

The Gathering:

A compendium of stories and presentations exploring positive, strengths-based outcomes related to enhancing First Nations and Métis child wellbeing of kids-in-care in Alberta.

A collaborative project between the Alberta Centre for Child Family and Community Research, Blue Quills First Nations College, and University of Calgary MSW Social Work students at Blue Quills First Nations College.

From an event held on March 5th, 2010 at Blue Quills First Nations College.

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Summary

This compendium is based on a qualitative research project that collected the stories of children and adults involved in various aspects of First Nations and Métis child protection. The Alberta Centre for Child Family and Community Research (The Centre) contracted with Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) and the graduate-level University of Calgary Social Work students at BGFNC to collect stories of success from First Nations and Métis children currently in care, First Nations and Métis children who had transitioned out of care, First Nations and Métis Child Welfare Case Workers and First Nations and Métis community people involved with providing support and services to children in care. Additional funding for the data collection was provided by the Northern Alberta Development Council.

A compendium literally translates as “to weigh together” from the Latin word *compendere*. This compendium will ask the reader to do just that; reflect on the contents of the research from the four selected areas exploring the successful outcomes in child protection; combine individual experiences and reflect upon the possibilities for future successes in First Nations and Métis foster/kinship care placements. To help you to “weigh together” the issues and concepts we have included an introduction by Tara Hanson, (The Centre), opening comments given by Dr. Leona Makokis (BQFNC), a brief explanation of the research process, summaries of the four areas, closing remarks by Dr. Jean Lafrance, and a brief discussion.



The Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research

The Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research (The Centre) supports community based research approaches that build on community achievements, existing strengths, local skills, values, wisdom, and culture. There is much to be learned by blending research approaches with traditional wisdom and different ways of knowing.

This Compendium is a collection of stories focused on positive, strengths-based outcomes related to enhancing Indigenous child well-being. Themes include Indigenous children in care, Indigenous young adults transitioned out of care, the experiences of Children's Services workers and Community Actions to prevent children from coming into care.

The Centre provided funding for the Compendium based on the interest of our Aboriginal Advisory Committee. Members identified a need to gather and share success stories about actions taken that enhanced the well-being of Aboriginal children, their families and the communities in which they live.

With support from the academic leaders at Blue Quills First Nations College, The Centre sponsored Master of Social Work students to compose this Compendium based on interviews with people in their communities and their own experiences. Upon the completion of the Compendium, the Centre provided funding for the students to plan and host a Gathering Event to share these success stories while celebrating culture and engaging participants in active learning and reflection.

The Centre's partnership with Blue Quills First Nations College was mutually beneficial. The students became familiar with The Centre and learned about research funding opportunities. Having the students develop the Compendium contributed to their course requirements and offered them additional qualitative research experience.

The Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research wishes to thank Dr. Leona Makokis, President of Blue Quills First Nations College, Dr. Ralph Bodor, Coordinator of the Master of Social Work program, as well as the staff and students for their leadership, support, dedication and enthusiasm in developing the Compendium and hosting the inspirational celebration at the Gathering Event.

This Compendium will be distributed broadly in the hope that others will be inspired by lessons learned and knowledge gained from experiences that have made a positive difference in the lives of Aboriginal children, their families and communities.

The Centre is a not-for-profit, charitable organization that is primarily funded by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and operates arms-length from government. The Centre's mission is to develop, support and integrate research across sectors and disciplines to provide a strong, evidence-based foundation for identifying and promoting effective public policy and service delivery to improve the well-being of children, families, and communities in Alberta, Canada, and internationally.

Tara Hanson March 1, 2010

Director of Operations Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research

Opening Comments: Dr Leona Makokis – President Blue Quills First Nations College

An Educational Experience of Indigenous Culture and Ceremony

Tansi, ninanaskomon anoch e pe takoteyek, mina e pe sîtoskamek oma mamawipowin.

Good Morning. Welcome to Blue Quills and thank you for your willingness to participate in our gathering where our presenters will share our “Success Stories with the goal of further Enhancing Indigenous Child Well Being.”

We felt that it was crucial to start with a smudge, and a pipe ceremony to begin the day in prayer, giving thanks and asking for guidance. I thank our Elder George Brertton for providing us with the teachings and giving us a base to start the day with.

Before we start our presentations, I wish to cover the following areas: our Cree world view; the historical/colonial influences which resulted in the disconnection of children, parents and community; our journey to reclaim Indigenous identity and finally the symposium will focus on strength based [practices] for better outcomes for children. We will be sharing the success stories of our children in care, as well programs that are making a difference in our communities and finally, inviting you all to share in our collective journey

I am sharing this information because it took me many years to make sense of what was happening in our communities. I could not understand why our communities were in a powerless and dependent state. I questioned why there were so many of our people incarcerated, why there were so many children in foster care, why were there so many school drop outs, why was there so much poverty, why there was such high unemployment, why is there so much alcohol and drug abuse, etc. etc. I did not believe that was who we were as a people.

I began my academic journey in the early 1980’s and at the same time, I returned to my spiritual, ceremonial and cultural teachings. This combination of academic research skills which led me to gather information on the history of our people, and the oral stories, ceremonies, and relationships guided me to understand who I was as a Cree woman (nehiyaw iskwew).

I learned that in our Cree world view, the term ‘life force’ is used to describe the Indigenous people’s connection to our Creator, to our relationships with the plants, animals, the cosmos, all of humankind, to the face to face interaction of people within a family and extended family, and the world of intimacy and friendship. In Indigenous societies, our ‘life force’ encompasses everything: the child’s birth in the home; the raising and socialization of children; the teaching of relationships, ceremonies, traditions, and rites of passage; the world of work; and the total immersion in the rhythms of the seasons. Our Indigenous worldview is clearly distinctive and ordered in a circular pattern of interrelated parts, the whole being greater than the sum of these parts. Our societies were set up in that model and the remnants of this worldview still remain. However, colonization proved to be a very disruptive force.

In exploring the causes of our depressed state, I learned about colonialism and how it impacted me and my community. Through my research, I learned the government’s implementation of their colonial policy was to remove all children from their parents, “in order to take the savage out of them and Christianize and educate them”. This was the beginning of a

confused way of thinking, believing and living. A 'forced institutionalized life' was imposed on thousands of children across Canada. Thousands of our people were destroyed through the process of legally enforced assimilation, our culture, our spirit, our identity, our language, our humanness, our traditions, our relationships, and our ability to parent, were extinguished.

The next phases of the colonial policy were the sixty's scoop, the Foster care system (stranger care). I will not focus on the impacts of these policies as they have similar outcomes as the residential school systems.

This gradual imposition of a foreign value system has resulted in impoverishment (material and spiritual) and pervasive sense of hopelessness in all of Canada's First Nations' people. The use of legislation and institutions shifted our living in an interdependent state to that of dependency on a foreign colonial system. How we arrived in the present state of dependency and loss of identity is best described in the following metaphor by Daniel Quinn (1996):

Systems thinkers have given us a useful metaphor for a certain kind of human behavior in the phenomenon of the boiled frog. The phenomenon is this. If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death. (p.258)

Like the boiled frog metaphor, gradually and consistently, the residential school policy removed us from the influence of our parents with the intention to assimilate us into the mainstream society. Indeed, it successfully removed our Creeness - our Indigenusness from us; furthermore, the policy did not provide us with the education to help us adjust to the demands of the modern world. Our experience in residential schools transformed us into wounded lost souls. Ashamed of our Cree identity, we were no longer connected to our life force, so we felt disconnected from our Cree world. Additionally, without the education that was designed to assimilate us, we were not accepted into the mainstream world. We were left floating - not fitting, and not belonging.

My personal story was that as a residential school student I became like the boiled frog: year after year being removed from my parents, siblings, extended family, grandparents and community, I lost my place in my family, and community. For many years, my younger siblings were not aware that I was their older sister; I just happened to be in their home in the summer months. As each year went by, I began to distance myself from my grandparents who were attending ceremonies that were outlawed, I began to believe what the nuns and priests told me: they were devil worshippers and they would be going to hell. I feared my own grandparents. In this fear, I did not take the opportunity to learn the sacred knowledge from them. I was not grounded in our ceremonies; instead I attended church every Sunday, and learned about the ten commandments, said the litany in Latin (but I didn't understand a word), [and] sang hymns. I said prayers for my father who was Protestant, so that he would eventually see the light and become Roman Catholic; otherwise, we knew that he would eventually go to hell if he wasn't baptized and we would all be in heaven.

On a larger picture, we also lived on the south side of the reserve, which was made up of Roman Catholics and our relatives who were Protestant lived on the north side of Saddle Lake. The church did not allow us to socialize with them. This caused a major division in our community, a division that was not of our making, but another example of the influence of government and church policies in our communities.

The Loss of Language

Language is our 'moral compass'. The ability to speak an Indigenous language is an indispensable part of our identity as these languages convey a sense of distinctiveness, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of spiritual relationship to the universe: plants, animals, Mother Earth, rocks, and people. Our elders repeatedly tell us that our language is a spiritual language. For example, "miskîsik" means an eye. "Mis" refers to a body part, and the root word "kîsik" means the heavens; it reminds us that our ability to see is a spiritual gift that we are related to the Creator, and every relationship carries responsibilities.

Defined in our language are the relationship, roles and responsibilities of the extended family. For instance, the word "nikawiy" means mother and the word "nikawiyis" is auntie, literally translated as my little mother. The role of the auntie, the mother's sister was to take the place of the mother; she would take over the mother's responsibility of training the child like her own in the absence of the child's mother. Similarly, "nohtawiy" is father; "nocawiy"s is my father's brothers, my uncles, or my little fathers with the responsibility of my father.

In Indigenous culture, everyone addressed each other by their kinship relationship term, giving that primary importance versus their name. Proper names are rarely used in everyday situations. Using the kinship terms therefore, demonstrated the respect between people. Our relationships are about how we take care of one another, how we are connected to one another. When you grow up in the language, each word carries a deeper meaning that doesn't have to be explained; you know it by the time you are expected to carry those responsibilities.

Another concept that our language carries that has great implications for how we conduct ourselves in this world is "pastahowin". That is, when you have violated a boundary, you cause an imbalance in your relationships with people, the land, and the animals. We understand that our actions affect the world around us, thus we are responsible. For example, when we gathered frogs as children, we were told it wasn't in our place to pick up those frogs and play with them, as they have their own place. By separating the frogs from their environment, we violated a boundary. Our parents and grandparents would tell us "kocinanawaw": Your actions involuntarily invite something upon yourself that becomes something that you are not; you invite bad habits into your life. Another example of "pastahowin" is when you mimicked or mocked someone with an illness such as Parkinson's disease; then down the line you may find yourself inviting that sickness upon yourself. "Kocinehaw" means if the illness doesn't happen to you, it will happen to one of your children or grandchildren. Understanding the terms "pastahowin and ocinewin" therefore helped me to monitor my behavior and treat everybody and every living creature with respect.

The language creates the context for understanding our relationships to our world. Another example is the relationship we have to our Mother Earth: "Kikawiyinaw askiy", our collective mother, the earth, the mother of all of us. Our language dictates how we view our responsibilities to mother earth; we owe it to the next seven generations to ensure her health, as well as the health of her creatures. Unlike the Western or capitalist worldview, which

encourages the exploitation of mother earth, the Indigenous worldview means that the health of our future generations is at stake.

Our relationship with the universe is governed by reciprocity: you invite into your life, and the life of future generations, optimum health or illness by the way you conduct yourself. When language is used as a guide for relationships, its absence can create significant loss. Today, our people are coping with the chaos resulting from colonization and loss of language due to residential schooling.

Loss of Language and Present Concerns

Colonization, coupled with the government's intent to assimilate the Indigenous population, contributed to the suppression of Indigenous languages, and thus the loss of our moral compass and its inherent teachings of how to live in harmony with the universe. Loss of language is equivalent to the loss of spirit; without our sense of spirit we become vulnerable to illnesses such as the addiction and violence epidemic currently engulfing indigenous communities.

The colonial process is coming back to haunt us. "E ki-ocinehikawiyahk": the impact of somebody's actions on us as a people, over the years, has now caused us to be people we are not. The colonial process tried to make us change into something we are not, and we suffer when we try to become someone we are not. During the residential school period, our connection to our language was destroyed, and with it, our connection to the teachings about who we are and how we are to be in this world. To restore our balance, our health, we need to restore our connection to the language. Our lives are informed by the knowledge carried in these Indigenous languages.

Throughout the human life cycle, which covers a span of seven stages – happy life, fast life, wandering life, truth, decision time, planting stage and wisdom associated with the elders – language emphasizes the interconnections between all aspects of the universe. The land with its rocks, trees, creatures and seasons as the source of our knowledge, is a teacher to our children. As children mature into teenagers and later into adulthood, language provides the spiritual grounding that nurtures their relationship within the human family, and just as importantly with all living things: plants, animals, rocks, water, and mother earth. The loss of language is, therefore, literally the loss of our moral compass that helped to nurture these sacred connections that make up the web of life.

As children mature into their teen years (wandering stage) without their Indigenous language, moral development has been severely compromised. They don't understand what their responsibilities are during this crucial phase of development. Traditional teachings emphasized 'our interconnectedness' through the oral transmission of stories and everyday life. These lessons have been replaced by a mainstream culture that emphasizes consumption and individuality. Individualism has replaced "mamawikamatowin", working together. Puberty, a time when teenagers were once guided to explore their gifts, to grow into who they are to be, how they relate to one another, and what their responsibilities are to mother earth, has become a time of confusion, a time to experiment with drugs, or a time to be initiated into gangs. It appears this loss of moral compass and sense of connection to others, our language, is the root cause of the extremely high suicide rate in the teen and young adult population in Indigenous communities.

Our Elders talk about purpose, and how through ceremony, we fast to understand our purpose. We attend ceremonies to find out from the spiritual grandmothers and grandfathers what our purpose in life is. Without ceremony, we are deprived of knowing what our purpose is and when we can't fulfill our gifts and our purpose, we are out of balance – "kipastahonaw". How can we be healthy, without our language, which carries our knowledge of ceremony? Through ceremony-embedded in language -we gain a sense of purpose for living. Without purpose, we become vulnerable to illness such as depression as we navigate through life aimlessly. We can't be who we are and we are out of balance.

The residential schools of the past, and a public school curriculum that devalues Indigenous knowledge, have disrupted the traditional life cycle stages. Not having experienced the wandering and truth stages as they were meant to be, young Indigenous adults enter the planting time without the knowledge of the 'sacredness of our connections to the universe', and so their children are deprived of their happy time and harmonious journey through the stages of life. We are taught that our children are gifts and we have a responsibility to nurture them to grow into their responsibilities and relationships. Because we have been so separated from these teachings that are defined in our language, we cannot transmit them to our children; therefore they lack the guidance to help create a world in balance and health. It is apparent that present day chaos within Canadian Indigenous people has history and connection with the loss of our language.

We are now challenged to address the effects of the intergenerational wounding; at the same time, we must bring back the foundation of our culture. We must move forward with new visions for meaningful education for the survival of our children, our grandchildren and the seven generations yet to be born.

The good news is that the residential school that was designed by the government to take away our Cree/Dene languages, identity, ceremony, community connections, parenting, our voices is now Blue Quills First Nations College, owned and operated by seven First Nations communities. We have been on a journey to healing, reclaiming our languages, our ceremonies. We are sharing our story and inviting healthy relationships and partnerships to address the issues we are collectively faced with.

As educators, social workers, administrators, leaders, we work with our elders to recapture the 'life force' by utilizing their knowledge and incorporating this 'sacred' knowledge as the foundation piece in all our programming,

On the other hand, we need to reach out and ensure that we educate and share our history with mainstream culture. We are in relationships with mainstream institutions and we cannot accomplish the tasks that need to be addressed without the understanding and assistance of people working in those institutions. I recognize that we are not living on an island, so we invite you to become a part of the decolonization process. In order to accomplish that, one needs to understand the true history of Canada and the Indigenous people of the land. I often say that we make the best decisions based on the information and knowledge we have. If one is not aware how their actions and decisions affect others, we continue to do the same things and doing more of the same does not give us different results. We may do things right, but we need to ask these question. Are we doing the right thing, who are we doing it for, why are we doing what we do, how do we address issues? We need to critique the current structures and practices that continue to oppress. As an example, I was talking to a young

mother who has been working extremely hard to get her baby back from the Foster Care system. She told me that one of the requirements was that she attend a parenting workshop. She said that she dreaded going on a weekly basis because when she arrived at the location, she did not find it welcoming nor did she fit in as she was in sessions with “White Foster Parents,” a group she had nothing in common with. She found it discouraging because she was given information about parenting, but she was expecting to develop relationships that would assist and support and empower her to become a better parent. Once the parenting sessions are complete, who does she have to turn to when her baby arrives and she has concerns? If someone had listened to her and determined what her needs were, would she be feeling so alienated? Would the program requirement and delivery been different? These are the challenges that we are facing, that we need to start thinking inside the circle. When we stay in the circle, we will begin to listen to the children and their parents, we will work on the strengths of our communities to find a better outcome. This is capacity building, and honoring who we are.

Many of our students are leaders in different fields in our communities and in mainstream organizations; we have been witness to the unfolding of many successful programs that address the needs of our children and parents. These initiatives include: Cultural Sensitivity workshops, Cultural Camp at BQ (May 24 – 28, 2010), Rights of Passages camps in our communities, Family Life Enrichment which combines the residential information with parenting, Circle approaches, such as Restorative Circles (Justice); Family Group Conferencing (child protection) or healing circles (mental health). It is through the use of circles that people redevelop relationships, feel empowered, finding voice, and consensus on issues. The circle approach can be used to build an integrated program effort across all disciplines and sectors. In this approach we can hold ourselves accountable and restore our people to our cultural practice and respectful relationships.

Finally, this gathering is one of sharing these successful stories, and I would like to thank all our presenters for their hard work to ensure the success of this gathering.

Again, I thank you all for honoring us with your presence and I would like to also extend our gratitude to the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research for their generosity in funding this gathering.

Introduction to the Research Project

The purpose of this paper is to communicate the success stories of people who have participated in the Indigenous child protection system, specifically foster care/ kinship care, within Alberta Child & Family Services Authorities. The Gathering was held on March 5, 2010 at Blue Quills First Nations College to present the themes of the collected data to workers and community members who have a stake in the growth and continued success of Indigenous child protection. Participants thoughts and comments were documented and are included in this report.

Defining “Success”

What is “success”? This was a common question throughout the project and was a discussion topic in the comments of the Gathering participants. While there are many

definitions of success in child protection, including the prevention of the family breakdown in the first place, this study acknowledges that foster/kinship care is essential to the protection of children. The research team found participants who describe themselves as being successful within the foster/kinship system. Each of the study participants was asked to define what they considered success for themselves and those responses have been included in the report. This project was designed to draw on the self-defined successes, however small or large, with a goal to improve the experiences of the children in foster/kinship care.

Why Blue Quills First Nations College?

It is becoming widely recognized in Canada that “Indian residential schools” were highly damaging to Indigenous family life. Indigenous parents were given little say in the decision of placing their children in the residential education system, and when consent was given it was not given in an “informed” manner. Colonization and the forcible confinement of Indigenous people to reserves are recognized as a significant cause of the oppression experienced by Indigenous families and communities. However, it was the removal of children from their homes and communities when placed into residential education schools that is regarded as causing significant damage to the family structure left behind. The child’s eventual capacity to parent was affected by their experiences in these schools.

Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) is a unique educational facility that started its life as a residential school for Indigenous children in 1931. By 1971, through persistent negotiations with the federal government, direct control was turned over to the seven First Nations surrounding the institution and BQFNC started its reincarnation as an Indigenous run educational facility. Under the current leadership of Dr. Leona Makokis, the college has expanded the relationships and to include partnerships between several Alberta universities. The University of Calgary and the Faculty of Social Work has a long history of a dynamic collaborative partnership with BQFNC in delivering the Bachelor of Social Work program and, since 2008, the Master of Social Work program. Both programs are geared toward social work practice within Indigenous communities, specifically the Cree, Dene and Métis cultures.

The experience of conducting research based out of the reincarnated education facility of BQFNC, offers a great advantage to the integrity of the research itself. The project was conducted under specific Cree protocols that place expectations that the research team will produce ethically and relationally accountable data for the people from which it was collected (Wilson, 2008).

In this project, the relationally accountable data is collected with the purpose of documenting what is already working within the current foster/kinship care system and what could create more success. This perspective on research within Indigenous communities, primarily by Indigenous researchers, and following Indigenous protocols, improves the likelihood that that data collected will actually improve the lives of the people it was collected from.

*“Let us put our minds together as one.” Irving Powless, Sr. ONONDAGA
If we sat in a circle and put an object in the centre of the circle and we all
described what we saw, everyone would have a different point of view
from each other. Some would even see opposites because they would be*

sitting on opposite sides of the circle. In other words, you don't have to see what I see for you to be right. In fact, everyone in a circle is right based on their own point of view, then we can get a more accurate description of the object in the centre. This is one way to put our minds together. When we get the clarity from each other, we should give thanks and be grateful for each other. Grandfathers from the four directions, guide me today with your wisdom from the east, from the south, from the west and from the north" (Traditional Indigenous knowledge, No date).

Approach

Protocols

This project was commissioned by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family & Community Research fund which informs policy development for the Alberta Child & Family Services Authorities. The research team collected data from four areas related to the success stories of Indigenous children who participated in foster/kinship care of the Alberta Child & Family Services Authorities, including the Designated First Nations agencies with whom the responsibility for child protection is given in specific areas in the province of Alberta.

This research was conducted using protocols developed by Blue Quills First Nations College for the ethical and relationally accountable research conducted by Indigenous people for the benefit of Indigenous people (Blue Quills First Nations College, 2009). Offerings were made to the participants according to Cree tradition and participants were offered a small honorarium. All the participants agreed to and signed a voluntary participant consent form that included a thorough explanation of the research study and value that this study may have in future child protection policies.

The Gathering

The data was presented to child protection workers and community members at a gathering held at Blue Quills First Nations College on March 5, 2010. The gathering began with a traditional pipe ceremony held by George Brertton and Dr. Leona Makokis, who are traditional pipe holders. The ceremony consisted of a pipe ceremony with the men's pipe and the woman's pipe and the pipes were shared in a circle to the voluntary participants.

The day progressed by dividing the participants into four groups according to a color coded name tag that represented the four traditional colors of the Medicine Wheel: blue, yellow, red and green. Each of the four groups moved into one of the four presentation rooms and the presentations were rotated to allow each group to have a chance to participate in each presentation. Each group became participants in the data collection process of the four presentations. The information was collected and is summarized later in this compendium.

The Project Team

The project team consisted of Dr. Ralph Bodor as the principal investigator, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, Dr. Leona Makokis, President of the Blue Quills First Nations College and Elder, Master of Social Work students; Claudia Berland B.S.W., Derek Chewka B.S.W., Carol Melnyk-Poliakowski B.S.W., Cindy Nelson- Dumont B.S.W., Denise Steinhauer B.S.W., Monique Sundlie B.S.W., Sharon Steinhauer B.S.W. and administrative assistant Terri Suntjens. The project team was predominately from an Indigenous and Métis background. Many of the team has previous personal or professional experience in the child protection

system which served to heighten their ability to connect to their research participants by having direct knowledge of the systems, terminology and practices that are encountered in child protection.

Sharing stories

This project adopted a very unique perspective in child protections research in that it accepts the unique stories that are collected directly from the participant's own experiences in child protection and then identifies common themes within the collective voice. Where there is no theme noted, specific quotes are used to represent the speaker. The data is also presented in a common voice, a blend of participants' similar experiences.

In this story-telling style of research, the stories are made available to the researcher *because* of the relationship between the researcher and the participants. A hermeneutics research style such as this often elicits responses that the researcher was not expecting and provides important perspectives that can greatly improve the validity of the study. Unexpected answers such as some of those expressed in this research validate the authenticity of the research by giving equal status to each voice.

The two areas that were specifically explored were related to identifying which were the contributing factors that empowered their overall successes and accomplishments in the foster/kinship care system. Specifically the two question areas were;

- ✚ What worked to support your success?
- ✚ What could have created more success?

These questions were explored by the researcher depending on the maturity of the participants and the context of their experiences within the child protection system. For instance, the children currently living in a foster home required more clarification of the questions than the child welfare workers did. This may be because the case workers have multiple opportunities within their employment to reflect upon program evaluations and to acknowledge what actions produced success, and which did not. However the children that were currently *living* the situation had more difficulty identifying the factors that created success without having more time for reflection and to process their story. This suggests that the children were living day-to-day and not focused on reflecting on "what was working". The children were in the business of living in the moment as most children do, without unnecessary reflection.

Why four categories

In the Indigenous paradigm, the number four indicates balance and harmony in life. Balance is represented by the four segments in the Medicine Wheel philosophy and many Indigenous scholars use the "four theme methodology" to articulate balance and harmony within their research (Hart, 2002). "Balance in life" is a concept that, when used within research, communicates a part of the Indigenous perspective from which the research is based. When combined, each of the four meta-themes provides much more clarity to the question than each aspect alone could reflect, as well as provides purposefulness and structure to the project. It is the multiple perspectives that exponentially multiply the value of the research. The researchers were assigned to collect success stories from a number of participants within each

meta-theme and over forty participants' stories are included in this study. The four areas of interest to the research team were:

- ✚ **Indigenous Kids in Care.** Children who were currently in care and having self-identified as being successful.
- ✚ **Indigenous Adults Out of Care.** Young adults who were transitioned out of care, and self-identified as being successful.
- ✚ **Experiences of Children's Services Workers.** Indigenous Children's Services Workers who identified success stories within their practice.
- ✚ **Community Actions.** Interviews from elders and community members that identifies actions that supported children in care to become or remain successful.

Data collection

Over forty interviews were conducted by the project team using the story-telling or hermeneutics style of collecting data. The participants were selected using the snowball method, with team members and project participants initially suggesting possible participants based on the knowledge that they had experienced success in child protection services. The data was collected primarily through face-to-face interviews, with free-flowing open-ended questions. As the participant became more comfortable sharing their story, the team members understanding of the participant's experience became enriched.

The stories were collected using digital voice recorders; however the researchers stated that some data was collected off the record, not because of an ethical disagreement with the data being shared, but because of the participant's discomfort with being recorded. The digital recording was collected, transcribed and stored in accordance with ethical research procedures. Some participants provided their story in a written format, which was handled in the same manner as the transcribed versions of the stories. The written format submissions were not interpreted through the relational interactions that were experienced in the interview process; however the data collected is regarded by the team as equally valid as the face-to-face interviews.

There were some difficulties experienced by the researchers in the collection process. One researcher stated that collecting stories from children over the Christmas holidays regarding their child protection intervention was difficult because the children were struggling emotionally to process their experiences about being shuttled between foster home and parental home. On average, children required three visits to acquire the necessary data. The researcher theorized that, for children, the process of sharing the story they are still living is far more complicated than it may be for adults who may have had the time and experience to place perspective about their life experience.

Summaries of the Four Areas of Research

Successes of Indigenous Kids in Care

Indigenous children currently in protective care may have the least heard voice of any in the system. This could be due to the public interest to protect the child's rights to privacy, but it could also relate to the experience that many children share by being the most vulnerable people in our society. However, there are many success stories within children's protection experiences that could be used to create healthy and effective policies with child protection. This project shares the stories collected with ten children currently living in the foster care system. This collective narrative contains themes and quotes from the children's stories about the self-described successes that they experienced as a result of being in the child protection system. This portion of the project was collected from children between the ages of seven and fifteen and all in permanent guardianship. The themes are not in any particular order.

What worked?

The children described several factors that they attributed to their self-described successes within the foster/kinship care system.

- ✚ Having the same placement over time - Children experienced stability and a sense of safety when they live in the same home over time.
- ✚ Having help with homework - Children wanted to succeed in school. Children with foster parents that provided help and supported the children's homework stated they felt more successful because of this help.
- ✚ Staying in the same school - Not having to start all over again when the child was placed in foster care created a valuable sense of stability and structure for the child.
- ✚ Good food to eat - Children recognized that having enough good quality food increased their successes in school and in their everyday moods and behaviors. Ideally, Indigenous children do well with high quality traditional foods acquired by having a relationship with the land it comes from.
- ✚ Playing sports or activities - Children recognized that extracurricular activities supported their vision of personal successfulness. It is important to recognize that Indigenous children often participate in traditional activities such as jingle dress dancing at Pow-Wows. While hip hop and soccer are great activities for children to participate in for healthy social activities, they are not an appropriate *replacement* for cultural activities and should not be recommended as a less costly alternative to traditional dancing competitions.
- ✚ Keeping the same friends - Children valued the stability that having the same friends gave them especially during times of chaos in the personal lives. Children appreciated the friends that stuck with them throughout their apprehension and placement. They did not have to retell their story and risk being faced with rejection all over again.
- ✚ Quality and fit of foster parents - Children stated they liked that their foster parents were "nice to them" and taught them things they were going to need to know when they were

adults, like boundaries and appropriate consequences. Foster parents that accepted and encouraged the child's participation in cultural activities (some foster parents even started learning the Cree language) were highly regarded by the child.

- # Having sibling group in the same home - Children appreciated the comfort and familiarity of living with their siblings, as do children not in care.
- # Being safe - Children spoke often about their desire to remain safe in their foster homes, during transportation and during their visitations with their parents.
- # Living close to the home community - having frequent access to familiar surroundings as well as having access to healthy role-models from their family or community.

What could have worked better? (Success in the future)

- # Children want the parents to visit them at the foster/ kinship care home - Children felt guilty about wanting to stay away in foster/ kinship care, but they qualified that statement with suggestions that the parents could visit them at the foster home instead. They wanted the relationship with their family but were very concerned about their safety. They also wanted the parents to experience how the children were living in care with the hope that the parents would adopt some of the conditions of the foster/kinship home.
- # Expanded definition of family - The children recognized that their parents may not have been healthy enough to look after them but they valued the established role of extended family and friends they grew up with. Scheduled visitations could include time with a wider scope of kin and friends such as with favored pets, grandparents, aunties and cousins, school, and familiar cultural activities in the home community.
- # More visits - The child would like to have more and regular visits to their parent's home and to the community.
- # Fewer case workers - The child viewed the worker as an extremely valuable to their safety, protection and ultimate success. Switching case workers lowered their sense of confidence in the worker's ability to keep them safe.
- # Relationship with worker - Children listened very carefully to what the worker was saying. When the researcher stated she was coming back another day to complete the research, the child asked if she was coming for supper and she answered "sure" which the child interpreted as a commitment by the researcher. Upon hearing of the next visit the child asked if she was coming for supper, which the researcher was surprised that he remembered. The child craves reliability from the case worker. The child also looks to the worker as a role model, appropriate but casual dress is important to the child.
- # Worker playing with the child - The children's trust in the worker grew when she played with them.
- # More frequent and regular visits by the case worker - Children looked to the case worker not as a substitute parent (that role was absorbed by the foster parent) but rather as a godmother or loving aunty, who can make miracles happen.
- # Earlier intervention - Child wishes the worker could have supplied earlier intervention and to prevent the breakdown of the home in the first place. The children often took on the guilt for the breakdown of the home, saying they thought they could have prevented it.

- ✚ Continuity of care - In one case, the child stated that he wished his worker could drive him back and forth from scheduled visitation with his parents. Instead he had a driver that dropped him off at the place he was told he could not live because it was unsafe. The child viewed the role of the driver as a betrayal by the worker because the worker is responsible for his safety and how would the driver know if he/she was safe during the visit? From the child's perspective the case worker should maintain consistency in their role to keep the child safe, including during visitation during visitation.
- ✚ Help to plan the future - the child does not want to talk about a "transition plan". Talking transition instills fear of abandonment within the child. At sixteen or seventeen years old, few children have the maturity to discuss the complexities of how he or she will support themselves. Like other teens, they are interested in talking about life goals and plans for the future such as graduating from high school, going to which college, the grad dress or tux, getting a driver's license, etc., definitely not "transition planning". Encourage the child to dream big and to plan to fulfill their dreams.
- ✚ "Talk to me like a normal kid"- Although the child recognized they were involved with child welfare and therefore they had a case worker, they also recognized that it was not "normal" for most other kids they knew. Children wanted their worker to resist talking to them using institutional terms such as transition planning, PGO, TGO, recreation allowance, parental visitation, child welfare screening for their friends, etc.
- ✚ Children in care need time to grieve and bring closure to the story of how they entered care - The researcher found that the children in care required an average of three visits in order to build trust with the researcher, to tell their story about how they came to be in care be told and to bring closure to it, before they were emotionally ready to discuss "what's working".

Successes of Indigenous Adults Out-of-Care

This research was conducted with ten Indigenous young adults who have transitioned out of care. The project participants were able to reflect on what they experienced while in care and how the system contributed to the overall successes of the adult. The participants were between the ages of twenty-four and forty-eight years old. These are the themes of successes and the recommendations that the young adults stated through the stories.

Adults Out-of-Care Experiences of Success

- ✚ Exposure to educational opportunities instilled the value of education. They relate their success to acquiring higher education.
- ✚ The adults valued having opportunities for travel. Travel was regarded as essential for expanded awareness of the world and the connection of the global concerns as it related to personal and community issues.
- ✚ "Structure of a home/family gave me discipline". Adults appreciated the structure of a stable home life. They valued the security that structure provided for them.
- ✚ Participants shared that they were exposed to other cultures and religions (but sometimes at a loss of their own).
- ✚ Readiness and appreciation of child rearing. Being in the healthy foster home allowed the young adult to delay becoming a parent until they felt more ready for the responsibility. The adults credit the foster family's influence on this decision.

- ✚ Lessons of self-determination. Successful adults recognized they have a say in how their life will go, when they compared themselves to the youth's relatives that do not seem to think they have a say in their own determination.
- ✚ Knowledge to deal with racism. Living in homes outside the Indigenous community gave the children experience on how to manage racism.
- ✚ Inclusion in a family. Adults appreciated being fully accepted and integrated into their foster family.

Barriers to Success Adults Experienced

- ✚ Feelings of loss/void/disconnect from biological family. Adults acknowledged the unresolved grief from the loss of their biological family.
- ✚ Numerous placements. Numerous placements were considered a barrier to success
- ✚ Placements far away. Living far away from their home community was another barrier to success.
- ✚ Screening and training of foster and kinship families. Adults expressed concern that the screening and training of the foster parents was often inadequate. Adults wanted more visitations by the workers to ensure safety and suitability of the placement over time.
- ✚ Young adults felt that there was a difference between Indigenous family values and Western family values. The Western family values were encouraged and the Indigenous family values were devalued.
- ✚ Adults reported that being in care was linked to issues such as poverty and housing issues. This could be related to the loss of the family connection on the reserves also means not having access to the family home.
- ✚ "It mattered when someone came to watch me in a sporting activity".
- ✚ "Having one significant person in my life made a difference and it did not need to be my biological mom and dad."
- ✚ Foster care provided me with a solid value base. Successful adults acknowledge appreciated that role that their foster parents had in their success.
- ✚ Participants reported feeling of fear. "The support that I received is on-going, even to this day". Fear and concern for personal safety started in childhood and continued after being in care, even if the foster home was safe. This fear suggests trauma is not erased by the placement of the child into a safe home, but trauma is ongoing through out adulthood. Long term supports may have to be integrated into the transition plan.
- ✚ Participants also commented on ceremonial healing vs. western counseling. Traditional ceremonies were often considered more effective in healing than counseling.

Suggestions

- ✚ Collective rights vs. individual rights. Adults recognized that in the Indigenous worldview, the collective perspective is more valued than the individual perspective. Child protection that values and honors Indigenous worldview will have to integrate the values of the collective in the community.
- ✚ There is a need to invest in both formalized and cultural Indigenous education. These services should be provided by Indigenous people, but should be available to all those involved in child protection services.

- # The project data suggested that there is a significant need for long term after-care services.
- # When contact with family is not possible, someone from the community can be responsible for the connections to the culture, language and to ceremony.
- # More focus could be placed on the problem of multiple placements.
- # There is a need to examine how the system can accommodate sibling groups and/or families.
- # A child being placed with an Indigenous family does not necessarily guarantee exposure to culture and ceremony. More research should be conducted in this area.
- # There is a role for someone involved in child protection to take the lead in connecting young people to Elders in their community.
- # There is a concern about the quality of the home visits. More research should be conducted on understanding what quality home visits really means for children.
- # Adults expressed concern that they have lost their language. There should be more effort to allow each child the opportunity to hear their language spoken and to practice their language with community members in the context of everyday life (language immersion).
- # The researcher and presenter asked the Gathering participants these questions: “Should we have different standards for Indigenous Social Workers? If we believe in the idea of relational accountability and the importance of relationships, should we not consider lowering case load numbers for social workers to allow them to form more meaningful relationships? ”
- # There is a significant role for youth and family consultation in the development and delivery of child protection services.
- # Adults requested more effort be placed on assisting children and young adults to develop their own healthy Indigenous identity.
- # There is the need for more Indigenous Social Workers, trained in the Indigenous cultural philosophies and with supporting and maintaining their retention. Professional oversight by an association that is educated about Indigenous philosophies would support Social Workers that have the kind of education experienced at Blue Quills First Nations College, to evolve ethical and professional practices.
- # Adults expressed that they did not know why they were ever brought in to care. Explaining why they were removed would alleviate the feelings of guilt and blame the young adults carried.
- # We need to look at the language we use with children. If we use labels, young people will internalize those labels.
- # Chronological age vs. developmental age. More research is needed to identify the physiological and mental impacts of trauma to the developing child’s brain. There is a suggestion that children in care are not at the same developmental age as their chronologically aged cohorts. Therefore expectations that a young adult who has been in care, should be as ready to leave the home at eighteen, may be an over-estimation of the youth’s capabilities at that time.
- # Cultural rights of the child. What are they? Do we acknowledge them?

- # On-reserve placement options need to be developed. We can expand the perspective of kinship care to include friends, neighbors, coaches and teachers, which is the traditional view of Indigenous kinship.
- # There is a need to assist young people in learning Indigenous social etiquette. For example, when you introduce yourself you include who your parents are. If you do not learn this from your family, how do you?
- # Indigenous Social Work values and integrates relational accountability. There is a significant difference between Western based child protection practice and Indigenous based practice. If the children in care are predominately Indigenous, it seems appropriate to integrate Indigenous child protection philosophies into mainstream practice.
- # Involvement of parents in a more meaningful way when their children are placed in group/foster or kinship care. Young adults often reconnect with their family and community after they become a legal adult. Concerted efforts should be placed on continuing and expanding the relationship between the family and the child regardless of the family's ability to care for the child's needs. Those bonds are extremely strong and with guidance the child may have the opportunity to recognize the problem is not with the people who their share DNA with, but that their family is experiencing the impacts of colonization and residential schools on the Indigenous way of life.
- # Help young people visualize life after care. Helping children to dream big and to visualize their life as an adult, rather than focus on the "transition plan". Professionals and adults should deal with the details of the transition plan to fulfill the system's requirements, but talking about "transition" instills fear of abandonment with youth that have already been traumatized by abandonment. "Professional lingo" talk should be left in the office and between adults. Talking to the youth about their future and their plans is more appropriate than pushing them to make decisions about transitions that they are not necessarily ready for.
- # **Video shown at gathering:** Trout, M. (1997). *Multiple transitions: A Young Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption*. [Video]. The Infant-Parent Institute.

Children's Services Workers Successes

These are the themes extracted from the research conducted with children's services workers. The themes are not in any particular order.

- # It is important for workers to be culturally connected...perhaps have been raised on the reserve...to understand the child's experience. Case workers who have knowledge and experience about the Indigenous world view are better prepared for working with Indigenous children and communities. This does not necessarily mean that the case worker must be Indigenous, as it is true that not all Indigenous case workers follow the Indigenous culture.
- # It is important to provide more support to families within their homes, before the apprehension may happen. A much greater investment in Family Enhancement will bring fewer kids into care.
- # It is important that case workers teach, mentor and role-model to help parents in raising and guiding their children. The worker may be able to intervene before the dissolution of the family if they came to the home with the attitude of the godmother or loving aunty and taught the parents how to be parents. Remember that because of the residential

- school experience, many parents were not parented themselves and this has caused intergenerational impacts on the community's ability to parent their children. Coming to each home with this in mind allows the worker to impart a sympathetic heart to the families still suffering from the residual effects of residential school experiences.
- ✚ It is important that workers offer a connection to culture and model developmental goals of traditional/healthful parenting for the accomplishment of the milestones for the children. Honoring the traditional milestones of development honors cultural protocols and allows opportunities for the children to experience success within their community.
 - ✚ It is important that foster homes be well-matched to children.
 - ✚ It is important that workers be well-matched to the children and families.
 - ✚ To establish more Indigenous (kinship) homes within the child home community. In the Indigenous tradition, kinship homes may include external family and community members. An expanded vision of kinship is essential to ethical practice in Indigenous communities.
 - ✚ It is important to support workers as they advocate for policy change. Case workers must have a collective voice for policy change with in the child protection system.
 - ✚ It is important that workers live in the community in which they work. Workers who live in the communities have significantly greater access to the knowledge about the connections and significant relationships for the appropriate placement of children within the kinship system. If the worker does not live in the community, it would help the worker if he or she would attend cultural activities such as round dances in order to establish trust within the community.
 - ✚ It is important that workers help kids maintain their significant relationships that already exist with family/extended family. This point is made through out the entire data collected. The relationships of the child to the community are considered as valuable as the relationship of the parents.
 - ✚ It is important to understand and accept that some kids thrive in care. Workers acknowledge that some children must live out of their family system. The children experiencing successes outside the family system are kept in contact with their community and culture are better off then the children who are completely disconnected.
 - ✚ It is important to accept and understand that for some kids not going back home is a success. If nothing has changed at home then for some children success is the placement and protection of the child.
 - ✚ It is important that workers provide stability. Workers are the sole source of stability for foster kids. Having a good relationship and rapport with the child is essential for open communication.
 - ✚ It is important that the worker 'love' the children. In the godmother metaphor, the worker loves and cares about the child in care as if they were their own. The worker considers the impact of decisions made for the children as if they were making decisions about their own child's welfare.
 - ✚ It is important to help children feel like they belong within the (foster) family. The workers role is to help the child and the family to "fit" together, and that the child has confidence that they belong to this family. Belonging creates a life-line which generates and sustains success

- ✚ It is important that worker help children keep traditional connections - to family, community, identity and language.
- ✚ It is important to have longevity in the work/the profession. Be careful about personal and professional burnout. Workers must regulate their own work schedules so that they can maintain a healthy balance between work and life responsibilities. Some workers report having done this work for upward of fifteen years and they continue to be rejuvenated by the success they experience.
- ✚ It is important that the children have a voice and to be able to express their wants, needs and plans. Workers are reminded to maintain frequency and quality of communication with the child. Their voices must be heard throughout their time in care as there may be times when their needs change while in care.
- ✚ It is important to try to make each and every day more interesting in a child's life. Workers, who strive to improve the quality of the child's life, have a greater sense of personal success through out their career.
- ✚ It is important to follow through on the promises to children. Workers stated that if they were considered trust worthy even for the simple things, their ability to maintain connections in the community expanded exponentially.
- ✚ It is important to practice culture 'with' the child. Workers who cultivated and maintained connections between the child and Elders, and the cultural teachings, considered their practice successful.
- ✚ It is important to understand that the child will have those grounded cultural teachings for their entire life. At times all children may resist their cultural identity in order to try to fit in with the dominant culture. However the workers responsibility is not only to the child in the moment but also to the adult they will grow into. Having the cultural teachings as a child will never leave them and will sustain them through hardship in life.

Community Actions that Result in Success

Ten community members and Elders were interviewed for this research. Out of their interviews there were several themes that emerged. Themes from the research are listed below in no particular order.

- ✚ Community recognized that being Indigenous is all about relationships, participation and agreement of the natural laws with the people and with the land.
- ✚ Success is defined by developing Child Care laws from the “Nehiyaw” (Cree) worldview. Successful outcomes have conventionally been defined through Western value systems. Indigenous community members recognized this incongruence between worldviews and are working towards correcting it with documented “Nehiyaw” laws.
- ✚ Community recognized repatriation as success. Repatriation is the act of reinstating the child or adult as a community member. Historical actions such as the Sixties Scoop and the residential school experience have only served to reinforce the colonizing methodology of some child protection actions that expropriate the child from their families and communities.
- ✚ Success is defined by less paperwork for case workers and more hands-on contact.
- ✚ Community recognized that Indigenous natural law requires that healthy adults should guide children, and not children dictating the actions of adults. It is very frustrating to Indigenous adults that the child who may be rebelling out of natural teenage angst would

have so much authority over their parents and community members to be able to inform them about their decision to leave the home. Conflicts are never appropriately resolved when leaving the home is considered a real option, and therefore poor conflict resolution habits are instilled early in life.

- ✚ Child welfare policies (and all other policies) which are informed with input from the community are considered success. Community members want to improve the community collaboration for policies that affect their lives.
- ✚ Success is described by the community as when people respect the natural laws of the land.
- ✚ Success is defined as kinship care rather than apprehension and removal from the whole community.
- ✚ Community recognized the culture is a way of life. Traditional parenting training and kinship care training must include culture and the “Nehiyaw Way of Life” as it is intrinsic to the implementation of the values.
- ✚ All of the people in an Indigenous community are connected through “Wahkohtowin” (a web of relationships). “Wahkohtowin” is the basis for all traditional laws and values which still inform the community today. “Wahkohtowin” informs the community about how children should be cared for within the community. Social policy should take a good hard look at the role “Wahkohtowin” plays in Indigenous child protection policy.
- ✚ Relationship connections are formed through community events, ceremony and feasts. Children are expected to play a role in these activities and that when children participate in the service of the community they are fulfilling the natural law of reciprocity.
- ✚ Indigenous children know who they are when they acknowledge their Medicine Wheel including the aspects of the self (spiritual, physical, emotional and mental). Communities that facilitate the growth and development of the individual’s Medicine Wheel are reinforcing healthy Indigenous values and identities.
- ✚ Community recognized that the Western laws and values are often rejected by Indigenous people because of the lack of meaningful answers in their lives. The leaders in the community want the members to follow Indigenous world view based laws.
- ✚ The community is developing a Grandmother’s Guide in Saddle Lake to support the role of the grandmothers in the community and in the upbringing of children. The home of the grandmother is the natural gathering place for extended family. Traditionally, children were placed with the grandmother while the parents went off to make a living or to hunt and gather food. The age of the grandmother is not a significant consideration for the placement of children in the home because children participated in the mutually beneficial relationship with the grandmother to assist in the care and wellbeing of the members of the household.
- ✚ Community recognized that adults may have experienced personal developmental trauma and that it is affecting the adult’s perception of healthy children’s developmental stages. Developmental trauma may explain the difficulty that many parents experience understanding the appropriate age and maturity for independence.
- ✚ Community is considering writing a constitution which will address how to raise their children, will define who they are, will acknowledge what historically happened to the community and includes the dreams for the future.

- ✚ There is a movement towards the “Nehiyaw Way of Life” in Saddle Lake. The “Nehiyaw Way of Life” is a standard and quality of life that has been impaired by colonization, residential schools, and substances. The “Nehiyaw Way of Life” has never died away, but is experiencing a re-growth in Indigenous communities.
- ✚ Indigenous people recognize a wide range of potential caregivers within the family or community system. This is known as the kinship system. It is within the “Natural Laws” for a child to be placed within the kinship system. The family and community system has the necessary knowledge about the quality and fit of potential caregivers. Trusting the Family Group Conferencing process to produce the appropriate caregiver is the desired route to follow. Recognition that the Kinship care model should be formulated into policy and law.
- ✚ Recognition that children in care eventually make it back to their home community. Maintaining and sustaining the community relationship serves the child much greater when they are not a “foreigner in their own land”.
- ✚ The community members recognized that traditional Indigenous values still exist in the community and that there should be more opportunities to teach them to children.
- ✚ Community recognized positive choices of children currently living within kinship care system in the community.
- ✚ Research studies such as this one improve the dialogue between policy makers and the people affected by the policies.
- ✚ Community recognized that traditional parenting programs benefit the entire community. Western based parenting programs often undermine the values of what was a highly functional parenting system that existed before colonization.
- ✚ Saddle Lake is currently developing its own Child Law Policy from which case workers may draw upon for knowledge regarding child protection concerns.
- ✚ Community members recognized that children benefited from being exposed to traditional Indigenous culture and values and to participate in ceremonies and healing circles.
- ✚ Community recognized that language initiatives help Indigenous children to know who they are through the depth and breadth of the language. Language is the covenant that the Creator has made between the people and the world around them. Language serves a greater purpose than to carry thoughts between people; it also carries worldview and identity through out time and space.

The Gathering: Participant’s Perspectives

The following is a summary of the participant’s comments from the presentations at the gathering held in March 5, 2010. The participants included workers, members of the Ministry for child protection, parents and children that have participated in the system, foster parents and various community members.

- ✚ **Kinship.** Kinship was discussed through out the four sessions. Traditional care in Indigenous communities included a wide scope of potential kin within communities. Kin is not only represented by the blood relatives of the child, they include teachers, neighbors, friends, great aunts and grandparents of the child. As children seek stability, they may have already identified safe places to live. The kinship model includes anyone in the

community that the child, the family or the community considers to be a healthy role-model.

- ✚ **Community Centre.** The community centre should be used to provide more culturally relevant resources for the community. Indigenous parenting classes, stage of life ceremonies, intergenerational activities would support the long term connections and relationships.
- ✚ **Visitations.** Visitations should be planned and organized for *quality* (One worker talked about organizing a picnic that included a large number of family members and became an annual event with a lot of children in care. Some of the children were related to each other, and so the picnic took on the tone of a family reunion). Visitations should include visits to extended family, family pets, school yards and neighbors (a wide range of what kinship actually means).
- ✚ **Indigenous Parenting Programs.** Participants repeatedly stated they wanted to have Indigenous based parenting programs that included cultural activities and history lessons. The cultural activities should also include stage of life ceremonies and traditional conflict resolution skills. Activities should be carried forth by healthy role-models and respected Elders within the community.
- ✚ **History of Colonization and Residential Schools.** It is essential that the whole system be well informed about the history of Indigenous colonization and the long term effects of the residential school experience and their children who became parents. Children are now affected by intergenerational trauma, and the next generations' children who are affected by the lack of parenting. It is also significant that the true history of colonization has yet to be taught in schools and in most social work training programs. Some educational programs, such as the Bachelors of Social Work and the Masters of Social Work programs of the University of Calgary and Blue Quills First Nations College have provided a basis for knowledge mobilization of the history and context of social work practice in Indigenous communities. More work needs to happen to answer the call for relational accountability between Indigenous communities and child protection which often perpetuates colonial trauma. When this knowledge is mobilized there will be a discontinuation of the colonial practices that are still in use in social work, that oppress and destroy Indigenous families.
- ✚ **Quality Foster Homes.** Participants recognized that there are very few culturally active Indigenous foster families. Quality and fit of foster homes was considered valuable to all participants. In one case, the non Indigenous foster parents took time to learn some of the Cree language. There needs to be more development in foster homes being culturally integrated in to the community that the child came from. Foster families could be recognized at the Round Dance ceremonies, which is the community's opportunity to recognize and appreciate successes within their communities.
- ✚ **Ministry.** Members of the Ministry state that they are very happy to be welcomed to participate in the gathering and that they appreciated and were humbled by the depth and quality of the research. As Dr. Leona Makokis (2010) states, if change is going to come, it must be *with* non-Indigenous people who are allies in the journey towards healthy communities; change will not happen without them.

- ✚ **Workers Schedules.** Participants stated that the workers eight to four o'clock schedule did not fit the Indigenous paradigm. To accommodate the request for stronger relationships, if the workers were able to have more flexibility in their scheduling, then the worker could attend community and social events that would enhance the trust of the community towards the worker. To prevent burnout, the client must have some control over their own schedule and to have a say in the kind of work they want to do. If a worker recognizes that they should attend cultural activities in the community they work in, perhaps they may benefit from having the hours documented as flextime.
- ✚ **Worker Wellbeing.** Participant recognized that workers must do their own journey towards healing in order to be effective advocates for their clients. Workers need to “do their own work” [healing] (prior to starting practice?) to be healthy role-models for the families they work with.
- ✚ **A Sense of Community in the City.** “Community” does not only have to exist on the reserves. Urban communities may be more difficult to recognize but if the worker and the people strive towards community wherever they are, the child is much better off.
- ✚ **Relationships.** Participants recognized that many of the problems experienced by the people involved in child protections were a result of the lack of relationship between the foster family and the parents/ community. An investment in relationships from every participant of the system would improve the quality of foster/ kinship care, including the long term foster family support of young adults “transitioned” out of care.
- ✚ **Long Term Placements.** Participants recognized that long term placements were the most successful outcomes.
- ✚ **Family Group Conferencing.** Family Group Conferencing is very useful for locating potential foster/kinship care providers. However a much wider scope of “kin” needs to be defined. In Indigenous communities “kin” refers to anyone who is considered healthy and respected by the community, the family and/or the child. Participant requested more research be done on the effectiveness of FGC placed children in care.
- ✚ **Building on Others’ Success Stories.** Participants recognized that there were successes within the system, and also outside the systems’ services. Research such as this one that identifies thinking “outside the box and inside the circle” would support the changes to policy that are required to effect lasting changes in the current system.
- ✚ **Media.** The media is already used to illustrate what is “wrong” with the system. If the media was used to highlight the positive the success stories such as those discussed in this research, then there may be more opportunity for trust to build up. This would lead to fewer barriers between agencies and between the levels of the system.
- ✚ **Fear-Based versus Safety-Based practice.** Participants recognized that workers are guided to practice from a fear-based approach rather than from a safety-based approach. Practice from a fear based approach leads to generating more fear and distrust, which is not conducive to relationship building. Practicing from a safety-based approach allows each of the participants of the system to act confidently and with the assistance of the relationships they form. Indigenous child-centered foster/kinship care requires a spiritual, emotional, mental and physical relationship.
- ✚ **Conflict Resolution for Everyone.** Participants recognized that children and their parents do not learn conflict resolution skills when they are simply pulled from the home.

Parenting skills should include conflict resolution and older children should have to participate in conflict resolution training as well. Conflict resolution should come in the format of traditional circle communication process and or other culturally based problem solving skills that are often found in ceremony.

- ✚ **Social Work Practice.** Participants recognized that workers need the tools to do the work in Indigenous communities. The tools may include in-depth and continuous training in Indigenous history, culture, traditions, practice, values, world view and language. Working ethically in Indigenous communities requires a strong relationship with community members. Participants recognized that there is a deep level of distrust of child protection and that it was due to the historical context of the “sixties scoop” and the intergenerational effects of residential school. Social work practice that included and supported building relationships with community and agencies were identified as especially important practices.
- ✚ **Children’s Concrete Needs.** Participants recognized that the children were asking for nothing more than what any other child would ask for: to do well in school, having nice clothes and good quality food, and having stability and safety. Participants also recognized that trauma experienced in childhood may affect the developmental age of the child’s brain and that some of the concrete expressions of the children in the study were based on values that were developmentally lower than their chronological age.
- ✚ **Personal Healing.** Participants stated they believed that a personal healing journey must be under-taken in order to become the role-model and advocate that people in involved in protection need. One adult participant, who was a child in care, stated that she considers her success to be that her own adult child is not involved in drugs or alcohol and that he turned out ok. For this participant, success is based on breaking the cycle. Workers who identify that a healing journey must take place should do so for the benefit of their clients but for the worker’s ability to stay healthy and strong within the helping profession.
- ✚ **More Research like This One.** More research like this one will inform the policy makers about the kind of social work practice that will best support and protect Indigenous children in care. Research could also include child protection strategies, which focus on traditional child rearing practices. Successes from other Indigenous communities must be considered as possible alternatives to the status quo. An example of this may be the “Family to Family” program in Alaska, where the community has prevented seventy percent of children from entering into care!
- ✚ **Connecting the Head to the Heart.** Participants recognized that what was missing in the system of child protection was that connection between head knowledge and heart knowledge. The social work profession has the double duty to fulfill the responsibility of meeting the requirements of a high standard of social work with having every “i” dotted and every “t” crossed on every paper, but we must never forget where we come from as humans in relationships (mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunties, friend and cousin and so on). Social work *should* include relationships and the benefits that are gathered through relational accountability.

Closing Comments: Dr. Jean Lafrance Ph.D., R.S.W.

Associate Professor Faculty of Social Work

This entire day was phenomenal and inspiring. Each presentation held some important messages for us to take with us, and I am sure will inspire us for the future. I will have to be selective in my recollections, and apologize in advance for those wonderful ideas that I will miss.

The ceremony led by Elder George Brertton set the mood for the day. The solemn and dignified pipe ceremony and smudge helped all of us to leave the rest of the world behind for the day, and removed any lingering negativity from our being.

Leona Makokis reminded us of how we got here with a powerful description of oppression and how the residential schools set the stage for what we have today. But she did not leave us there, leading us to a new vision of what could be possible with a return to Aboriginal culture and tradition to achieve the healing called for by the many that have been so wounded.

The presentations each provided a different aspect of the situation we face, and resonated in our hearts. Each touched on relationship as a core concept – reminding us that the most important dimension of our lives on this planet is that of “All our relations.”

Social workers spoke of the importance of their relationships with their people, their communities and the organizations that employ them. A key point for them was having an opportunity as helpers to engage in their own healing. Only by knowing who they are and where they belong could they convey this to the children and families that they serve.

Persons who had been in care spoke about the void they experienced from their loss of connection to their biological family and how good it felt when their foster families tried to help them re-connect. They recommended that repatriation efforts focus on building better relationships with family even if a return was not possible.

Children in care had a powerful message and a blueprint for child welfare practice that was eminently practical. They ask only for stable placements, to keep their siblings together, help with homework at times, to stay in the same schools, good food, sports and other activities, to keep their friends, to be close to the community they know, adult role models, regular visits from their workers, for their parents to visit them in their foster homes and to visit them at home regularly. Surely, this is what every child wants - can we do less?

Finally, if we can treat each other with respect and compassion, as the relations that we all are, perhaps we could replicate this marvelous day – one in which we could acknowledge our common humanity, and in many instances, our common goals.

Discussion

The Research

We believe that the stories collected by this project accurately represent the voices of the people that shared their stories. Some of the findings were surprising even to the team, but we documented whatever the stories told us. The project team provided suggestions for child protection practices and policies and it is our hope that some of the suggestions be considered for integration into policy and practice.

In Indigenous research methodology, meaning is not presented as ultimate truth. The stories are told – and it is the reader’s role to listen to the story and take from the story as is fit for them and where they are at the time. Each time we hear a story, we understand it differently – readers are encouraged to return to the stories provided here from time to time.

The Gathering

The Gathering was an opportunity to step into the shoes of the children in care and to hear the stories from various people involved in the child protection. We recognized that all of the Gathering participants wanted the best for children and not one participant stated they disagreed with the content of the research data. Regardless of the Gathering participant’s cultural background, they all echoed the common desire for a holistic vision of Indigenous child protection.

Individuality vs. Collectivity

The stories collected in this project highlight some of the culture, value systems and the great importance placed on relational accountability in the Indigenous world view. Indigenous people are traditionally and naturally relationally accountable. It is when Western values of individuality and colonization impacted the Indigenous way of life that the trouble started for Indigenous families and the safety of children came into question. Indigenous people are willing to share with professionals how to ethically practice *within* the Indigenous paradigm. However, because of the significance of the outcomes of the research and the impact it seemed to have with the Gathering participants, it is feasible to consider that the whole child protection industry would benefit from adopting Indigenous philosophies, especially “relational accountability” and the concept of connecting the “head to the heart”. Indigenous ways of relating would benefit every single person affected by child protection policies.

Dr. Leona Makokis (2010) stated that all people must work together in order to create change. By using the Indigenous philosophy called the “Ethical Space of Engagement” (Ermine, 2009, 2008 & 2000); people from different backgrounds and ideologies may learn from and teach each other about the ways that people from different cultures should interact. Ethical Space advocates for a gentle and respectful tone to the interactions between people from different cultures. Because there is a disproportionate number of Indigenous children in child protection in Alberta, practicing within the “Ethical Space of Engagement” would acknowledge the integrity of the Indigenous worldview, and advocate social work practice from *within* the Indigenous perspective of child protection (relational accountability). If the business of child

protection is to truly evolve, the policies should reflect the Indigenous world view of the families that are most affected.

Chief Dan's Prayer for My Brother the Bear

O Great Spirit who listens to all

I speak for my brother the bear:

*Make the moon shine softly during the nights of childhood
so that the warmth of his mother will always be in his memory.*

*Make the berries grow in abundance and sweetness so that the vigor of life will strengthen his
heart and the years of old age shall never be a burden to his body.*

*Let the wildflowers refresh his temperament so that his manner will always be carefree. Give
his legs swiftness and strength so that they will always carry him to freedom.*

Sharpen the senses of his ears and nose so they will always keep harm from him.

*Let only those men share his path who in their hearts know his beauty
and respect his strength so that he will always be at home in the wilderness.*

*Make men praise life so that no one needs to feel the shame
that lives in a heart that has wronged.*

*Then my wild brother, the bear, will always have a wilderness,
as long as the sun travels the sky.*

O Great Spirit, this I ask of you for my brother the bear.

(George & Hirnschall, 1982)

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