

Special Panel: Queering Child Welfare and Child Well-being (Part 2)

with Kayley Kenney, Kristi Pinderi, Marko Aguilar Maurer, Emma McIlroy, Kyle Turone

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

0:08

Hello everybody. Welcome to Season Two of the *Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership in Action* podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Barbara Lee, Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia School of Social Work, Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Services to Children and Families, and Knowledge Exchange Mobilization Scholar.

This episode is part two of a special two-part feature from the Centre for the Study of Services to Children and Families' Annual Transformative Child Welfare Panel held on February 27, 2026. In this second half, we move into an open and unstructured Q&A with panelists Kayla Kenney, Kristi Pinderi, Marko Aguilar Maurer, Emma McIlroy, and Kyle Turone. Building on the research and reflections shared in Part One, this conversation creates space for deeper dialogue on practice, policy, and lived experiences related to Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ children and youth in the child welfare system, offering further insights and considerations for how the child welfare system can continue to evolve in more inclusive, affirming, and responsive ways.

If you haven't yet listened to Part One, we recommend starting there for the full introduction and overview of the panel.

I'm going to move us along and ask the next question. I also see some questions in the chat, and we certainly want to open it up for the audience here to ask questions. The next one: Based on your findings, what is one concrete change, whether in practice, policy, reflection, or training, that would meaningfully improve service delivery or outcomes for Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ youth?

Emma McIlroy

1:52

I think within our project, one of the things that we found, although the project was tailored toward foster parents, was that when you looked at the statistics, far more gender-diverse youth were in staffed resource homes, so group homes, than necessarily with family-style foster caregivers. So definitely expanding those kinds of training opportunities. There's also a different sort of accountability, because most of the staffed resources are contracted out, so they're not under the MCFD umbrella the way that a foster parent would be. So definitely expanding those trainings so that agencies are responsible for hiring staff who have that awareness and can create those signals of safety for youth who might be looking for them. And then also advocacy training, skills, and support for foster parents. Quite a few of the caregivers in our study worked in the system—they were social workers. But for the parents who weren't, that was really, I think, an area that they didn't anticipate, like how much work they were going to have to do to support their child. That more didactic form of training around advocacy would have been really helpful for them, because the research also shows that this kind of modeling of advocacy really supports youth to be able to advocate for themselves, both while they are young and when they become adults.

Kyle Turone**3:10**

And just to build further on that, I remember during the interviews one really concrete thing that someone was very passionate about, and I think we heard it a couple of times, was that for youth who are on their gender transition journey, when they hit 19, they often need to go and get proper ID and things like that. But when you hit 19 and you're with MCFD, there are no more supports for you. And this costs money, and it takes advocacy and time. There's also a lot of trauma involved in navigating those systems and having to explain yourself.

So I think we made one of our recommendations that all those things that you can really only start when you're 19, as a post transitional support for aging out, need to be implemented. Those need to be prioritized by social workers and the Ministry and funded before youth hit 19. He also spoke about how that's a safety concern. If they have a youth who appears as one gender, but their ID shows another gender, then if they're traveling, if they're stopped by police, it could present a safety danger for them or create a safety issue. So yeah, that came across loud and clear. And while we were doing that, I thought that's not the most complicated change to implement. As one concrete change, in the scheme of things, and given how complex our research was, it would be interesting to see whether that is implemented.

Marko Aguilar Maurer**4:31**

Very against specific policy, like this one policy will make everything better, and I'm of the opinion that policy got us into this mess. But I'm also of the opinion that policy can get us out of this mess when we check assumptions and those tensions. But also, the goal is that we use policy to get us out of this mess so that we perhaps move beyond policy, caring for each other in a way that doesn't necessarily rely on policy or rigid structures to dictate how we care for one another.

Kristi Pinderi**5:02**

Thanks for sharing that. It reminded me of a fascinating observation by Vachon. Vachon is an important scholar in BC who writes about queering child welfare, and we both use his writings in our thesis. And he says something that resonates with me in a powerful way. He writes, "care permeates queerness". And queer communities throughout history have been able to survive and have been able to go through adversity because we've cared for each other.

And I think we can dismantle the systems, yes, but we won't dismantle the need that we have to connect with each other. And then within a specific system like MCFD, queer social workers and Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ self-identified social workers have an extra responsibility to hold some of the keys to make a difference. And I don't know how that can look in practice, but I really believe, I really think, that focus on care for each other is perhaps what connects both policy and the future, and unfortunately also the bad legacy that systems like MCFD represent.

Kayla Kenney**6:21**

I really love that recognition of Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ social workers, that what we offer, I would love to see resourced at a systemic level, all of the labor that we do that's not in our job description, but because the gaps are visible to us based on our lived experiences. I joke that I'm a professional queer person. I used to teach sexual health, so I was the sex ed lady, and then I came out as non-

binary. And so I adjusted my title to professional queer person. But a lot of us do this professional, or just queer, care work where, in the settings we're in, we see things that must be different, with, at this time, fairly little institutional support for that role and difficult work. So thank you, Kristi. That makes me think of that, and it resonates tremendously.

This is not based on my own findings, but as a doctoral student, you get the privilege of supporting other researchers in their work. And for a couple of years of the program, I was focused on misinformation about gender-affirming care that Dr. Drew Clark led here at UBC. And so, if I was to pick one thing as a concrete change, or concrete resource for social workers, it would be for us to have a clear appraisal of the evidence base around gender-affirming care, especially for young people. That is to say, that appraisal exists, and that evidence base is substantial. It is long, and decades long, in terms of research. And I think it would be powerful if social workers and other allied health professionals had the language to give parents, colleagues, and young people clear and accurate information, and to know where to look for clear and accurate information.

The We Are Allies project here in Canada, that ran a couple of years ago and continues to run, has a lot of great resources in that sense. But there's just so much evidence. We need even more research because we need this care to continue to improve. But we know a lot about medical care for trans youth, and it's really important, including for social workers and child welfare systems, to have this knowledge, as sometimes they are in the role of connecting young people to this care. You mentioned the *Right to Thrive* report, and we know from reporting in the province how delayed young people in care's access is to gender-affirming medical care. And so social workers have an important role in changing that, because it has serious repercussions for young people's lives.

Antoine Coulombe

8:56

So I'll go with the next question. We're currently in a time where we're seeing increased discrimination and violence around queer people, especially in youth environments in Canada. So my question is, what responsibilities do child- or youth-serving systems have to actively prevent harm to Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ youth, so not just respond to it, but prevent it? And how does your research or your findings inform more accountable and ethical practice in that area?

Kayla Kenney

9:24

In this province, I am really heartened to see an active protection of gender-affirming care. We have the Society for Advocacy for Gender-Affirming Healthcare (SAGAH). We have Trans Care BC that is helping to connect people to gender-affirming care in the province. That very much is in need of protection, given the climate that exists. So I would say, to prevent harm, we need to be ready to refuse state-driven violence against trans youth. I am from the United States. I'm from what's known as New Hampshire, which has been Abenaki and Pennacook Indigenous peoples' land. And just in my own state, and in many states in the US, I am seeing clinics and health care teams close prematurely because of the regulatory climate that the US government is leading. So I would love to see our systems continue to defend this care and avoid it becoming the political tool that it is in the country to the south of us. And for social workers to be ready to refuse some of the mandates that social workers in the US have been given.

Kristi Pinderi**10:39**

I can share another personal story from there. There is increasing anti-trans rhetoric, like everywhere in the world, and one of the arguments that people bring, and they always use Canada as an example, is, look, in Canada, they can take away your child if you don't agree with them being trans. Mostly, that rhetoric goes against trans people. But it also reminds me of an important element within the child welfare system, which is the need to see issues holistically and not in separation from each other, including families.

Unfortunately, we lack research about parents of queer children and youth because, of course, we need to focus on the needs of queer communities. But it is also important to focus on the needs of parents. And from my previous experience and from my day-to-day work, I realized that there is a coming-out process for youth. And unfortunately, that moment becomes a disruption, especially for families who have ongoing issues with poverty, violence, and communication. But it also becomes an important sign that we need to focus on parents as well. They have their own coming-out process, and for many parents, realizing the sexual and gender diversity of their children becomes a moment of horror. They realize the challenges that are out there in society, and some of them are in denial. Some of them are fighting the way they know how to fight, without realizing that they are causing more harm.

But it is important, especially because social workers within the child welfare system are in a great position, and of course they hold a lot of extreme power that should be challenged, but they also are in a great position to work with families in meaningful ways. During the summer, I did my practicum with CYMH (Child and Youth Mental Health), and I did have cases when, after receiving consent from my clients, I was able to talk with their parents. And I could do that not because it was part of my work, but because I felt there was a need. Those parents see and watch the horrible things that everyone watches on TV. They needed some assurances. They needed to be understood, in terms of the lack of information and the concern that they experience. So I think that is also important to recognize as a need. I'm hoping that research like this can be the beginning of meaningful change. I see, for instance, your work with foster parents as very complementary to my work because we need to see the issue holistically in a way that benefits everyone.

Marko Aguilar Maurer**13:36**

I might add as well, in addition to thinking holistically about the problems that we're facing, I think something I see in our care practices is how much of it is governed from a fear or scarcity mindset. Which is totally understandable, and I can see why that happens. But acknowledging that, when we practice from that kind of mindset, it inevitably impacts how we care for others. And I think that's where that unintentional harm can come from, because we so desperately want to prevent pain and prevent harm, or we're so scared of these things, that we don't necessarily take the time, for example, to think differently about pain. We practice from being pain-averse, wanting to shut it down. But there are other cultures that teach us that pain can be a very powerful teacher for us. And embracing that kind of perspective, again, allows for different outcomes to occur. So challenging the moments when we experience scarcity or fear and addressing that and seeing what changes it makes to our practices, is important.

Kyle Turone**14:32**

Two things I want to add, but I'm going to be mindful of time. First, when we were doing our research, and I'm very grateful that we were able to do our research in partnership with MCFD, but I truly believe research is practice. And I think that research has the opportunity to do a lot of nourishing work while you're engaged with families, youth, or children. But when we did our research, we originally were asked to interview a focus group of youth, and where I'm going with this is, we were like, "okay, yeah, that sounds great". But then we read the report that this research proposal, designed by MCFD, was based on, and that was the *Right to Thrive* report. The five of us sat together and we were like, "this has already been done". The *Right to Thrive* report did exactly what they're asking us to do. So why are we doing this again, as a small group of five doing our MSW here at UBC? We do not have the resources that RCY has. They conducted this multi-year process and wrote up this report. But as a matter of due diligence and formality, MCFD needed and wanted to do their own.

And I understand the reasons for that, especially after the wisdom of my professor Barbara talking to all of us through lots of frustrated conversations. But eventually, in the RCY *Right to Thrive* report, one of the findings was that youth are also fatigued. They're really tired of researchers coming in and asking a lot of these questions, and they're not really seeing any changes. And then we were being asked to go and do the exact same thing, when the report is telling us not to do that. And so that's one of the reasons why we actually didn't interview youth, which is a limitation of our study, but it's also anti-oppressive practice. It's good practice, too, that we didn't, because it had already been done and it wasn't going to find anything new. But MCFD really wanted us to at least just put it out there for a focus group of youth who were already connected to a group internally. Anyways, we got no responses. Practically, we didn't end up interviewing anyone. No one really wanted to. That was fun to go back to MCFD with and say, aha, you see. But I felt like, in that moment, it was our responsibility to highlight that and to speak up. Fortunately, we were in a position as students, there is academic freedom, there is institutional backing, to push back against that. But if you're a researcher at MCFD and your director is asking you to do that, how much are you going to push back? So that's one thing. I think that's it. I don't remember my second one.

Dr. Barbara Lee**17:00**

I see that we had some questions online, so maybe we'll take this opportunity to turn it to the audience for some questions.

Dr. Sarah Dow-Fleisner**17:09**

Great. Thank you so much for sharing all of your insights and expertise. We do have a couple of questions. I'm going to start with the one that came in first. It says, in my service delivery area, it has become very difficult to recruit caregivers who are committed to gender-affirming care for youth in government care. How can social workers expand their reach so that we can recruit families and caregivers who will be willing to provide support to Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ youth?

Kyle Turone**17:39**

I think the first things that come to mind are, how can we incentivize this more? Or is there going to be monetary value, or things like that, to try to get more people to sign up as foster parents? I

believe there's a huge shortage of available foster homes. I haven't worked for MCFD myself, but that's what I understand from all of my friends who have. And I think, going back to when we talked about how we need caregivers who are really practicing from the heart and coming in with an open mind, I don't think we necessarily want to incentivize the wrong folks with money or something like that, or housing, to take care of these youth. I think that could be extremely harmful.

At the same time, we have a lot of people who would probably be very willing and do have an open mind and heart to take this on. But especially in the Lower Mainland, housing, who has five bedrooms available, or even two? I live in a two-bedroom apartment and one's an office. You can't just grow a third bedroom. So it's very complex, and I think there's a lot of tension with it. But I'm pretty critical of any kind of concrete incentivization. I think we have a bit of a moral failing in terms of, and of course social workers are going to go there, but from a macro scale, I think we have a bit of a moral failing in just wanting to do the right thing, and just our neighbors wanting to step up, and community members wanting to step up. And I don't know exactly how to answer that.

I think that is the reason for a lot of the anti-trans rhetoric that we hear these days, and so forth. And I really lean into education, our public education system, I think. We all know it's very underfunded. We all know capacity numbers in schools and things like that. But really trying to teach a bit of a moral sense, or doing good for your neighbor or your community, from an early age, and just re-implementing that into our lives, I think is important. I think we've lost that a bit as a society lately, and I think it has to come from that. We can't just hand out money alone and get all these random people volunteering to do it. At the same time, we need to fund and adequately support those with a good heart, who do. Probably more problems raised to it than answers.

Kristi Pinderi

19:44

I think the realization that this is a problem, I think that in itself is a good start. Because if the system is designed for risk management, then a potential foster parent who is unwilling to be affirming to this child or this youth might be considered a risk in itself. So perhaps that's not the best placement for that youth. And perhaps when you start having, of course, I understand the lack of resources, and depending on the service delivery area, because MCFD functions through service delivery areas, the same system and the same policies can still produce different cultures based on the local office. But sometimes they don't have the same resources. So I understand that a certain service delivery area in a remote rural area might not have the opportunity to find those affirming foster parents.

But if people start to realize that this is a problem, and if people within the system who are aware and who understand that this is a problem start making this a problem, I think that will be the biggest beginning to change the system. Because otherwise, if we just complain, and if we don't find within ourselves those pathways, I don't see any other way to improve that. Also, there is an important observation that came up in my research with the way a top-down system like MCFD works and operates, and the obsession with specialization, also the drive to specialize the process of care. It brings so many people to the table, but less responsibility and less accountability. So you have a resource social worker, you have a guardianship social worker, you have a family service social worker, and you have an intake social worker, and you have one single family who

needs care, right? And if you design a system that is meant to equalize responsibility, but not share the information, and not maximize the opportunities for family, then there is something wrong in the policy, or there is something wrong perhaps in the model that is being applied. So no, that's a big challenge. One of the most successful stories I heard in my research came from those rural areas. They came from that social worker who thought it's not safe if the foster parent is not willing to be an affirming foster parent. And they found a way. They found a way to address that concern, and they changed the life of that person forever. And people were eager to share those stories.

Dr. Sarah Dow-Fleisner**22:32**

We have another question related, I think, to some of your points, Kayla. And I'm from Maine, so we should chat sometime, because my husband's from Derry, New Hampshire. So when I heard New Hampshire, I was like, yes, I'm from the same area. But one of the questions that popped up was about the current political climate. Awareness of, here in BC last week, an MLA proposing legislation restricting gender-affirming care, and some proposed legislation around eliminating the BC Human Rights Code. How do you all think about and understand the impact of this on trans and gender-diverse children's sense of safety and belonging, and what context our federal and provincial elections could create to dramatically shift child protection policy itself, and what we can do as social workers?

Emma McIlroy**23:19**

I think, to start small, one of the things I ask myself when these things are happening is, would this ever happen over a cisgender person? Would we ever talk about their gender identity if they were cis? And if the answer is no, then I think we know it's not really about that. It's about political gain, or control, or reduction of bodily autonomy across the spectrum of gender. So I think it's a pawn. It's something that there's been a lot of hysteria around, and it's really easy to get people whipped up over. But I think being able to slow down to ask those questions, and to ask those questions of people who are espousing that rhetoric in a way that is maybe less confrontational than I would have done when I was younger, but maybe a little more kind and curious now.

Kyle Turone**24:02**

I think, so I haven't worked for MCFD, but I did work for the Ministry of Social Development for almost a decade, eight years. And one of the skills that I gained in that work, that I think is invaluable, is the ability to understand legislation, read legislation, and understand how you can use that against policy to serve your clients. So in a totally different context, when I was working with people who were low income, I might be looking at legislation and trying to make it work to get them a certain grant, or a certain program eligibility, or something like that. And so in this context, as we see these kinds of politics shift, as social workers, really not losing sight of the power that we do have in our positions to enforce or interpret legislation with our own eyes. And that might not necessarily be the same as the way our coworker is interpreting that legislation, and that's okay. And being brave enough to write up your decision and your rationale to justify why you're making a decision that goes against maybe what a lot of people do, and learning how to work with the legislation to do that, I think that will be incredibly important.

I'm going to guess, in MCFD, there are times like Kristi spoke of where maybe there's one social worker who really is trying to fight for a youth and trying to make something happen. And so I think just being brave and trying to do that. I call that working in the gray, and I think that's where we often work best.

Dr. Sarah Dow-Fleisner

25:24

So we have another one in the chat, and I did check in with our in-person audience here as well, but we'll go with our chat question. What are some of your insights about encouraging collaboration between MCFD and external organizations? How are we trying to work together, which is not happening right now?

Marko Aguilar Maurer

25:42

I'm speaking from professional work experience, and from working for a nonprofit, which I'm assuming is the external body that coordinates with MCFD or is funded by MCFD. And I feel like something I notice that can be hindering connection and good collaboration is this idea that MCFD is coming in and they've got their professionalism shields on. We're just the nonprofit. And when we talk about finances, even just mapping out the power imbalance there, if we want to move toward meaningful collaboration in a good way, it really means addressing that imbalance and how we view our role, either hierarchically or laterally, with our partners. And I would say that's something I notice.

Emma McIlroy

26:29

I would say, too, I think what social work knows and does so well is that it's relational. It's not about these formalized communication protocols. It's about, hey Kyle, I have a client, I don't know what to do, can I consult with you? It's reaching out and maintaining those connections. And I've worked in nonprofit, in Ministry, and now in a health authority, and I think MCFD has a real transparency issue, where you think about it very differently when you're on the inside versus the outside, versus the service provider, versus the service recipient. And I think instead of that kind of confrontational advocacy that I think social work can get into, which is a skill and is super important, and I realize I just said we need to teach advocacy skills, so I'll keep that in mind, but I think really trying to work together, rather than pushing.

And working at the hospital now, there's really this sense that you have to call, you have to push, you have to stay on it. I really wonder how it would be different if we actually understood what system constraints we were both up against and could find a path through that, rather than just infighting with each other. So yeah. Keep everyone's phone number and email that you ever get.

Kristi Pinderi

27:35

I can add that if you send an email, it's very difficult to ignore if you send it the first time. Probably, yes. The second time, a little less. The third time, it will be difficult to ignore. And it's also interesting, MCFD has a huge budget and it subcontracts a lot of services because without those services, without those partners, without those external organizations, it won't be able to do its work. So there are certain smart strategies that can be used intentionally to push, or force, MCFD to take a turn. Obviously, because it's a huge oppressive organization, taking a turn needs more

time. But once it does, then it's difficult to stop. I would also think Barbara's excellent experience in trying to navigate those challenges, in working with MCFD in, I think, very meaningful ways, and sharing those experiences, from inside and from outside.

Kyle Turone**28:35**

I might just quickly say, too, that it's really easy for a group of social workers to come and say this about MCFD or say that about MCFD. But if my time in another Ministry taught me anything, it's how much governments really take into account the view of the taxpayer. And again, when I spoke about education and our neighbors and our community, government truly is a reflection of the population. They truly cannot just go and do what the public does not necessarily want them to do, hopefully. And if you talk to your friends who are not in this field at all, or family, business leaders, engineers, doctors, whoever, a lot of them aren't going to know a lot about these things that we're talking about. And not in a bad-person way, but maybe what's a bit disheartening is they might actually also not care so much. And I think that's what we need to work on changing, too.

We see that in health care, we see that in education, we see that in all of our public systems right now, I think. And I think to acknowledge that as well, and to put some of the onus on our community members and not just MCFD, because ultimately they are who can push MCFD to make those turns. MCFD can only respond to the public that it serves.

Antoine Coulombe**29:50**

So I'm going to do a summary, which is not very easy considering the amount. I have three words to remember. Please help me remember them. Complexity is one. The second one is storytelling. And the third is creativity. So we can tell, by hearing all of you, about the complexity, and research is about understanding complexity. That's one of the most useful things we can do right now, because our world is very complex. It was very interesting to see all your viewpoints interconnect and embrace that holistic view on complexity, because that's the way we can move things forward, right?

Storytelling, as researchers, we hear stories, and then we carry them, and then we share the stories, and it becomes a way of empowering people and voices. And that was something that we definitely saw in all of your work today, as you were sharing stories of people whose stories we don't hear enough, right? And that was carried throughout the panel discussion.

And creativity reminds us that our world is continuously created and recreated, even our institutions. But we need ideas, right? We need ideas that come from conversation and research. And today you've shared many important ideas in recreating this. And this, of course, brings me to a famous hope that we enjoy in social work. When we understand all these things, it brings us the potential to move things forward. So I want to thank you. As someone who has been working with queer youth for many years, I'm so excited to see so many young researchers embrace those topics and move those topics even much further than we did. It's very inspiring for me. So thank you.

Dr. Sarah Dow-Fleisner

31:26

Thank you. I just want to thank all of our panelists. Thank you for sharing your stories, your research, and yourselves with us today. Barbara, as always, you are my best friend in research. You are such an amazing person. Antoine, thank you for joining our little band of hopeful researchers. Thank you to the practicum students who put together these beautiful brochures and flyers. And thank you to all of you who are attending. Share this recording far and wide. These are important stories, important ideas that need to be heard. So, keep an eye out for future work. Keep an eye on our website, which is under construction, so don't judge it too harshly. And we look forward to many more opportunities to not only talk about change but be drivers of that change. So, thank you, everyone. Thank you. In Vancouver, signing off from the Okanagan now.

[Outro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

32:25

You've been listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, your host, and executive producer. Our production team for this episode includes Michelle O'Kane, Cathy Jiu, Maddie Cathcart, Qian Zhou, and Safiya Bhinder. Our cover art is by Cathy Jiu and our open-source music is called Motivational Day, Audio Coffee by Denis Kyshchuk. Thanks for listening!

