

APPENDIX D Discussions with Off Reserve Child Welfare Managers

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 D 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 Off-Reserve Child Welfare Agencies in New Brunswick: An Effort to
Better Understand the Needs of Aboriginal Children in Care**

Lisa Jodoin

Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network Atlantic

Part of:

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
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Introduction

Across New Brunswick, social workers face a lack of Aboriginal foster families to place Aboriginal children in care with. As a result, many Aboriginal children are placed with non-Aboriginal foster parents. In the larger project *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*, researchers sought to develop a province-wide training module for non-Aboriginal foster parents caring for Aboriginal children in New Brunswick. This report delves into the unique issues impacting off-reserve children in care.

Methodology

Upon receiving ethics approval from St. Thomas University's Research Ethics Board, four program managers from around the province were identified as key informants. Each of these individuals was selected because of their high level of experience working in child welfare. Participants were contacted by email and were invited to participate in an interview. The interviews were conducted in person when possible and over the phone when long distances did not allow for an in-person meeting. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. Audio recordings of the interviews were made and hand-written notes were taken. All recordings and notes from these interviews will be destroyed three months after the submission of this report. The interviews (included as Appendix B) were aimed at discovering what challenges and barriers

off-reserve Aboriginal youth in care experience as well as how service delivery can be improved to better meet the needs of these children.

Findings

The below findings were developed and organized based on key themes that came up in the interviews.

The effectiveness of PRIDE training

Informants were unanimous in their conviction that PRIDE training, while an excellent resource for foster parents in general, does not do enough to cover Aboriginal issues and needs. PRIDE briefly addresses multiculturalism and the importance of recognizing a child's culture and religion, but it does not include information specific to Aboriginal youth. As a result, respondents felt that the current PRIDE training does not meet the needs of non-Aboriginal foster parents fostering Aboriginal children. Informants recommended updating PRIDE training to be more culturally sensitive and to offer more specific information on Aboriginal issues to better support non-Aboriginal foster parents caring for Aboriginal youth. One informant recommended having a core module of PRIDE dealing specifically with the needs of Aboriginal youth in care as a potential remedy for this current gap in information.

Barriers to placing Aboriginal children in foster care

One of the main issues when it comes to placing Aboriginal children in foster care in New Brunswick is the general sparsity of foster parents. Participants discussed the difficulties of placing Aboriginal children with Aboriginal foster parents. Because there is a general lack of foster parents in New Brunswick, social workers tend to focus on simply finding foster parents for children and pay little attention to whether or not the foster parents are Aboriginal. Additionally, when the child has been in a foster family for an extended period of time, social

workers do not want to move the child simply to place them with Aboriginal foster families, as this can disrupt the child's life and do more harm than good. Participants also expressed that in New Brunswick, a lot of children who are adopted are adopted by the foster parents who are taking care of them. By this point, the child and the foster parent are so attached that it would be detrimental to move the child simply because Aboriginal foster parents are available.

Another barrier that participants noted was that jurisdictional issues can impact the care an Aboriginal child receives. For example, sometimes a parent will ask that a youth being placed in care be placed in a First Nations community, but when the social worker contacts the First Nations community, they find that they are unable to provide a home for the child. In some cases, if the child lives off-reserve, the community may be unwilling to care for the child as that child no longer lives in the community. In these cases, the child will have to be placed with a family outside of the community, and, as a result, will more than likely end up being placed with a non-Aboriginal foster family. This jurisdictional issue can make it more difficult to place off-reserve Aboriginal children in care with Aboriginal foster parents.

Cultural disconnection

Because the majority of foster parents in New Brunswick are non-Aboriginal, respondents found that there is a real barrier to maintaining a cultural connection for these youth. Foster parents need to be able to meet the cultural and community needs of Aboriginal youth in their care, and, as a result, it can be difficult to find proper matches for First Nations children. Participants noted that one of the concerns with placing Aboriginal children with non-Aboriginal foster parents is that when they are visibly Aboriginal and the foster parents are visibly non-Aboriginal, this can have an impact on the child as they grow up. The child may experience disconnect between not being in their family of origin and being in a completely different

culture. They may become aware that they are adopted. They may feel differently, or that they do not belong, and this can lead to feelings of cultural disconnection that can negatively impact the child's well-being. Being off-reserve, these children may experience this disconnection far more acutely than children in care who live on-reserve, as those children have more opportunities to participate in cultural events and to be around other Aboriginal people. Additionally, if the foster parents are non-Aboriginal, they may struggle with knowing how best to link the youth with their community and culture. This is why it is imperative that PRIDE and other foster parent training and resources give these parents the information they need in order to meet the unique needs of the Aboriginal children in their care. Without proper training and background, beliefs and behaviours of the child and of the child's family could be misinterpreted or neglected. Proper training and resources are needed for the foster parents to deal with these situations and to have the cultural awareness to help minimize the child's experience of cultural disconnection.

Importance of identifying Aboriginal children off-reserve

Another key barrier to placing Aboriginal children in foster care is the difficulty of identifying Aboriginal children off-reserve. Participants emphasized the ease with which aboriginality can become invisible within the system. Because the parents and children are not always asked whether or not they are Aboriginal, and because whether or not they are is not considered important or relevant, service providers are forced to resort to guess-work. If the child looks visibly Aboriginal, or if the family name is recognizably Aboriginal, then the service provider may know, but many Aboriginal children may not be visibly Aboriginal or have a traditionally Aboriginal name. As a result, the foster parents of these children may not receive the supports and resources that they need to raise an Aboriginal child, and consequently, the child may experience increased cultural and social disconnection.

Participants noted that while some social workers are getting better at trying to find out if the child can get status or can be recognized or affiliated with a community, there are still many bureaucratic and systemic barriers in place, and it is not considered a priority to do so. Additionally, depending on whether or not the child is Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Cree, or Inuit different resources may be required for foster parents. So it is not only important to be able to identify whether or not the child is Aboriginal; it is also important to identify the child's specific Aboriginal background.

Additionally, there are no protocols in place to guide social workers in *how* to ask whether or not a client is Aboriginal. Participants felt that more work needs to be done to develop appropriate methodologies for gaining this information from clients. One respondent noted *“Is it appropriate to ask ethnicity and race coming in through the front door of our service? And if so, what do those questions need to look like? How do we identify that in a culturally safe way? Until we do that, we're going to continue to miss those youth.”* One participant mentioned that their office was partnering with local Aboriginal organizations to start answering these questions, but having provincial guidelines and protocols in place to instruct social workers in how to collect this information would be ideal.

Lack of statistics on Aboriginal children in care in New Brunswick

One reason that service providers have difficulty identifying Aboriginal children in care is because statistics are not kept. Participants stressed that collecting this information is vital and should be as important as name, date of birth, and Medicare number. One participant stressed that *“that would be the place to start and to acknowledge the fact that we don't even keep them. I mean the system has a component where you can fill in whether they're Aboriginal, but people*

don't always say, and I'm not sure if it's a mandatory field that has to be filled. Getting the statistics, the facts, they speak for themselves."

Because service providers are not required to collect this information, they do not consider it to be important. Making it a mandatory part of the process would instill in service providers the belief that whether or not the child is Aboriginal is important and relevant. There is still a lack of awareness about off-reserve Aboriginal people and a tendency for people to think that all Aboriginal people live on-reserve. Keeping a record of how many children in care off-reserve are Aboriginal is essential for understanding the depth and scope of the situation.

What do non-Aboriginal foster parents need to know?

Participants noted that work is currently being done to find out what information non-Aboriginal foster parents need most and what resources would best benefit them when caring for Aboriginal children. Focus groups have been conducted with social workers, people from the community, people from the Child and Youth Advocate's office, social workers who have worked in Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal social workers, and other key people. It is hoped that this work will lead to better resources for non-Aboriginal foster parents and a better understanding of what is important for Aboriginal children when they are placed in care.

Some things informants mentioned as key information that non-Aboriginal foster parents need to know include: needing to know that they have an Aboriginal foster child in their care, what the child's culture and community is, what their day-to-day life experience is, what their family culture is, what the child's experience has been, why they have ended up in care, who the links are between the youth in their care and their home community, and how to use these links to best care for the child. Informants noted that there is a protocol in place to help foster parents

get this information, but they felt that it could be enhanced and that better supports for the foster parents to connect with the child's family and with other important people in the child's life are still needed.

There is an expectation that non-Aboriginal foster parents help maintain a cultural connection for the child in their care. That requires that the foster family have some level of awareness of the culture of the youth that's living in their home. They need to have the ability to gain that exposure and information, and they need a system in place that can help them get that information. In addition to this, participants also felt that foster parents should get broader information on the history of Aboriginal people in both the country and the region to learn about the particular challenges that First Nations people in the region face. Participants felt that if there is research on why First Nations children specifically are increasingly coming into care, that research needs to be communicated to foster parents and to social workers as well.

Respondents felt that most foster parents want the information and are open to learning, but the problem is that there are no clear, agreed-upon answers for these parents, and it does not seem to be a priority for government. Foster parents need to know that it is important that they meet the unique needs of the Aboriginal children in their care; they need to know it is a priority for government because that message is not currently being communicated to foster parents.

Systemic injustice

Participants also discussed the role of systemic injustice in relation to Aboriginal children in care. Oftentimes social workers may feel that they themselves are not prejudiced and will remain unaware of the overall system of oppression that their clients struggle with daily. One participant noted that "*if 20 Syrian kids were in care, there'd be eyebrows going. 'Hey wait a minute, why are all these Syrian children coming into care?'*" This suggests that the large

number of Aboriginal children in care somehow goes unnoticed or is not considered to be problematic. It is just accepted that a lot of Aboriginal children are in care and the deeper issues as to why this is the case remain unaddressed. Participants stressed that it is important for social workers to be aware of how systems of oppression impact the lives of their Aboriginal clients and to be more aware of the history of colonization and the government's historical role in assimilating Aboriginal people. A lot of times social workers focus on the parent's lifestyle and poor choices and do not consider how colonization and discrimination impact the parent and their situation. Participants felt that while social workers are dealing with individual clients, they also need to take into consideration the greater historical context of colonization in which their clients exist.

Social worker training and education

Participants stressed that there is a need for social workers to be more sensitive and better educated about Aboriginal cultures and the history of colonization in Canada. While participants stressed that social workers are already overworked and are expected to know so much about so many different topics, they felt that it was important for social workers to be taught more about cultural sensitivity and systemic racism in relation to their Aboriginal clients. If the child going into care is Aboriginal, participants felt that social workers need to be really aware and astute about Aboriginal history and the supports that foster parents will need. Participants felt that the work needs to be done at the level of the social workers more so than at the level of foster parents because they are the ones communicating with partners and service providers on behalf of these youth. As a result, interviewees felt that mandatory professional level courses are needed for non-Aboriginal social workers in New Brunswick. Participants felt that social work training should include: protocols for identifying Aboriginal clients and for

making appropriate links to help support the child, cultural information on the various Aboriginal groups in New Brunswick, information on what cultural sensitivity means and what that looks like in practice, how to identify what community the client lives in, and what supports and resources are available. Once a youth is identified as Aboriginal, the social worker needs to have specific protocols in place to meet the unique needs of that child.

What do non-Aboriginal social workers need to know?

Participants identified some key things they felt that non-Aboriginal social workers need to know when dealing with Aboriginal clients. These include: where the child's connections are, who the youth's existing supports are, and who they already receive support from. They need to know information about the child's culture, what a day in their life looks like, and what the family's comfortable with. They need to know about the birth family, as well as the extended family, whether or not the child is connected to a community, what services that may not traditionally be offered but that the child is entitled to, and if there are challenges, they need to know who to call. There are consultants in place to help social workers working with Aboriginal youth, and social workers need to know that and be in contact with these consultants in order to help navigate them through what services and resources the child is eligible for.

One of the challenges social workers face is learning how to best support the Aboriginal youth in their care when there are no province-wide protocols in place. One participant explained that *“Working with their Aboriginal clients looks potentially different than some of their other files, but what they need to know is more about the client's culture and how to incorporate that culture into their case file. We need to get creative, we may need to think a little bit outside the box when it comes to accessing services.”* By thinking outside of the box and trying to bring that cultural element to the case files, social workers can find new and effective ways to better help

and support the Aboriginal youth in their care. In practice, that could look like working with local Aboriginal organizations to find Aboriginal mentors for youth in care, or Aboriginal parent aids who could better support Aboriginal parents. Working with local Aboriginal organizations can help social workers foster that cultural connection for the child as well as for the biological and foster parents.

Inter-organizational collaboration

Participants emphasized that inter-organizational collaborations were incredibly helpful in offering crucial supports for Aboriginal youth in care. By building relationships with local Aboriginal organizations, both on- and off-reserve, interviewees found that they were able to provide much more suitable, culturally relevant, resources for their Aboriginal clients. Having such great experiences in this regard, many of the interviewees wished that there was a directory of such contacts in place for social workers to turn to.

Each region has different First Nations groups making up their clientele, and some regions may have very few Aboriginal clients. For social workers who do not have many Aboriginal clients, they may not have many natural opportunities to forge relationships and partnerships with local Aboriginal organizations. Having a database of supports and consultants would be greatly beneficial for social workers across the province who need such a resource to better support both their Aboriginal youth in care and the non-Aboriginal foster parents who care for them.

Resources and priorities

Participants felt that other provinces had better, centralized resources in place for non-Aboriginal foster parents and that this did not seem to be a priority in New Brunswick. For example, British Columbia has an Association of Aboriginal Foster Parents, and Prince Edward

Island has a whole handbook for Aboriginal child welfare. Participants felt that New Brunswick was very behind in this respect. They did mention, however, that having three different Aboriginal cultures in New Brunswick makes creating a centralized resource more challenging, but participants still feel that such a resource is necessary. Prioritizing Aboriginal children in care in New Brunswick would help necessitate such a resource.

Participants felt that what is particularly needed is a set of protocols in place to advise social workers once they identify their client as Aboriginal – an infrastructure of supports, resources, and services specific to the needs of off-reserve Aboriginal children that social workers can turn to. Interviewees noted that rather than using the same resources that they do for non-Aboriginal clients, they felt that it would be more suitable to have resources that better cater to their Aboriginal clients' needs in terms of being culturally sensitive and bringing that cultural element to the table. One participant stated

if we can identify the youth as First Nations then we can make the services not just for the youth culturally specific but for the parents as well ... We need to develop resources in our community that are culturally specific – it seems that we're reinventing the wheel every time now, whether it's a foster home, whether it's a parent aid, whether it's a mentor – we need to develop that capacity so that it's not reinventing the wheel every time. We need it to be second nature to our social work staff that when they're developing a case plan rather than call the company we always call for parent aids, is there a cultural piece to this? If so, what does that look like? Who can I get that service from? Even with that identification of the youth as Aboriginal, we still struggle with what capacity there is in our community to provide the service we want to provide.

Having a directory in place would allow social workers to better access the services and resources that would be most beneficial to the Aboriginal children in care.

Because each region has different First Nations communities that they deal with, and because some regions may have 4 or 5 First Nations communities in their region while others may not have any, the level of resources for Aboriginal clients can vary dramatically between regions. Participants felt that there needs to be provincially-led directives across every region to communicate the expectation and protocols. One participant noted that

All of the regions can do whatever they want to do to make this better, but until there's provincial leadership, someone who takes it and runs with it at the provincial level, there's always going to be a gap. ... A level of service a First Nations person might get in Fredericton will be a lot different than the service a First Nations person might get in Moncton. There'd be very little consistency. That provincial leadership would be required to get that consistency.

Creating province-wide protocols and resources for working with Aboriginal children in care would be a step towards making the level of service that Aboriginal children in care experience consistent across the province.

Opportunities – Truth and Reconciliation

Participants identified Truth and Reconciliation as a great opportunity for working with Aboriginal communities to improve services for Aboriginal children in care across the province. One participant noted that

One of the things that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation is the idea that we need to recognize that our way isn't always better. There's different ways that children can be brought up in families. ... I really think we need to be more open about other ways of helping families than the way we've been led to believe is the best way. And I think that's where we've missed out a lot. In some cases they can do better work than we can.

By working together with First Nations communities and urban Aboriginal organizations, social workers can find better ways to support Aboriginal children and parents both in terms of the services that can be provided and the resources that can be developed.

Participants felt that they had no guidance or leadership from government on Truth and Reconciliation. While the TRC had some very specific guidelines for child welfare, participants felt that there was no movement in the province towards implementing them.

One participant stated that

I can't even find out who's responsible for them [Truth and Reconciliation], like one of the recommendations is specifically around fostering Aboriginal children and we haven't gotten any leadership centrally on that. And when I asked ... who's responsible for Truth and Reconciliation he said that's a good question, I don't know ... Why aren't we asking those questions? I don't know where our government is with Truth and Reconciliation. I don't know what's happening or why it's not happening. But it's like if you don't ask the questions, you're not going to get the answers.

Truth and Reconciliation can be an opportunity for the provincial government and service providers to partner with Aboriginal communities to work together to finally “get it right” when it comes to Aboriginal children in care.

Recommendations

1. Create a plan to better recruit Aboriginal foster parents and non-Aboriginal foster parents who are sensitive to First Nations cultures and history and who are willing to work at maintaining a cultural element for the Aboriginal youth in their care.
2. Provide better training for non-Aboriginal foster parents of Aboriginal children by developing a core module of PRIDE training on First Nations issues, history, and fostering Aboriginal youth.
3. Have mandatory training on cultural sensitivity, Aboriginal culture, and history for non-Aboriginal social workers in New Brunswick.
4. Work with both on- and off-reserve Aboriginal organizations to create an appropriate methodology for collecting information on identity from First Nations clients.
5. Create a database of statistics on how many children in care in New Brunswick are Aboriginal and how many are living with non-Aboriginal foster parents. These statistics are crucial for identifying the scope of the situation and for addressing the issues relevant to Aboriginal children in care.
6. Create a directory of First Nations organizations, services, and resources that social workers can turn to in order to better support non-Aboriginal foster parents and the Aboriginal youth in their care.
7. Create a centralized resource that outlines protocols and expectations for social workers working with First Nations youth in care in New Brunswick. Such a resource should outline the

steps that a social worker should take when working with First Nations clients in order to ensure that the services the client receives are as culturally relevant as possible.

8. Create an off-reserve Aboriginal central office to help meet the unique needs of Aboriginal children in care who live outside of their home communities.

9. Take provincial leadership in implementing Truth and Reconciliation in New Brunswick, particularly in terms of child welfare, and working with First Nations organizations across the province in order to do so.

Conclusion

What was always consistent throughout the interviews with the informants was their belief in the need for better education on Aboriginal issues for both social work staff and for non-Aboriginal foster parents caring for Aboriginal children. Additionally, participants continually stressed the importance of incorporating culturally relevant resources and services into service delivery for Aboriginal children and caregivers. By working together with on- and off-reserve Aboriginal organizations, the present gaps in services can be met and improved, and the quality of care that Aboriginal children receive across the province can be greatly enhanced; however, without provincial leadership only so much can be done. In order to uniformly improve the quality of service that Aboriginal children in care receive across the province, provincial-wide protocols and resources need to be developed and implemented. By actively participating in Truth and Reconciliation in New Brunswick, the provincial government has an opportunity to begin this important work and to make real change for the Aboriginal children in care in our province.

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?