



## **Making our hearts sing!**

Reinventing Child Welfare in  
Aboriginal Communities: A  
journey of discovery in Alberta.

*Alberta Children's Services  
Blood Reserve, Metis Settlements and  
Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation  
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# Purpose and Goals of the Current Research

- To accompany three First Nations communities in an examination of their child welfare policies and practices from an Aboriginal perspective.
- Aboriginal people, research academics, and child welfare leaders wish to develop a fresh perspective of the service system to generate more relevant program responses.
- The goal is to develop action that is sustainable over the long term and builds upon the capacity of the community



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# Why Research this topic?

- **Aboriginal children continue to come into care in disproportionate numbers**
- **Some positive change has occurred but the outcomes for too many children are the same; loss of language, connection to community, sense of identity**
- **We can change the future if we want to**
- **To help create a a brighter future for all of our children!**



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# Research Questions

- **What have been the historical effects of the residential school experience on the identity of Aboriginal children, families, and communities?**
- **How does this compare to the current effects of placement in child welfare services on the identity of Aboriginal children, families and communities?**
- **How can we collaborate to create effective and innovative program responses that are consistent with Aboriginal worldviews and respectful working relationships that can lead to reconciliation and enhanced collaboration?**



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# Philosophy and Methodology of the Research

- The participatory action research methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was used
- Appreciative Inquiry focuses on the ‘what’s right’ rather than the ‘what’s wrong’ within a community and that can generate community empowered models for change.
- Research was community driven and owned: using community theatre, youth pictures, world café, and gatherings
- Two First Nations communities and participants from Alberta's Métis Settlements were involved in the study: the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta, the Sturgeon Lake First Nations (Cree), and the Métis Settlements distributed across Northern Alberta.



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# Gatherings used as a way to share and obtain knowledge

- An initial gathering shared what is known about the effects of residential schools with Elders, community leaders and child welfare staff.
- Children, families, community leaders and Elders share their perspectives on the current situation
- A ceremony and celebration of communities through a feast, round dance and give-away provided a forum to share the learning that has occurred with all of the participants.



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# Community meetings have revealed that:

- There is a clear understanding of the current and past issues and their impact on community and family life.
- To address these issues will call forth the strength of the people based on the continuity of culture, kinship systems and tribal responsibilities.
- It is essential to reinstitute a structure that supports kinship relational roles and responsibilities, as the continuity of kinship is the key to well-being and survival, and the basis of their identity.



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# The stories

- **Dramatic shifts in parenting and loss of parenting skills**
- **Sharply contrasting ways of raising children**
- **Stories of abuse, neglect, loss of identity**
- **Intergenerational impacts**



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# Preliminary findings

**Aboriginal communities have expressed a wish to address**

- A stronger sense of identity as Aboriginal people
- A return to traditional spirituality
- A renewed sense of culture

## Implications

**While these are essential to the development of culturally relevant we need to consider that:**

- There is no “one size fits all” solution for the 600 tribes in Canada
- There is a continuum of traditional to less traditional people in Aboriginal communities



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# Challenges

- **Bridging the divide between traditional aboriginal values and present day child welfare systems**
- **Finding common ground between aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people**
- **Generating greater operational specificity in program development while respecting community values**
- **Federal funding that supports and sustains Aboriginal families**
- **Provincial authorities fully supporting Aboriginal aspirations**



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# Old tools for new challenges

- **Importance of culture**
  - Passing on old knowledge to youth
- **Renewed sense of identity**
  - Who am I?
  - Where do I belong
- **Healthier relationships**
- **Interconnectedness and belonging**



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# Spin-offs

- **Bringing them Home to the Saddle Lake community for children in care in the Edmonton Region in March, 2006.**
- **Sturgeon Lake Cultural Centre**
- **Student Work**
  - **Study of three generations of aboriginal youth in care with focus on resiliency**
  - **Study of healing medicine wheel to guide interventions with target group of aboriginal children at risk aged 5-13**



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# What does this imply for child welfare?

- These are fundamental issues that need to be resolved to prevent need for child welfare interventions
- Current models of service delivery are ill-equipped to meet the challenges of aboriginal communities that flow from these experiences



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# Further questions

- How do we develop child welfare program tools that are consistent with the vision of aboriginal people?
- How can we best reconcile traditional aboriginal views with prevailing western approaches?
- How can we reconnect in spite of the legacy of “jagged colonialism” in our common history?
- How do we make our hearts sing!?



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## Where to with Kainai?

- Complete production of documentary film on Kainai experience
- Co-create models of child welfare practice that are consistent with Blackfoot culture
- Inform ongoing development of Legislative Framework

## Where to with Saddle lake?

- Hermeneutic research with community and graduates of the U of C's Access program
- Gathering of stories from elders and youth
- BSW graduates will learn and apply fundamentals of hermeneutic research
- Commitment on part of Blue Quills and Boys and Girls Club along with FSW



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# Where to from here in overall terms?

- Organize findings along spiritual, emotional, mental and physical of life
- Develop approaches that flow from each of these elements that can create a more holistic and healthy life



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# Films

- **Creating hope for the future - This film documents the experiences of child welfare survivors from the 60's scoop.**
- **Wisdom of the Blackfoot Elders - In production. Documents the views of indigenous researchers and scientists. It sets the ground work for future planning and the development**
- **The Elders Speak to Child Welfare - Documents the advice of Blackfoot Elders to Child Welfare Staff of the Blood Reserve**
- **Aboriginal Co-Chairs in Alberta: Views from the Policy Domain – Filmed collaboration in the early stages of production**



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# Policy and practice links

- To inform the development of a new legislative framework of the Blood Tribe based upon the concept of Kainaisini - Bringing together western knowledge with traditional aboriginal knowledge in the creation of a new legislative framework.
- Blackfoot Elders held a one day meeting with all of the Child welfare staff on the blood reserve, where they shared their wisdom and hopes for the future in terms of program development. This has been filmed and will serve as a base for future program and policy development.
- The Creating Hope for the Future gathering hosted by the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation has involved policy makers, administrators and supervisors from the Children's services ministry in the 2 day reflection with survivors of the Residential Schools and the 60s scoop. Participant feedback indicates that this was a powerful experience in influencing policy and program development.



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# Bent Arrow Healing Society

- **Fall 2006 - Collaboration with three faculty members of the Edmonton Division**
- **Evaluate the effectiveness of several promising programs delivered by Bent Arrow using an Aboriginal framework**
- **Documentation in print and film media**
- **Translate of learning into teaching modules**
- **Share learning with policy makers**



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# Policy and Practice Links

- **The Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research is planning a gathering in September entitled “Taking Action.”**
- **It will explore a growing interest on the part of First Nations Child Welfare Agencies and Provincial Children’s Services authorities and contribute to a multi year, and multi partner initiative to address the co-creation of new knowledge that will guide the development of new program models.**



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# Next Steps

- **Identify promising programs that fulfill the expectations of aboriginal people**
- **Evaluate these programs in terms of their effectiveness and relevance**
- **Compare and contrast Aboriginal Programs with ‘mainstream’ programs**
- **Document key elements in print and film media**
- **Develop teaching and training materials based on this learning and experience**
- **Recommend policy and practice changes for government, agencies and First Nations that would pave the way for a more comprehensive implementation of programs that are consistent with Aboriginal world views.**



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# Recognition of the qualities of Aboriginal People

- Loyalty to family and friends which is capable of expansion into loyalty to a wider circle.
- The deep love of children from which can be developed the strong desire to help the children of the race to be well-born.
- The generosity and hospitality which are outstanding characteristics of the Indian races which may be developed as some of the finer elements of social living.
- The traditional quality of courage and admiration of brave leadership and which can be used to spur the young Indian on in the face of discouragement and the hard grind of monotonous routine.
- The engrafted dignity and serenity of the leaders of the race.



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# Outcomes in Child Welfare

- Adoption of a bureaucratic and legalistic paradigm
- Increasingly rigidified practice
- Overly specialized roles
- Top down and fiscally driven policies
- Disconnection from community
- Overly prescriptive standards
- Increasing distance between child welfare practitioners and those they serve

Yet these are the models passed on to Aboriginal service providers



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# What now?

- **Bring together the best of indigenous and western approaches by strengthening elements of interconnectedness and spirituality to child welfare practice in all of our communities.**
- **Our destinies are so intertwined, that only by bringing together the full force of our understanding that we can reverse the actions of past generations and create new approaches based upon lessons critical to our common future.**



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▪ **Experience in residential schools and child welfare systems**

**Impact on children, families and communities**

**Advice from elders**

**Implications for today**

**Forced separation from parents, family and community and subsequent isolation from own community and society at large**

**Children felt abandoned  
Not belonging anywhere –  
Rejection by family, community and society at large  
Extreme loneliness  
Invisibility to white people**

- Learn about your history
- Know your relatives and keep in contact with them
- Maintain family ties
- Give lots of hugs to your children and grandchildren
- Develop a cross cultural program between native and white people

- Children are a community responsibility
- Find more creative ways to sustain connections to family and community (e.g. Homecoming celebrations)
- Increase understanding and communication between non-aboriginal child welfare systems and aboriginal communities
- Incorporate spirituality as the basis for program development
- Provide training for front line workers regarding our culture, spirituality and language

▪ **Assault on spirituality**

- Learn Indian prayers and traditional smudging
- Pray to recognize and acknowledge our purpose in this lifetime
- Teach our children our language, spirituality, and prayers



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▪ **Experience in residential schools and child welfare systems**

▪ **Loss of parental and extended family connection**

**Impact on children, families and communities**

**Lack of love as a foundation for life**  
**Breakdown of family life**

**Advice from elders**

- Connect youth and Elders
- Recognize and support kinship connections
- Share family values, visiting one another, storytelling, family history (genealogy)
- Learning the family ways, extension of family ties through cultural ways aunts, uncles extended family

**Implications for today**

- Ensure that children have someone they can trust (Elder/Mentor)
- Ensure that children feel they belong
- Let children know that they are special and unique
- Teach parenting in aboriginal ways
- Listen to families, they know what we need to do



▪ **Experience in residential schools and child welfare systems**

▪ **Assault on culture, language and spirituality**

**Impact on children, families and communities**

- Loss of identity as an aboriginal person
- Loss of pride
- Low self esteem
- The loss of culture and language
- Feeling “white” on the inside in spite of appearances

**Advice from elders**

- Seek direction from the Elders
- Involve Elders in decision making and teaching
- Live our traditional way of life with our values
- Know who we are
- Record and preserve traditional knowledge, history, stories, songs and traditions
- Community must take responsibility to improve the standards for child care
- Take a traditional and holistic approach to child welfare

**Implications for today**

- Take a traditional holistic approach to child welfare
- Hire our own people to do the job.
- Train our front line workers regarding our culture, spirituality and language
- Incorporate our own methods of research and not let ourselves be driven by western ideology
- Lay our own foundation and stop being dictated to by INAC



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▪ **Experience in residential schools and child welfare systems**

▪ **Denigration of parents and race**

**Impact on children, families and communities**

- Alienation from own people and white society
- Fear of child welfare and of having children removed
- Fear of being judged as inadequate parents

**Advice from elders**

- Pride in who we are
- Importance of language and cultural history
- Integrate Blood Tribe ways in our everyday lives and teach these ways to our children
- Make our religious leaders be true to their roles
- Help our young people to enhance their aboriginal knowledge and way of life
- Teach our children about native pride and to be proud of who they are
- Children need to hear old stories and history
- Ensure each family member has a nature name

**Implications for today**

- Teach our children what their duties are to become positive contributors to a well functioning community
- Teach our children about their future
- Having an Elder mentor in the program in the community, with youth and Elders working together, where Elders would give traditional teaching and just interacting with the Elders



# Challenges

- The loss of culture and tradition that has resulted from colonisation continues to affect the lives of Aboriginal people.
- “Western” people are often unaware of the oppressive impact of their assumptions, beliefs and attitudes toward aboriginal people.
- Historian Lise Noel (2000) reminds us that systemic colonization is grounded in intolerance. This intolerance comes from unconscious assumptions that underlie “normal institutional rules and collective reactions”. It is a consequence of following these rules and accepting these reactions in everyday life.
- In systemic colonization, Noel suggests no single source of oppression or demeaning can be assigned causal or moral primacy. These are imbedded in the consciousness of all and engrained in our day to day lives to such an extent that if the oppressed cannot point to any single form of oppression, then the oppressor and his consciousness become invisible.



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# Recognition of common humanity

- Jagged Colonialism (Leroy Littlebear)
- We all need to heal
- We can learn from each other
- Build upon healing strategies of the AHF



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# What this will call on from all of us

- Courage to reflect on our beliefs, assumptions, biases
- There is a strong and continuing desire among many Aboriginal people and their allies to build upon traditional Aboriginal strengths and values such as; courage, respect for each other and for nature, the oral tradition and the wisdom of the elders, a deep connection with each other and mother earth, a consistent application of spirituality to all of life, Cultural camps and some models of practice provide concrete examples of the power of these concepts to improve daily life.



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