

APPENDIX C Discussions With On Reserve Child Welfare Directors

Let's Get It Right: Discussions with Child Welfare Agencies on Reserve Communities in New Brunswick: An Effort to Better Understand the Needs of Aboriginal Children in Care

Appendix C forms part of the report titled,

“LET’S GET IT RIGHT: CREATING A CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE TRAINING MODULE AND IDENTIFYING LOCAL URBAN ABORIGINAL RESOURCES FOR NON-ABORIGINAL CAREGIVERS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN NEW BRUNSWICK”

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Discussions with Child Welfare Agencies on Reserve Communities in New Brunswick: An
Effort to Better Understand the Needs of Aboriginal Children in Care

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Lets Get it Right: Creating a Culturally Appropriate Training Module and Identifying Local
Urban Aboriginal Resources for Non-Aboriginal Caregivers of Aboriginal Children in New
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Discussions with Child Welfare Agencies on Reserve Communities in New Brunswick: An
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Abstract

The reality for many Aboriginal children in care is that non-Aboriginal caregivers are raising them. This has long been a concern for the Aboriginal community across the province of New Brunswick and Canada, largely due to the fact that these children are at a high risk of becoming disconnected from their Aboriginal culture and identity. This research will inform the development of a province wide training module for non-Aboriginal Foster parents who are caring for Aboriginal children. It is the hope that this training module will improve the quality of life and cultural connection of Aboriginal children in care and their families across the province.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to acknowledge and extend our deepest gratitude to all of our participants who made the completion of this research possible. Our discussions with you have broadened and challenged our own individual understandings of the complex reality of Aboriginal children in care in the province of New Brunswick. Without the time you generously gave to us through honest discussions and conversations, this research would not have been possible. With that, we thank you.

Introduction

The reality for many Aboriginal children in care is that non-Aboriginal caregivers are raising them. This has long been a concern for the Aboriginal community across the province of New Brunswick and Canada, largely due to the fact that these children are at a high risk of becoming disconnected from their Aboriginal culture and identity. As part of a larger project to develop a province wide training module for non-Aboriginal foster parents fostering Aboriginal children in New Brunswick, this research focuses on better understanding the processes involved surrounding these specific types of placements. Questions were asked pertaining to two main categories; questions specific to foster parents and questions related to inter-agency collaboration. Four interviews with individuals who have extensive experience working in First Nation child welfare agencies on reserve communities in New Brunswick, have shed light on what is currently working well and where there are areas for improvement.

Methodology

Upon receiving approval from the St. Thomas University Research Ethics Board, four key informants were identified based on their involvement and work within child welfare agencies involving Aboriginal children in the province of New Brunswick. These key informants worked in child welfare agencies on reserve communities. Each individual was invited to participate in interviews via email. Interviews were conducted by two members of the project team and took approximately one hour. The interviews sought to explore different understandings and knowledge of the processes involved in placing Aboriginal children in the care of non-Aboriginal foster parents. Members from the research team conducting the interviews took hand written notes. Participants were given the opportunity to view these notes prior to giving permission for their use. The interviews were not audio or video recorded. Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the purpose of the project and what was expected of their

involvement. Members of the research team reviewed a consent form with each participant, which participants and interviewers then signed prior to the interview.

All notes from the interviews were typed within 48 hours and anonymized. These electronic documents were password protected and stored on a secure server. The notes were seen only by the members of the project team and analyzed according to each question and issues raised by the participants. All notes will be destroyed three months after submission of this report. As stated previously interview questions were asked pertaining to two main categories; questions specific to foster parents and questions related to inter-agency collaboration. This information has formed the following report.

Findings

As stated previously, interview questions were designed in order to broaden understandings of the processes involved in placing Aboriginal children in the care of non-Aboriginal foster parents. These questions were split up into: questions pertaining to foster parents and questions focused on inter-agency collaboration.

The Effectiveness of PRIDE

The first question asked was specific to Parents' Resources for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE). PRIDE is currently required training for all potential foster and adoptive parents within the province of New Brunswick. Participants' discussed their experiences with PRIDE as relatively positive. They felt that PRIDE has been very beneficial for families. While it was mentioned that the training lacks Aboriginal content, it was acknowledged as essentially being better than nothing. As stated by one participant "PRIDE is all we have at this point."

It was also stressed that social workers need to be able to access PRIDE competencies, specifically that they should have a good understanding of PRIDE. One community offers their own PRIDE training, described by one participant as being “the Provincial model with tweaks.”

Concerns with placing Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal foster homes

Participants were asked what, if any, concerns they had with placing Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal foster homes. Participants made it quite clear that placing children “off community” is of significant concern to the families they work with and support. One participant expressed how it is bad when children need to be removed from their home in the first place, so taking them out of their communities makes the situation even more difficult and harmful for the child and their family. Some members of the community do not understand the need to remove children from their homes; to then place children “off community” stirs up a lot of emotion. When children are absent from their schools and communities, they are also gone from their culture. According to participants, families that they have worked with have indicated that children should be left with the family while they “figure things out.” By this, the respondent clarified that families felt children should be left in the home longer and more time should be given for them to solve the problem without outside involvement or intervention. Respondents also felt that within many non-Aboriginal communities and families, there is very little knowledge of Aboriginal culture, which results in the manifestation of stereotypes. There is a concern that non-Aboriginal foster families are not culturally sensitive and as such Aboriginal children may not be encouraged to connect with their culture. One participant in particular spoke of many examples where non-Aboriginal foster families had no interest or desire in supporting their Aboriginal foster child in maintaining relationships with their home community or culture. In some cases these foster families do not want their foster child to have any contact at all with their biological family. When this happens it

is a concern for the biological family, the child's community, and the child welfare agency (agencies) involved.

Respondents stressed that taking steps to prevent a loss of culture for Aboriginal children in care is a crucial area to focus on. One participant discussed the benefits of having a cultural mentor at the middle school and high school level, as this mentor provides much needed empathy, support and guidance to Aboriginal youth. Participants saw this as a critical preventative measure as cultural disconnect is common and happens at a young age for many Aboriginal youth in care. Keeping Aboriginal children connected to their family and community events is a must, if not they are at a high risk of becoming disconnected from their culture and/or losing their cultural identity. Participants mentioned that it is important that those children living "in town" be included in reserve community. Given the responses from each participant, it became clear that the main concern is always to foster the child's connection to their community and family, and to nurture their spirit. Participants discussed that whenever possible, children are often placed in kinship (family) placements. It is better for the children to be in the community and with family and their culture. Generally throughout the interviews with participants, group homes in the region were criticized as lacking in cultural sensitivity. Although on a more positive note one respondent shared that her community works closely with a woman who provides foster/group home services and support to First Nation youth. The woman, as the respondent explained, has been trained by the First Nation communities and Social Development and is quite "savvy" in that she understands the important role culture plays in a youth's life.

Potential Barriers with Placing Aboriginal Children in Non-Aboriginal Foster Homes

Several different areas were discussed surrounding the barriers involved with placing Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal foster homes. Mainly there were significant concerns around the child's connection to their family, community, and culture, as well as concerns around the child's education. Within many First Nation communities, when a child needs to be placed into care the priority is to organize a kinship placement, however participants expressed that it always an option. In these circumstances a non-Aboriginal foster home becomes the only option. Respondents spoke to the lack of Aboriginal foster homes and how this reality contributes to many Aboriginal children being placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes. One respondent shared more specifically that the lack of emergency foster homes in the community is another barrier. Often times the foster homes that are available are long-term and not looking for short-term placements. In such cases, staff are forced to find kinship placements which brings with it many other complexities and challenges. Regarding the recruitment of potential foster parents, one participant felt that more effective recruiting methods may be necessary in order to generate interest within the community.

Regarding the education concerns involved with placing an Aboriginal child in a non-Aboriginal foster home, one respondent discussed the importance of support for numeracy and literacy through First Nations initiatives at schools. First Nations social workers work closely with the teams at these schools not only in areas regarding numeracy and literacy, but also to address the disconnect that can occur when youth from First Nations communities attend off-reserve schools. Despite these efforts, high dropout rates remain of significant concern. Participants voiced concerns that when a child is placed off a reserve community with a non-Aboriginal family, access to school and educational services that were available to them while attending school on reserve are lost.

Supports that non-Aboriginal Foster Parents Need in Order to Best Support Aboriginal Children in Care

Participants stressed that it is critical that non-Aboriginal foster parents have an understanding, awareness, and education of whichever culture and community their foster child comes from. In circumstances when a child is moved off a reserve community to be placed in the care of non-Aboriginal foster parents, participants greatly emphasized that these parents must also have an understanding of what is happening in that particular child's reserve community and stay as up to date and informed as possible. This allows the child opportunities to remain connected and allows them to be able to return for various events, gatherings and get-togethers. It was noted that although maintaining this connection to the child's home community is recommended, there is no official requirement placed upon the foster parents to do so. This depends entirely on the foster family and social worker involvement. Ideally children should have the opportunity to remain in a First Nations community, as many community members do not want their children to be adopted by non-Aboriginal families. Permanency for children is a priority, as is maintaining a child's connection to their home community. In an ideal world each of these priorities would be met, however participants have acknowledged that this is not always feasible.

What non-Aboriginal Caregivers Should Know

Regarding what non-Aboriginal caregivers should know when caring for Aboriginal children, one respondent highlighted that this may depend upon the level of the child's connectivity to their community. For example, a child's family connections to spirituality, community, and traditional practices may vary. Traditions, beliefs and culture specific to the child's birth family should be taken into consideration; regardless foster homes should always consider the child's community and culture, whatever this may look like (i.e. traditions and customs).

Experience Working with Non-Aboriginal Foster Families Within the Region

One participant noted that they have worked with foster families who have been interested in the culture of their foster children. They stated that it is helpful for the foster parents and biological parents to have a positive relationship. Among the many benefits this brings to the child, one participant noted that when foster parents and biological parents have this positive relationship, it prevents the child from feeling as though they are choosing between the two sets of parents. One interviewee stressed the importance of the foster parent knowing what is needed in order for First Nation communities to survive. The survival of the community depends on community members being engaged in the community, as youth learning traditional cultural practices and language will take this with them throughout their lives. The risk of not engaging Aboriginal children in care with their home community amounts to not only a loss for the child themselves; it is also a significant loss for the community as a whole.

It was found throughout participant experiences that foster parents generally, although not in every case, have willingness and an openness to engage with the child's home community by bringing the child to participate in various events. For some non-Aboriginal foster parents however, there can be immense hesitation and discomfort present, perhaps due to being asked to participate in unfamiliar situations and experiencing feelings of being an outsider. It is clear that foster families need a great deal of support and encouragement from social workers and other professionals in navigating this process.

Interviewers also asked participants how the provincial standards for foster homes and group homes impacted the process of placing Aboriginal children in care. Respondents explained that regarding foster care, reserve communities follow provincial licensing standards. The reaction to the standards, from participants and from the families they work with, is generally negative; the

standards are experienced as intrusive and feel like they were not made for First Nations communities and the unique culture, needs and complexities involved. As expressed by some participants, many First Nation families felt that the provincial standards required for foster homes or group homes in actuality create significant barriers as there is a lack of Aboriginal foster homes. For example, participants explained that the risk assessment tool used to assess foster homes is a challenging tool to use. For instance, if a prospective kinship relative is a residential school survivor, questions on the risk assessment could be very intrusive or re-traumatizing. First Nations child welfare workers try to offset and challenge this barrier by bringing a “cultural twist” to Provincial standards. Practice standards are based on Family Services Act but have “helpful hints to remember culture.” There is more leniency and flexibility in these adapted standards, and protocols are different. Kinship with the province generally has the goal that the child will eventually return home. On some reserve communities this may not necessarily be the case, as it may be accepted that the children live with kinship family permanently. Kinship can be a flexible, voluntary agreement where parents are not forced to agree.

Indian Affairs and money allocation are big concerns that impact the care of Aboriginal children. Indian Affairs does not provide the funding necessary to have group homes that are culturally appropriate. One community is hopeful about the Centre for Excellence being constructed in Campbellton; this treatment centre will be visiting reserve communities across the province for ideas to ensure the centre is culturally appropriate.

Experiences Working with Other Agencies

Participants acknowledged that part of working within First Nations child welfare agencies means working with provincial departments. This inter-organizational collaboration happens for variety of reasons, some being service user relocation as well as the overall provision of services.

Agencies try to work together and communicate effectively by making an effort to relay culturally appropriate information to each other as needed. One respondent noted that they have a good relationship with provincial child welfare services because their work is respected. This particular interviewee acknowledged that they have no negative history or trust issues with government largely due to their own cultural identity and positionality. They recognized that some First Nations professionals “who have a negative history with Social Development may be less able to work with Social Development.”

A child’s education is a significant concern when working with other agencies. It was noted that when children transition to a new school it can be traumatic as they can experience “culture shock.” Although as the participants mentioned, schools are generally supportive to certain extent. Some workers have experienced schools having the expectation of social workers being “miracle workers.” One participant discussed that covert racism is prevalent in the school system, and that issues at school can impact parents as well.

Factors that Might Help or Hinder the Effective Management of Child Welfare Files

The interviewers asked participants to explain their experience of cases where an Aboriginal child living on a reserve community needed to be placed in care outside of this community. It is a courtesy to contact First Nations community where the child is from, which would help the process run smoothly. If an Aboriginal child is up for adoption, Social Development with the province should consult to see if a First Nations community would want to be part of it. Participants mentioned that a factor that helps the effective management of child welfare files is for the child to maintain relationships with their community, and to have visits with their birth family. Participants mentioned that foster families being able to ask for help and support when they need it is a factor that certainly helps the process. This goes hand in hand with the foster

families working to keep the child involved and connected to their home community. Respondents stated that staff at child welfare agencies, as well as Social Development, need to make it known to families that they are available and they need to follow through with commitments.

A factor that hinders the effective management of a file is time. Respondents stressed that they work in small agencies with large caseloads, therefore it can be challenging to find the time and staff to provide the right amount of support. One participant stated, “we can't always be there when we should be. We rely on parent aids to be eyes and ears when we can't be there. It's not ideal.”

Another factor that can often hinder this process is the staff or social workers involved, having a lack of knowledge of First Nation culture and history. Cultural Sensitivity Training would be a helping factor, as it would provide knowledge and background of historical and intergenerational effects, and offer insight and explanations for why many Aboriginal communities and families have the issues they do. Moreover, when a child is placed in foster care outside of the community, it would help if there is knowledge of FASD as it is intergenerational in some First Nation communities. It is important because children living with FASD do not process the same way as child without FASD. ADHD is diagnosis that usually precedes FASD. In one community, a participant noted that their children with guardianship status have all been diagnosed with FASD.

What Would be Helpful to Include in the Training for non-Aboriginal Social Workers

Trainings by Hann Martin & Associates have been very helpful. They discuss Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), colonization and the disruption that occurred as a result. Many clients have white social workers because they live off-reserve, as a result, it is imperative that white social workers understand and are educated about Native families, processes, and

ideologies. “Aboriginal Awareness Training for social workers is good, it gives a history, details how things look now, and gives the policies and standards.”

In many First Nations communities there is a belief in experiential learning. For example, while an outsider to a community may think a child running around on their own is a sign of neglect, many Aboriginal families believe that this is a very positive experience for the child as it allows them to explore on their own. Another example given by a participant was that many Aboriginal children react and relate to their families through joshing and ribbing. The participant stated that nicknames are considered positive and are very common. Specifically, they shared about a time a nurse called to report about a grandmother who had her grandson at the doctor's office. The child had fallen down, though he was not hurt. The nurse felt that the grandmother's response to him was inappropriate as she began joshing with him instead of comforting him, in the way the nurse felt should have happened.

It is important to understand “idiosyncrasies” and general cultural differences; social workers need to know about differences in worldviews. Aboriginal people may look at things from a different perspective based on how they were raised and their experiences and expectations. Mainstream society can be very materialistic, while sharing is a significant component of Aboriginal cultures. In addition to supportive social workers, children in care must be provided with services and resources that are accessible and feasible.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Co-managing Files when an Aboriginal Child is Placed in a non-Aboriginal Foster Home

Participants emphasized that all staff involved in such cases, whether working with Social Development, a child welfare agency on a reserve community, or anywhere else, must be knowledgeable and respectful of the child and their family's culture. This respect needs to be

transferred to foster parents. Social workers need to be able to diffuse tension between birth parents and foster parents, creating spaces where a positive relationship can grow whenever possible. One participant explained that, “negative influences sometimes occur when birth parents bash/speak negatively about foster parents. Sometimes visits have had to be cancelled because parents will say to children ‘they don't know anything about us’.” This thinking goes back to non-Native agencies, historically only coming on reserve to remove children. Now that First Nations has their own child welfare system, they are more visible and less threatening. First Nations social workers can do their own foster home assessments on and off reserve, which provides continuity and stability for families. Additionally, belief was expressed that the implementation of NB Families will be conducive toward dialogue and the general sharing of information between agencies. Another strength would be the input of what should happen to ensure culturally safe and culturally sensitive elements, including the spiritual and emotional well being of youth. Another strength is the First Nation knowledge of culture.

Weaknesses mentioned include time constraints. Co-managing files means one more file that a worker has added on. Communication to make sure that all agencies are on the same page is necessary. One participant shared that having more than one “decision maker” can make things very difficult and time consuming. Another area of concern is that standards are currently in limbo to determine relationships for co-managing. Two respondents identified access to mental health as a significant concern. It is hard to get into and often families do not want to go there. In some instances the reserve will pay for private counselling, “we need to purchase service.”

Conclusion

Through interviewing professionals from Child Welfare agencies in First Nation communities, the researchers hoped to gain a greater understanding of the many factors involved

in placing Aboriginal children into foster care. Specifically, questions were focused upon those children placed with non-Aboriginal foster parents. Areas discussed ranged from training and programmes (such as PRIDE) to best practices in case management. Regarding PRIDE, it was found that while certainly a step in the right direction, the training's impact upon the quality of life experienced by Aboriginal children living in the care of non-Aboriginal foster families remains yet unclear. To this end, it stands to reason that a more culturally relevant programme is likely needed in such situations. However, the preference of either a modified PRIDE or a different programme altogether was neither suggested nor expressed.

In terms of major themes, all seemed to converge primarily upon the need for both Social Workers and foster parents to possess (or acquire) knowledge of Aboriginal culture, history, and traditions. Furthermore, a willingness to engage with these elements of the experiences of First Nations children is also critical. Rather than merely remaining “culturally sensitive”, this would involve active engagement and participation over an extended period of time in order to provide a “culturally safe” environment for the child, which primarily includes working to maintain a connection to his or her people, community, and culture. To this end, the various insights provided by the respondents resembled, more than anything, ethically sound, experience-based Social Work practice (with a special emphasis placed upon sensitivity commitment and flexibility). Going forward, it will be critical for future practice models and programming to follow advice and examples such as theirs in order to fill in the gaps denying culturally safe and relevant service to Aboriginal children in care.

Appendix A

Let's Get it Right: Creating a culturally Appropriate Training Module and Identifying Local Urban Aboriginal Resources for Non-Aboriginal Caregivers of Aboriginal Children in New Brunswick

Interview Consent Form

Code:

Initial Indicating Agreement

I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions which have answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to the interview for the purposes of the research described in the information sheet.

I understand that I do not have to answer a question if I do not want to and can stop the interview at any time.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the research at any time until the submission of the final report. If I choose to withdraw all information I provided will be destroyed.

I understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if I disclose during the interview any previously unknown or future illegal activities and/or express a desire to harm myself or others.

I would like/not like (delete as appropriate) to see the final report.

Agreement:

I understand that by signing this consent agreement I am not giving up any of my legal rights.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

_____	_____
Signature of Investigator	Date

Appendix B

Let’s Get it Right: Creating a culturally Appropriate Training Module and Identifying Local Urban Aboriginal Resources for Non-Aboriginal Caregivers of Aboriginal Children in New Brunswick

The following is a list of indicative questions but not a comprehensive list. While the research is interested in the following areas, the interview is lead by participant responses and identifiable areas of importance.

Questions Pertaining to Foster Parents.

In your experience, how effective is the PRIDE training for foster parents, specifically non-Aboriginal foster parents who are fostering Aboriginal children?

What concerns, if any, do you have with placing Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal homes?

What are the barriers, if any, to placing Aboriginal children in foster homes?

What do non-Aboriginal caregivers need to know when caring for Aboriginal children?

What do non-Aboriginal foster parents need in order to support Aboriginal children in care?

What has been your experience working with non-Aboriginal foster families within this region?

What are the standards for foster homes your community?

In what ways, if any, are these standards different from other agencies?

How do these differences or similarities in standards impact the care of Aboriginal children?

Inter-organizational collaboration

Tell me about your experiences working with other agencies in providing services to Aboriginal children and their foster families.

What factors might help or hinder the smooth and effective management of child welfare files when an Aboriginal child is placed in foster care outside of a First Nations community?

In an ideal world, what would you include in the training for non-Aboriginal social workers?

What do non-Aboriginal social workers need to know when providing services to Aboriginal children in foster care?

What are the strengths and weaknesses in regards to co-managing a file; when an Aboriginal child is placed in a non-Aboriginal foster home?