Not Just Disability and Adoption:
Addressing Culture and Minority Issues in Special Needs Adoption

by
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH PROJECT

The purpose of this research project was to examine the issues and challenges unique to transracial special needs adoption, and identify what additional support is needed when children with disabilities are placed cross-culturally for adoption. I was specifically interested in how cultural planning practices are affected with the emergence of children’s other special needs in transracial adoption. This project was conducted in collaboration with Dr. Alice Home from the University of Ottawa, who recently completed research to explore different stakeholders’ views on the experiences of adoptive families parenting children (aged 1-12) with special needs (Home, 2010). Dr. Home’s exploratory study, entitled Special needs adoptive parenting: Canadian stakeholders’ views on parents’ experiences and support needs (Stakeholder), involved 26 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with adoptive parents, adoption associations and social workers in Ontario and British Columbia. Many of the parents interviewed in the Stakeholder study had adopted children cross-culturally or transracially. Dr. Home and her community partners subsequently received a public outreach grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (April 2012) to conduct dissemination workshops to discuss the research findings with original research participants and other key community stakeholders, and to seek input and identify areas for future collaborative work (Home, 2011). Working as Dr. Home’s research assistant to coordinate and facilitate the BC workshop allowed me to simultaneously explore my area of interest for this MSW research project.

Dr. Home’s dissemination project, entitled Towards successful special needs adoptions: Working and learning together across boundaries, had four goals: make results available to diverse research users, provide an opportunity to give feedback and input on next steps, build
connections within and between adoption and disability communities, and ensure that the research remains accessible for flexible use (Home, 2011). Two workshops were held in Ontario and British Columbia in fall 2012 in order to meet the project goals of dissemination and consultation. Main themes identified in the Stakeholder study became the basis of four small group discussions that were held in the afternoon of both workshops, giving participants an opportunity to discuss the issues and propose strategies for improving services for adoptive families parenting children with disabilities. The one-hour theme group that I facilitated at the BC workshop specifically explored the challenges associated with addressing culture and disability in the transracial adoption of children with special needs. A parallel afternoon theme group discussion on this topic was also held during the Ottawa workshop, and a summary was written of the group discussion. To achieve the project goal of ensuring the research remains accessible, four monographs are being produced in 2013 for wide distribution via partners’ websites, addressing the key themes emerging from the research findings and workshop group summaries. This current monograph on the topic of addressing culture and disability in adoption is longer to meet the standards for an MSW research project for the University of Victoria, but will be shortened to be similar in format and length to the others (Appendix 1).

To explore issues in transracial special needs adoption, I drew from three main sources of information: a review of relevant literature, secondary thematic analysis of selected Stakeholder interview data (with identifying information removed), and thematic analysis of the two small workshop group summaries from Ontario and BC. Information from these three sources was then used to write the monograph for parents and professionals on the topic of addressing culture and disability in transracial special needs adoption (Appendix 1). The monograph summarizes
my research findings regarding the additional support needs of adoptive parents raising special needs children cross-culturally, and identifies implications for practice. Recommendations to improve services for children and families stem from this analysis, and also draw on material derived from the literature and from the professional experience of the project team. This monograph is being distributed in 2013 to various communities of interest, with the potential to guide Canadian parents, professionals and policy makers in the field of adoption.

This paper outlines the steps taken in conducting this research project, and summarizes the main findings that led to the production of the monograph. A discussion of relevant literature is offered, along with a review of research methods undertaken to complete this research within Dr. Home’s existing project. A more comprehensive literature review and analysis of the findings, including recommendations for parents and professionals in adoption, is included in the final monograph. This research paper, the monograph, and the workshop activities with Dr. Home, together make up my final research project to fulfill the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work from the University of Victoria.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION AND PERSONAL LOCATION

I approached this research project from my background of anti-oppressive social work practice\(^1\). Research based on anti-oppressive epistemology recognizes the “political nature of research and the duty to decolonize” through inquiry (Brown & Strega, 2005, p.2). In this

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\(^1\) Anti-oppressive practice is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of critical approaches that embrace a social justice perspective in social work, seeking to challenge and eliminate discrimination and oppression. Anti-oppressive practice acknowledges power relations within the institutional structures of social work.
research project, I aimed to identify and explore the views of adoptive parents and key community stakeholders, bringing new knowledge to the current discourses\(^2\) in transracial and special needs adoption. Anti-oppressive research is grounded in the lived experiences of the research participants, linking personal experiences to political issues in society in order to contribute to social justice and transformative practice. Accordingly, it was important in my research that I represented the subjective experiences of parents raising children with special needs cross-culturally, while simultaneously situating these stories within the larger historical context of Canada’s colonial child welfare practices.

Anti-oppressive research also acknowledges the power relations that exist between the researcher and participant, and positions the researcher as learner (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). In facilitating the workshop theme group discussion, I considered my role as a ‘witness’ to the participants’ stories and ‘observer’ to the interactions in the group, hearing their narratives while recognizing the political nature of my topic of inquiry. I was not able to include birth parents or transracial adoptees as participants in this research project; however, this would be an important area for future research to explore in order to build upon the existing knowledge regarding cultural planning practices in special needs adoption.

It is important to recognize my social location in relation to my research topic as a White colonial settler subject, and a social worker with extensive experience working in child welfare and adoption. An important aspect of anti-oppressive epistemology is to “recognize the complicity that each of us has in creating and sustaining oppression over others” (Potts & Brown, 2005, p.258). My interest in this topic was partly derived from the discomfort I have felt in my

\(^{2}\) Discourse, according to Foucault (1980, 1981), is related to power and the creation of truth, and legitimizes certain knowledge while excluding others based on power relations existing in society.
position of dominance and privilege working under colonial child welfare policies that continue to negatively impact racialized groups. I am implicated as an agent of this enduring colonialism in my child welfare encounters with Indigenous\(^3\) people and in the transracial adoption placements of other minority children needing permanency. I have witnessed the failure of superficial cultural plans in the adoption of children placed cross-culturally, and have heard from adoptees who struggle with their racial identity in transracial adoption. Similarly, I have observed parents of special needs children struggle with limited access to resources in the post-adoption period. As a former Ministry social worker, I have engaged in hegemonic economic discourses and policies that place increasing constraints on public spending that thereby limit services for families in need. I acknowledge these power relations and racial hierarchies embedded in adoption and child welfare practice, and approach my topic with awareness of the assumptions I bring to it as a White worker engaging in dominant discourses in transracial and special needs adoption.

Facilitating this workshop discussion from an anti-oppressive framework allowed me to explore and expose participants’ perceptions on my topic of interest, as well as analyze the inter-relational dynamics between the group participants by placing myself as researcher and group facilitator in a peripheral role (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). In this research, I worked to ensure that my participants’ voices were central to the final written monograph regarding the challenges associated with respecting culture while addressing disability needs in adoption. The project offered an important opportunity to bring parents, professionals and community stakeholders

\(^3\) The term Indigenous, used to describe First Nation, Métis and Inuit people, has been chosen to reflect the history of colonialism and oppression enacted upon the First Peoples of Canada. The term Aboriginal will only be used in direct citations from other sources.
together in a one-day workshop, to learn across boundaries and offer validation for the common experiences of parents in special needs adoption. Data from the BC and Ontario parent interviews and theme group discussions offered diverse perspectives on my topic of inquiry. Drawing from these three sources of data (original Stakeholder interviews, workshop theme group summaries, and a review of relevant literature), as well as from the professional expertise of the project team, provided me with rich and varied information to guide me in the writing of the monograph. My first task in completing this research project was to examine the literature that currently exists on the topic of transracial special needs adoption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive review and analysis of relevant literature is included in the final monograph (Appendix 1), and will be only briefly summarized in this paper. Research indicates that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of families adopting children transracially and cross-culturally over the past four decades. Transracial adoption refers to parents (usually European/Caucasian) forming their families with children who are members of a different racial or ethnic group by birth, while cross-cultural adoption can include parents of one racial group who adopt racially similar children from a different cultural background (McCroy, 1989; McCroy & Grape, 1999). The trend towards transracial and cross-cultural adoption started shortly after World War II as a humanitarian effort to provide substitute families for children left without parental care. Adoptions from Korea, Central and South America, Eastern Europe and China began to increase dramatically after 1950, and coincided with lower fertility rates and fewer infants available for adoption in Western countries. Between 1998 and 2004, international
adoption rates in the 20 primary receiving countries increased by 41.7%, from 31,667 to 44,872 children placed during this period. The majority of these children were placed cross-culturally into families in the USA (50.9%), Spain (12.3%), France (9.1%), Italy (7.6%) and Canada (4.4%) (Paulsen & Merighi, 2009). Similarly, adoptions of Indigenous children in Canada resulting from colonial assimilationist child welfare policies such as the ‘60s scoop’ resulted in thousands of children being forcibly removed from their homes and communities. Over 70% of those apprehended during this period were adopted by non-Indigenous families (Sinclair, 2009). Following this growing trend in transracial and cross-cultural adoption, research has explored how children’s racial identity, language barriers and cultural differences can exacerbate post-adoption difficulties for adoptive families, and has identified the importance of preparing parents adequately for these challenges (McRoy & Grape, 1999). Consequently, children’s unique racial identity needs in cross-cultural and transracial placements became an area for concern in adoption and child welfare practice.

The importance of cultural planning practices that maintain cultural connections and improve outcomes for children in transracial families has been widely researched and documented (Blackstock, 2003; Carrière, 2007, 2008, 2010; Howe, 2008; McCroy, 1989; Paulsen & Merighi, 2009; Sinclair, 2009; Vonk, 2001). Cultural planning policies in adoption developed largely from examining negative outcomes for Indigenous children being raised outside of their homes and communities due to this enduring history of colonial child welfare practices (Carrière, 2008, 2010). While adoption legislation in most Canadian provinces includes culture as a ‘best interests’ provision in permanency planning for children, British Columbia, with its high number of Indigenous children in care, has been more progressive by
enforcing this into child welfare and adoption policy. Cultural planning policy in British Columbia, which developed out of the *Adoption Act* (1996), identifies the importance of “preserving the child’s cultural identity” when doing permanency planning for Indigenous children (*Adoption Act*, 1996, Section 3(2); Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2009). Social workers must follow BC’s *Adoption Practice Standards and Guidelines* when planning for Indigenous children in adoption, which provide direction on preserving an Indigenous child’s cultural heritage and identity (Ministry for Children and Families, 2001). However, despite the emergence of these cultural planning policies, identity loss continues to be a major issue in transracial adoption, and children struggle with the development of healthy racial identity if they are raised in families where cultural connection is not maintained (Carrière, 2007). Parents in transracial adoption must incorporate their child’s culture into the family in regular and meaningful ways, and help their child develop skills to cope in a world where race continues to be inextricably tied to issues of power and inequality (Howe, 2008).

Maintaining cultural connections for children in transracial adoption can be significantly more challenging when there are additional special needs resulting from a child’s history of institutionalization, trauma or prenatal risk factors (Asbury, Cross & Waggenspack, 2004; Lazarus, Evans, Glidden & Flaherty, 2002). “Bio-behavioural special needs”, or disabilities that relate to a child’s physical, mental and behavioural functioning, often manifest later in life and are not identified at time of adoption placement (Wind, Brooks & Barth, 2007, p.379). Adoptive parents are often unprepared for the emerging challenges that come with parenting a special needs child, and report persistent challenges and reduced parental satisfaction in the post-adoption period (Home, 2010; Reilly & Platz, 2004). Furthermore, with the worldwide increase
in wait times for adoption, many families now enter the process choosing to adopt a child with minor, correctable special needs through various international “Waiting Child Programs”. However, recent research indicates that many of these children with known minimal special needs may turn out to have much more complex physical, emotional and psychological issues later in life that their parents were not prepared for (International Social Service, 2012). These parents face additional stressors and require adequate support in the post-adoption period in order to be successful.

Adoptive parents of children with special needs face the highest risk of adoption disruption, and their demand for post-adoption services increases as their child’s special needs become more evident over time (Reilly & Platz, 2004). Transracial families parenting children with special needs therefore face the dual challenge of balancing both culture and disability needs in adoption, with a limited number of supports and resources available to them in the post-adoption period. There is very little literature that addresses the preparation and support needs for parents managing culture and disability in adoption, or research into how children cope with discrimination due to both racism and ableism in society. These adoptive parents likewise have the task of confronting their own attitudes about disability and race, and consequently require adequate screening, preparation and support in order to facilitate positive placements for these children.

Given the prevalence of minority special needs children waiting both locally and internationally for permanency, it is vital that we examine the question of how parents can successfully address culture and disability in order to meet the diverse and comprehensive needs of children in transracial special needs adoption. This research project begins to address the
current gap in social work literature by exploring the themes and issues in transracial special needs adoption and proposing strategies to better support families.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

Given the growing number of special needs children being placed for adoption into transracial families, it is important to examine how and if parents can successfully address children’s cultural and disability needs in adoption, and what additional support and preparation is required for these families. If the trend of special needs cross-cultural and transracial adoption continues, how should cultural planning practices and supports for these children be adapted to ensure their racial identity needs can be met in adoption? In this research project, I was interested in examining the main issues in transracial special needs adoption, what barriers currently exist to successfully maintain cultural connections for children, and how governments, associations and agencies can work together better to provide adequate support for these families. I chose to draw from different sources of data to offer diverse perspectives on how cultural planning practices are affected in transracial adoption with the emergence of bio-behavioural special needs. My goal was to develop recommendations from themes emerging from the literature and data to enhance ethical adoption practice for the future.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This research project included the following activities: conducting secondary analysis of Dr. Home’s (2010) original Stakeholder parent interview data, facilitating and analyzing a
workshop group discussion on addressing culture and disability in adoption, and writing a monograph based on emergent themes from this data and a critical review of relevant literature (Appendix 1). Ethics approval for my research project was granted by the University of Victoria on August 31st, 2012, and by the University of Ottawa with Dr. Home’s original research study. Permission was granted by Dr. Home to conduct secondary analysis of original interview data with all identifying information removed for this research project (Appendix 2).

As many children placed cross-culturally for adoption are of Indigenous heritage, it was important that I consult with the Indigenous community prior to starting this research, specifically with leaders from Caring for First Nations Children Society and Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services. I chose to consult with these two local Indigenous child and family serving agencies because part of their mandate is to protect and promote the well being of Indigenous children by ensuring child welfare policies and practices are culturally appropriate. I personally approached the Executive Directors of both organizations to provide them with information regarding the purpose of this project, details regarding Dr. Home’s original data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations of this research. As a non-Indigenous social worker researching the political issue of transracial adoption, it was important that my research be validated through this consultation. These Indigenous leaders confirmed that there is a gap in social work research on adoptive parents’ ability to maintain cultural connections in special needs adoption placements. Through this consultation, I also learned important information regarding the meaning of ‘family’, ‘adoption’ and ‘disability’ based on Indigenous ontology that informed my research project and the writing of the monograph.
Secondary thematic analysis of Dr. Home’s data was chosen as a research method to explore how the intersecting challenges of culture and disability appeared in selected original Stakeholder interviews with parents raising special needs children cross-culturally. The benefit of using secondary analysis for this project was that it allowed me to generate new knowledge from existing data about my topic while reducing the burden on participants and avoiding the need to recruit further subjects (Hinds, Vogel & Clarke-Steffen, 1997). Dr. Home’s Stakeholder study explored parents’ and stakeholders’ views on the experiences and support needs of adoptive families parenting children with disabilities, but did not focus specifically on children’s racial and cultural identity needs in adoption. Original Stakeholder research participants included a contrast sample of 18 parents, 5 adoption agency and Ministry workers, and 3 parent associations in Ontario and BC (Home, 2010).

I conducted thematic content analysis of 8 selected parent interviews, all of whom had adopted special needs children of various ages either transracially or cross-culturally, or in some cases, across distinct Indigenous nations. Of the Stakeholder interviews analyzed, 4 families had adopted children through international adoption, and 4 had adopted domestically. The breakdown of the children’s cultural/racial background is as follows: Indigenous (4), African American (2), European/Russian (2). The adoptive parents’ cultural/racial backgrounds varied and were identified by Dr. Home to include Caucasian, Asian, and Indigenous. In my analysis, I specifically looked at how race and culture emerged as themes in the data, and the additional challenges and support needs expressed by parents in transracial adoption with the emergence of other bio-behavioural special needs. I grouped information under three main headings: additional issues or challenges identified relating to cultural or racial difference, supports or
services noted as being helpful to these families, and suggestions or solutions offered to help address children’s cultural needs in adoption. I then looked for commonalities in the data under these three main headings, looking for overall themes based on the frequency with which they appeared. I was interested in how parents address their child’s cultural and racial difference in the family given the challenges they face in meeting disability needs, and what barriers prevent parents from maintaining cultural connections for their special needs child. Not surprisingly, this thematic content analysis revealed that children’s cultural needs appeared as a secondary issue for adoptive families facing more urgent behavioural or learning difficulties. This will be discussed further in the Research Findings section of this paper.

As Dr. Home’s research assistant, I was involved in planning and facilitating the workshop, *Towards successful special needs adoptions: Working and learning together across boundaries*, held on November 24th, 2012 in Victoria, BC with several original *Stakeholder* participants, community professionals and key stakeholders. A parallel workshop was held October 27th, 2012 in Ottawa, Ontario, which was teleconferenced to London and facilitated by Dr. Home and the Ontario research team. Together with Dr. Home’s planning committee, which also included a representative from a national adoption association, I identified and sent workshop invitations by email to 35 local community professionals and stakeholders who work in the fields of disability, child welfare, education and adoption. Invitations were also extended to parent groups through these professional and stakeholder contacts, advising that the workshop was limited to 30 people and registrations would be accepted as space permitted. Registration priority was given to the original *Stakeholder* research participants. Parents who were part of
that study received email invitations directly from Dr. Home to protect their anonymity as per ethics requirements.

Participants were invited to attend the one-day workshop as a follow up to Dr. Home’s study on special needs adoption, to hear about the research findings and give feedback and input on next steps (Appendix 3). One of the goals of this consultation and dissemination workshop was to build connections and work across boundaries by bringing together adoptive parents, professionals and researchers. In order to promote cross-boundary learning between these diverse communities, we attempted to have representation from various groups including professionals working in disability, adoption, mental health and education, as well as university scholars and Indigenous leaders. Details about the workshop were included with the email invitation (Appendix 4), as well as an RSVP form requesting that participants indicate their choice of afternoon workshop theme discussion group (Appendix 5). Participants responded directly to me except the 6 Stakeholder parent participants, who responded by email directly to Dr. Home.

As research assistant, I gathered responses by email from invited participants, and planned the afternoon theme discussion groups based on their indicated first and second choice of group. One of the afternoon theme groups offered at the workshop, entitled Not just disability and adoption: Addressing culture and minority issues in special needs adoption, focussed on the issue of addressing both culture and disability needs in adoption. 26 responses from parents, professionals and stakeholders were received, and 6 indicated their first choice was this specific theme group on culture and disability. On the day of the workshop, this one-hour theme group was comprised of 2 parents of special needs children in transracial adoption, 1 social worker
from the Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2 social workers from Queen Alexandra Centre who work in disability and adoption, and 1 professional from the Indigenous community. The theme group discussion was held following a presentation by Dr. Home on her Stakeholder research findings regarding unmet parent preparation and support needs in special needs adoption.

In my introduction to the group, I identified myself as a non-Indigenous UVic Master of Social Work student and adoption professional researching issues in special needs transracial adoption. I explained that the purpose of this group was to specifically explore the additional challenges of addressing culture and disability in special needs adoption. Participants in all small groups were asked to read and sign a form before the group began that outlined the purpose and guidelines of the theme group discussion. The form specified that first names only would be used in the group to protect participants’ confidentiality, and outlined the specific, open ended questions which would guide the discussion. This form was adapted for my group in BC to meet the University of Victoria ethics requirements (Appendix 6). Highlights of the group discussion were documented by an unpaid recorder, and a summary of the small group discussion was presented during a plenary session to the other workshop participants for review and discussion (Appendix 7). A summary of the group discussion was also emailed out to group participants to seek feedback and ensure validity and accuracy of the content (Appendix 8).

I explored my research topic during the small group discussion in a manner similar to focus group methodology, and believe this method was appropriate for this project for a number of reasons. Focus groups offer the opportunity to learn about participants’ experiences and perspectives while exploring their understanding of the researcher’s topic of interest (Morgan,
1988). The added benefit of this methodology as it applied to my research question was that it allowed for the group interaction to produce new insight to participants that might not normally be accessible without the interaction found in a group setting (Morgan, 1988). The group discussion held between this diverse group of parents and professionals provided an opportunity to raise questions and offer insight regarding the important cultural needs of children in transracial special needs adoption. Parents and professionals could share their views openly concerning the challenges and benefits of maintaining culture for special needs children in adoption, and learn from one another through this discussion.

Focus group research methodology also fits with anti-oppressive epistemology, in that it offers a means of “reducing the imbalance of power traditionally created by the interviewer/interviewee relationship” (Montell, cited in Berg, 2004, p.126), allowing the researcher to discuss and explore social phenomena from a participant-centered point of inquiry (Fraser, 2004). I placed myself as facilitator in a peripheral role during the group discussion, and documented my observations regarding participants’ responses to questions and group discussions, using this information in the writing of the monograph. Despite the assumptions I brought to this research project based on my experiences as a White worker in child welfare and adoption, I was able to facilitate the group discussion from this peripheral role, observing the interactions and raising additional questions as appropriate.

I used thematic analysis to identify and summarize commonalities between the stories appearing in Stakeholder interview data and summaries of the workshop group discussions from Ontario and BC, looking for overall themes on addressing culture and disability as described by the research participants. I examined the prevalence and appearance of culture and race as found
in the original interview data, and compared this to the themes discussed in the Ontario and BC workshop groups. I grouped interview and workshop discussion data under the three main headings discussed earlier (additional issues, useful supports, and suggestions for future), looking for commonalities between the issues and stories as told by the participants, and drawing equally from workshop summaries and interview data in the analysis. Six main sub-themes emerged in the data, which are outlined in detail in the monograph and supplemented with information from the literature review where appropriate. I attempted to address issues of both culture and disability throughout the sub-themes by highlighting the additional support needs relating to children’s cultural and racial identity needs in special needs adoption, and identifying areas where gaps in service exist. Recommendations for practice stemmed from this analysis of the main themes in the interview and workshop data, combined with my own professional experience and the expertise of the project planning team. These main themes and recommendations for practice are summarized in the monograph, and will be highlighted in the following section of this paper.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Thematic analysis of workshop and interview data revealed important findings regarding the needs of families who adopt special needs children transracially and cross-culturally. While participants generally acknowledged the importance of addressing children’s cultural and racial needs in adoption, the primary themes emerging from the data related more to challenges in meeting children’s bio-behavioural needs. This can be partially explained by the sampling
method used in the Stakeholder study, which recruited a broad sample of adoptive parents with special needs children. The focus of this study was on unmet parent preparation and support needs in special needs adoption, and not specifically on the additional challenges associated with addressing culture and disability in adoption. However, it is important to note that by focusing primarily on bio-behavioural special needs, parents may be less able to engage in meaningful cultural planning practices for their child. Adoptive parents stated repeatedly that they must expend considerable time and energy addressing the challenges in the home, school and community due to their child’s special needs. Consequently, these children may be missing opportunities to establish meaningful connections to their cultural heritage, reducing their ability to develop healthy racial identity in their transracial family. Despite the emergence of cultural planning policies and practice in adoption, it appears there is still much work to be done in order to truly support and protect the cultural needs of children with disabilities in transracial adoption.

Parents in both the original Stakeholder study and the workshop group discussions consistently identified the main issues in special needs adoption as being inadequate preparation and a lack of support in the post-adoption period. Parents indicated repeatedly that inadequate respite and fragmented services for families with special needs children led to increased strain for the adoptive family. This is further complicated by the many unknown risks in adoption, and the resultant challenges faced by families whose children have special needs they were not prepared for. Without adequate preparation and support, families are left guessing the nature of their child’s emerging special needs. These findings are discussed in greater detail in the monograph, and include many recommendations for such services as specialized respite, pre- and
post-adoption education, medical services, easier access to information, and specific services offered by culturally relevant resources.

One of the themes revealed in the data concerned the manner in which adoption preparation tends to separate special needs and transracial issues into two distinct components of adoption education. Consequently, many families enter the adoption process with some training in transracial adoption issues, but very little knowledge regarding special needs. The participants in this study expressed the important need for adoption service providers to train and educate all families adequately in special needs issues, as there are unknown risks in all adoption placements. Similarly, publicly funded disability services tend to focus on specific medical diagnoses or functional level (e.g., IQ under 70, dependency for personal care needs), and often exclude families raising adopted children with mainly bio-behavioural special needs. Many adopted children have emotional or behavioural difficulties relating to their environmental history of maltreatment, disruption and prenatal substance exposure. These children often do not fit the narrow funding criteria for these public services, yet their family’s need for respite and support are great. Participants repeatedly requested that public funding for respite be based on need, not specific diagnosis, enabling more families to access much needed support to help them be successful.

Many parents expressed frustration with the limited post-adoption support services offered by culturally appropriate resources. Adoptive parents described one of the difficulties in maintaining cultural connections for their child stems from this lack of cultural support being available in their community. Specialized services for adopted children often do not incorporate both cultural needs and disability, and as a result, families find they are unable to meet their
children’s diverse needs by a single service provider. Furthermore, resources relating to cultural needs and racial identity in adoption must be presented in a developmentally appropriate format for children with learning disabilities to understand. The development of healthy racial identity for many children is compounded by learning difficulties, and very few supports exist that have knowledge of both disability and cultural needs in adoption. This lack of culturally appropriate special needs supports can leave parents with inadequate services to help them successfully maintain cultural connections for their child.

One of the important themes that emerged throughout both the workshop and interview data was the different cultural meanings of ‘family’ and ‘adoption’. These socio-cultural constructs vary across different cultures, yet parents in transracial adoption often come to adoption with dominant Eurocentric views on their meanings. Participants in the Ontario and BC workshop theme groups, and many original Stakeholder participants, identified this as an important issue in special needs cross-cultural adoption. Many participants identified the importance when adopting an Indigenous child to have additional awareness of the impact of adoption for the child and community, and honour the ties that continue once the child legally joins the family. While both Ontario and BC workshop participants discussed the meaning of ‘adoption’ and ‘family’ based on Indigenous ontology, interestingly only the Ontario workshop discussion group addressed the additional barriers faced by immigrant families in seeking support for special needs parenting due to cultural beliefs, taboos or history. This may be explained by the different multi-cultural demographics between the provinces, and also by the representation of different cultural associations in the Ontario workshop. In writing the monograph, I chose to also address ‘disability’ as a socio-cultural construct; while not a main
theme emerging from the data, I felt it was important to address these cultural variations that have an impact on cross-cultural parenting of children with disabilities.

Perhaps the greatest value in conducting this research was in the workshop itself - the experience of bringing parents, professionals and stakeholders together to discuss and collaborate on the important findings from the Stakeholder study. The cross-boundary learning that occurred in this community-based workshop was of significant benefit to all participants, as is evident in the initial analysis of workshop evaluations. The workshop most certainly achieved its goal of building connections between the adoption and disability communities, and preliminary evaluation indicates that parents felt heard and validated from the presentation and discussion of Stakeholder research findings. Common concerns about inadequate respite and support were identified across disability and adoption circles, and advocacy strategies were offered that may eventually serve to unite all families parenting children with disabilities. Interestingly, despite many attempts to include representatives from the education system at the workshop, their absence at the event was noted as significant by the other research participants.

The workshop discussions amongst representatives from children’s mental health, government officials, disability services, advocacy organizations, private agencies and adoption associations allowed for true collaboration and cross-discipline learning, engaging parents and professionals together to develop new insight and knowledge into special needs adoption and child welfare practice. There were more similarities than differences noted in these discussions between workshop participants, and many opportunities for future collaborative work were identified. Many of these recommendations are included in the monograph, which have the potential to add to the discourse and further inform practices in transracial and special needs
adoption. Disseminating the research findings further through the distribution of these monographs and video segments will ideally lead to further discussion and collaboration between agencies, government and associations. The learning that occurred in the workshop served to strengthen the links between adoption and disability communities, and establish some viable strategies to better serve children and families in transracial special needs adoption in the future.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining cultural connections for children in transracial adoption is essential to promote their healthy development of racial and cultural identity. However, as discussed in this paper, an increasing number of children placed locally and internationally for adoption have additional special needs due to pre-natal risk factors or pre-adoption environmental conditions. Little research has been conducted to explore the additional challenges faced when these children with special needs are placed for adoption into transracial families. This community research project based from anti-oppressive social work practice begins to raise questions about how we can meet children’s disability and cultural needs in adoption, recognizing the colonial antecedents of transracial adoption policy and practice. Data analysis revealed important information about the additional preparation and support needs of families from the perspective of key stakeholders and adoptive parents who are balancing both culture and disability needs in adoption. Workshop activities provided an opportunity to engage in cross-boundary learning and hear from a diverse group of research participants, which in turn has the potential to lay the groundwork for further research and collaborative practice to occur. The monograph summarizing the stories and themes revealed in this research can ideally serve to inform adoption practice and improve the future outcomes for children with special needs in transracial adoption.
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APPENDIX 1

Monograph - Not Just Disability and Adoption:
Addressing Culture and Minority Issues in Special Needs Adoption

Introduction and brief history of project

Parents take different paths to adoption, and while some families choose to adopt a child with a defined risk history, international and private adoptions can bring many unknowns. Regardless of route taken, many parents find their children have special needs related to conditions, circumstances or past history which make them difficult to parent and bring persistent post-adoption challenges. While environmental special needs stem from past abuse, neglect or multiple placements, bio-behavioural needs reflect disorders, disabilities or health conditions that may not be obvious at time of adoption placement. Parents may be unprepared for emerging challenges, not knowing what is causing the difficulties or how to respond. Recent research by Dr. Alice Home explored different stakeholders’ views on the experiences of parents whose adopted children (aged 1-12) have mainly bio-behavioural special needs, and sought to identify areas for future collaboration between parents, associations, government and community agencies. This Stakeholder study involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 18 adoptive parents, 3 adoption associations and 5 social workers in Ontario and British Columbia. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed rich findings regarding unmet parent needs in these adoptions, suggesting priorities for future research and collaborative practice.

As a follow-up to this research, a public outreach grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council was awarded to Dr. Home and her community partners (April 2012) to disseminate findings to original research participants and to communities of interest.
This project, entitled *Towards successful special needs adoptions: Working and learning together across boundaries*, had four goals: make results available to diverse research users, provide an opportunity to give feedback and input on next steps, build connections within and between adoption and disability communities, and finally, ensure the research remains accessible for flexible use. To achieve this last goal, four monographs and several short videos are being produced in 2013 for wide distribution via partners’ websites.

Two full-day workshops were held in Ontario and British Columbia in fall of 2012 in order to meet the project goals of dissemination and consultation. Adoptive parents of special needs children, professionals and volunteers from disability and adoption communities came together to hear the main results emerging from the *Stakeholder* data and give feedback in four theme group discussions held in the afternoon of both workshops. This gave participants with diverse types of expertise an opportunity to discuss theme-related issues in small groups, and propose strategies for improving services for adoptive and other families parenting children with disabilities. The four short monographs being produced in 2013 will address themes emerging from the research findings and the workshop group summaries. The current longer version of this monograph on the theme of culture and disability in adoption was written to meet the standard for an MSW research project for the University of Victoria. The final version will be similar in format and length to the others.

The purpose of this monograph is to explore the issue of addressing both culture and disability in transracial and cross-cultural adoption. It draws on three main sources of information: a review of relevant literature, secondary analysis of selected *Stakeholder* study data (identifying information removed to protect participant anonymity), and analysis of the two
group summaries from the Ontario and BC workshops on the topic of addressing culture in special needs adoption. The literature review in the first section of the monograph highlights the importance and rationale for addressing children’s cultural needs in transracial special needs adoption. Main issues regarding trends in adoption, considerations in cross-cultural/transracial adoption, and concerns about adopted children’s racial identity are explored. Themes emerging from workshop group discussions and Stakeholder study interviews will then be discussed, revealing the intersecting challenges of addressing culture and disability needs in adoption from the perspective of research participants. References to original data will be made throughout the monograph, tying back to the 8 selected Stakeholder parent interviews (Par 1-18) and workshop theme group discussions (Group summary Oct 27 or Nov 24). Of the Stakeholder parent interviews analyzed, 4 families had adopted children through international adoption, and 4 had adopted domestically. The breakdown of the children’s cultural/racial background was as follows: Indigenous (4), African American (2), European/Russian (2). All 8 families had adopted special needs children of various ages either transracially or cross-culturally, or in some cases, across distinct Indigenous nations. The adoptive parents’ cultural/racial backgrounds varied, and included Caucasian, Asian, and Indigenous parents.

Interview data and workshop group summaries were analyzed by grouping themes under three main headings: additional issues or challenges identified relating to cultural or racial difference, supports or services noted as being helpful, and suggestions or solutions offered to help address children’s cultural needs in adoption. Drawing equally from these two data sources (Stakeholder interviews and workshop group summaries), these headings were used to identify commonalities and themes. Those that appeared repeatedly were then grouped into six sub-
themes, which are highlighted and discussed in this monograph. While recommendations to improve services for children and families stem from this analysis, they draw also on material derived from the literature and from the professional experience of the project team. The last section of the monograph provides a list of resources that may assist special needs adoptive families, especially those dealing with cross-cultural issues.

The importance of addressing culture and minority issues in transracial adoption

The number of families adopting children through international adoption has increased dramatically over the past four decades. Many children placed through international adoption have different racial and cultural backgrounds from their adoptive family, and often have special needs resulting from their history of institutionalization and adverse social or economic backgrounds. Additionally, Indigenous children in Canada continue to be overrepresented as a population in foster care, and are known to wait longer for adoption than Caucasian children due to a shortage of Indigenous substitute homes. Minority children waiting for permanency have cultural placement needs and should be matched with culturally similar homes wherever possible. However, transracial and cross-cultural adoption is often considered as an alternative to these children remaining in foster care. Transracial adoption refers to parents (usually European/Caucasian) forming their families with children who are members of a different racial or ethnic group by birth, while cross-cultural adoption can include parents of one racial group who adopt racially similar children from a different cultural background.

The worldwide increase in transracial and cross-cultural adoption placements has been met with a growing body of literature regarding the importance of maintaining culture for
children in transracial adoption vii. Research has explored how children’s racial identity, language barriers and cultural differences can exacerbate post-adoption difficulties for families viii. Studies have also identified several factors which lead to more positive outcomes for children and better adjustment for parents in transracial adoption. Success is more likely when parents address their child’s racial and cultural difference within the adoptive family, and help their child develop positive racial identity and survival skills to cope with racism in society xi. Transracial adoptive parents, who themselves often represent racial dominance in Western society, are faced with the challenge of preparing their child for living in a world where race continues to be inextricably tied to issues of power and inequality xi.

Knowledge regarding the importance of maintaining culture for children in transracial adoption grew largely from examining negative outcomes for the high number of Indigenous children in out-of-home placements, stemming from Canada’s colonial child welfare policies and assimilationist practices. The complex issues and problematic outcomes for Indigenous children being raised in non-Indigenous adoptive families has been widely researched and documented xiii. These children are known to experience a significant disconnection between their cultural roots and daily family life, often leading to confusion, psychological harm and a loss of cultural identity xiv. British Columbia’s cultural planning policies, developed in response to this devastating colonial history in Indigenous child welfare, identify the importance of “preserving the child’s cultural identity” when doing permanency planning for Indigenous children xv. Indigenous children in transracial adoption have a “fundamental right to their culture, language, and appropriate cultural context” xvi when being raised outside of their families and communities.
Maintaining cultural connections for children in adoption, crucial to a child’s development of healthy racial identity, can be significantly more challenging for transracial families raising children with disabilities and other special needs. Many recommendations have been made to improve outcomes for children and families in special needs adoption, including providing adoptive parents with better preparation, special education, respite care, financial assistance, specialized medical services, informal peer support, emergency assistance, and family counselling across the child’s lifetime. However, there is very little literature that addresses the issue of addressing culture and disability in adoption, or research into how children in transracial families cope with discrimination due to both racism and ableism in society. Instead, issues of culture and disability are treated separately in the literature, and public services often occur in silos, leaving parents in transracial families uncertain how to deal with their child’s diverse needs.

The number of transracial special needs adoption placements from other countries is rising, and an increasing number of adopted children manifest special needs that are not identified at time of adoption placement. This shift towards special needs adoption has been accompanied by an increased reporting of post-adoption difficulties for these families. Many families facing long wait times for adoption are choosing to adopt children with known medical conditions through various international “Waiting Child Programs” that offer children with special needs. Adoptive parents often enter the process expecting to adopt a child with minimal special needs or accepting of correctable medical issues. Special needs classification systems in other countries (in particular, China) can lead prospective adoptive parents to believe the child they are adopting has very minor correctable needs, most commonly cleft lip or palate.
However, recent research indicates that many children with such “minor, correctable special needs” may turn out to have other, much more complex physical, emotional and psychological issues later in life”. When these “waiting children” are placed for adoption into transracial families, their parents face the added challenge of addressing culture and minority issues for their child, in addition to dealing with other emerging special needs.

Addressing culture and minority issues in special needs adoption is an important part of improving outcomes for children and families. Incorporating culture into a child’s life through meaningful and long-term interventions may assist parents in differentiating a “normal” adoption issue (i.e., racial identity struggles in transracial adoption) from other emergent bio-behavioural or environmental special needs. Yet there is virtually no research or published work that addresses this challenge or proposes strategies for parents to manage both cultural difference and disability needs in adoption. Given the prevalence of minority special needs children waiting both locally and internationally for permanency, it is vital that the issue of culture be addressed in order to meet the diverse and comprehensive needs of special needs children in transracial adoption.

**Themes and issues in transracial special needs adoption**

The themes and issues discussed in this monograph are based from an analysis of research data found in selected Stakeholder interviews and workshop theme group summaries, and supplemented by available literature on the topic of transracial special needs adoption where appropriate. As the Stakeholder study focused on parenting adopted children with bio-behavioural special needs, questions related to culture and race were not raised specifically in the
interviews and were not expected to appear as a primary issue in the data. Therefore, the six primary sub-themes discussed below relate more to issues in managing children’s bio-behavioural needs in adoption. However, it was interesting to note the additional challenges that participants reported regarding children’s cultural needs in adoption, and the supports and strategies offered to address these needs. Main issues that appeared repeatedly in both Stakeholder interviews and workshop group summaries are discussed in the following section, with specific quotes by research participants chosen to reflect these six main sub-themes emerging from the data.

1) **Cultural needs becomes secondary to bio-behavioural needs**

Not surprisingly, children’s cultural needs in transracial special needs adoption become secondary to managing a child’s more urgent and challenging bio-behavioural needs. Stakeholder interviews indicate that parents with limited formal or informal support and inadequate respite in the post-adoption period often find themselves exhausted and unable to cope with caring for their special needs child. This can leave little energy left for parents to engage in meaningful ways with their child’s cultural or racial heritage. Furthermore, it is difficult for children with learning disabilities to grasp concepts of racial identity and engage meaningfully with cultural supports, requiring parents to expend additional energy finding creative ways to incorporate issues of culture and race in their parenting. It is understandably more difficult to conduct cultural planning in special needs adoption, particularly when parents face unexpected developmental delays and disabilities in their child. Adoptive parents often find they focus instead on addressing urgent behavioural or learning challenges in the home, school
and community. At the same time, adoptive parents are also trying to determine the nature of their child’s special needs which may be complex and not fully known.

“Behaviours are really misunderstood. Trauma, FAS, neglect, abuse all have the same behaviour...we’re trying to find out what’s wrong with the child or what their special need is, often times its misdiagnosed.” (Par 14).

As focusing on the child’s special needs leaves little time or energy to address cultural needs, children may be missing opportunities to establish meaningful connections to their racial or cultural heritage, which can in turn exacerbate behavioural challenges in adolescence due to identity confusion.

2) Medical risks and unknowns in adoption: culture, adoption, trauma, disability, or all of the above?

In adoption, and particularly international adoption, information can be extremely limited and contact with birth family impossible, often leaving adoptive parents to independently determine the nature of their child’s emerging special needs. Children are often placed into adoptive families with very little birth family medical history or prenatal information, as well as a history of environmental deprivation or trauma. One adoptive parent, whose daughter started exhibiting signs of special needs three months after they returned home from Russia, stated:

“Our daughter was abandoned so we have no family history or birth family history on her. We were not aware of any factors that would affect her behaviour or affect her physical well being...We hired a doctor privately there to review her medical files and current physical state...the report we got back was that there was no concern.” (Par 1).
The loss and strain experienced by parents who face raising a child with unexpected disabilities can lead to poor adjustment and adaptation for the entire adoptive family.

As children who are available for international adoption are frequently found abandoned and have no birth family information or medical history available, adoption authorities and agencies are often unable to fully alert prospective parents to the risks in adoption. These unknown risks due to limited knowledge of the child’s background, combined with cultural interruption and language barriers for children in international and cross-cultural adoption, can present significant adjustment difficulties for adoptive families. Understanding how to best meet their child’s needs may be challenging for these adoptive parents, complicated by added identity struggles that children can face in transracial adoption.

3) Adoption preparation and support does not address culture and special needs together

Not surprisingly, there is a direct relationship between adoption preparation, family adjustment, and success in special needs adoption. Preparation for adoption is one of the key indicators of success, and it is essential that parents receive adequate and realistic preparation for the potential challenges they will face. However, there remains wide variation across Canada on adoption preparation that parents receive, and virtually no preparation is offered to prospective adoptive parents on ways to address both cultural and disability needs in adoption.

Adoption education programs tend to separate special needs and transracial issues into two distinct components, and prospective parents attend specific seminars depending on which adoption path they are taking. International adoption education seminars often focus more on
travel tips and what to expect in the country, and there is inconsistency across Canada in the way this education is delivered to families. Adoption training on special needs issues is sometimes minimal, depending on the adoption route taken and education offered by the agency. Consequently, adoptive parents are often unprepared for the special needs that emerge as their child develops, and find they cannot return to the adoption agency for support due to a lack of funding and unavailability of post-adoption services.

“*We were required to go through the classes – I think there were 8 sessions – but nothing was done to prepare us for these children...they want to prepare people and not have them change their minds so don’t talk about the bigger issues or tell them there’s no recourse, no support.*” (Par 11).

“*It’s not enough. They don’t really focus on special needs either...you should be given more education to prepare yourself.*” (Par 18).

This inadequate preparation in special needs and cross-cultural issues, combined with parental grief over the loss of the “expected” child, can create significant strain and anxiety for families in the post-adoption period.

4) **Limited access to publicly funded post-adoption support**

The availability of appropriate and immediate post-adoption services is critical to increasing the likelihood of success in transracial special needs adoption. Specialized services such as respite care, cultural resources, education for special needs parenting, in-home counselling, financial support, medical services, and advocacy strategies are some key areas where families often need assistance in the post-adoption period. *Stakeholder parents*
interviewed stated that these services, in particular respite care, are currently being underfunded and poorly coordinated between government, agencies, and associations. Specific eligibility rules for programs result in services being fragmented in their delivery, and many parents described the challenges they face in obtaining qualified respite caregivers for their child with special needs.

“I was phoning the agency crying, saying I don’t want to give this kid back. I love her to death but we need sleep. We just need sleep.” (Par 13).

Adequate respite for families in special needs adoption can help avoid adoption dissolution, and help parents manage the emotional and behavioural needs of the child long-term.

With the higher number of private special needs adoptions occurring through international Waiting Child Programs, there is a corresponding increase in challenges reported by parents in the post-adoption period, placing more demand on limited public resources xxx. Adoptive parents who choose private adoption currently receive no funding for respite or post-adoption services, and support is therefore extremely limited for these families. Furthermore, parents who adopted privately especially report feeling unable to go back to the agency for fear of judgment by professionals.

“The number one thing is I think agencies have a responsibility to provide a post-adoption program...a lot of people come home and they are isolated...but adoptive parents are scared to talk about these issues because we all wanted to be parents for so long and we’re trying to be perfect parents, which is impossible.” (Par 4).
Parents and professionals alike need to recognize that all adoptive families parenting children with disabilities require access to adequate respite offered by trained caregivers in the post-adoption period.

5) **Racial identity is compounded by behavioural and learning difficulties**

Identity loss continues to be a major theme for children in transracial adoption, despite recommendations made to enhance adoption policy and practice\textsuperscript{xvi}. Adoptive parents must protect their child from racism, and also help them develop a healthy racial identity in the face of it. Parents who are sensitive and aware of issues relating to race, culture, power and inequality are thought to be better able to help their child cope with racial difference and discrimination\textsuperscript{xxvii}. Yet it is significantly more difficult for parents to help their child make meaningful connections to culture in transracial adoption when disability complicates or prevents the comprehension of racial identity and awareness.

Children in transracial adoption tend to identify strongly with people of similar racial background, and need access to positive role models for the development of healthy racial identity. In special needs transracial adoption, the development of healthy racial identity and establishment of appropriate boundaries with same-race mentors can be complicated by other learning challenges. In the Stakeholder study, one transracial parent of an African American child with anxiety-related special needs explained this challenge in the following example:

“You couldn’t show him a commercial from Haiti [post earthquake]. If he saw it he thought he was going to die, we were all going to die.” (Par 10).
Parents who attempt to make cultural connections for their special needs child can face barriers when their child over-identifies or makes unhealthy connections to same-race mentors. Transracial adoptive parents of special needs children therefore have the added challenge of ensuring their child has ongoing meaningful access to positive role models and can establish healthy boundaries with these role models across his or her lifetime.

6) The meaning of ‘family’ and ‘disability’ as socio-cultural constructs

Adoption is a way of building a family, and parents tend to enter the adoption process with the goal of creating a ‘family’ as defined by Euro-Western culture, consisting of parent(s) and child(ren) in a single household. Extended family and community members in Western culture augment and provide support to the family, but generally are not directly responsible for the child rearing. For parents adopting cross-culturally, it is important to understand the definition of ‘family’ within the child’s socio-cultural context, as this now becomes the family’s shared reality in adoption.

“In First Nations, kin adoption is preferable so the priority is on the culture of origin with disability accommodations taking second place...Secondly, some immigrant cultures put less emphasis on raising an autonomous individual than do Western cultures, preferring to keep the child in the family without asking for any external support.”

(Group summary, Oct 27).

Certain cultures expand the definition of ‘family’ to include the entire community, yet the legal and formal process of adoption does not take this into account. It is important for parents to
recognize these lifelong ties that go beyond kinship do not terminate at time of adoption placement.

“The definition of “family” extends beyond the nuclear family to include the whole community. The adopted child from these cultures becomes a member of the community, is embraced by all members, and everyone is responsible for caring for that child.”

(Group summary, Oct 27).

Adopting a child from a culture with such beliefs, and in particular children of Indigenous heritage, requires parents to have additional awareness of the impact of adoption for the child and community, and honour the ties that continue once the child legally joins the family.

Implementing a broader definition of ‘family’ through cultural planning practices can be challenging for parents who are also dealing with their child’s bio-behavioural needs as previously discussed. Further obstacles related to cultural taboos, history or beliefs can prevent some immigrant and Indigenous families from seeking support, resulting in persistent challenges and a reduced ability to cope with the child’s special needs.

“Parents can be hesitant to fight for or ask their rights to be respected…for fear that the children will be taken away from them (residential school experience), social stigma (having a child with a disability is a taboo subject as child and family can be rejected by the community), and fear of authority (immigrant experience of reprisals if government challenged).” (Group summary, Oct 27).

Similarly, the concept of ‘disability’ is defined differently across cultures, often leading to cultural incompatibility between the child’s needs and the delivery of services through a Western, Eurocentric lens. Deficit-focused assessments and negative perceptions of disability
tend to dominate, often resulting in increased stress and decreased parental satisfaction with a child’s diagnosis of special needs\textsuperscript{xxviii}. Parents and professionals alike bring their own socially constructed preconceptions about disability, and do not always consider cultural variations in its meaning\textsuperscript{xxix}. Support services that are not culturally sensitive can target the child’s deficits without accounting for these wide cross-cultural beliefs and values regarding the meaning of disability. Understanding and embracing a new definition of ‘family’ and ‘disability’ within the adopted child’s cultural context can provide parents with valuable insight, meaningful connection and practical support in transracial special needs adoption.

“It’s about family…that’s what we’re all about. You don’t own Aboriginal children. The community is a part of who they are.” (Par 14).

**Recommendations and suggestions for ways forward**

The opportunity to connect and learn across boundaries allowed workshop participants to identify additional challenges that adoptive parents face in addressing culture and minority issues when children have bio-behavioural special needs in adoption. In addition, closing workshop plenary sessions elicited suggestions on improving services for families parenting these children. The following recommendations are derived from interview, theme group and plenary session data, combined with the professional experience and expertise of those involved in the project.

1) **Provide immediate support in the post-adoption period**

As transitions are more difficult for children facing both disability and cross-cultural issues, more support is required to ensure successful adaptation to their new adoptive families.
These families require immediate support in the post-adoption period to help address the child’s complex needs early on. Having a visit from the adoption social worker within the first two weeks of placement is crucial to help link adoptive parents with appropriate cultural and specialized resources, and assist with family adjustment to adoption. Follow-up visits should occur on a regular basis and be increased according to the needs expressed by the adoptive parents. Child welfare authorities and adoption agencies should ensure this immediate professional support is available to families to facilitate a child’s successful integration into the family and assist parents in identifying and managing the child’s needs from the time of placement.

**Post-adoption education** for adoptive families is another important way to enhance long-term success in addressing culture and disability needs in adoption. Adoption education should not end at time of placement; it is arguably more important to continue learning about transracial and special needs adoption issues after the child joins the adoptive family, when parents can actually put the theory into practice. Agencies should offer post-adoption education on promoting positive parenting, managing special needs, and supporting cultural/racial identity development for children in special needs transracial adoption placements.

“You’ve got a child who’s not used to the food, the texture is different, the language is different...number one is post-adoption. For example, when you just come home, having a workshop or seminar. You know, now you’re home, now what?” (Par 4).

However, across Canada, the responsibility for this post-adoption support and monitoring for international adoptions of special needs children falls to the private sector. Government and
private agencies should collaborate to develop post-adoption programs that provide better support to the many families who need it. Given the growing number of families adopting children with special needs, this current gap in service must be addressed in order to promote positive outcomes for children in adoption.

The service needs of families adopting children with disabilities have been well researched and documented. Of particular importance is the timely delivery of post-adoption specialized medical services to assist families to identify early whether their child may have special needs not known at time of placement. A comprehensive child development assessment is recommended early in the post-adoption period, followed by involvement of pediatric professionals who have an understanding of the impact of early deprivation, trauma, and language/cultural discontinuity for children. Delays in completing these assessments can further confuse adoptive parents concerned about the etiology of their child’s presenting needs.

2) Fund respite based on need, not diagnosis

Research clearly indicates that adequate respite is essential for adoptive families to be successful in coping with the additional stressors that come with parenting special needs children. However, the current funding model for public services across Canada is based primarily on specific diagnosis, not need, preventing many families from accessing the support they require. Respite benefits are based on household income, are rarely immediately available, and require that families be placed on a waitlist for service. This narrow eligibility criteria and limited funding for respite have led to extremely long wait lists and inadequate service delivery
to families, a theme that was found repeatedly in the data. Many adoptive parents of children with FASD, ADHD, attachment disorder or developmental delays find their children do not fit the strict eligibility criteria for access to respite care. In addition, families who adopted children through private international adoption are not eligible to receive provincially funded post-adoption assistance. This is a significant gap in service, which results in many families facing increased challenges and higher risk of adoption dissolution, sometimes resulting in a child’s entry to foster care. Significant long-term damages and public costs associated with children entering government care due to adoption dissolution may be preventable with the timely provision of adequate respite care.

Interview and workshop data reveal that this current funding model for publicly funded services creates competition between parents and breaks down opportunities to unite as a group and support each other in the common challenges they face in parenting high needs children.

“A lot of times it’s not about adoption, it’s about having universal supports for children with special needs...[but our kids] don’t qualify for a lot of special needs supports.” (Par 11).

There is an urgent and ever-growing need to expand respite funding to all adoptive families parenting children with disabilities who demonstrate a need, regardless of whether they adopted their child through a private agency or from foster care. Public/private initiatives to fund and enhance respite programs could help to prevent future adoption disruptions for families with special needs children.
3) Increase post-adoption services and provide easier access to resources and information

Parents report not knowing where to turn for help following their adoption, and have great difficulty navigating the various government systems responsible for providing respite and support to families with special needs children. Resources are not easy for parents to find when they are exhausted and confused. Many improvements can be made to increase access to services for families parenting special needs children. Child welfare agencies in each province could centralize information and create a single website for parents of children with special needs. Services linked to this site would be accredited and screened by the government, saving parents time and energy searching for appropriate cultural and disability support services. Additional resources such as adoptive families’ blogs and contact information could also be available on this website. Linking with other families through this network would help to address the isolation expressed by many parents in the Stakeholder study. When asked what additional support would help, one parent reported:

“...anything with other adoptive parents, any kind of group where you could just share your experiences.” (Par 13).

This support and information website should be easily accessible and supported by provincial funding as part of government’s mandate to provide services to families parenting children with disabilities.

Child welfare and adoption agencies should provide a comprehensive list of professional resources for families parenting special needs children cross-culturally/transracially. Easier
links with appropriate community supports can help parents maintain cultural connections for their child. Finding support for both cultural and special needs was seen as a difficult challenge:

“Parents would like to see more groups for their children, but cultural groups for adopted kids are often not developmentally appropriate for special needs children. Parents expressed finding difficulty finding the appropriate group for their child.” (Group summary, Nov 24).

“If you find that there are needs or things that you didn’t sign up or didn’t come up before, we have a list of people and resources that you can go to...in my case having a black child puts me in a whole different group because I also have the race thing.” (Par 10).

Furthermore, it would be helpful for agencies to establish specific post-adoption social workers to be available to support families so that parents would know exactly where to go for help after their child has joined the family.

“Oh I’d like to have somebody to turn to. I’d like to have a contact with any social worker or anybody...okay, you’ve adopted this child, here’s the contact person.” (Par 10)

Many parents in the Stakeholder study suggested expanding community support networks available to adoptive parents, such as establishing a 24-hour peer support line for adoptive parents. Emotional support could be offered by parents with experience in special needs adoption, with further formal or professional support available as needed.

“The minute we adopt we scatter...We adoptive parents are not linked.” (Par 10).
As families have fewer informal supports available to them than in the past, having this kind of emotional peer support available would reduce isolation for families struggling with their child’s often overwhelming special needs.

Child welfare and adoption agencies should collaborate and share resources to offer a list of in-home and out-of-home emergency respite caregivers in each community, preferably ones from diverse backgrounds to provide good cultural matches for children in transracial adoption. Families approved for adoption and waiting could be trained and available as respite caregivers, providing them with an opportunity to care for children with special needs prior to adopting, giving prospective parents an opportunity to gain some experience with the challenges that often emerge. Adequate special needs training for these respite caregivers could be offered collaboratively by disability, cultural and adoption agencies to ensure that the care provided addresses both their disability and cultural placement needs.

While developing post-adoption services and education could help parents manage both disability and cultural needs in adoption, it is clear from this analysis that more research, literature and curriculum development is needed in this area. Parenting courses and groups for children geared to transracial special needs adoption could help parents gain specific support in this area and help children learn social skills and racial/cultural awareness. Furthermore, material on special needs and cross-cultural adoption issues must be incorporated into the professional education of child welfare and mental health workers if we are to improve practice and address issues unique to special needs adoptive parenting.
4) Offer culturally appropriate services geared to children with special needs

Adoptive parents report that the difficulty in maintaining cultural connections for their child stems partly from the lack of available culturally appropriate services in their community. It is evident from interview and workshop data that we still have a long way to go to meet children’s cultural needs in transracial adoption. Post-adoption services to families should include FASD key workers, respite caregivers, mentors, peers, and others who have both cultural relevancy and special needs knowledge. When support is offered by culturally appropriate service providers, it can help parents fully embrace and understand cross-cultural issues and incorporate this knowledge into their parenting. For example, these adoptive parents of Indigenous children describe the benefit of receiving culturally-appropriate disability support services:

“The Native Friendship Centre for the younger two has been really helpful for our family. They can implement services that the children need at no cost, like Physio and OT. They could do Speech as well.” (Par 18).

These specialized services must continue to receive adequate funding to ensure continued access for the growing number of children and families who need support. However, these services are not readily available for other minority children in special needs adoption. Those cultural supports that do exist often do not address the disability needs of the child.

“We did [cultural camp] for the first time last year. It’s a very religious camp and so that was an interesting fit for us. It wasn’t a special needs camp. Again they don’t entirely
Services that occur in silos tend to address either children’s cultural or disability needs, but not both. Additional special needs services delivered by culturally relevant sources are needed in order to address the multiple needs of children in transracial special needs adoption.

5) Ensure adequate preparation for adoption

Regardless of whether families adopt a child through intercountry adoption, domestic newborn adoption, or from foster care, pre-adoption training must include both transracial and special needs information, as part of the many core issues in adoption. As preparation is a key indicator for success in adoption, government and agencies responsible for family recruitment and pre-adoptive screening must offer prospective parents realistic preparation for the risks inherent in all adoptions. Research on pre-adoption preparation supports implementing standardized mandatory adoption education training, and ensuring this education is consistent for all families regardless of the adoption path entered. Furthermore, this preparation is optimal when delivered in group format, which allows families to make important connections early in the adoption process and provide them with a valuable network of support down the road. This adoption preparation should also provide families with information about appropriate cultural and disability resources that are available in their community.
6) **Establish cultural planning requirements for all adoption placements**

It is recommended that increased training and support be provided to *all* adoptive parents to help them commit to meaningful cultural planning practices for special needs children in transracial adoption. However, the current practice of cultural planning varies widely from agency to agency and province to province, and is often only briefly addressed in pre-adoption training for parents. Cultural planning for children in international adoption placements is not currently required by law, yet we know children who do not develop healthy racial identities often face other behavioural and emotional difficulties later in life. Providing adequate support to parents in international cross-cultural or transracial adoption can help them to implement and maintain meaningful cultural connections for their child.

Resources relating to cultural needs and identity in adoption must be presented in a developmentally appropriate format for children with learning disabilities. **Cultural support groups and mentors** for children and parents must be readily available to help foster healthy racial identity for children in transracial adoption. While internet-based resources ease access to information for over-burdened adoptive parents, simply being provided print or web-based material cannot replace the meaningful connections established for children who are immersed in a real cultural experience. Support should be offered to allow families to engage in a range of meaningful ways with their child’s cultural heritage, such as attending cultural events, connecting with families and children from similar cultural/racial backgrounds, and linking with mentors or elders from child’s cultural background. Child welfare authorities and community agencies must examine how to better support families to assist children to develop healthy racial identity, especially when other learning difficulties are present.
Conclusion

It is apparent from this review and analysis of the unique issues in transracial special needs adoption that further work and resources are needed to support children’s healthy development of racial identity in multiracial families. Identifying and addressing the current gaps in services is critical to support cross-cultural placements of children with special needs. To ensure ethical adoption practice for the future, the needs of this growing population must be immediately addressed, and adequate support must be offered to all families in the post-adoption period. Additional research is needed to examine the factors that contribute to children’s ability to develop healthy racial identity in transracial adoption when other learning or developmental disabilities are present. Revising child welfare practices to include culture and minority issues may help to meet the increasing needs of families parenting special needs children cross-culturally, and augment the future placements for the many children who are still waiting for permanency.

Selected list of resources on transracial and special needs adoption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NATIONAL/PROVINCIAL ORGANIZATIONS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADOPTION COUNCIL OF CANADA</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.adoption.ca/">http://www.adoption.ca/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the umbrella organization for adoption in Canada, ACC offers a variety of services and support for all adoptive families.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| **ADOPTION COUNCIL OF ONTARIO** | 36 Eglinton Ave West, Suite 202 | |
| [https://www.adoption.on.ca/](https://www.adoption.on.ca/) | Toronto, Ontario M4R 1A1 | Email: info@adoption.on.ca |
| A non-profit agency providing outreach, support and education to all adoptees, adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents, birth families and professionals in the province of Ontario. | | |
| Province wide support, advice and adoption education to families in transracial and special needs adoption in British Columbia. |
| **CARING FOR FIRST NATIONS CHILDREN SOCIETY**<br>http://www.cfnocs.com/ | 664 Granderson Road<br>Victoria, BC V9B 2R8<br>Telephone: 250-391-0007<br>Email: info@cfnocs.com |
| A BC agency offering Indigenous online training program, cultural planning support, training for professionals working with Indigenous children, and Indigenous youth mentorship. |
| **MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT**<br>http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/adoption/ | 1 877 ADOPT-07<br>Email: WaitingChild@bcadoption.com |
| Offers provincial adoption services, adoption support, adoption reunion registry, Waiting Children profiles, and post-adoption assistance for children with special needs in British Columbia. |
| **NORTH AMERICAN COUNCIL ON ADOPTABLE CHILDREN**<br>http://www.nacac.org/ | 970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106<br>St. Paul, MN 55114<br>Telephone: 651-644-3036<br>Email: info@nacac.org |
| Committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and the families who adopt them through advocacy, education, adoption support, and leadership development. |

**WEBSITES AND ARTICLES**

Growing Up in a Multiracial Family: My Concept of Self<br>http://www.bcadoption.com/articles.asp?pageid=38&Offset=75&AK=ShowAll&HC=1&AD=63


The Adoption Counselor for adoptive families and professionals – Brenda McCreight<br>http://www.theadoptioncounselor.com/

Transracial/Transcultural Parenting, NACAC http://www.nacac.org/postadopt/transracial.html

### BOOKS & AUDIOVISUALS FOR PARENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive Families Association of British Columbia (1999).</td>
<td><em>Raising healthy multiracial adoptive families: A question and answer guide for adoptive parents,</em> AFABC.</td>
<td>This guide is designed to answer questions and offer support to address the unique challenges of raising children in multiracial families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crumbley, J. (1999).</td>
<td><em>Transracial adoption and foster care: Practice issues for professionals,</em> CWLA Press.</td>
<td>This book goes beyond the arguments about transracial adoption and asks the question: How do we help children and families make transracial adoptions and foster placements work?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### BOOKS & AUDIOVISUALS FOR CHILDREN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bobula, K. and Bobula, J. (n.d.).</td>
<td><em>We are powerful series,</em> Wilberry Productions.</td>
<td>Designed to introduce the lives of children affected with various disorders, syndromes and learning disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kissinger, K. &amp; Krutein, W. (2002).</td>
<td><em>All the colors we are: The story of how we get our skin color,</em> Redleaf Press.</td>
<td>A book that helps young children sort through the often confusing information they learn about human skin colour, and help to develop racial identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lester, J. (2008).</td>
<td><em>Let’s talk about race,</em> Harper Collins Publisher.</td>
<td>This book offers an opportunity for discussion about how racial identity affects the way we view one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, R. (2000).</td>
<td><em>I love you like crazy cakes,</em> Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.</td>
<td>This story of a woman who travels to China to adopt a baby girl, based on the author’s own experiences, is a celebration of the love and joy a baby brings into the home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parr, T. (2007).</td>
<td><em>We belong together,</em> Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.</td>
<td>This kid-friendly book explores the many ways that families can come together. Excellent for toddlers and young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent, A. (2010).</td>
<td><em>My brain needs glasses,</em> Quebecor.</td>
<td>This practical book is designed to help young people living with ADHD and their parents better understand this disorder and how to manage it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES


vi The term Indigenous, used to describe First Nation, Métis and Inuit people, has been chosen to reflect the history of colonialism and oppression enacted upon the First Peoples of Canada. The term Aboriginal will only be used in direct citations from other sources.


xv Adoption Act, R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 48, Section 3(2).
Carrière (2010).


International Social Service (2012). *Monthly Review. Special Issue: The adoption of children with so-called ‘special needs’*.

Home (2010).


APPENDIX 2

Permission from Dr. Alice Home

735 Western Slope Close
Sooke BC V9Z 1C5
July 26, 2012

Human Research Ethics Board
ASB, Room B202, University of Victoria
PO Box 1700, Station C
Victoria BC V8W 2Y2

RE: Application for Ethics Approval: Rachel Warren

Dear Sir or Madam:

This letter confirms that, as principal investigator for the research study *Special Needs Adoptive Parenting: Stakeholders’ Views on Parents’ Experiences and Support Needs*, I give my permission for the above-named student to have access to the interview data for her Master’s project. I have a current ethics certificate from University of Ottawa for that study. They are aware of this student’s request to use the data for secondary analysis purposes, as part of her MSW project exploring additional support and preparation needs of parents adopting special needs children transracially. Prior to Rachel gaining access to these data, all identifying information will have been removed and all research participants will have had an opportunity to review and revise their transcripts.

As a member of Rachel’s committee, I will be in regular contact with her and her research supervisor. This will allow me to oversee the connections between her work, the above-named study and my new dissemination project “Towards successful special needs adoptions: Working and learning together across boundaries”, in which she is also involved.

I trust this letter provides all required information. Please do not hesitate to contact me at ahome@uottawa.ca if you need a signed version of this letter or if anything else is needed.

Sincerely,

Alice M. Home, Professor Emeritus
School of Social Work,
University of Ottawa
APPENDIX 3

Invitation to workshop

Towards successful special needs adoptions:

Working and learning together across boundaries

Date

Person invited, organization, address

Dear ______________:

I am writing to invite you to a one-day workshop on parenting children with special needs, being held November 24th, 2012 in Victoria, BC. The morning features two presentations on this subject, while the afternoon activities offer the opportunity to discuss issues in small theme groups. The keynote address presents findings of a new Canadian study on parenting adopted children with special needs arising from a disability, a behavioural disorder or a medical condition. Results focus on stakeholders’ views of parents’ experiences and supports, based on interviews with 18 adoptive families, 3 parent associations and 5 social workers in Ontario and British Columbia. The second presentation deals with issues and strategies related to advocacy for children with disabilities.

With support from a SSHRC Public Outreach grant, our team is offering these workshops free of charge including a light lunch. Workshop goals are to make research knowledge widely available, build connections between communities of interest and ensure the material remains accessible to a range of users. A workshop is being held in each region where the study took place (Ottawa Oct 27th, Victoria Nov 24th).

This dissemination and consultation activity is directed to Stakeholder study participants and key community representatives, with others accommodated as space allows. Study participants will not be identified as such and families that were part of the research can be reimbursed for transportation and some child care expenses. Full program and contact details can be found in the “Workshop information” document, while RSVP information is in a separate document.

As the workshop is limited to 30 people, please complete and return the RSVP no later than November 19, 2012.

This is your opportunity to hear new research, learn strategies and work together with parents, associations, professionals, policy-makers and community groups to help families succeed. Your input is very important. We hope you will lend us your views and take advantage of this unique learning opportunity.
Sincerely,

Alice Home, Professor Emeritus (social work), on behalf of the project team:

Irene Carter, Associate Professor (social work), University of Windsor
Sandra Scarth, collaborator, Adoption Council of Canada (ACC)
Pat Convery, partner, Adoption Council of Ontario (AOC)
Paula Schuck, partner, Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families (CCAF)
Rachel Warren, representing partner, Choices Adoption and Counselling
APPENDIX 4

Workshop information

Towards successful special needs adoptions:

Working and learning together across boundaries

Saturday November 24th 2012 at CHOICES Adoption & Counselling
100-850 Blanshard Street, Victoria BC V8W 2H2

9:00  Registration, distribution of workshop kit
9:40  Welcome, agenda for day, brief introduction to team
10:00  **Keynote address:** Dr. Alice Home, University of Ottawa

*Canadian stakeholders’ views on special needs adoptive parenting*
Questions and discussion, short break (11-11:10)

11:15  **Presentation:** Dr. Irene Carter, University of Windsor

*Advocacy for children with disabilities: Issues and Strategies*
Questions and discussion

12:00  **Response** from Adoption Council of Canada: Sandra Scarth

*How does this reflect what we see in the community?*

12:25  **Networking lunch** (Tables with presenters, informal sharing areas)

1:15  **Theme discussion groups** (details below)

2:30  Refreshment break

2:50  **Plenary:** Group summaries, discussion of ways forward

3:40 – 4  Evaluation, door prizes, closing
Theme discussion group information

Afternoon activities focus on **consultation** in small groups around themes that emerged from the findings. Attendees will be assigned to a group, based on their first or second theme choice from the five listed on the RSVP form. Group facilitators will ask members to give their views on two theme-related issues and suggest any priorities or strategies that might be helpful. Members are free to choose what they contribute but not asked to share identifying information or personal experiences. As everyone needs to feel comfortable sharing his/her views, first names only will be used and all will sign a discussion group information/guideline sheet before beginning theme groups. A recorder will take written, general notes on main points discussed, excluding any identifying information. A brief summary based on these notes will be presented in the plenary, to help all workshop attendees understand the issues enough to discuss ways forward.

Subsequent use of workshop material

An important project goal is to ensure both the findings and some workshop content are available for later use by groups, professionals and families that need them. To this end, the project team will be preparing audio-visual and print material for distribution through partners’ websites in 2013, as well as an edited book. Group summaries may be used to prepare print material, after verification that they are accurate and contain no identifying information. To preserve audio-visual content, both the Ottawa teleconference and the morning portion of the Victoria workshop will be filmed. While the focus will be the presenters’ work, attendees have the option of requesting that their questions or comments be excluded from any audio-visual material resulting from workshops.

For further information, contact a team member for your region:

**Victoria workshop**

Alice Home, Project Leader  
ahome@uottawa.ca

Rachel Warren, Graduate Research Assistant  
rachelwarren@shaw.ca
APPENDIX 5

Workshop RSVP

Towards successful special needs adoptions:

Working and learning together across boundaries

Please return as an attachment via email by November 19, 2012 to Rachel Warren at rachelwarren@shaw.ca EXCEPT Stakeholder study parent participants: please send to Alice Home at ahome@uottawa.ca, to protect your identity and be authorized for reimbursement of some transportation and/or child care expenses.

NAME (organization, if applicable) __________________________

CHECK ONE:

I (or delegate) will attend the November 24th workshop ______

I do not plan to attend ______

ALL ATTENDEES:

Please indicate your preferred theme groups by putting 1 and 2 beside your choices. We will do our best to accommodate you while balancing numbers. Please note that only four of the five theme groups below will be offered.

What’s going on? Identifying the disabilities, obtaining the right supports ______

Disentangling disability issues from child’s past history ______

*Not just disability plus adoption: Addressing cultural and minority issues ______

What works? Preparing and post-adoption support for complex parenting ______

Hanging in over the long haul: Supporting the caregivers ______

Stakeholder study PARENT PARTICIPANTS attendees only

Number of parents attending (1 or 2) ______

I request reimbursement of expenses for: child care ______

(Note: receipts required, some limits apply) transportation ______

*The discussion theme group Not just disability plus adoption is being facilitated by Rachel Warren, a UVic Graduate Student as part of her Master of Social Work project. Additional information will be forwarded to participants who indicate they wish to attend this group.
APPENDIX 6

Consent form

Not Just Disability and Adoption:

Addressing Culture and Minority Issues in Special Needs Adoption

Information and guidelines for workshop discussion groups, offered within dissemination project “Towards successful special needs adoptions: Working and learning together across boundaries”

The above-named project offers workshops in order to disseminate, and seek feedback on, findings of the research study “Special needs adoptive parenting: Stakeholders’ views on parents’ experiences and support needs”. Study participants who attend the workshop, which is also open to some community members, will hear those findings in morning research presentations. All workshop attendees will have an opportunity to discuss the findings in groups, give feedback and provide input on next steps. This one-hour feedback/input activity will take place in small groups organized around themes and subthemes emerging from the findings. This document outlines goals, discussion questions and guidelines for facilitators and participants in this feedback activity. These groups aim to encourage sharing of views regarding relevance of research findings, important issues related to themes and ways forward.

In conjunction with this dissemination workshop, a specific discussion group is being offered entitled Not Just Disability and Adoption: Addressing Culture and Minority Issues in Special Needs Adoption that is being facilitated by Rachel Warren. Rachel Warren is a Graduate Student in the Department of Social Work at the University of Victoria, and you may contact her if you have any questions at (250) 888-9783. This particular discussion group is being undertaken as part of a community project in order to meet the requirements for a Master of Social Work degree at the University of Victoria. The purpose of this group discussion is to explore how culture and minority issues are impacted in special needs adoptions, and discuss implications for practice and potential for future collaborative work between the various stakeholders. Community stakeholders and adoptive parents of special needs children in transracial adoption are encouraged to attend this workshop to provide input into this important discussion topic. Participation is voluntary, and all group participants will remain anonymous and can withdraw from the group discussion at any time. An unpaid recorder will document main themes discussed in the group with no identifying information revealed. The recorder will also sign this consent form to ensure participant confidentiality.

Rachel Warren will also conduct critical literature review and secondary data analysis from original interview data from the research study, “Special needs adoptive parenting: Stakeholders’ views on parents’ experiences and support needs”, with all identifying information removed. As a final project, Rachel will draw on emergent themes from these sources to write a monograph on the topic of
managing culture and disability in adoption that will be distributed to the community of interest. No identifying information will be used in the writing of this monograph, and data will be disposed of one year after completion of the final project. Participants may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

In the group discussion *Not Just Disability and Adoption: Addressing Culture and Minority Issues in Special Needs Adoption*, participants will be asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Give a first name and identify the *one finding* that resonated most with your observations or experience.

2. What do you think are the *main issues* related to the research finding in terms of the additional support and preparation needed for adoptive parents parenting special needs children cross-culturally?

3. Based on these findings, what action do you see being possible from this point in terms of collaborative practice between families, agencies, community and government to better meet the needs of transracial adoptive families?

**Guidelines for group discussion:** As workshop attendees have equally valuable ideas based on their particular expertise in special needs, disability or adoptive parenting issues, they all need to feel fully comfortable sharing their views. The following guidelines are designed to ensure this.

1. No one is expected to share identifying information or personal experiences. Group members may use their first name or any other name they feel comfortable with.

2. Participants in the research study being disseminated (*“Special...support needs”*) will not be identified.

3. While facilitators encourage each group member to contribute on all questions, participants are free to choose what and how much they say.

4. Recorders will capture content in written form only, without any identifying information.

5. Main points noted will be checked with members prior to the facilitator summarizing content in the closing workshop plenary. A written summary of group discussion will be sent to all group members to check for accuracy. Requested revisions will be made prior to any use of summaries in the preparation of monographs, articles, reports or other documents.

6. The dissemination team will not share any information excluded from the final summary outside the group. Members are asked to respect this guideline as well.
We ask each person to sign this sheet at the beginning of the group and give it to the facilitator.

I __________________________ have read and understand the above goals, questions and guidelines for group discussion within this dissemination workshop. I will do my best to adhere to those guidelines.

Signed __________________________ Date ______________________
APPENDIX 7

Plenary summary of key themes and issues

Not Just Disability and Adoption:

Addressing Culture and Minority Issues in Special Needs Adoption

1) Concern re: separate “silos”, same issues – fighting for the same resources (e.g. foster families, adoptive families, biological families with special needs children have same needs). Need to advocate together for resources.

2) Grey areas of disabilities that don’t have funding (e.g. if no diagnosis but have special needs).

3) Cultural openness widens view on child, puts into context or might explain what is seen as a disability (e.g., fire setting vs. cultural need – Aboriginal).

4) Idea of creating a “cultural family” for the child. If not immediately available in community – internet support group for children.

5) Focus becomes disability-driven and culture often gets lost in transracial special needs adoption – “survival mode”.

6) Need to advocate for cultural support for adoptees to be made more easily accessible
Good morning,

On behalf of Alice Home and the BC team, I want to thank you for coming to our workshop on November 24th and contributing your experience on the topic of parenting children with special needs. We will write again soon with an update and plans for 2013.

For now, I am sending a one-page summary of your afternoon theme group's discussion. Could you please read the attached document as soon as possible and let me know if there are any important changes that need to be corrected before we use the information for further work. If we do not hear from you by January 11th, we will assume the information contained in the summary is accurate.

Thank you again. Wishing you the best of the holiday season.

Sincerely,

Rachel Warren

Summary of Key Themes and Issues

Key Issues
1) Knowing other people are in the same situation is helpful. Parents aren’t well connected with each other.

2) All parents with special needs children need help/respite in order to be successful, whether biological, adoptive, foster or mixed. Parents need to advocate together for the limited resources available for special needs children.

3) Lack of respite is the main issue. Disruption risk decreases if adequate support and respite is available.

4) Services offered in silos, and parents have to research their own resources to help. Supports are not easily accessible, and hard to find when parents are tired and confused.
5) Pre-adoption education is not enough. Parents need tips on how to assist their child to develop healthy racial identity in transracial adoption.

**Challenges**

1) Parents would like more groups for their children, but cultural groups for adopted kids are often not developmentally appropriate for special needs children. Services are limited in BC to meet the needs of special needs children in transracial adoption. Parents expressed difficulty finding the appropriate group for their child.

2) Openness with culture can help address the child’s cultural and racial identity needs, answer questions about why the child does certain things that are ‘different’. This openness needs to be offered safely to the child, which is not always possible with birth family, leading to even greater challenges to parents.

3) Maintaining cultural connections can be harder for special needs children who are not able to establish healthy boundaries due to disability.

4) Services are fragmented and based on diagnosis, so many children do not fit the funding criteria.

5) It is more difficult to address the child’s cultural needs when parents are struggling with their other special needs that require immediate attention (i.e., problems with behaviour, school issues, etc).

**Solutions**

1) Bring families of special needs children together (whether adopted, biological or foster) more so they can advocate together for adequate service delivery.

2) Fund adequate respite for all families (not just those adopting from the Ministry) and train respite workers in special needs issues; increase the number of respite caregivers available.

3) Support adoptive parents to widen their perspective on ‘family’ through the provision of adequate cultural supports, enabling their child to have access to culture in transracial adoption. Other ideas include a cultural support group for children, internet-based resources, mentors/peers, etc.