The Aboriginal Practice Standards Re-Design Project

Literature Review

The challenge is not to toss out everything we are now doing – but rather to build a system based on Aboriginal ways of knowing and being at the centre that considers the child as part of an interconnected world. – (Cindy Blackstock 2005)

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Caring for First Nations Children Society

December 2009

Executive Summary

Background and Overview of Practice Standards Redesign project

British Columbia was the first jurisdiction in Canada to create operational and practice standards for delegated Aboriginal child and family service agencies. The Aboriginal Operational Practice Standards and Indicators (AOPSI), developed in 1999, represent the minimum expectations of performance in relation to child welfare-related practice for delegated agencies[1]. They parallel the Ministry for Children and Family Development's (MCFD) set of policy and practice standards regarding provision of all MCFD programs and services.

Although the existing AOPSI practice standards emphasize the importance of family and community within Aboriginal cultures and have been updated from time to time on an incremental basis, they do not embody practice founded on an Indigenous worldview. Thus, while the current standards may represent a novel application and adaptation of MCFD's standards, they cannot be considered reflective of core Aboriginal beliefs, values, and cultural traditions.

To address the need for culturally relevant child welfare practice standards, in 2009, MCFD, the Caring for First Nations Children Society (CFNCS), First Nations, Aboriginal and Métis Child and Family Service Agency Executive Directors, and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, jointly launched the *Practice Standards Redesign Project.*

The goals of this project are to develop new standards that will meet legislative requirements while delivering services in a manner congruent with traditional Indigenous ways of caring, in order to achieve the overall goal of improving outcomes for First Nations, Aboriginal and Métis children, families and communities.

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[1] Twenty-four delegated agencies with various levels of delegation are to be found throughout BC: one is in start up phase; three can provide voluntary services and recruit and approve foster homes; eleven have the additional delegation necessary to provide guardianship services for children in continuing care; and nine have the delegation required to provide, in addition to the above, full child protection, including the authority to investigate reports and remove children.
(http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/aboriginal/delegated/index.htm)

This literature review is one of three related activities and sources of information for the *Practice Standards Redesign Project*. Consultation with Indigenous scholars and information gathering from Indigenous Elders, agencies, communities, and community leaders comprise the other two activities.

Process for selecting the literature

The authors of this literature review sought materials that spoke to traditional principles and values from an Indigenous perspective. This material was drawn from: searches of peer-reviewed research and writing relating to traditional values in caring for children; the Aboriginal child welfare research literature known previously to the authors; and information known by members of the project's Working Group, particularly in relation to sources of local knowledge. A focus group with Indigenous scholars helped identify some additional information sources, including the Indigenous Child Welfare Research Network.

Information also came from narrative accounts of legislative change processes and stories that described firsthand the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous peoples and/or communities. In addition, information was included that related to broader international and legal obligations concerning children's well-being, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with practice examples that were congruent with an Aboriginal viewpoint and/or were already used by Aboriginal organizations, such as family group conferencing and anti-oppressive practice. Other sources of 'grey' literature included research done as part of a graduate thesis or dissertation, as well as reports written for organizations such as INAC, the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare, Health Canada, and provincial and federal ministries.

Historical Context

Since the 1980s, First Nations have been trying to reverse the deleterious effects of residential schools and colonization by steadily taking back control of delivery of child welfare services in their communities. In BC, this has largely, though not exclusively, been carried out via 'delegation' in which Aboriginal agencies receive full or partial

jurisdictional authority for child welfare via provincial delegation with funding provided by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs[2]. Agencies with partial delegation cannot provide child protection services.

While Indigenous approaches to child welfare hold promise, services have continued to be delivered under the auspices of existing legislation. The result is "a lack of cultural fit between child welfare, ideology, law and services delivered" (Mandell, Clouston, Fine, & Blackstock, 2007, as cited in Strega & Sohki Aski Esquao, 2009, p. 152).

One way to make a difference and to guarantee culturally relevant services is to ensure that services are enshrined in a uniquely Aboriginal worldview whereby the framework for service delivery that is based first and foremost on Aboriginal core beliefs, practices, values and wisdom. Of necessity, this also would result in a fundamental shift away from continuation of the risk management paradigm on which current westernized child welfare practices are based.

Traditional principles, values, concepts, and models in caring for children

Although every Nation has its own teachings, history, clan and family complexities, there also are many fundamental similarities across Nations and communities, particularly in terms of overarching visions and goals. These include:

- Emphasis on the connection between caring for and transmitting culture to Aboriginal children and the very survival of Aboriginal people and communities
- Importance of Aboriginal control of child welfare systems
- Importance of keeping Aboriginal children in the care of family and community
- Centrality of the family unit within traditional Aboriginal culture, and the family's being the vehicle through which individual identity is formed.

The literature also revealed other commonalities in communities' and Aboriginal child welfare organizations' statements of guiding principles and values. For example, **self-**

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[2] Jurisdictional disputes over which level of government funds services on and off reserve continues to plague delivery of services including those that have relevance in child welfare/child protection situations.

determination, culture and language, and **using a holistic approach** were listed as the first guiding principles for the *Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children* project (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown & Formsma 2008); these were along the primary principles of the *Indigenous Child at the Centre Action Plan* (ICCAP, 2009). The centrality of family and extended family's role in caring for children; the role of Elders and culture and the key role Elders play in caring for children were emphasized, along with the importance of respectful, collaborative partnerships and supports for families. At an organizational level, open communication, transparency, and accountability, along with strong leadership and governance supported adequate funding were often raised as important ingredients needed to assist communities in caring for their children and families.

In sum, the concepts of **relationship, connectedness** and **balance** are central to many traditional models of wellness, healing, and caring for children.

Traditional cultural practices relating to caring for children, from different Canadian jurisdictions

A number of examples can be found in the literature regarding ways in which traditional beliefs, values and principles have been used to guide development and implementation of Aboriginal child welfare programs and practices. For example, The Tikinagan Child and Family Services, which provides services to approximately 20,000 people in 33 diverse and remote Nishnawbi Aski First Nations communities in Northern Ontario, was created in 1984 in order to ensure that children would no longer be removed from their communities as a result of child welfare concerns. The model is premised on: community-based control and decision making; a continuum of child protection options based on customary care and the availability of alternative dispute resolution processes; and a commitment to ensuring that children remain connected to their families, communities, land and culture, given an underlying belief that children permanently belong to their extended family, clan and community.

Similarly, in Alberta, the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) was created in 1987 following community leaders' concerns that too many of their children had been removed from their families and had been placed in non-Native foster homes off-reserve. The teachings of the Medicine Wheel, which "teaches that all things are interrelated" (Thomas & Green 2007, p. 92, cited in Wa Cheew Wapaguunew Iskew, 2009, p. 277) provided the basis for YTSA's program development. YTSA's programs include Custom Care, Open Custom Adoption, Caring for our Own Community Support Services, and Family Enhancement; moreover, the YTSA Custom Care program is similar to the Tikinagan program in that it is based upon the traditional practice of using extended family members when parents are unable to care for their children, and ensuring that children are connected to their family and community of origin.

As additional examples of programming emerging from traditional beliefs and values, Kunuwanimano Child and Family Services, incorporated in 1989, provides prevention and family support services to 11 First Nations in the Timmons, Ontario area. Kunuwanimano, which means, "keeping our own", has focused on shifting from a risk assessment model to a "strength-based" approach that draws on traditional culture. As well, the West Region Child and Family Services in Manitoba has been providing Aboriginal children services since 1982, with hallmarks that include local First Nation / community-based control, cultural relevancy, proactive prevention programs with crisis response, and ongoing daily healing.

Another example of a process based on traditional Aboriginal values and approaches is Family Group Conferences (FGC), which originally developed in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The overall intent of FGC is to rebuild a family's support network by engaging immediate family as well as extended family members and/or community members in developing a plan for the child. An underlying assumption is that the family is best able to identify its strengths, challenges, and supports. To date, FGC has been used in communities in British Columbia, as well as other jurisdictions in Canada and internationally.

Approaches and skills that support traditional ways of caring for children

A number of approaches to practice are relevant to the *Aboriginal Practice Standards Redesign* project given their fit with traditional Indigenous principles and values; these approaches are often discussed as components of good social work practice and include:

- Relational approach to practice;
- Strengths-based approach to practice;
- Anti-oppressive practice (AOP);
- Service users' approach to practice;
- Cultural safety approach to practice; and
- Resilience and resistance approach to practice.

In addition, the literature review describes practice skills that support and stem from traditional Aboriginal values and principles regarding caring for children. For example, in place of risk assessments in child welfare, assessments using an anti-oppressive practice approach are recommended; from an AOP perspective, the assessment process may be viewed as a way to build relationships with parents and children (Strega, 2009). Specific skill sets believed to be required for child protection social workers in order to conduct an assessment in keeping with an AOP framework also are described (Strega, 2009), as are practice tips from AOP designed to restore dignity to child welfare recipients (Kinewesquao & Wade, 2009).

Two other approaches to assessment discussed in the literature review are the "Signs of Safety" approach and the Islands of Safety model. Signs of Safety was conceived initially in the 1990s in Australia as a strengths-based approach (Government of Western Australia, 2008), and has gained international attention over the past decade, including being used in communities in BC. Islands of Safety was first developed for use with Métis families and uses traditional Indigenous practices to promote family dignity along with a plan of safety (Richardson, 2009).

Conclusion

Unravelling the implicit values and beliefs that underpin Indigenous culture and ways of knowing, and making them explicit within practice is central to the *Practice Standards Redesign Project*. The literature illustrates that a number of Aboriginal communities and jurisdictions have successfully moved in this direction or are in the process of doing so. However, achieving this on a provincial scale is unique and thus presents its own particular challenges. Nevertheless, this step out from under past colonial procedures and practice standards is also an enormous step forward. The hope this process can bring Indigenous children, families and people for a better way of doing things, is the impetus for this project and leads to a vision of transformation from the risk-management based system we currently have, to a model of healing that centres on Indigenous values, traditions, practices and ways of knowing.