

Community Networking: A Policy Approach to Enhance Aboriginal Child Welfare in Off-Reserve Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results from a community based participatory research initiative involving an Aboriginal Interagency Committee located in northern Alberta. The research aimed at developing knowledge and understanding of community oriented policy frameworks that promote social change at community and structural levels, to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. Emerging policy lessons suggest “community networking” as a viable approach to address off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. This approach utilizes a formal structure, grounding in Aboriginal values and traditions, leadership and guidance from Aboriginal community members, and the values of inclusiveness and respect for cultural diversity. There is a need for further research to understand the outcomes of such an approach for the welfare of Aboriginal children and families and for similar research within other contexts.

Introduction

Despite a lack of consistent measurement between and within various jurisdictions, it is widely known that Aboriginal¹ children and families are strongly overrepresented within statutory child protection systems and that this trend is international in scope. There is acknowledgement that addressing this issue requires community level approaches that target contributing social and structural factors. Yet there is little research and even less theoretical anchoring of community oriented policy frameworks. Consequently, few guideposts exist for developing community approaches to address off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. In this paper we present research that has examined the membership and actions of an Aboriginal Interagency Committee in Northwestern Alberta. From this research, the concept of a “community network” has emerged as one institutional design that can facilitate the promotion of social change to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare.

The first section of this paper highlights the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children within statutory child protection systems as an international phenomenon and notes the larger social and structural issues that have acted as contributing factors. In the second section we introduce the focus of our research and its objectives and methods. We then outline a conceptual framework for understanding

¹ In Canada, the term Aboriginal is used to encompass First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Although New Zealand’s indigenous people are referred to as “Maori,” the US employs the terms “American Indian,” and/or “Alaskan Native,” and Australia distinguishes between its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For the purpose of consistency, the term Aboriginal is applied in each instance throughout this paper.

community approaches to child welfare. In the final sections we introduce the concept of the community network, identify its key functions and processes, and discuss the policy lessons it offers.

Aboriginal child welfare: An international crisis

Although direct comparisons between countries are not possible, the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection systems in Canada, Australia, the US, and New Zealand is indicative of an international crisis. In Canada, Aboriginal children constitute approximately 6% of the total child population (Statistics Canada 2006a). However, they typically comprise 40 to 80% of the children in foster home, group home, or institutional care (Trocmé, Knoke and Blackstock 2004). A 2003 study found that 16% of Canadian child protection investigations resulted in formal placements for Aboriginal children, compared to 7% for non-Aboriginal children (ibid). The most recent data indicates that Australian Aboriginal children are nine times more likely to be placed in out of home care than non-Aboriginal children (Australian Institute of Health and Family 2010). New Zealand's Aboriginal children constitute 24% of the child population (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) but between 35% (Thoburn 2008) and 45% (Brown 2000) of the children in government care. Aboriginal children in the US typically represent about 1% of the child population, and about 2% of children in government care (US Department of Health and Human Services 2009). Furthermore, studies have reported that the disproportionate overrepresentation of Aboriginal children increases as they move deeper into the child protection system in Canadian (Blackstock, Trocmé, and Bennett 2004; Trocmé, et al 2005), American (Carter 2009; Harris and Hackett 2008), and Australian contexts (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare 2010; Tilbury 2009). What is perhaps more disturbing, however, is that despite efforts to address this overrepresentation, the numbers of Aboriginal children coming into care continues to rise. For example, Canadian government statistics indicate that the number of on-reserve First Nations children placed in out of home care grew by 71.5% between 1995 and 2001 (McKenzie 2002), while in Australia, during the five year period ending in 2009, the number rose by 44%.

This increasing disparity may be at least partially related to population dynamics. In particular, Aboriginal populations are increasing more rapidly than the overall population in Canada and internationally (e.g. Statistics Canada 2006b). However, neglect – which is linked to structural-based issues, such as poverty, inadequate housing, and substance abuse – is the primary reason Aboriginal children enter child protection systems (Trocmé et al. 2005). Moreover, studies have indicated that these structural factors impact placement decisions more for Aboriginal children than for non-Aboriginal children (Carter 2010, 2009; Lavergne et al 2008; Trocmé et al. 2005).

In fact, it is well understood that the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and families within child protection systems is symptomatic of a larger crisis that can be traced back to the legacy of colonization, marginalization and oppression that generations of Aboriginal people have endured. It is also widely acknowledged that there is a need for strategies to address both on and off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. Blackstock and Trocmé suggest that overrepresentation of Aboriginal children is unlikely to improve as long as the problems continue to be defined within the narrow scope of child protection systems. They argue that a new approach is needed, one that addresses the larger community and structural issues impacting Aboriginal child welfare: “Resilient Aboriginal communities provide the best chance for resilient, safe and well Aboriginal children, young people and

families” (Blackstock and Trocme 2005, p. 117). Connors and Maidman note that “[First Nations] children are protected through the natural healthy functioning of well communities” (Connors and Maidman 2001, p. 414). These voices are echoed by many others who suggest that community approaches are needed to enhance the welfare of Aboriginal children and families.

The “on-reserve” and “off-reserve” distinction

In many countries policy frameworks distinguish between Aboriginal people residing “on-reserve” versus those residing “off-reserve.” However, Aboriginal people who officially reside “off-reserve,” often maintain strong ties with reserves and may reside there for weeks or months at a time. Similarly, those officially living “on-reserve” often spend considerable time “off-reserve” engaged in employment or other activities, as well as utilizing services not available on their reserve.

In Canada, Aboriginal people officially residing “off-reserve” number approximately 700,000 or about 70% of the total Aboriginal people living in Canada. Aboriginal children and young people represent more than 40% of this total (Statistics Canada 2006). Similar to “on-reserve” Aboriginal families, these families have higher rates of unemployment and poverty and poorer quality housing than non-Aboriginal families. They also deal with ongoing issues of racism, social exclusion, and lack of cultural esteem.

There is a need for policy approaches to address these community level issues in off-reserve contexts. Current debates focus primarily on issues of Aboriginal self-governance in relation to the delivery of off-reserve child protection services (Hudson and McKenzie 2003). While not denying the importance of these debates, our intent has been to side-step them, concentrating on a policy framework that focuses on promoting social change in off-reserve contexts, as opposed to social service delivery (Tseng 2002).

Research Design and Methods

Our research began in the spring of 2008 as a combination of longitudinal case study research and community-based participatory action research (CBPR). The research encompasses not just understanding the dynamics of social promotion in the governance of child welfare, but the development of community-based knowledge to advance the capacity and effectiveness of this social promotion (Minkler 2005). Specific objectives of the research include:

- I. Examining activities directed at community based social change to address Aboriginal child welfare.
- II. Exploring roles and relations between individuals involved in these efforts as well as linkages between these individuals and other organizations relevant to Aboriginal child welfare including federal, provincial/state, regional and municipal governments.
- III. Identifying factors impacting community based efforts to address Aboriginal child welfare, including institutional designs and policy frameworks.

The methodology for this research includes community members in defining what we seek to know, and in gathering, organizing, and analyzing information, and reflecting on its relevance to our goals for social change (Bradbury and Reason 2003). Because this process occurs throughout the research, sources of information, methods of collection and analysis are continually redefined. However, the research is also guided by Aboriginal epistemology. While there is a certain amount of congruence with CBPR, notably the creation and use of knowledge for the benefit of the community, and the recognition

that this requires reflection and attunement to subjective experience (c.f. Ermine 1995), there are also tensions and areas of divergence. The notion of community as “case study,” and the idea of acting *on* one’s community to create change are concepts that do not necessarily resonate with Aboriginal methods of research (Smith 1999). Consequently, the research methods involve processes of dialogue and reflection.

The members and the work of an Aboriginal Interagency Committee in Northwestern Alberta provide the focus for this research. Situated within the Peace River valley, the area was originally the site of a diverse mix of Indigenous people including Cree, Dene Tha’, and Athapaskan Beaver. Métis communities also developed in this area as a result of the fur trade. To the north of these groups were the Inuit. Europeans came to the area, first with the fur trade, later as farmers and ranchers, and more recently as part of the oil and gas and pulp industries. The area’s Aboriginal population is more than double the provincial average of 5% and four times Canada’s national average of 3% and is comprised primarily, although not exclusively, of all of the above groups (Statistics Canada 2006). The area is largely rural and encompasses the town of Peace River (pop. 6,315) as well as several smaller towns, villages and hamlets. First Nations located within this area include the Duncan’s, Woodland, and Lubicon Cree First Nations.

The Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC) has a twenty year history in the community. Its mandate is to enhance the welfare of Aboriginal children, youth, families and Elders. Initiated originally as a way of sharing information between service providers, the group has become more action-focused over time, engaging in social promotion to improve the lives of Aboriginal people. Yet the committee remains an informal organization with no permanent funding. In all its activities it relies on voluntary participation, donations, and funds contributed by agencies and organizations both within and outside of the community.

Data has been gathered through participation in interagency meetings, focus groups and interviews with AIC members, analysis of documents including minutes of interagency meetings, correspondence to or from the interagency committee (or its sub-committees), and documents from the member agencies themselves. This information is being analyzed qualitatively using a reflexive-dialectical approach that encompasses four broad “domains of analysis:” subjective individual meanings and values, social discourses and dialogues, individual words and actions, and social systems, structures and events (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000).

Conceptualizing Community Approaches to Child Welfare

A community focused orientation to enhance Aboriginal child welfare first requires distinguishing between concepts of *child welfare* and *child protection*. Child protection is the protection of children and youth from negative outcomes; abuse and neglect, addictions, sexual exploitation and other situations that pose significant risk to their immediate and long term well-being. Child protection systems are the formal systems and services – the legislative authority and duly delegated administrative systems – that are developed to address such risks. Child welfare, on the other hand, refers to the physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual well-being of each and every child. Child welfare systems should be viewed as encompassing all of the people and processes that promote this well-being (Peirson, Laurendeau and Chamberland 2001; Stroick and Jensen 1999).

Aboriginal child welfare was sustained for thousands of years through rich and vibrant socio-cultural lifeworlds² that placed a high degree of value on children and ensured traditions, identities, roles and relations that nurtured children's physical, spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual growth. European colonization attacked these lifeworlds; implementing formal systems of power that enabled genocide, and in many countries, confinement on reserves, outlawing of cultural traditions, and enforced removal of children to residential schools (Blackstock and Trocmé 2005; Connors and Maidman 2001; Hand 2006; Pettipas 1994).

The disturbance of a people's lifeworld has profound impacts on individual and collective well-being. These impacts include the disruption and loss of tradition and collective identity, of social roles and relations, and of individual identity, motivation, and self-pride. Interpersonal violence, depression, addictions, alienation, and suicide become common (Duran and Duran 2000). All of these impacts have been identified for Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities and are further magnified by barriers to housing, employment, and education.

However, these negative impacts should not be viewed as the only or whole "truth." Many Aboriginal people survived and resisted these assaults on their personal and collective identities, maintaining cultural traditions and positive social relations. Many others are reclaiming and revitalizing them. This is testimony to the strength of individuals and groups, and to the power of these Aboriginal lifeworlds. Nonetheless, the consequences have been and continue to be severe, of which the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children within child protection systems is one obvious reflection.

The concept of community encompasses geographic localities as well as social relations and interactions guided by norms, values, and traditions that are socially transmitted (Boothroyd 1996). Socially cohesive communities serve as "spaces of belonging" for their members (Dal Fiore 2007). Within traditional Aboriginal perspectives 'community' is intrinsic both ontologically and epistemologically. As Morriseau states, "I speak of *community* as if it were a living entity, and rightly so, for a community has a life of its own. It is made up of many individuals tied together through a collective desire to live in a type of harmony" (Morriseau, 1998 p. 48). In Canada, this is reflected in First Nations' on-reserve approaches to child protection – despite little support for these in face of government approaches that reflect Western individualism (Brown, Haddock and Kovach 2002; Foxcroft and Blackstock 2003). At the same time, traditional Aboriginal perspectives of community are situated within a view of all entities – human and non-human – connected through a spiritual life force transcending both time and space (Little Bear, 2000; Rice, 2005). Thus the concept of community encompasses a much broader perspective of universal relations of balance and integration.

...collectivism is valued over individualism, and this collectivist 'belief system' includes ...harmony with nature; a present time orientation; a collateral relational orientation that includes kin and extended family; an active orientation to 'being' and 'being in becoming' where

² The term "socio-cultural lifeworld," or "lifeworld" refers to social roles and relations, cultural beliefs and traditions, norms and values that are longstanding and intergenerationally transmitted. See, for example, Duran and Duran (1995).

attainment of inner fulfillment and serenity with one's place in the community and the universe is the focus.... Most importantly, in this collectivist world view, the welfare of the individual is intricately bound to the well-being of the community and its relationship with more than the human world (Hart 2008, p. 133).

Yet as noted above, issues of exclusion, marginalization and oppression have profound implications for Aboriginal child welfare in off-reserve contexts. Consequently, community approaches must directly address these, focusing on the promotion of social change, targeting social systems and the processes within those systems. Given the traditional focus on the provision of services to individuals, key questions concern policy approaches and institutional designs that can facilitate the promotion of social change to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare. Based on the findings of our research, we introduce the concept of the community network, identify its key functions and processes, and highlight the policy lessons it offers.

Community Networking: An Institutional Design for Social Promotion of Off-Reserve Aboriginal Child Welfare

While the study of social networks is not new, interest in them has grown considerably due to the explosion of interest in the role of social capital in individual and collective well-being (Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993, 2001). Social networks refer to social structures consisting of members (individuals, organizations, countries) and their shared associations, interests, or activities. Members of a network may or may not have strong connections to one another and share similar goals, values, and interests. Typically, the boundaries of a network are extremely loose, membership is fluid, and members have many other connections that give them access to a broad range of information, ideas, and resources. Consequently, networks often result in the diffusion of radical innovation and change (Dal Fiore, 2007). Communities represent a specific type of network that is characterized by much denser ties between members as well as the existence of strongly shared norms and values. Communities represent social groups which embody belonging and commitment to one another and to the group as a whole (Hart, 2008; Morriveau, 1998). It has been noted that within groups that display these characteristics, change and innovation tend to be much more limited (Dal Fiore, 2007). (See Fig. 1)

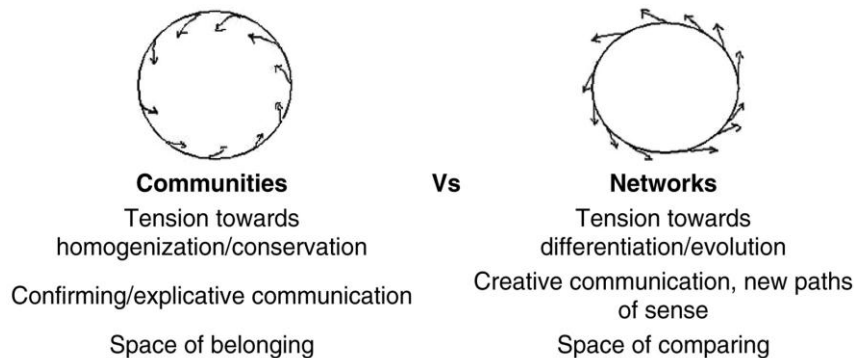


Fig. 1: Differentiating communities from networks (Dal Fiore 2007, p. 861)

In the field of public administration, there is an increasing interest in networks and the role they play in policy implementation and public management. This interest is particularly evident where policy issues are viewed as dependent on co-operation and mobilization of resources that are outside the traditional hierarchal control of government. From this perspective, policy networks are best understood as “webs of relatively stable and ongoing relationships which mobilize and pool dispersed resources so that collective (or parallel) action can be orchestrated towards the solution of a common policy” (Kenis and Schneider 1991, p. 36). Policy networks are characterized by “predominantly *informal* interactions between *public and private* actors with distinctive, but *interdependent interests*, who strive to solve problems of collective action on a central, *non-hierarchical level*” (Börzel, 1998, p. 260, emphasis in original). Interorganizational and multiorganizational networks are viewed as being more capable of addressing social issues that cannot be addressed, or addressed easily, by single organizations (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001).

The Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC) is best understood as a “community network.” This institutional form represents a hybrid of characteristics associated on a continuum between communities and networks (Dal Fiore, 2007). Community characteristics include ongoing, face to face interaction between a specific group of people who have a consciousness of common bonds, and who develop, and from time to time, reaffirm their common vision, norms and values. Network characteristics include a degree of fluidity in the membership and boundaries of that membership and differential linkages of members to individuals and organizations that offer information, ideas, identities, and resources (Mignone, 2003; Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988). The non-hierarchical nature of the community network is a characteristic of both communities and networks.

COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

AIC documents suggest that the work of the AIC is grounded in a vision and values that have been developed by its members and that are periodically reviewed to ensure their continuing relevance. This vision is to “promote unity, respect, tradition, values, and culture of the Aboriginal people for the well-being of our communities.” Stated values and beliefs include:

- Involve all people, race, color, creed – that come together in a safe and caring environment.
- Respect the equality and dignity of individuals and agencies
- Practice respect, confidentiality and integrity.
- Act with honesty, kindness, compassion and discretion.
- Work together in partnership with other agencies and communities to promote the traditions, values and culture of Aboriginal people
- Honour the seven teachings: courage, honesty, humility, love, respect, strength, wisdom.³

Interviews, focus groups, and participant observation suggest that the vision, values, and beliefs of the AIC are congruent with the personal visions, goals and values of individual members.⁴

We're all working individually but we're working together as a whole with the same goals and visions. (AIC Member)

³ Aboriginal Interagency Committee, Goals and Action Plan for 2007.

⁴ All of these comments are taken from interviews conducted with AIC members.

It is really working at something outside ourselves. ...We are all working into the circle to further the ... build up the life and values of First Nation, in whatever way each of us, and through our organizations, can do it. So we are kind of turned outward and we all meet there in the middle somehow. Each one is not worried about guarding their own pet project, somehow we have a sense of 'what I'm about,' is building up this community of Aboriginal people, but everyone in the circle is contributing toward that. So we are all affirming what is happening. (AIC Member)

Prominent for many AIC members is the importance of connection with the larger culture and spirituality to the work and success of the AIC. In all its activities, the committee is grounded in and guided by more traditional Aboriginal perspectives of child, family, and community well-being. The participation of Elders, prayer and ceremony are accepted, promoted and encouraged.

I like that we open with a prayer, I really appreciate that. I like the way we have the Elder if she's there or he's there opening with a prayer ... a traditional prayer. I like the respect that is there. (AIC Member)

The more a person walks with First Nation, or among the people, we have discovered that they are a very spiritual people. It is woven into their culture. It is so a part of who they are that if we want to be an Aboriginal interagency, then we need to walk that path too. (AIC Member)

The AIC holds an annual cultural awareness event for the benefit of the membership. This event serves the purpose of keeping the membership in touch with Aboriginal traditions, values and beliefs. These traditions, values and beliefs are the very lifeblood of the AIC.

Equally prominent in interviews with members were personal values of inclusiveness and respect for diversity.

Because Little Red is different than Peace River and Métis from the Manning area are a little different yet again, and then we have towards Worsley, so yeah, there's some Beaver here, some Dene influence & that, some Cree, so yeah, you know,...we are trying to unify it, but create sort of equal representation and then bringing in that knowledge., as well respect for and belief in the importance of the traditions, values, and culture of [all the diverse] Aboriginal people. (AIC Member)

Incorporating and maintaining respect for diversity includes working through differences to arrive at consensus.

...just the respectfulness with which we treat each other ... there can be differences of opinion, and I guess one of the things that, that tends to happen is that we just, uh, wait until we have more of a consensus.

There's no hurry to over-rule people and move on. It [the AIC] will try to allow different opinions in a respectful way, and still move forward towards [a common] goal. (AIC Member)

For Aboriginal members of the AIC, the committee provides an important source of connection and shared purpose with other Aboriginal people.

Well, there's a ... connectedness that we have there. You know, sometimes when you're working in mainstream sometimes ... there's connectedness there, but then there's even more so when you're amongst your own, your own kind of people I guess ... because you share the same values and beliefs and you have the same goals and visions. You know you want the people and the students you're working with to be successful in every way, so you're all working towards the same goal you know. (AIC Member)

On a personal level it offered an opportunity to connect with the Aboriginal community in the area. That is important on a personal level because I'm from the Aboriginal community...so then it is an opportunity to connect with my own people. It sounds kind of discriminatory maybe, but when you work in a large non-Native organization and there's your own people out there, well for me anyways, it's always been rewarding – fulfilling maybe is a better word – to connect with other Aboriginal people, so it offered that. (AIC Member)

NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS

As noted above, networks are characterized by permeable boundaries that include a high degree of fluidity in membership as well as differential linkages of members to other individuals and organizations that offer information, ideas, identities, and resources. Through these features, networks lead to boundary-spanning learning and, as a consequence, radical and breakthrough innovations (Mignone 2003; Wellman and Berkowitz 1988). The membership of the AIC encompasses a fluid and diverse mix of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The involvement of many members is specifically supported by the mandates of the organizations or programs that they are employed by. For example, the Mission Statement of the Sagitawa Friendship Society states that the society will work “in partnership with community agencies and service providers [to] provide opportunities and programs that assist aboriginal people to feel valued, supported and capable of reaching their full potential.”⁵ Similarly, Alberta Learning has implemented a First Nations, Métis and Inuit program that emphasizes a vision of collaborative relationships to address the needs of Aboriginal learners.⁶ The involvement of Larry Stewart, a community development officer with Alberta Culture and Community Spirit, is

⁵ Sagitawa Friendship Society, retrieved Jan 15, 2009 from <http://www.anfca.com/peacriver.html>

⁶ Alberta Learning, retrieved November 10, 2008 from <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/fnmi/fnmipolicy/policyframework.aspx#vision>

supported by an organizational mandate to assist where requested with community collaboration and capacity building efforts. And the AIC is one of the committees to which a Town Council representative is appointed. And as Senior Advisor for Aboriginal Services with Region 8 Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA), Dennis Whitford's role encompasses work with Aboriginal inter-agency committees, as part of CFSA's strategic priority to improve services for Aboriginal children, youth and families through building and sustaining relationships with Aboriginal Partners.⁷

Through their various organizations and their personal lives, AIC members are connected to children, youth and elders; to men and women; to individuals living in the town of Peace River and in surrounding communities; to First Nations, Métis and Inuit as well as non-Aboriginal community members. They are employed in government, community based non-profit organizations, faith based organizations, and education and health care systems. They are connected to various regional, provincial, and federal government departments, and to a range of civil society organizations. These connections create multiple sources of information, expertise, and resources that offer possibilities for greater social change than can be achieved by any one agency or organization. Many of the member organizations also contribute financially to the work of the AIC, by assisting with funding for specific events or in-kind contributions.

A story shared by Brenda Brochu, Executive Director of the Peace River Regional Women's Shelter illustrates the impact of this networking in social change processes:

We had a couple of memorials to remember the Montreal Massacre,⁸ where a number of female students at the Polytechnique were murdered, and we had smallish turnouts, 20-25 people would come to a candlelight ceremony to remember those people. And I was keeping track of who the murdered and missing women were around Peace River, and especially deaths from family violence, and they were overwhelmingly Aboriginal women. They weren't post-secondary students! In fact, in the ten years that I've been the director here, there's only been one non-Aboriginal woman murdered in our area and there've been many – about 2 a year – Aboriginal women murdered. So when I heard about the Sisters in Spirit Campaign, sponsored by the Native Women's Association of Canada, I thought, that might resonate with people here. So I took a proposal to [the AIC] and I was just thrilled with the result! Two Aboriginal members quickly volunteered to be co-chairs of the organizing committee, and it was because, we ... we had sort of decided that 'we'll do it if we have Aboriginal buy-in, but we won't if we don't. We're not gonna do this on our own.' ... That buy-in was absolutely there, and we had, I think in the very first year, 70

⁷ Northwest Alberta Child and Family Services Authority, 2009 – 2011 Business Plan, 4.

⁸ The École Polytechnique Massacre, also known as the Montreal Massacre, occurred on December 6, 1989 at the École Polytechnique in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Twenty-five-year-old Marc Lépine, armed with a rifle and hunting knife, shot twenty-eight people before killing himself. He deliberately targeted women as he claimed to be "fighting feminism."

people or something, way more than we ever had with our Montreal Massacre Memorial. And it was because the Aboriginal Interagency was able to reach out and find people who had been affected by this tragedy and they came and told their stories. We read the names of 40 missing or murdered Aboriginal women, mostly women from northwestern Alberta, and we invited family members of four missing or murdered Aboriginal women to come and talk about what they remembered of their loved one. We chose the number four because of its sacredness to Aboriginal people. And that really was much more meaningful to people in this area. And this past year we had over 200 people at the memorial, and while once again we invited family members of four different women to speak, many more showed up - relatives of at least eight different women and girls who had been murdered or gone missing spoke out. So, that has really forwarded awareness of violence against women, and particularly Aboriginal women.

Social Promotion Processes: Targeting Systems and Lifeworlds

The vision and values of the AIC, and its events and activities encompass three elements: strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds; strengthening relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members; and challenging the institutional racism embedded in formal community systems.

STRENGTHENING ABORIGINAL LIFEWORLDS

Strengthening of Aboriginal lifeworlds includes the celebration of Aboriginal identity; repairing and enhancing social relations, including respect for elders, extended family and community involvement in child care and child rearing, and challenging interpersonal violence within Aboriginal families and communities. In the off-reserve context, it also encompasses building awareness and respect between all of the different Aboriginal nations and cultures residing within the community. Above all, strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds requires enhancing cultural knowledge and participation in cultural traditions; it is this that serves as the cornerstone for Aboriginal community resilience (Chandler and Lalonde 2008).

The AIC works to strengthen cultural continuity in various ways. An annual Aboriginal gathering and Pow-wow is held each year in the town of Peace River celebrating the diverse Aboriginal cultures of the region, Adults and young people have the opportunity to participate in traditional dance, to interact with elders, and a memorial danced is held to honor families who have experienced loss and grief. An AIC member who works with youth shares her knowledge of the impact this event has on social change for Aboriginal youth:

I've seen those kids come alive because they've learned to dance and they find themselves, and I mean, I have amazing success stories, where I had a kid that was leading down the road of addictions and everything else and she came around because she learned to dance. And within herself she found out that she's a really good writer, because

she started to write about her dance in poetry, and then has gone on and on and on. So, that's just one little success story. I've seen other kids that, they'd wear their hoodie over their head, and you'd never see them, and then when they started to dance, all of a sudden they're walking prouder. They're saying they're Cree, and their proud of it, and before they would say they were Mexican. You know? There was no pride there. (AIC Member)

Similarly, the “Sisters in Spirit” event brings together members of the Aboriginal community to honor Aboriginal women, draw attention to violence against Aboriginal women and highlight the impact this has on the whole community. According to one AIC member who works with a First Nations community:

The Sisters in Spirit, for example, well, women in Little Buffalo are telling me about abuse that happens, and they want to bring their children to the Sisters in Spirit Walk so that they can know how we care for these people [who have lost family members to violence] and how women are honoured.

The AIC membership has also partnered with school divisions and community support services to organize annual student conferences that promote Aboriginal cultural awareness and esteem and student health and success. In keeping with the principle of inclusion, these conferences are open to all students.

ENHANCING RELATIONS BETWEEN ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Fostering greater understanding and respect among non-Aboriginal people towards Aboriginal people, their cultures, traditions, and knowledge is also a vital element of this social promotion approach. No matter how strong and cohesive Aboriginal communities may be, Aboriginal children and families living off-reserve will continue to be vulnerable if their cultures, traditions, beliefs, and identities are not respected and valued within their broader communities. This entails education and information sharing as well as the creation of opportunities for ongoing interaction and relationship building between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In off-reserve communities, it is particularly important to strengthen the relationship between municipal government and the Aboriginal community (Walker 2008).

Without mutual understanding, a renewed relationship is impossible. Part of the answer is better information. Indeed, we were told many times during our mandate that most Canadians know little of Aboriginal life and less of Aboriginal history. ...Building awareness and understanding through public education is certainly a first step. Also needed are opportunities for meaningful interaction and commitment. A relationship among peoples is not a

once-and-for-all transaction. It needs to be adjusted regularly and, from time to time, reaffirmed. (Dussault 2007, pp. 10-11).

The Aboriginal gathering and Pow-wow is held within the town and draws a large number of non-Aboriginal residents and as stated above, the youth conferences welcome students of all cultures. The membership of the AIC itself is a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal and the volunteers that assist with its many activities also represent diverse cultures. But perhaps most important is the role of the municipality in AIC social change processes. As noted above, a representative of Town Council sits on the AIC. The town contributes financially to the Annual Gathering and Pow-wow and offers the arena as an alternate site in the event of inclement weather. And the Town and the AIC are working together to find funding and a site to erect an Aboriginal dance arbor that will offer a permanent facility for the Aboriginal Gathering and Pow-wow. The presence of the arbor will communicate the importance of Aboriginal culture to the fabric of the community.

CHALLENGING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

As noted earlier, from schools, to health care clinics, to businesses and corporations, to municipal, regional, and provincial government programs and services, Aboriginal people continue to be impacted by forms of exclusion and cultural genocide embedded in Euro-Canadian structures and institutions, in ways that are blatant and direct as well as in ways that are more subtle and insidious (Connors and Maidman 2002; Duran and Duran 2000). Institutional policies reflect limited understanding of the profound cultural differences and change is slow to occur. It is vital that links are created to open up dialogue between these institutions and the Aboriginal community and to promote greater cultural respect and cultural safety for all Aboriginal people.

Members of the AIC are involved in observing, monitoring, assisting, and at times expanding the implementation of Aboriginal Technology within their agencies and organizations.

In simple terms, Aboriginal Technology refers to “ways of helping” and supporting children, youth and families that have their origin in Aboriginal culture and teachings. For example, although there is a profound shortage of Aboriginal foster homes, foster home recruitment typically occurs through processes that are not in keeping with Aboriginal culture. The AIC responded by organizing a more culturally relevant recruitment event: This event opened with prayer by an Elder, included a feast, complete with a food offering ceremony, and an Aboriginal community member providing a spiritual and humanistic sharing of her story. This particular event resulted in sixteen persons expressing interest in becoming caregivers and an equal number indicating they wished to have more information about being caregivers. Another example of the implementation of Aboriginal Technology is the development of a regional Elder roster to make Elder support and consultation available to children, families and CFSA staff. AIC member agencies have begun to inquire about accessing Elders from the roster to assist in their own work. The impetus for this approach comes from several sources: Elders, who inform us that the way to address problems in the Aboriginal community is through application of traditional culture and spirituality; research that affirms an association between individual and community well being and cultural continuity (c.f. Chandler and Lalonde, 2008); and evidence indicating that the number of Aboriginal families involved with child protection services continues to

increase. The latter validates the implementation of Aboriginal Technology as a means to test Aboriginal interventions, with the intent of ultimately achieving more favourable outcomes.

Emerging Policy Lessons

The following lessons are emerging in our understanding of a policy framework to enhance off-reserve Aboriginal child welfare:

1. The importance of social promotion activities

A key lesson concerns the importance of social promotion activities to address Aboriginal child welfare. The focus of social promotion is on social change at the community level. We echo the perspective of many others who acknowledge that social promotion is one element in a continuum of approaches to child welfare. Prevention, early intervention, and protection are also necessary elements (Blackstock and Trocmé 2005; Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson 2001; Tseng 2002). However, along with them, we emphasize that social promotion has been a missing element in off-reserve child welfare policy. While specific strategies need to be developed within specific community contexts, goals should emphasize strengthening Aboriginal lifeworlds, enhancing respect for Aboriginal culture and relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members, as well as challenging forms of institutionalized racism.

2. Social promotion requires a community networking approach

Community networking fosters intersectoral, non-hierarchical collaboration between diverse community members with a wide range of internal and external links. It entails commitment to a common vision, values, and beliefs. Although more research is needed to understand how community networks are enabled and sustained, it appears that a minimum requirement is agency or organizational mandates that include goals of action-focused intersectoral social promotion at the community level, as well as the willingness to pool and to coordinate financial resources. The best ways to achieve these goals should be left up to community members and agencies, rather than being defined by organizations and agencies outside the community.

3. A community network requires a formal structure

A formal structure is needed for planning and implementing social promotion activities. This structure should have meeting space and time, financial and administrative support, coordination and leadership, regular review of progress, identification of new or ongoing priorities, and reaffirmation of personal and organizational commitment. The above should be shared among all members and member organizations.

4. Grounding in Aboriginal cultures and traditions, led by Aboriginal people

We also suggest that a community network to enhance Aboriginal child welfare must be grounded in Aboriginal cultures and traditions and led by Aboriginal people utilizing Aboriginal values and processes; this includes the guidance of elders in all its activities. In off-reserve contexts this will likely entail respect for and inclusion of multiple Aboriginal cultures, values, and traditions.

5. Building capacity for community networking through ongoing social inquiry

Further research is needed to enable better understanding of strategies for and impacts of social promotion on the welfare of Aboriginal children that could translate into capacity building for community practitioners, agencies and organizations. This research should be grounded in Aboriginal epistemology and should respect the resiliency embedded in Aboriginal ways of caring for children, families and communities.

Conclusion

The success of the Aboriginal Interagency Committee in addressing the well-being of Aboriginal people through social promotion has led to the expansion of similar networking and formalized efforts to three additional Aboriginal inter-agencies at major urban centers in northwestern Alberta. In addition, the Northwest Alberta Aboriginal Council has been formed. The membership consists of the executive from the four Aboriginal Inter-agencies, representatives from Friendship Centers and Native Counselling Services as well as Aboriginal liaison positions from the Ministries of Child and Youth Services, Education and Justice. The early thoughts about the NAAC mandate are that it will address the lack of an Aboriginal off-reserve voice.

In presenting this research, based on a case study in one rural/remote community in north-western Alberta, we are mindful that the landscape of “off-reserve” Aboriginal child welfare is comprised of a diversity of political, geographical, and cultural milieus. There are important differences between urban, rural, and remote community contexts that are often not considered in policy and program development. Additional issues of diversity must be considered in terms of the individuals and families residing in particular communities. We suggest that this research offers a fruitful foundation for adaptation to many other contexts but we emphasize the need for further dialogue and investigation.

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