

**Is Nova Scotia shifting from a risk-based to a child well-being system? A critical content analysis of the child
and family well-being practice framework in Nova Scotia**

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Approval page

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Abstract

The child welfare policy landscape in Nova Scotia has been subjected to significant criticisms for its reliance on risk-based protectionist paradigms. In response, the provincial government introduced the Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025) as a shift towards a holistic well-being practice. This study adopts a two-pronged design. First, a scoping review that synthesizes peer-reviewed and grey literature from 2014-2026, to better understand the discursive orientations shaping contemporary child welfare policies and practices in Nova Scotia. Second, a qualitative document-based analysis that critically examines the CFW (2025) practice framework and its policy manual to assess the extent to which it represents a substantive paradigm shift from a risk-based approach to a holistic child well-being paradigm. Using interpretive critical content analysis, the study examines if the CFW (2025) reflects a paradigm shift that prioritizes child's rights and wellness. Research findings are categorized into three interrelated dimensions: structural (legislative governance), procedural (culturally responsive practice), and systemic (governance and child and family well-being). The analysis reveals that the CFW (2025) and its policy manual reflects a hybrid governance model characterized by a partial paradigm shift in Nova Scotia's child welfare system. The shift towards a holistic well-being paradigm is constrained by the embedded legislative authority and risk-based governance structure. The study concludes that achieving a substantive transition from a risk-based child protection model to a culturally responsive child and family well-being approach requires structural and legislative reform of the child welfare system, alongside alignment between policy discourse, institutional practice, and legislative frameworks in Nova Scotia.

Keywords: *child welfare policy; holistic child and family well-being; risk-based governance; neoliberalism; interpretive critical content analysis; Nova Scotia*

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Traditionally, Nova Scotia's child protection system has prioritized the physical safety of children from harm or abuse through a risk-based perspective. Risk-based approaches are often linear, aligned within a standardized normative framework and uphold child protection laws and policies aimed towards providing support to the individual child. Connolly (2017) states that such safety concerns are often framed within a logic of precaution, leading to increased surveillance within the child protection system. This orientation has been widely critiqued in academic and policy discourses as being characteristic of the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021), reflecting traditional development approaches to child services, neoliberal ideologies (e.g., privatization and commodification of social services) and risk-based orientations (e.g., surveillance, accountability, quantification and assigning metrics in risk-assessments) (Boyer & Halbrook, 2011; Garrett, 2017; Parton, 2014). Most recently, the Nova Scotia government developed a new document called the Child and Family Well-being Framework (CFW) (2025), developed to shift towards a more diverse and holistic approach to child welfare beyond static risk-based approaches. Explicitly, the CFW (2025) aims to represent a departure from the nomenclature of child welfare, and focus on the whole child (i.e., social, cultural, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of children, youth, and their families) (CFW, 2025, p.4; Human Rights Commission, 2024). Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to find out if the new CFW (2025) document has shifted towards supporting the well-being of the whole child beyond the traditional characteristics typically applied through the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021).

It is important to analyze how child welfare frameworks inform and impact child wellbeing. As Freire (1970) reminds us, “often, educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address” (p. 96). In this thesis, I am concerned about the language embedded in the CFW (2025) document as it relates to child well-being. I want to find out if our child welfare system has shifted beyond the traditional developmental risk protection approaches stated in the CFSA towards a more critical stance that supports children’s well-being. The central focus is to understand the concerns that the language of policy may mask rather than transform the realities it claims to address. This discursive shift motivates me to investigate whether the CFW (2025) represents a substantive transition from a risk-based paradigm to a holistic well-being paradigm that facilitates systemic change. Alternatively, to find out whether it constitutes a rhetorical repackaging that remains aligned with the systemic workings of neoliberal ideologies within contemporary capitalist societies that seeks to help families without consistently centering family needs, experiences and societal conditions.

Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to investigate whether the contents of the CFW (2025) practice framework reflect an ideological shift from the traditional developmental model with a focus on protection of children from harm and abuse toward a broader focus on the holistic well-being of children, youths, and their families. To address this problem, I intend to critically examine the contents of Nova Scotia’s Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025), including the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021) to determine if significant changes have been made to the Department of Opportunities and Social Development (DOSD) approaches to child welfare and protection.

Significance of the Study

In Nova Scotia, the responsibility for protecting and supporting children at risk of abuse and neglect lies within the purview of the provincial government (Luther, 2015). Boyer and Halbrook (2011) argue that the existing social policy system is influenced by neoliberal ideologies that have positioned social services as a public burden rather than a necessary social support. For instance, social issues such as poverty and domestic violence, which deeply affect children's well-being, have been increasingly privatized and commercialized (Dean, 2012; Luxton & Braedley, 2010). These dynamics have historically influenced legislative developments, such as the transition from the Child Services Act (CSA) to the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 1990) with subsequent amendments in 2021.

The CFW (2025) states explicitly in the opening section of the document that it's committed to embedding child and family well-being into practice standards. This focus on child well-being represents a pivotal phase in Nova Scotia's evolving social policy landscape. This research is therefore significant, as it critically examines whether the CFW (2025) constitutes a paradigm shift that challenges entrenched neoliberal and traditional risk-based ideologies, or whether it linguistically restates them using euphemisms and the rhetoric of well-being. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by situating Nova Scotia's policy reforms within wider debates on capitalism, neoliberalism, power, risk, and the impact these constructs have on children's well-being (Keddell, 2013; Tremblett, 2025).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze Nova Scotia's CFW (2025) and its policy manual to determine whether it represents a substantive shift in ideology from a traditional risk-based child protection paradigm toward a holistic child well-being model. This

study contributes to critical scholarship on child welfare by examining the extent to which the policy texts reflect, reproduce, or resist neoliberal ideologies and risk-based paradigms.

Research Aim

This study aims to critically examine Nova Scotia's Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025) and its policy manual, to determine whether they represent a shift toward a child well-being system or merely constitute a rhetorical repackaging aligned with the systemic workings of neoliberal ideologies of contemporary capitalist societies.

Research Question

This study is intended to provide answers to the research question:

“To what extent does Nova Scotia's Child and Family Well-being Practice framework represent a substantive policy shift from a risk-based child protection paradigm to a holistic child well-being paradigm?”

Research Scope and Context

This research is situated within Nova Scotia's social policy and legislative framework. The main document of analysis across this study is the Child and Family Well-being Framework (CFW, 2025). I will conduct a critical content analysis of the CFW (2025) and its policy manual. The CFW (2025) positions itself as a value-based practice guide grounded in seven standards of practice that define the vision, values, guiding principles, and standards for practice. It emphasizes inclusivity and the recognition of diverse perspectives, cultures, and needs of children, youth, and families. The framework claims to mark a departure from reactive approaches towards preventative, collaborative, and designed to achieve the best outcomes for children, youth, and families. In the course of this study, I will refer to the Children and Family

Services Act (CFSA, 2021), which is the overarching legal framework governing the structure and operation of social services in Nova Scotia. The CFSA (2021) is a legislative document passed by an Act, purposed to “*protect children from harm, promote the integrity of the family and assure the best interests of children*” (CFSA, p.4). Across my analysis, I will refer to the CFSA document to determine if the new CFW (2025) has made significant shifts from neoliberal, authoritarian, risk-based and punitive ideologies that have been widely critiqued in relation to the Act. The analysis of these documents will support identifying intersections, affinities, contradictions, and gaps between the CFW (2025) practice framework and its policy manual and the CFSA (2021) as the overarching legislative framework.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Content Analysis (CCA) (Johnson et al., 2017). CCA is particularly suited for examining policy texts, as it interrogates explicit contents of the document, as well as the underlying ideologies, assumptions, and power structures embedded in these policy texts and discourses (Johnson et al., 2017). This method provides opportunity to evaluate whether the CFW (2025) reflects, resists or reproduces neoliberal ideologies, authoritarian logics, and risk-based paradigms. Specifically, I aim to find out if the CFW (2021) has made substantial shifts from traditional risk-based paradigms outlined in the CFSA (2021).

To ensure both critical depth and methodological rigour, this study draws on the thinking of Paul Michael Garrett (2017), whose analysis of welfare provides a critical foundation for analyzing the language of policy texts, and Nigel Parton (2014), whose work on child protection and politics offers an understanding of the ideological positioning of welfare systems. This study adopts bottom-up and top-down analyses of the policy texts. The bottom-up analysis examines

the linguistic and narrative features of the documents. In contrast, the top-down analysis situates these texts in relation to the influencing elements and within broader ideological, political, and theoretical frameworks (Johnson et al., 2017). This dual approach ensures methodological rigour through triangulation between textual, contextual, and theoretical dimensions of analysis.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One presents the historical and ideological context of Nova Scotia's child protection system, which has long been critiqued in academic and policy discourses as reflecting neoliberal ideologies and risk-based orientations. In response to these criticisms, along with insights gathered from feedback during various public consultations, the provincial government introduced the Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025). This new framework purposes to expand the focus of child protection beyond physical protection to encompass the psychological, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of children, youth, and their families. The chapter also identifies the central research problem of whether the contents of the CFW (2025) reflect a genuine ideological shift from a traditional risk-based model of child protection toward a holistic paradigm of child and family well-being.

Furthermore, the chapter highlights the significance of this study within a critical period of policy transformation in Nova Scotia, where debates around neoliberalism, capitalism, power, and social policy continue to shape the province's social services landscape and influence the well-being of children and their families. Finally, the chapter outlines the methodological approach, grounded in critical content analysis (CCA) adopted to critically analyze the policy texts of the CFW (2025) and its policy manual. Through this approach, the study seeks to determine the extent to which Nova Scotia's Child and Family Well-being Practice framework

represents a substantive policy shift from a risk-based child protection paradigm to a holistic child well-being paradigm.

The next chapter is a scoping review, presented as a journal manuscript of related contemporary literature on social policies, risk-based frameworks, and neoliberal ideologies. This is to understand how these theoretical and ideological underpinnings shape and influence child and family well-being.

CHAPTER TWO: Manuscript - A critical scoping review of child protection and child well-being paradigms in Nova Scotia

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Abstract

Child welfare policy and practice in Nova Scotia, Canada have been critiqued for its reliance on risk-based protectionist paradigms that constrain children's rights, agency, and well-being. This scoping review identifies peer-reviewed and grey literature from 2014-2026 to better understand the discursive orientations shaping contemporary child welfare policies and practices in Nova Scotia. Guided by Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage scoping review framework, 5,524 records were identified and screened across 21 academic databases and grey literature sources, with 17 publications included in the final analysis. This critical synthesis revealed three dominant and interrelated thematic orientations: (1) protectionist language and risk, (2) constructions of childhood innocence and power, and (3) tensions between risk-based child protection and family service paradigms. The findings indicate that Nova Scotia's child welfare system remains structured by protectionist-oriented language that prioritizes surveillance, intervention, and compliance over children's rights and well-being. The review highlights the misalignment between provincial legislation and child rights-based standards that are articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). By offering a critical analysis of language, power, and legislative frameworks, this review contributes to child welfare scholarship by illuminating the structural and ideological conditions shaping policy

and practice in Nova Scotia and advancing a rights-based paradigm for child and family well-being.

Keywords: *child welfare policy; risk-based child protection; child well-being; scoping review*

Introduction:

When navigating child protection systems in Canada, children and families may unknowingly be disempowered and oppressed by discourses of innocence and protection. This scoping review examines relevant scholarly and policy literature, published between 2014 and 2026, on Canada's child welfare system, with a particular focus on Nova Scotia. This review is timely as there has been a paucity of scholarship that has synthesized and conducted a critical analysis of traditional child protection discourses and risk-based paradigms that inform young people's well-being. This inquiry is important, as framing children through traditional risk-based paradigms reproduces static childhood innocence frameworks that do not account for children's rights and agency when accessing social services (Garlen, 2019). What requires attention is the long history of child protection services that has framed children as docile subjects in need of protection, rather than as participants with active social roles and agency within their respective social systems. This enduring orientation calls for an examination, particularly considering contemporary scholarly commitments to child rights and well-being (Anderson et al., 2023; Bryan et al., 2024; Frank et al., 2026).

While there has been some research focused on the child welfare system in the province of Ontario (Breton, 2018; Veenstra, 2020), the extent of studies focused on Nova Scotia's system is largely limited. This paucity of research is particularly concerning given Nova Scotia's historical and contemporary significance within the Canadian child welfare framework, as the first province to inherit the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601¹. In fact, in their recommendation in the *2025 Report Card on child and family poverty in Nova Scotia*, Frank et al. (2026) called on the

¹ Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 is a law which aimed to reform a social system considered to be generalist and defective. It represented a significant shift by institutionalizing state responsibility for the poor, systematizing almsgiving by giving local parishes (akin to modern provinces) the responsibility of levying taxes on the middle class and allocating these funds towards alleviating the suffering of the 'deserving' (Dean, 2012 p.17-18).

provincial government to “[f]undamentally transform the child welfare and social assistance systems to achieve meaningful rights-based, trauma-informed outcome” (p. 9). As such, there is a need to critically assess the child welfare landscape in that province, to determine whether Nova Scotia’s child welfare system continues to be rooted in traditional risk-based paradigms, or whether there has been a meaningful discursive shift toward a holistic child well-being and rights-based approach.

This scoping review aims to critically examine recent literature (2014 - 2026) on the child welfare system, its policies and practices predominantly in Nova Scotia, Canada. Specifically, it reviews recent literature to determine if traditional risk-based child protection paradigms continue to shape current child welfare policies and practices, and what impact this has on children and family well-being. This inquiry is important given the shift within the early childhood sector toward more socially- and culturally responsive practices that support children and align with child rights-based models, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

Background:

According to the National Advisory Council on Poverty (2025), Nova Scotia’s poverty rate at 12.9% remains among the highest in Canada, with a rising child poverty rate at 22.7% (the third highest in Canada), and youth crime at 16% from 2022 to 2023 (Department of Justice Canada, 2025a; Department of Justice Canada, 2025b; Frank et al., 2026). Children and youth under the care of child welfare and youth justice systems have continually been listed among the most marginalized groups. This economic disparity, along with having one of the lowest income supports, exposes the province to systemic vulnerabilities and marginalization. Recent contemporary advocacy reports, such as the Contradictions in Care (2024), Coverdale (2024),

and the Restorative Inquiry (2019), have associated these vulnerabilities with family instability and child protection interventions. These critiques have called for a review of the existing policy framework and legislation, with recommendations to safeguard families from the existing punitive interventions towards policies that support parents and families through meaningful, compassionate, and preventative well-being frameworks.

Historically, child protection policies in Nova Scotia have evolved in response to social, economic, cultural and political changes (Parton, 2014). Nova Scotia's child welfare system has predominantly witnessed three dominant child protection orientations: The era of child-saving (1800s-1920s) aligned with a safety orientation viewing child abuse as a criminal offence (Luther, 2015, Trocmé et al., 2018); the era of morality (1920s-1950s) with the establishment of the juvenile delinquent system categorizing the child as a moral offender requiring intervention (Luther, 2015), and; the risk-based era (1960s-1990s), producing regulatory frameworks to ensure accountability in decision-making within a failing social services system (Trocmé et al., 2018). These historical orientations have continued to shape contemporary child welfare policies and practices in Nova Scotia. Specifically, the government of Nova Scotia, in response to the various challenges confronting the social services system, adopted a risk-oriented child protection paradigm. However, the development of risk assessment tools and standardized intervention frameworks has significant long-term effects on the well-being of children and continues to persist. Therefore, the purpose of this scoping review is to identify contemporary scholarship on traditional risk-based child protection paradigms in Nova Scotia, Canada and critically synthesize their dominant paradigms and discursive orientations in the province, that shape contemporary child welfare policy and practice. In addition, it will outline the implications of these factors on the well-being of children and their families.

Methodology:

This study adopts a critical methodological framework, informed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Explicitly, we examine contemporary literature on child protection and welfare systems in Nova Scotia published between 2014 and 2026 to identify dominant paradigms and discursive orientations shaping current child welfare policies and practices. Consistent with critical scoping review approaches, this review will address what is present in literature, as well as the tensions, silences, and exclusions within policy documents and scholarly discourses. In addition, this review identifies key linguistic, conceptual and policy gaps between risk-based child protection approaches and rights-based child and family well-being-oriented paradigms. Aligned with the typology of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), this scoping review follows their five-stage framework: identifying the research question, identifying relevant literature, selecting studies, charting the data, collating, summarizing, and reporting the results.

Identifying the research question

This review was guided by the research question: *What does the current literature say about the dominant paradigms, language, and orientations that shape child welfare policies and practices in Nova Scotia and Canada, and what are their implications for child and family well-being?* Contextually, this question indirectly examines the overarching ways of thinking that are legitimized by those in positions of authority and advanced through language as a descriptive, constructive and discursive mechanism. Such discourses serve as a basis for justifying ideological framings, thereby shaping the structures and practices of Canadian child welfare systems. In turn, these dominant discursive orientations influence the social contexts and lived experiences of children and their families, including their understanding of who they are and how they should live their lives premised on circumstances and the expectations imposed on

them by the system (Luxton & Braedley, 2010). These ways of thinking are foundational to how child welfare policies and practices are operationalized with significant and far-reaching implications for child and family well-being in Nova Scotia.

Identifying relevant literature

A search identified relevant academic and scholarly peer-reviewed articles and publications, published between 2014 and 2026, that reflect contemporary developments in child welfare policies and practices relative to the research question. This search strategy was developed in consultation with subject specialist librarians to ensure depth and relevance of identified articles for inclusion in the study's analysis and synthesis. Academic data sources spanning child and youth, social sciences and education were searched (n=15) including: Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Educational Research Complete, Academic Search Premier, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycINFO, Child Care and Early Education Research Connections, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), MSVU Archives Catalogue, MSVU e-commons: Graduate theses, Open Access Theses and Dissertations, Sage Journals, SOCINDEX, Springer Nature Link, Taylor & Francis. The grey literature was also searched across six sources (n=6) to ensure policy-relevant and contextual materials were identified: Canadian NewsStream (ProQuest), CBCA Complete (ProQuest), Government of Canada publications, Films on Demand, Legislative archives of the Government of Nova Scotia, and published books on the subject area. Searches were narrowed to the publication dates between January 2014 and March 2026, with search terms developed using the research question as a guide to capture significant concepts of the study focus (e.g., Nova Scotia, child protection, child welfare, child well-being, childhood and childhood innocence, risk and risk-based paradigms). These terms guided the process used to establish inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Study Selection

Selection of relevant studies addressing the review question was done using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A total of 5,524 records were identified and screened across 21 academic databases and grey literature sources. After removal of duplicates, titles and abstracts were independently screened to ensure consistency and transparency. Full text reading was then conducted against established inclusion and exclusion criteria as guided by Brown et al. (2020). Through this process, seventeen (n=17) peer-reviewed articles, journals, and grey literature were selected, based on their relevance to the research focus, publication period (2014-2026), study population, and thematic emphasis on child protection, child welfare policy, child and family well-being, risk-based protection system, and child welfare paradigms. Sources used exclusively for theoretical or conceptual framing were retained in the reference list but excluded from the primary synthesis. Table 1.0 outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria, guided by Brown et. Al. (2020).

Table 2.1: Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus	Child welfare paradigms, language and orientations that shape child welfare policy and practice in Nova Scotia and Canada, and their implications for child and family well-being	No discussion on the welfare system, welfare policies, paradigms, and children wellbeing
Publication type	Peer-reviewed; Grey literature	Review articles
Publication date	January 2014 to March 2026	Before January 2014 and after March 2026
Province/Country	Nova Scotia and Canada	Any country other than Canada

Data Charting

Data charting was guided by a critical analytical lens used to identify relevant information that met the aims of the research and with a central focus on discourses of child protection, risk and risk-based paradigms, welfare policies and practices, child and family well-

being in Nova Scotia, Canada. Additional analytical attention was given to key themes such as language, risk, childhood and childhood innocence, power, family and other relevant child welfare ideological assumptions that inform child welfare policies and practices. Language in the literature was analyzed using thematic coding supported by textual analysis. This involved a categorical analysis of key terms and examination of their patterns and structural relationships within research and policy contexts, with attention to recurring constructions that reinforce either risk-based child protection or child and family well-being paradigms. An initial coding framework was organized around two overarching categories: risk-based child protection; and child and family well-being paradigms. Within these frameworks are key thematic codes, which included child protection, child welfare, child and family well-being, child rights, risk and risk-based constructions (e.g., child at risk, child in need, risk-assessment), family service orientation, discursive governance, constructions of childhood, geographic context of Nova Scotia and Canada. A textual analysis was used to examine how vocabulary (e.g., child at risk, child in need) and discursive patterns were constructed across literature. The analysis critically interrogated why certain language was constructed and the latent and implied meanings they carry, and how they reflect the positioning of the authors within broader social policy and governance discourses (Fischer et al., 2015; Yanow, 2000).

All coding was conducted manually without the use of any data analysis software. Thematic categories were systematically grouped to identify dominant orientations and underlying assumptions across literature. To ensure analytical rigour and transparency, coding records and analytical notes were maintained and continuously contextualized through engagement with relevant scholarly literature, selected print and media sources. Furthermore, theoretical or conceptual frameworks were differentiated from the primary literature that directly

address child welfare discourses, policies and practices in Nova Scotia and in other provinces across Canada. The information charted included: author(s), year of publication, and location; jurisdiction, study purpose, methodology, key findings, discussion, recommendations and reference networks.

Collating, summarizing and reporting results

This study critically synthesized seventeen (17) peer-reviewed and grey literature sources. Consistent with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework, studies for the scoping review were analyzed for relevance and alignment to the research question. A brief historical synopsis was carried out before the review of scholarly literature. Findings were collated using a synoptic strategy that encapsulates the publications, ensuring a synthesis of affinities, tensions and continuities across all relevant scholarly materials that were captured and presented. Table 2.0 lists the various literature, published books, and authors that were included in the scoping review:

Table 2.2: Reference listing for scoping review

Anderson, K., Carrea, C., Gagnon, C., Hopson, J., Kirk, S. F. L., Pavey, L., & Siritsky, N. (2023). <i>Child rights and well-being in Nova Scotia: A critical conversation</i> . Healthy Populations Journal, 3(2). https://doi.org/10.15273/hpj.v3i2.11592
Barkley, J. & Wright, R. (2019). Nova Scotia Child Welfare in Crisis: A Shared Perspective. https://nscsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Nova-Scotia-Child-Welfare-In-Crisis-Barkley-Wright.pdf
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Findings:

When conducting this scoping review, three dominant thematic orientations were identified: child protectionist language and risk; constructions of childhood innocence and power; and tensions between risk-based child protection and family services paradigms. What follows is an explanation of how these themes are articulated and legitimized across the literature, highlighting recurring conceptual and linguistic framings, policy orientations and their theoretical implications.

Child protectionist language and risk

Contemporary scholars have criticized the continued use of protectionist terminology within child welfare policy and practice (Garrett, 2018; Holborow, 2014; Lines et al., 2025). What emerged from this scoping review was the persistent use of protectionist language that frames a child through the traditional social constructs of *protection*, *safeguarding* and keeping children *safe* from abuse (Lines et al., 2025; Davies et al., 2023, emphasis added). Such discourses on protectionism, that view children as passive and incapable of making rational decisions for themselves, reproduce static models of the innocent child requiring adult protection (Lines et al., 2025; Luther, 2015).

Garrett (2018) and Lines et al. (2025) emphasize the significance of language in shaping institutional practices and professional relations in the child protection system. Garrett (2018) states that language informs the ways the profession communicates to the public. Lines et al. (2025) went further to reiterate that language frames how social issues are identified, understood and responded to, suggesting the need for a critical analysis of the language used in child welfare forms, documentation, legislation and correspondence with, or about children and their families. Legislative texts, such as the Nova Scotia Child and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021), a

document aimed at protecting children, safeguarding their rights, and preserving families, adopts the language of protectionism alongside surveillance and punishment. Similarly, across this scoping review, the phrase “*in the child’s best interests*” is identified as a recurring justification for actions including intervention, without constructively engaging with the child and their parents in the decision-making process (Coverdale, 2024; Stratford, 2020). Garrett (2018) argues how intervention discourses such as *poor*, *needy/in need*, *juvenile*, and *problem child* have been used to justify the need for increased funding in the child welfare system. Stratford (2020) similarly criticized the market prioritization strategy of the government of Nova Scotia as being at the root of rising inequality and of prioritizing the interest of the affluent. This has led to silencing the voices of families and children, leading to diminished trust in the provincial welfare system, and a dire need for a shift in paradigm.

Other literature in this scoping review highlights how linguistic framing within child welfare policy documents serve as descriptive and constructive determinant to justify and legitimize surveillance-based interventions (Garrett, 2018; Holborow, 2014). Holborow (2014) states that because we “socially inherit linguistic use, our ‘unthinking’ engagement in language can often appear to accept uncritically its ideological meanings” (p.4). In the context of this scoping review, this suggests that language is one of the key mediums through which Nova Scotia child protection services are understood by families, practitioners, and other child and youth professionals. This reinforces the importance of a critical analysis of the language used within Canadian child protection policy frameworks and practices and their implications on the well-being of children (Garrett, 2018; Holborow, 2014). A recurring concern in the literature of the CFSA relates to the legislative language that lowers thresholds for intervention, justifies intrusive action, and expands the discretionary powers of risk-assessment officers in the child

protection services in Nova Scotia. An example can be found in Section 22 (2b) of the CFSA (2021), which states:

“A child is in need of protective services where
(b) there is a substantial risk that the child will suffer
physical harm inflicted or caused as described in clause (a);” (p.17)

This type of language indicates that the focus of both policy and practice is on protection from a generalized risk, while also leaving the determination of the nature and likelihood of that risk entirely to the discretion of the officers that are sent out by child-protection services². Lines et al. (2025) explains that the emphasis of keeping the child safe is indicative of neoliberal values of individualism and protectionism, which amplifies an adversarial parent-child relationship and undermines broader socio-political contexts.

Constructions of childhood innocence and power

This scoping review provides evidence that childhood was conceptualized (and continues) to be constructed as a period of innocence maintained through the rhetoric of protection that justifies its practices and policy narratives of childhood at risk (Ciotti et al.; Gallagher, 2019; Garlen, 2019). As such, Garlen (2019) calls for an interrogation of childhood innocence and how innocence is operationalized as an exclusionary social practice that obscures children’s lived realities by positioning them as ignorant of social conditions, thereby making them vulnerable to the dangers from which we seek to protect them. This exclusionary categorization potentially influences children’s behaviour towards actions that expose them to further harm, anti-social behaviours and even getting them into the criminal justice system (Theunissen et al., 2020).

² Section 22 (2a and 2b) states that: “a child is in need of protective services when (a) the child has suffered physical harm, inflicted by a parent or guardian of the child or caused by the failure of a parent or guardian to supervise and protect the child adequately; (b) there is a substantial risk that the child will...” (CFSA, 2021. Pg. 17). Section 22 of the CFSA implies a linguistic tension in the construction of post-harm and anticipatory risk, which expands discretionary authority for intervention. The use of the words *has* and *will* in the Act presents a response-based child protective mandate which defines risk after harm has already happened (sub-section 2a) versus a protectionist language that portends to be preventative but rather a protectionist action during actual harm or where there is a substantive risk of harm (sub-section 2b) (CFSA, 2021).

Liebenberg et al. (2014) highlights how power relations in the context of child protection systems are pervasive, and how these power structures often unknowingly constrain children from fully realizing their identities, voice, and agency within their spaces. Child protection-oriented systems have historically limited children's power and voice in relation to their own decision-making (Liebenberg et al., 2014). The often-hidden power relations that circulate within child protection systems can reproduce static constructs of childhood innocence and consequently reinforce notions of childhood purity that silence children's capacities to have agency (Garlen, 2019; Liebenberg et al., 2014). Contemporary scholars in Nova Scotia have critiqued child protection systems to be more legally oriented and characterized by child protective mechanisms (i.e., safeguarding children from harm and abuse) with limited attention to the wider dimensions of children's subjectivities such as how they perceive and interpret their lived experiences (Barkley & Wright, 2019; Stratford, 2020; Theunissen et al., 2020). That is, risk-based policies, pre-determined standardized assessments, and surveillance mechanisms are often the unspoken power relations that circulate within Nova Scotia child protection services that unknowingly objectify children as passive, thereby making them victims of oppressive hegemonic practices (Gallagher, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2011; Parton, 2014).

In what could be considered a paradox, Theunissen et al. (2020) argues that the use of the language "*looked after children*" denotes a prioritization of care of children over the structure that governs the practice of that care to children (p. 20). Others have characterized this risk-based orientation as legitimizing intrusive forms of control (Gaventa et al., 2018; Land et al., 2022). A few examples from the Nova Scotia CFSA highlights the responsibility of the Minister for the general supervision and management of the Act and its regulations, and the court as an enforcer of compliance.

“The Minister may designate, in writing, a person, to have, perform and exercise any of the powers, privileges, duties and functions of the Minister pursuant to this Act and shall, when so designating, specify the powers, privileges, duties and functions to be had, performed and exercised by the person so designated” (CFSA, 2021, s5(1) p.9).

“The Minister may make payments in respect of child-care services and child caring facilities in such amounts as are appropriated annually for those purposes.” (CFSA, 2021, s7(1) p.10).

“Where a peace officer has reasonable and probable grounds to believe that a child who is under the age of sixteen years or who is a child in care is in need of protective services, the peace officer may detain the child and shall forth with take such reasonable steps as are necessary to....” (CFSA, 2021, s27(1) p.23).

“The court may issue an order authorizing a peace officer to locate and detain the child and upon detaining the child, the peace officer shall, as soon as is practicable....” (CFSA, 2021, s29(b) p.25).

This vested authority within the child welfare service centralizes control and enforces compliance with standardized policies as approved by the Minister. Therefore, the fear or risk of losing employment, funding or revocation of licenses of agencies due to infractions or non-compliance to laid-down standards compels agencies to conform to these normative standards of practice, that are potentially detrimental to the well-being of children, youth and their families. Here, scholars argue that discourses of agency and voice, which are designed to facilitate children’s agency and rights are not accounted for when engaging in child protection services (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Gallagher, 2019). Theunissen et al. (2020) argue that when youth lack the official voice in various administrative spaces and have no corporate representation (i.e., child & youth advocate) they cannot influence their categorization by the existing structures and the society. The consequence of negating childhood rights likens to regulatory functions, where traditional developmental norms are applied to assess childhood behaviour and those who do not conform are subjected to authoritative forces (e.g., parental force, institutional force) (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Gallagher, 2019). Land et al. (2022)

describes this as a perpetual pendulum that swings from child protection to regulatory control. Thus, the underlying message to children and youth is one of surveillance, with minimal opportunities for self-decision making and independence (Gaventa et al, 2018; Land et al, 2022; Liebenberg et al., 2014). Gaventa (2018) illustrates how entrenched power structures and systemic inequalities can widen the gap between those at the core (e.g., government, policymakers) and those at the periphery (e.g., children, individuals, and families). This is evidenced in the CFSA (2021) when it states

“AND WHEREAS the rights of children, families and individuals are guaranteed by the rule of law and intervention into the affairs of the individuals and families so as to protect and affirm these rights must be governed by the rule of law” (p. 4).

The CFSA accounts for the rights of children collectively, serving as a discursive foreground for legitimizing intervention. The emphasis on the “*rule of law*” serves as a judicial justification that authorizes surveillance and intervention rather than prioritizing children’s voice, agency and participation. By positioning the Nova Scotia Department of Opportunities and Social Development (DOSD) as the primary enforcer of rights, the CFSA reflects a child protectionist orientation that reinforces dominant social constructions of childhood innocence, framing children as passive subjects of protection rather than as active participants in decisions that affect their lives (Ciotti et al, 2023; Garlen, 2019; Gallagher, 2019). This framing is at variance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which conceptualizes rights as inherent to the child whose participation, agency, and best interests should be prioritized and serve as a guiding principle to provincial government actions (Anderson et al., 2023; Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, 2025; UNCRC, 1989).

Tensions between risk-based child protection and family service paradigms

Another theme that emerged from this scoping review describes how the dominant, risk-based child protection orientation in Nova Scotia is too centered on managing risk, rather than proactively advocating for the wider dimensions of children's well-being (i.e. social, cultural, economic, familial) (Higgins et al., 2019; Ports, 2024; Veenstra, 2020). Parton (2014) and Higgins et al. (2019) characterize child protection-oriented systems in Nova Scotia as focusing predominantly on risk assessment and statutory intervention; however, these are fraught with flaws. In addition, the structural limitations within Nova Scotia's child protection-oriented practices create systemic limitations in relation to poor response to individuals experiencing vulnerability, bureaucratic bottlenecks, overreliance on actuarial assessment tools, and treatment-focused interventions that misalign with children's diverse needs (Higgins, 2019; Parton, 2014).

An example is the report by Mercer and Jones (2025, August 11) regarding the ongoing investigation of missing Jack (4yrs) and Lilly (6yrs) Sullivan. Since May of 2025, it has been documented as one of the largest ground searches in the history of Nova Scotia. The child protection services (CPS) were accused of secrecy about how the provincial government responded when concerns about the missed children were reported. According to Mercer and Jones (2025, August 11), the CPS were denounced for overlooking early warning signs, even after visiting the children's home, following a report from their school before their disappearance. When questioned about the children's disappearance, Minister Scott Armstrong acknowledged that there were shortcomings in Nova Scotia child protection system. In addition, Jones and Mercer (2025, June 19) reported that despite the passing of Bill 39 in 2021 (Nova Scotia Child & Youth Advocate Act), Nova Scotia and Ontario are said to be the only two provinces without a child and youth advocate or an independent child and youth commission

(CYC) relying on provincial regulations to investigate complaints related to the welfare of children (Anderson et al., 2023; Grant, 2019; Mercer & Jones, 2025; Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, 2025).

Another example from the grey literature is a story that questions the existing child protection system about 19-year-old Chorny Elliott, who was accused of stabbing a six-year-old boy, who was standing with his parents at a bus stop in downtown Halifax (Lambie, 2025, Feb. 27). The mother of Chorny claimed that their child had mental health challenges that led to Chorny becoming unhoused. Lambie (2025) cites Chorny “[a]fter becoming homeless, I have endured more bullying and public humiliation ... I am easy target because I am severely maladjusted...[c]riminals get more support than law abiding citizens. I’ll die or go to jail” (para. 20) (Lambie, 2025; February 27). Chorny’s accounts reflect broken trust and confidence in the child protection system. This story reflects broader systemic socio-economic challenges that situate youth-in-transition as becoming victims of bullying, abuse, public stigmatization, and wards of the system.

Discussion:

Nova Scotia’s DOSD continues to operate within a traditional child protection lens that privileges risk management, surveillance, and institutional authority forces over participatory approaches to child well-being. The persistence of this framework reveals a static policy space in which dominant protectionist logics remain unchallenged, limiting the extent to which children’s rights-based participation are integrated into practice. It further suggests that across Canada, child protection-oriented systems are too focused on setting up mechanisms to enforce regulatory risk-based paradigms (i.e., laws, policies) rather than work with families (Parton, 2014). These adversarial practices that view families as the problem to be fixed, deepens the already strained

trust-deficient relationship between families and the social services system (Lines et al., 2025; Parton, 2014).

This scoping review, however, challenges the assumptions that child protection is inherently synonymous with surveillance and risk-based intervention, rather we present the possibility of the child protection services in Nova Scotia adopting a child-rights based approach by paying deeper attention to the broader socio-economic realities of children's lives, including the prioritization of their well-being. The findings demonstrate how language, constructions of childhood, and institutional logics of risk intersect to reproduce and sustain a child welfare system in Nova Scotia that prioritizes surveillance, risk-management and control. By normalizing surveillance-based interventions, children and families become vulnerable to structural inequities. Drawing on Freire's (1970) assertion that dominant groups fail to attune to the lived realities of marginalized people, this scoping review illustrates how protectionist language in Nova Scotia's child welfare system misaligns with the socio-economic and cultural realities of children and families. As child and youth practitioners, social workers, educators, and community members, we need to account for these structural hardships that do not always serve the best interests of the child. With this, we must begin to address how dominant constructions of childhood innocence intersected with institutional power can constrain children's active participation within child welfare systems.

It also underscores the uneven distribution of power within the child welfare services in Nova Scotia, which operate through a centralized, top-down hierarchical governance structure. Legislative authority as stated in the CFSA (2021), reinforces a centralized administrative structure that prioritizes compliance with standardized protocols over professional discretion and relational engagement. This is a misalignment between Nova Scotia's legislative framework and

international rights-based standards that acknowledge the rights of the child. This is important as the CFSA does not clearly outline the rights of the child. Explicitly, the distinctions between Nova Scotia's legislative framework and the UNCRC (1989) reinforces the need for legislative reform that embeds children's rights as guiding principles rather than conditional considerations.

Conclusion:

This scoping review demonstrates that despite the policy claims of well-being and family centered practice, Nova Scotia's child welfare system remains deeply rooted and governed by protectionist and risk-oriented logics. The findings present the need for a critical reassessment of the legislative and policy frameworks that embed risk-based protectionist orientations within Nova Scotia's DOSD. We suggest aligning the CFSA (2021) with the UNCRC (1989), as well as the establishment of a Child and Youth Advocate in Nova Scotia, and an Independent Child and Youth Commission (CYC). Bill 39 would strengthen Nova Scotia child welfare governance towards a rights-based child and family well-being system. This review similarly underscores the need for child rights-based frameworks to support child and family well-being. Central to this is the recognition of children as active participants in decisions affecting their lives and their families as essential partners rather than subjects of regulation.

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CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

Nova Scotia's child welfare system is critiqued as being governed by protectionist and risk-oriented logics. In response to these critiques, the provincial government through the Department of Opportunities and Social Development (DOSD) introduced the Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025). This framework is presented as a paradigm shift in child welfare governance towards preventative and holistic well-being (i.e., social, emotional, cultural and spiritual) rather than a narrow focus on the physical safety of the child. This chapter discusses the qualitative methodological framework used to critically analyze the new CFW (2025) practice framework and its policy manual to determine whether it substantively represents a shift toward a holistic child well-being system or discursively restates a rhetoric of well-being underpinned by traditional risk-based paradigm. This study adopts a qualitative document-based interpretive research design to critically analyze the Child and Family Wellbeing Practice Framework (CFW, 2025) and its policy manual. In this analysis, I will also reference the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021) to identify areas of tensions or affinities to substantiate the research findings. Guided by the research question: *To what extent does Nova Scotia's Child and Family Well-being Practice framework represent a substantive policy shift from a risk-based child protection paradigm to a holistic child well-being paradigm?* By employing an interpretive critical content analysis, I aimed to identify if traditional risk-based child protection paradigms and authoritarian logics are reproduced in the CFW (2025), and to analyze the language of the CFW (2025) to see if a substantive shift has been made towards a holistic paradigm.

Interpretive critical content analysis:

This qualitative study adopts an interpretive critical content analysis. An interpretive content analysis is widely used to make inferences from texts and interpretations within the contexts of the text (Johnson et al., 2017). By recognizing that government child and youth frameworks and policies are socially constructed, interpretive policy analysis is an analytical approach that prioritizes context and subjective experiences, enabling researchers to explore various perspectives to reveal insights that would have remained hidden through traditional quantitative coding. In this context, interpretive policy analysis provides a useful framework for understanding the textual data by exploring layers of meaning expressed and communicated within the CFW document taking into account the knowledge of how policy texts or issues are framed or conceptualized by various stakeholders (i.e., policy makers, Ministers, practitioners, social workers, child protection services, families, children) (Browne et al., 2019; Yanow, 2000).

In the context of this inquiry, an interpretive critical content analysis aims to not merely describe the policy document, but to examine if it reflects traditional risk-based child protection paradigm or has there been a substantial shift towards a holistic child well-being paradigm. This integrated approach ensures an explicit dialogical position to uncover sites where power, ideology, and governance are articulated and reconfigured, with an aim to transform conditions of potential inequities for children and their families.

This interpretive content analysis involved a close analysis of the linguistic and narrative features of the CFW policy texts, including discursive patterns, key themes, and categories. To do this, I drew on existing contemporary scholarship to determine whether the CFW (2025) practice framework and its policy manual reflects a substantive holistic child well-being paradigm shift or constitutes risk-based logics (Johnson et al., 2017). This layered analytical strategy strengthens

methodological rigour by ensuring that my interpretive analysis is systematically grounded in an in-depth reading and contextually situated within the institutional context of child welfare system in Nova Scotia.

Data analysis:

To conduct the interpretive analysis, I followed five rigorous stages to support meeting the aims of my research inquiry. The five stages of analysis included: clarifying the research purpose, research question and policy documents; iterative reading of policy documents; critical interpretive examination of policy documents; identifying, analyzing and revisiting texts as themes emerge; and preparing analytical notes to document interpretive insights and report findings.

Clarifying the research purpose, research question and policy documents

The selection of textual data in an interpretive content analysis is guided by the purpose of the research (Johnson et al., 2017). This study explicitly specifies its purpose as a critical analysis of Nova Scotia's CFW (2025) practice framework and its policy manual to determine whether it represents a substantive shift from a traditional risk-based child protection paradigm toward a holistic child well-being paradigm. The primary documents analyzed in this research are the Child and Family Well-being Framework (CFW, 2025), including the CFW policy manual (2025). The CFW (2025) outlined the approach to practice with children, youth, families and communities and the policy manual serves as the guiding document in the implementation of the services offered by the CFW. During the analysis of these documents, sections of the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021) were referenced to examine areas of affinity or tension between the legislative framework and CFW.

Iterative reading of policy documents

I began with a first, second and third reading of the entire CFW framework and CFW policy manual. This process involved reading the CFW (2025) framework and policy manual multiple times to familiarize myself with its content. An in-depth review of the policy documents was then carried, identifying phrases, policy statements or terms that indicate meanings relevant to the research purpose and question of the study. The process of reflective review of the documents multiple times allowed me to become familiar with the content. In addition, it offered a rigorous space to pay particular attention to initial broad themes that reflect traditional risk-based paradigm or holistic well-being.

Critical interpretive examination of policy document

This process involved an in-depth layered interpretive textual analysis of the CFW (2025) and its policy manual. This critical interpretive process included identifying linguistic and discursive features within the CFW and its policy manual. Specifically, I began to code broad themes, reoccurring language as it relates to the research aim.

Identifying, analyzing and revisiting texts as themes emerge

The next process involved the identification of patterns of meaning within the documents coding for specific themes, refining identified themes, revisiting texts, and reporting the findings (Creswell, 2013). Following the approach outlined by Liebenberg et al. (2020), the analysis passes through several stages: familiarization with the policy texts, identification and generation of initial codes, identification of patterns and thematic categorization, reviewing and refining themes, and finally interpretation of themes and the inherent meanings within the study contexts. By breaking the policy texts into parts and analyzing for recurring patterns and categorizing with

codes allowed me to explore in-depth if traditional risk-based paradigms and authoritarian logics were reproduced or if a substantive shift towards a holistic well-being paradigm was evident (Browne et al., 2019; Creswell, 2013; Yanow, 2000) This coding process ensured that key themes are substantiated with strong evidence from the texts to support these findings.

Preparing analytical notes to document critical interpretive insights and findings

Throughout the analysis, notes were made, documenting meanings, reflections, connections between themes, and emerging interpretations. In this final stage, I connected notes to specific themes then supported these with theoretical scholarship. The insights generated through this process form the basis of the findings in the subsequent chapter.

Reliability and validity of analysis

To ensure the credibility and analytical rigour of the research, this analysis was guided by methodological standards in critical interpretive content analysis, supported by scholarly writings on these methodological approaches (Browne et al., 2019; Creswell, 2013; Fischer et al., 2015; Garrett, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Parton (2014; Yanow, 2000). The study relied on systematic iterative review of the policy texts and to identify themes as they emerge. Secondly, analytical notes and documentation of codes were maintained throughout the entire research analysis process to ensure transparency on how interpretations were developed. Finally, to ensure reliability, this analysis was subjected to critical supervisory and committee review for appropriateness, analytical coherence and credibility.

Ethical considerations

This study does not involve human participants and adheres to the principles of ethical standards as stipulated by the Research Ethics Board (REB) of Mount Saint Vincent University, ensuring academic integrity, transparency, and respect for intellectual property. All policy

documents reviewed in this study were drawn from official, publicly available government and legislative sources.

Summary:

Chapter three presented the methodological framework guiding the research. The study employed a qualitative document-based interpretive critical content analysis to examine the Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025) and its policy manual. Through iterative reading, thematic coding, and critical interpretive analysis of the policy documents to support meeting the aims of this thesis inquiry. This methodological approach enabled the research to critically examine whether the CFW (2025) practice framework and its policy manual substantively represents a shift toward a holistic child well-being system or merely restates traditional risk-based paradigm using euphemisms and the rhetoric of well-being. The next chapter presents the findings of this critical interpretive analysis, examining and interpreting the dominant themes shaping the CFW (2025) framework and its implications on the wellbeing of children and their families in Nova Scotia.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction

The chapter presents the findings of an interpretive critical content analysis of Nova Scotia's Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework (CFW, 2025) and its policy manual. The analysis examines whether the framework and its policy manual represent a substantive shift from a traditional risk-based child protection paradigm to a holistic child well-being approach. Guided by the research question, this critical analysis aims to identify the extent to which the CFW (2025) advances this reorientation or, alternatively, continues to reproduce conventional approaches rooted in surveillance, intervention and potential sites of inequities.

The findings are grouped into three interrelated dimensions: structural (legislative governance), procedural (culturally responsive practice), and systemic (governance and child and family well-being) While the CFW (2025) is intended to support culturally responsive services for children and their families, its structural and systemic dimensions show tensions between traditional risk-based approaches and holistic well-being orientations. Such tensions are a product of the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021) being embedded within the new CFW. I will now analyze the three dimensions and the implications these have on children's well-being.

Structural dimension (legislative governance)

The analysis reveals that the CFW is not autonomous but is governed under the Department of Opportunities and Social Development (DOSD). While the CFW is described as a division and "part of a community responsible for the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families" (CFW policy manual, 2025. p.1, para. 1& 2), it is misleading as it is embedded within a bureaucratic structure. The CFW framework also makes clear that all actions must

follow provincial legislation, including the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) (p. 2).

Therefore, while the CFW presents as a shift toward well-being, the policy repeatedly reinforces legislative governance. For example, staff are “... delegated through legislation to support children, youth, and families” (CFW policy manual, 2025, p. 11) and this demonstrates that authority is not derived from the community, but rather from statutory legislation. This statement from the CFW policy manual reinforces the existence of a top-down hierarchical system reinforcing that the power to care for children, youth, and families is not under the scope of a culturally responsive pedagogical practice. Rather, child’s well-being practices emanates from law, particularly the CFSA (2021).

The legislative governance of the CFW (2025) and its policy manual is strongly linked to relevant sections of the provincial legislation. The embedded use of the CFSA (2021) within the framework restricts the capacity of the CFW team to substantively deliver holistic child well-being services to children and their families. For example, statutory thresholds for intervention under the CFSA (2021), such as the requirement to establish “substantial risk (s.22), constrain frontline practitioners to exercise discretion when responding to complex or extenuating family circumstances; social workers report that such restrictions contributes in making them feel devalued and underappreciated by decision-makers, policymakers, and the society (Contradictions in care, 2024). This aligns with the argument by Brown and Gallagher (2014), that the CFSA serves as a legislative vehicle used in entrenching authoritarian logic with the intent of promoting child protectionism. It can be interpreted that while the CFW (2025) discursively embraces a community-based collaborative approach, its operation remains rooted in a top-down hierarchical structure that defines the scope of its decisions and actions.

Procedural dimension (culturally responsive practice):

The CFW (2025) policy document repeatedly emphasizes ‘*culturally attentive and responsive*’ child and family well-being services for children, youth and families. A culturally responsive practice focus presented across various contexts in the CFW (2025) highlights the centrality of cultural responsiveness as a guiding principle in the operations of the CFW team. When analyzing the CFW framework, it was evident that formalized risk management processes (CFW policy manual, 2025, p. 60), including a standardized criteria (CFW policy manual, 2025, p. 80) are implemented when determining well-being services for families. The existence of a framework that procedurally adopts a socio-cultural and holistic responsive practice that is mediated using standardized, predetermined risk assessment criteria and tools within a legal rights-based framework presents a contradiction within the framework. For example, the use of actuarial and structured decision-making instruments such as formalized intake screening criteria, risk management conference protocols, and inter-agency risk tools (e.g. ODARA – Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment) as prerequisites for decision-making and intervention constrains culturally responsive practice. This creates tension as decision-making is subject to a closed bureaucratic process that emphasizes standardized risk-based criteria (p. 80). Particularly, the CFW (2025) policy manual directly references Section 22 of the CFSA (2021) highlighting when a ‘*child is in need of protective services.*’

Connolly (2017) argues that decisions regarding child welfare contain varying levels of uncertainty that may be compounded when managed through standardized risk frameworks. In the context of Nova Scotia, intervention guided under the CFSA (2021, s.22 (2b)) prevents the prioritization of culturally responsive well-being practices due to its focus on intervention and protection. The central challenge is that while the CFW (2025) promotes a culturally responsive

approach, this orientation is not supported by the existing legislation that governs practice. Decision making remains tied to standardized risk criteria limiting the capacity to support diverse child well-being practices. Consequently, the CFSA procedures and laws may constrain the CFW's goal of holistic care.

Systemic dimension (governance and child and family well-being):

The CFW (2025) emphasizes a culturally attentive and responsive child and family well-being practice with efforts to move from a reactive response-based “child welfare” approach to a holistic, collaborative, and family-based paradigm (CFW, 2025, p. 4-5; Human Rights Commission, 2024). This language is indicative of a socially responsive and public health driven perspective that reflects child welfare beyond physical protection, to include spiritual, emotional, psychological, and cognitive well-being of the child, youth and their families. However, rather than the system of governance taking ownership of this responsibility, it delineates this task by framing it as a shared responsibility, diffusing accountability away from government and service providers reflects underlying risk management logics (CFW, 2025. p. 6. para. 2).

These findings show that despite its emphasis on culturally responsive practice, the CFW (2025) remains embedded in a system of governance established under the CFSA (2021). This positions the CFW (2025) within a hybrid governance system that intersects a holistic well-being-oriented approach with risk-based legislative and decision-making structures. Discursively, the system promotes a proactive, relational approach, but structurally, it relies on risk management governance limiting transformational holistic social services.

To further clarify these intersections, Table 4.0, informed by the works of Parton (2014) and Ports et al. (2024), depicts the features of both risk-based and well-being paradigms across key dimensions of the CFW (2025) practice framework and policy manual.

Table 4.1: Child and Family Well-being hybrid model

	Child & Family Wellbeing (CFW)	
Value of system	Risk management (Risk-based)	Child well-being (Social model)
Top-down vs Bottom-up process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down hierarchical system defined by the CFSA • Formalized decision-making process using standardized risk assessment criteria and tools • Risk management conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partially bottom-up approach to the practice of child and family well-being • Collaborative practice, community engagement towards providing culturally acceptable and responsive social services and support, but decision-making still at the risk management conference
Individualism vs Collectivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees every child as unique • Intervention is still targeted at individual family • Legal and rights-based • Centralized decision-making system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizes shared responsibility • Broadens responsibility by prioritizing child well-being via community collaborations. • Goal is to holistically address issues affecting children, youth, and family well-being
Reactive vs Proactive solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalized process that makes it structurally reactive • Response-based – Seeks “<i>substantial risk</i>” to determine that the <i>child needs protective services</i> • Government funding skewed towards response-based services (such as foster care, commissions of enquiry etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks proactive approaches via community engagements towards addressing problems. • Goal is to ensure a stable, safe, and nurturing social condition for children and their families.
Problem focused vs Solution-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government not taking ownership of the problem • Emphasizes responsabilization using the language of <i>shared responsibility, trusted relationship, and collaborative partnerships (p. 3)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of community level intervention to address and resolve problems • Solution-framed but initiated by problem
Raising awareness vs Implementing prevention action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness on the definitions, guiding principles, and standards of practice of the CFW guided by provincial legislation (CFW policy manual, 2025) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The discursive shift from the language of <i>child welfare</i> to <i>child and family well-being (CFW, 2025. P. 4)</i> • Prevention-oriented - Clear emphasis on service delivery, early support, and defined intervention

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed towards raising awareness, and knowledge of the needs of children, youth, and families and its impact on the health and well-being of children and their families.
External mandates vs Collective intrinsic motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on executing policy mandates set by policymakers and institutional stakeholders • Centralized risk-based ideologies that influence decision-making and social policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driven by the paradigm that preventive efforts should be intrinsically motivated by the collective. • Public health driven approach focused on community engagement to create healthy conditions for all.

The table illustrates a hybrid framework that indicates the co-existence of well-being-oriented elements across all dimensions, mediated by risk-based structures, systemic logics, and anchored on legislative governance.

Summary

The research findings indicate that the CFW (2025) reflects a partial paradigm shift from a risk-based child protection system to a holistic model of child and family well-being. Though not transformative, the CFW (2025) presents discursive and procedural changes that emphasize preventive, collaborative, culturally attentive and responsive CFW support and services.

However, these practices remain structurally and systemically anchored upon the legislative governance of the CFSA (2021). Premised on this, the CFW (2025) and its policy manual depict a hybrid governance model, indicating that though there have been meaningful changes in the policy framework, it still does not displace the underlying risk-based logic that continues to shape the child welfare system in Nova Scotia.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

While the Child and Family Well-being (CFW, 2025) introduced important discursive shifts in practice toward a holistic model of child and family well-being, these developments remain embedded within an enduring risk governance system anchored in the Children and Family Services Act (CFSA, 2021). This chapter summarizes that the new practice framework represents a partial transformation rather than a substantive paradigm shift from a traditional risk-based child protection paradigm toward a holistic child well-being model. It discusses issues related to risk governance, social policy, and neoliberalism, their implications and recommendations for improved child, youth, and family well-being in Nova Scotia.

Hybrid governance paradigm:

The findings reveal the hybrid position of the CFW (2025), situated between a holistic child well-being paradigm and a traditional risk-based child protection model. This hybrid positioning reflects features of both paradigms across structural, procedural, and systemic dimensions. While the linguistic and discursive shift toward a well-being paradigm signals a positive development, it does not displace the centrality of a risk management paradigm. This creates a situation of competing logic within the child welfare system, as the existing risk governance structure is construed as a socio-cultural model. There is a need to address this issue and advance a Nova Scotia child welfare system that prioritizes children's well-being. For social policy, one recommendation would be for the government to develop a social policy that advocates for the rights of the child and centers a holistic socio-cultural approach within child services. Second, is to develop a more inclusive, critical and outcome-based approach to policy making. Third, is to develop a practical social policy process that includes implementation and

evaluation from first voice perspectives (i.e., children, youth, families, child and youth study practitioners). In addition, there is a need for legislative and policy reforms on all levels.

To achieve a substantive shift, child and family well-being paradigms should not start and end with a new practice policy document but rather require sustained engagement with the legal and institutional structures that govern interventions. These include the Department of Opportunities and Social Development (administrative governance), the Provincial Legislature and its legislative framework (legislative authority), the justice system (legal authority), frontline social service professionals (service delivery), community partners and leaders, families and children, inter-agency service providers, as well as independent oversights such as Child and Youth Advocate and Child and Youth Commission. This will ensure alignment between policy frameworks and legislative structures that produce the desired transformative outcome. Findings indicate that changes in paradigms are usually welcomed so it becomes imperative to sustain discursive engagements with various stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, Ministers, CFW team, children and families), including academics in various policy discourses challenging these neoliberal justifications that enforce a risk-based protectionist model.

Developing a social policy:

Human societies are complex associations of interdependent beings, and sustaining this interdependency requires the development of social policies (Dean, 2012). Developing social policies that support a holistic approach to child well-being requires unfolding and addressing layered power relations on the micro, meso, exo, and macro ecological levels, make it challenging for frontline practitioners to effectively engage with families and make better informed family-centric and collaborative decisions. To address this, social policies must be inclusive and developed at all levels (i.e., service delivery, community, organizational, and

systemic levels). As Fallon et al. (2021) reiterate policy development should start with the identification of needs and problems through critical questioning, such as what social problems do we seek to address? What historical antecedents and traditions have led to the current situation? This helps us understand the existing policy we intend to review, enabling us develop policy options, and making choices on preferred solutions. Then, we implement service plans and evaluate outcomes. For instance, the CFW practice framework should adopt a well-coordinated and culturally responsive community-level approach to achieve the desired outcome. This shift towards a culturally responsive social policy requires participatory evaluative processes to ensure clarity on expected outcomes, effectiveness of the policy through a feedback mechanism, and adherence to the principle of cultural relativism to all stakeholders (especially children, youths and families) (Fallon et al., 2021, p32).

It should be noted when designing a social policy that policy writing is fraught with messiness as it is influenced by capitalism that serves as an instrument of social control rather than empowerment (Dean, 2012). Therefore, the hybrid positioning of the CFW (2025) calls for clarity in its protocols, strategies, and functions, such as the distinction between preventive and protective functions within the child welfare system. As existing research suggests, response/reactive protocol (i.e., protectionist approach) requires immediate response to a crisis, while preventive/proactive protocol involves carefully developed responses that consider various options. The practice of combining both response and prevention strategies within the framework can create tensions, leading to unintended outcomes which may be unsupportive to children, families and detrimental to the child welfare system.

More specifically, when designing social policy, Nova Scotia's legal system needs to accommodate the goals of child welfare services by matching legislative support with adequate

resources to support children, youth, and families. On the community level, there is a requirement for culturally adaptive legislative and administrative resources that will empower communities to collectively engage and address these needs and problems. On the organizational level, there should be a review of the administrative governance, management and decision-making process. Implementing a culturally responsive and outcome-based program administration, effective recruitment, and development policy of frontline field workers, particularly those operating in the rural areas, will ensure improved community relations. These program outcomes should be subject to routine monitoring and evaluation.

Additionally, the language used in social policy is a salient mechanism for transformative change. Historically, language has been a key instrument used by those in hegemony to colonize minds, influence actions and behaviours of children, youth, and families to accept intersubjective risk-based ideologies as the most appropriate way to address the complexities of human interdependence. To change this narrative, the language of social policy must move away from being rhetorical to reflective in its process, and pragmatic in its approach to addressing the social, cultural and lived experiences of children and families. Such policy language can shape professional judgement, legitimize intervention, challenge ideologies, influence behaviours, and empower the agency of children and families.

Neoliberalism and its implications for child and family well-being

The hybrid positioning of the CFW (2025) can be further understood from discussions on the implications of neoliberalism for children, youth and family well-being. According to Luxton & Braedley (2010), market principles expressed in neoliberal social policy language has penetrated and colonized the ways children, youths, and families understand who they are and how they should live their lives. In Nova Scotia, neoliberal ideologies have reshaped the child

welfare system, with the privatization of families, commodification of social services, and individualization of social issues, like poverty. This is at the expense of socio-economic and structural policies, thereby reinscribing and intensifying inequality and injustice to children, youth and families, mostly the marginalized and vulnerable within the lower social strata. An example is the privatization and commodification of welfare services that are now provided by private organizations. With the DOSD receiving the third-highest budgetary estimate (\$1,676,809 in 2025-2026 and \$1,784,748 for 2026-2027) (Government of Nova Scotia, 2026), provision of social services such as childcare facilities, child service agencies, youth care centers, and foster homes has become viable businesses.

The emphasis on responsabilization, the language of shared responsibility, trusted relationship, and collaborative partnerships is indicative of neoliberal logic of reduced direct government intervention and accountability for the well-being of children, youth and families. While this approach fosters community participation and collaboration, it diffuses responsibility by distributing it across families, communities, and service providers. Social policies should ensure that such a collaborative approach to partnership, community engagement, and shared responsibility are supported with the required resources, as well as legal and strategic thrusts to ensure equitable intervention. Such resources include improved funding (including remuneration), enhanced staff welfare supports, reduced caseloads, specialized training, the establishment of an independent Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, accessible community-based family resource centres, improved communication between frontline practitioners, field staff, and administrators, and clearer statutory guidance to support professional discretion in complex decision-making contexts.

However, despite the emphasis on shared responsibilities, the provincial government still retains legislative authority and control over decision-making. Therefore, addressing the widening social, structural and systemic inequalities between those at the core (i.e., government, policy makers, capitalists) and those at the periphery (i.e., children, individuals, and families) remains imperative.

Implications for child, youth and family well-being

With the focus on a culturally responsive, collaborative, and preventive approach to deliver child and family-centric services, the CFW is potentially positioned to deliver a more inclusive and improved community-based engagement and preventive practices. However, given the enduring risk-based legislative and governance structures, access to social services remains contingent upon formalized risk management criteria and decision-making processes. As a result, the CFW becomes constrained to address broader social determinants of health challenges confronting children, youth, and families, particularly the marginalized and vulnerable. The implementation of these recommendations ensures the CFW (2025) will achieve its well-being outcomes.

Conclusion

Child and Family Well-being (CFW, 2025) practice framework and its policy manual represent a partial transformation of the child welfare system in Nova Scotia. As a hybrid governance model, this partial paradigm shift significantly highlights changes in the language and procedures towards achieving a holistic child and family well-being model, however this shift remains constrained as it is embedded within a system and structure anchored upon legislative authority and risk-based intervention. To successfully transition from a risk-based child protection model to a culturally responsive child and family well-being model requires a

review of the legislative, structural, and ideological underpinnings of the child welfare system in Nova Scotia.

A successful child well-being system is one that acknowledges and amplifies children's voices, giving them opportunities to express their agency and rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Children (UNCRC, 1989), which Canada is a signatory. The UNCRC recognizes and ensures the rights of children to be protected from all forms of discrimination (Article 2), their best interests in decisions affecting them (Article 3), and their right to freely express their views on all matters affecting them (Article 12). This, when recognized and implemented, can shift children and families towards the core (decision-makers), not as passive subjects, but as active change agents/participants whose actions (can) affect the actions of hegemony and its agencies of governance. As Freire (1970) argues, transformative change comes through praxis, defined as the integration of critical reflection on prevailing conditions with deliberate action toward liberation. Where this integration is absent, transformation risks remaining rhetorical rather than substantive.

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