively homogenous group. Another limitation lies in the exclusion of direct participation of children, youth, and families that have been involved with child welfare.

### **Implications and considerations**

Further research can help explore possible opportunities for marginalized communities and the child welfare system to engage in participatory and democratic policy development. There may be a strategic value in understanding intersectionality-informed analysis as the foundation of this transformative process. At the same time, child welfare agencies might see value in re-imagining how policy is evaluated, and how intersectionality lenses can aid that process. Therefore, enabling marginalized communities to engage with the child welfare system can become an investment in a sustainable long-term regeneration of trust. Researchers on the other hand might find it important to explore and generate further discussions about the interconnectedness of intersectionality with democracy, and participatory policy making.

## Conclusions

Participants in two focus groups identified an inherent healing nature in an intersectionality-informed approach because it (1) enables the child welfare system to capture the unique experiences of the families and clients it serves, (2) allows clients to experience a sense of representation of their values and worldviews in the system, (3) provides a pathway for rectifying past injustices, and (4) serves as a social justice standard that can reshape the expectations placed on front-line workers, and can increase their sense of well-being. Participants had nuanced perspectives when it comes to the question of how to operationalize intersectionality-informed approaches in the policy development process. For some, it is less about specific tools, and it is more about a transparent, proactive, and bottom-up approach to democratize the policy development process. For others, it is also about seizing any opportunity arising from internal and external dynamics, including processes that are bureaucratic in nature, for advancing policy change.

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