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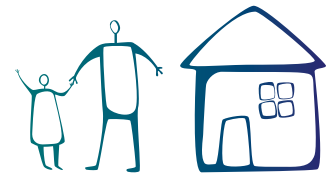

Promoting Cultural Connectedness Through Indigenous-led Child and Family Services: A Critical Review with a Focus on Canada

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Abstract

There is consensus that quality services to Indigenous children and families involve the transmission, preservation, and promotion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultural connections and must be delivered within specific First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultural frameworks led by Indigenous people. This view is expressed across research and service reports, in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 2015 Report and Calls to Action, and in the Government of Canada's newly enacted An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families (2019). This article reviews support for this viewpoint, drawing from primarily Indigenous scholarship and illustrated with reference to Indigenous-led services across Canada.

Keywords: *cultural connectedness, cultural identity, child and family services, community self-determination, customary care, Indigenous child welfare, An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families, Bill C-92.*

Introduction

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released 94 Calls to Action (TRC, 2015b). The first five Calls to Action deal specifically with child welfare, with the goal to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in government care. In the fourth Call to Action, the TRC

> call[s] upon the federal government to enact Aboriginal child-welfare legislation that establishes national standards for Aboriginal child apprehension and custody cases and includes principles that...[a]ffirm the right of Aboriginal governments to establish and maintain their own child-welfare agencies (TRC, 2015b, p. 1).

This call is echoed in academic and service reports, including those reviewed throughout this article, with a consensus that quality services to Indigenous children and families means that they are

delivered within a specifically Indigenous cultural framework. Yet, this rarely happens in Canada due to structural inequities, insufficient funding for the quantity and quality of services needed, and lack of authority, human resource capacity, and physical infrastructure, especially in rural communities (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), 1996a; TRC, 2015a). The federal government's newest instrument to promote facilitation of cultural connectedness as an essential feature of child and family services for Indigenous children and families is *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* (2019) (henceforth referred to as Bill C-92). As its stated intention, Bill C-92 "affirms the rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services" (Government of Canada, 2021b).

This article reviews theory and research evidence supporting the pivotal argument that services that are Indigenous-led and delivered within Indigenous cultural frameworks can effectively foster cultural connectedness and positive Indigenous identity. The first section provides descriptions of key features of Indigenous cultures and knowledges and how they are transmitted, preserved, and promoted through cultural connectedness. The second section explains why culturally based child and family services are important for Indigenous children and their communities as a whole. The third section provides examples of community-based and culturally adapted child and family service programs and initiatives, followed by a discussion section.

Context

Many First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous communities are working tirelessly to ensure the wellbeing of their children and families. Yet, Indigenous families face pervasive systemic barriers to achieving quality of life comparable to the rest of the Canadian population. These barriers contribute to well-known disparities in health, wellness, and achievement outcomes for Indigenous children (Ball, 2008; Boulet & Badets, 2017; Eni, 2009; Government of Canada, 2019; Greenwood et al., 2018; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), 2016), and over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in government care (Fallon et al., 2021; Sinha et al., 2011; Statistics Canada, 2018). These disparities "are a direct result of colonial policies and practices that included forced relocation, loss of lands, creation of the reserve system, banning of Indigenous languages and cultural practices, and creation of the residential school system" (Government of Canada, 2019, para. 10; TRC 2015a). Legacies of these colonial policies and practices remain entrenched in Canadian society and institutions today, leading to "persisten[t]... harm of systemic racism and discrimination that Indigenous people face on a daily basis" (Government of Canada, 2021a, web). These barriers are systemic in nature and therefore overcoming them requires systems-level change, including legislation that reconceptualizes the way child and family services are provided to Indigenous families. Authority must be returned to Indigenous communities to conceptualize and deliver services, and adequate financial and technical resources must be provided to enable this change.

Countless sources describe how mainstream child and family services fail to meet this standard for Indigenous children (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020; de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017). The British Columbia (BC) Representative for Children and Youth recently reported that Indigenous children in BC are 18 times more likely to be removed from their families than non-Indigenous children (Charlesworth, 2021). In a recent youth-led study, Indigenous youth expressed anger and frustration about the perceived injustice of being removed from their homes, families, communities, and cultures. Many youth participants described the child and family service system as a continuation of residential schools and a form of forced assimilation (Navia et al., 2018). Some participants portrayed their own child welfare apprehensions as "being taken without warning under false pretenses" and "a form of kidnapping by the state" (Navia et al., 2018, p. 44).

A 2019 independent review of child and family services for Inuit in Newfoundland and Labrador investigated why 15% of children in government care are Inuit, when only 1.8% of the population is Inuit (Kavanagh, 2019). In addition to chronic under-funding of child and family services, the review found that the service delivery model failed to incorporate Inuit knowledge and culture, to promote cultural connectedness for children in care, to demonstrate a goal to support Inuit families, and to prioritize prevention and building community capacity over child apprehensions (Kavanagh, 2019). The author emphasized that "[they] heard again and again that people perceive[d] more resources going into sending children away from their communities than in keeping them close to home or with circles of people that know and care about them" (Kavanagh, 2019, p. ix).

While Bill C-92 is limited, it is a legal framework affirming the rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to exercise authority over child and family services and to embed cultural connectedness within child welfare services and policies. Below we explore the notion of cultural connectedness and how this concept is a cornerstone of quality, Indigenous-led child and family service models. We focus especially on the signifiers of culture, cultural competence, and cultural connection that are typically less visually tangible than specific artifacts or practices. These include abstract and community-embodied attitudes, meanings, memories, and values transmitted in day-to-day interactions where Indigenous children, their families, and communities live and transmit their cultures (Ball & Simpkins, 2004; Little Bear, 2000.)

Method

To conduct our review, we examined peer-reviewed scholarly literature and non-formally disseminated reports (e.g., on organization websites), using key words searches (e.g., "Indigenous," "culture," "child and family services") in a wide range of databases. While primarily drawing on Canadian sources, we also examined literature from the United States, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, as those countries have similar challenges with ongoing colonization as in Canada and similar disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous children in government care. We reviewed sources in English from 1996 to 2021, and prioritized Indigenous scholars and sources. We also

discussed cultural connectedness and Bill C-92 with Indigenous scholars, Indigenous policy leaders, and Indigenous child and family service practitioners in Canada. These were informal interactions and did not constitute a research project per se. While we strongly uphold the principles of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP) as ethical guidelines in research (Schnarch, 2004), no new data collection from individuals or communities was undertaken for this critical review.

In addition, our social positioning is integral to understanding how we as scholars approach our work and understand our topic.

Jessica Ball: I am a white settler living and working on the unceded territory of the WSÁNEĆ peoples. For three decades I have engaged with First Nations across Canada in partnerships involving community-based training in child and youth care (Ball & Pence, 2006) and research projects requested by First Nations to support their community capacity aspirations (see www.ecdip.org). These experiences have heightened my awareness of how I have been protected from many structural inequities and social exclusions due to my positionality as a white, middle-class, cis-gendered woman who has often taken the rights associated with Canadian citizenship for granted. Reflecting on my privileged status has exposed the deeply colonial worldview in which I was incubated throughout my education. My community-engaged scholarship has demanded vigilance against unexcavated assumptions and a willingness to turn the world on its head in order to view it from the perspective of those whose marginalization is manufactured through persistent colonial laws, policies, and practices. This stance motivated my interest in supporting the federal government's Bill C-92 during its proposal stage by serving as an expert witness in the federal government's defence of Bill C-92 against contestation by the Government of Quebec and by joining with Indigenous colleagues to prepare this review. The Assembly of First Nations and First Nations Child and Family Caring Society were supportive of the federal government's defence of the Bill, while recognizing its limitations.

Annika Benoit-Jansson: I am a Mi'kmaw, French, and Swedish woman, from Nujio'qoniik, Ktaqumkuk (Bay St. George, Newfoundland). I was honoured to spend the majority of my life on the unceded territories of the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ peoples (Victoria, BC). I have been drawn to the topic of Indigenous child protection after spending years working in youth suicide prevention and as a family support worker at a semi-delegated Aboriginal child and family service agency. I was amazed by the resilience of children and families. Yet, watching children being raised by a myriad of systems without meaningful cultural and family connections, even when individual practitioners may have had good intentions, cemented my belief in the need for systemic and structural changes. Today, I am grateful to live with my two young children and my partner in the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations' community of Ty-Histanis on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Being a part of this community has deepened my perspectives and led me to pursue a master's degree in child and youth care at the University of Victoria, focusing on familial, community, and cultural connections for children, youth, and families.

Findings

Indigenous Cultures

A central rationale for Indigenous self-determination in matters concerning Indigenous child and family services is that effective services must sustain and enhance Indigenous belonging and identity in children and their family members (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2017). There is significant diversity among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures in remote, rural, and urban communities. While a pan-Indigenous approach to cultural connectedness would not be meaningful, many Indigenous organizations and scholars agree on general dimensions of Indigenous cultures and processes for promoting cultural connectedness (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2017; McIvor et al., 2009; Ullrich, 2019).

As Indigenous scholars have summarized, Indigenous cultures arise from Indigenous philosophies, knowledges, and languages, and are closely connected to relationships with the land, water, sky, and spirituality (Little Bear, 2000). Cultural connectedness is engendered through participation in the everyday life of the community. Indigenous cultures are rooted in Indigenous knowledges, which are place-based, social, and relational (Michell et al., 2008). Each culture encompasses "a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity" (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 41). Indigenous knowledges can be conceived as "a way of life, an experience-based relationship with family, spirits, animals, plants, and the land, an understanding and wisdom gained through generations of observation and teaching" (Emery, 2000, p. 37). Indigenous knowledges are typically emergent and specific to particular First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and individuals. Thus, codifying Indigenous knowledge into policy and law for non-Indigenous institutions (e.g., schools, government organizations) and service agencies, which often favour uniform policies and practices, can be challenging and lead to misrepresentations (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000). Indigenous knowledges are local, ancient, socially and relationally transmitted, and "cannot be compartmentalized and cannot be separated from the people who hold [them]. [They are] rooted in the spiritual health, culture, and language of the people. It is a way of life" (Emery, 2000, p. 27). Like all cultures, Indigenous cultures are dynamic; earlier ideas and practices are continually adapted as families and communities respond to ongoing experiences, new concepts and technologies, emerging needs, goals, resources, and opportunities (Dei, 2000).

Indigenous knowledges are embodied in Indigenous languages (Little Bear, 2000), which communicate the cosmology, values, and structures of Indigenous cultures (Makokis et al., 2010; Peltier, 2009) and are transmitted through families and communities (McIvor et al., 2009; RCAP, 1996a). Canada's Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (2015) asserts that language is one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity, connecting people with their past and grounding their social, emotional, and spiritual vitality. Thus, "[e]xposure to language and culture in everyday interactions tells children who they are and how to construct their learning" (Rinehart, 2000, p. 136).

Indigenous philosophies and the practices they inform emphasize the interconnectedness among people past, present, and future, and the inseparability of the child from extended family, community, and the broader natural and spiritual worlds. Cree/Métis psychologist Couture (2011) summarizes two key points of Indigenous philosophies: "…one is that everything is alive, and two is that we're all related" (p. 83).

Defining Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities exist in many forms across Canada, including in urban, peri-urban, and rural settings, as well as in First Nations communities on reserve in rural and urban settings, in settlements (for Métis) and in the north (for Inuit). While it can seem simple to categorize these settings separately, "[f]rom a policy perspective, it is crucial that we recognize that the urban Aboriginal population in Canada is not distinct from the 'nonurban.' They are interconnected in terms of mobility, culture and politics" (Graham & Peters, 2002, p. iii).

The 2016 Canadian census revealed the rapid growth of Indigenous peoples in metropolitan areas (Bennett, 2015), but also their high rates of mobility. Describing Indigenous peoples as either rural or urban fails to capture their lived geography (Bennett, 2015). However, because many Indigenous peoples spend considerable time in metropolitan areas, cultural connection through community activities and services is critical to sustaining positive Indigenous identities and belonging. For example, many young children and their family members rely on the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities program in order to practice and transmit their cultures (Ball, 2012; Mashford-Pringle, 2012; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2017). Similarly, urban Indigenous peoples of all ages often rely on organizations like Aboriginal Friendship Centres to remain connected to their Indigenous identities, communities, and cultures (Neale, 2016).

Transmission, Preservation, and Promotion of Indigenous Cultures

Across rural, northern, and metropolitan contexts, Indigenous cultures are transmitted though participation with families and communities in cultural traditions and norms of collective caregiving (Bennett, 2015). Children raised in their family and within their cultural community are routinely socialized to embody their culture through processes such as hearing and speaking Indigenous languages, learning on the land, having multigenerational relationships of care, teaching and learning, and participating in culturally significant livelihood activities (e.g., ceremonies, art, storytelling) (Ball & Simpkins, 2004; Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000).

The implicit nature of forming a cultural identity and belonging points to the necessity of Indigenous-led child and family services. Outsiders, however well-informed, are not likely able to provide the more intuitive, gestural, and embodied knowledge conveyed by service providers and caregivers who are a part of the community and culture. Creating an authentic cultural framework around Indigenous child and family services goes far beyond the use of a few Indigenous language

phrases, artwork in an office space, or taking children to cultural events, although these can contribute to cultural awareness. A cultural framework is "not a thing or a possession, but rather the name for a series of relations that are always shifting" (Valverde, 2003, p. 221).

In 2013, Cree lawyer and former BC Representative of Children and Youth, Judge Turpel-Lafond reported that cultural plans of care for Indigenous children in foster care were usually incomplete; when they were completed, they were typically limited to the child or youth attending a potlatch or cultural ceremony (Turpel-Lafond, 2013). Turpel-Lafond emphasized that "cultural planning for Indigenous children and youth in care should be much more comprehensive and meaningful" (p. 54) and requires extensive, ongoing interactions with their Indigenous community to maintain cultural connection and build a strong, positive Indigenous identity. In a report by the BC Representative for Children and Families, Charlesworth (2021) found similar challenges persist in BC child welfare, adding that Indigenous children's rights to cultural connections and belonging tend to be overshadowed by Euro-Western ideas of permanency (e.g., adoption), often leading to lifelong negative consequences.

Cultural Connectedness

Cultural connectedness refers to an individual's alliance with a culture as an aspect of one's identity and sense of belonging. According to Indigenous health researcher Reading and her colleague Wien (2009), Indigenous cultural connectedness includes, but is not limited to, interactions with Indigenous kin, knowledge of an Indigenous language, spirituality, and environmental stewardship. Inupiaq scholar Ullrich (2019) describes five areas of connectedness to provide a framework by which culture is transmitted, preserved and promoted, described subsequently.

Intergenerational Connectedness. Intergenerational connectedness includes learning history from Indigenous perspectives, participating in ceremonies, and learning songs and language, each embedded within distinct cultures, communities, and land (Ullrich, 2019). Storytelling is similarly a function of intergenerational connectedness. Anishinaabe scholars Peltier (2009) and Simpson (2008) describe how Elders pass knowledge and teachings to younger generations. Simpson (2008) explains that intergenerational storytelling, often depicting experiences on the land, has sustained Indigenous cultures and communities for generations, and will continue to carry them into the future. Elders may also engage as mentors to younger cultural knowledge-holders, teachers, and community leaders (RCAP, 1996c).

Family Connectedness. Family connectedness involves relationships with immediate and extended family, community members, and relationships to the land of one's family of origin (Ullrich, 2019). Examples of Indigenous practices that enhance family connectedness are kinship care and customary adoption. Kinship care refers to the practice of extended family and community members caring for children until parents are able to assume or resume their role as primary caregiver (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society (FNCFCS), 2019). Customary adoption refers to "a complex institution

by which a variety of alternative parenting arrangements, permanent or temporary, may be put in place to address the needs of children and families in Aboriginal communities" (Trerise, 2011, p. 2). These practices are grounded in Indigenous traditions of caregiving that emphasize building a strong web of relationships around a child, rather than severing relationships or transferring custody outside the family (Baldassi, 2006; Carrière & Richardson, 2009; de Finney & di Tomasso, 2015).

Community Connectedness. A child's sense of belonging to their community is critical to a positive Indigenous identity. It is enriched through the sharing of cultural values, social norms, support and guidance, celebrations, ceremonies, language, and gatherings (Ullrich, 2019). Métis researcher Richardson (2012) describes how many culturally grounded Indigenous ceremonies: "(1) promote a sense of connection, belonging and community, (2) acknowledge a particular life phase or accomplishment, (3) assign a challenge or task to be overcome, and (4) invoke … the spirit of life to infuse the group with wisdom and love" (p. 69). Culturally based, community ceremonies and celebrations are important in child and family services, including customary adoptions, rites of passage (e.g., 'aging' out, puberty), 'coming-home' celebrations, baby-welcoming and naming (Bennett, 2015; de Finney & di Tomasso, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015). These ceremonies acknowledge children and families' changes and growth, while reinforcing community and cultural connections for subsequent stages of development (de Finney & di Tomasso, 2015; Richardson, 2012; Ullrich, 2019).

Environmental Connectedness. Connection to land is fundamental within Indigenous cultures and knowledges (ITK, 2014; Little Bear, 2000, 2009; Makokis et al., 2010; McIvor et al., 2009; Michell et al., 2008; Ullrich, 2019). Scholars and Indigenous leaders highlight the profound importance of connecting Indigenous children and youth with the land, in both urban and rural settings (Hatala et al., 2019; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Lines & Jardine, 2019; Ritchie et al., 2015). Land-based activities are often paired with stories connected to the particular geography and place-based knowledge of each Indigenous community (Little Bear, 2009; Liebenberg et al., 2015; Sable et al., 2012; Simpson, 2014).

Spiritual Connectedness. Spiritual connectedness is woven into cultural learning and "natural laws, knowledge, set roles and day-to-day activities" (Ullrich, 2019, p. 125). Spirit and culture "can be observed and experienced through art, names, beauty, dance, songs, music, history, foods, clothing, home structures, games, transportation, science, education, hairstyles, tattoos, subsistence lifestyle, and language" (Ullrich, 2019, p. 125). Spiritual connectedness goes beyond particular practices to encompass the life force or spirit of a child as interconnected with the wellbeing of the entire family, community, and land (Ullrich, 2019).

Cultural Connectedness as a Determinant of Indigenous Wellness and Identity

Social determinants of Indigenous health have been conceived by Indigenous scholars as somewhat distinct from those of Euro-Western conceptualizations (McIvor et al., 2009; Reading & Wien, 2009).

Indigenous worldviews hold that a child's wellness is a function of the wellness of the child's family and community, and vice versa (LaBoucane-Benson et al., 2017). Indigenous conceptualizations of health and wellness include the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional wellness of all family members who are embedded within an ecological system that includes their cultural community, relationship with the land, and broader economic, political, and social systems (McCormick, 2009; Richmond et al., 2007; RCAP, 1996b; Reading & Wien, 2009). An outcome study of a community-led, land-based, culturally informed program that embodies this understanding found sustained positive impacts. The Makimautiksat Youth Camp in Nunavut enhanced youths' overall wellness and resilience and sustained connection to Inuit culture and land-based activities and relationships with peers and other community members (Healey et al., 2016; Mearns & Healey, 2015).

Indigenous scholars and community service agencies emphasize how child and family services that promote cultural connectedness help children and youth to consolidate positive Indigenous identities (Carrière, 2008; de Finney & di Tomasso, 2015; John, 2016; Quinn, 2020). This link was confirmed in research about First Nations adoption and kinship care by Métis scholar Carrière (2005, 2008). In contrast, lack of cultural connectedness is particularly deleterious. Indigenous adult adoptees who were raised by non-Indigenous families without connection to their families, communities, or cultures of origin reported a profound, often lifelong, sense of loss (Carrière and Richardson, 2009).

Connections to Indigenous cultures and languages are strong protective factors that promote resilience and serve as buffers that mitigate negative impacts of historical and continuing injustices affecting Indigenous peoples (Auger, 2016; Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; ITK, 2014; McIvor et al., 2009). Building and strengthening Indigenous children's cultural connectedness also revitalizes Indigenous communities.

In a study examining links between language and mental/social health, Hallett et al. (2007) found that First Nations communities with higher levels of Indigenous language knowledge experienced rates of suicide risk and completed suicide that were well below the provincial averages for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, while those with lower Indigenous language knowledge had more than six times the number of suicides. Youth suicide was non-existent in communities where at least half the members reported a conversational knowledge of their own traditional language.

Another example of the protective effect of cultural connectedness was found in a study conducted with Indigenous youth who use illicit substances. Among these youth, knowledge of their Indigenous culture and language was strongly associated with their resilience (Pearce et al., 2015). A study completed by Njeze et al. (2020) shows similar results, linking cultural connectedness to the resilience of Indigenous children and youth and shows that "[a] strong cultural identity as a child and adolescent leads to improved outcomes in education, employment, and health and wellness in adulthood" (p. 148).

It is not only children who benefit from cultural connectedness. Indigenous scholars emphasize that children are the heart of communities (Anderson & Ball, 2020). As communities strengthen their capacity to care for children, adults can become stronger and more open to re-engaging in relationships with Elders. Elders stimulate curiosity, confidence, and pride in Indigenous cultures and become supporters and resources for community practitioners who can transmit culture and language to children. As children become engaged with and proud to know their culture and language of origin, they in turn motivate their parents, continuing the cycle, which gains in strength and velocity over time.

In the foregoing, our examples from research and practice illustrate the benefits of Indigenous-led services that facilitate cultural connectedness. In the next section, we provide examples of Indigenous-led service models that aim for cultural connectedness as a goal across all programs for children and families.

Promoting and Preserving Indigenous Cultures Through Child and Family Services

Indigenous leaders agree that quality child and family services are culturally appropriate, holistic, governed by and accountable to Indigenous parents and communities, compliant with regulations developed or accepted by Indigenous administrative bodies to ensure children's wellness and safety, involve Elders, show respect and provide opportunities for staff to develop their skills, and use research to document, apply and develop Indigenous knowledges (BC Aboriginal Child Care Society & Assembly of First Nations, 2005; Greenwood et al., 2007; Greenwood & Shawana, 2003; Preston et al., 2012).

Despite inadequate government funding and persistent structural inequities, the examples of Indigenous-led child and family service organizations described in this section are based on an understanding of the need to facilitate cultural connectedness. These are only a few examples; across Canada, many Indigenous-led agencies are re-imagining how to structure services to secure children's connection to their cultural communities. Both because of the lack of comparative effectiveness research examining the outcomes of various approaches to Indigenous-led child and family services, and because each community's needs, goals, and resources are somewhat unique, we eschew the concept of 'best practices.' However, the concept of wise or promising practices (Wesley-Esquimaux et al., 2010) applies to these examples. They provide a snapshot into diverse legislative and community-grounded ways that Indigenous organizations are working to ensure cultural connectedness for those involved in the child welfare system. Beyond emphasizing cultural and community connections, recurrent and overlapping themes include: (a) a focus on prevention and community-building; (b) strengths-based practices that empower families; and (c) culturally based and community-grounded frameworks.

Kina Gbezhgomi Child & Family Services

Kina Gbezhgomi Child & Family Services is an “Anishinabek Agency serving Anishinabek people” (Kina Gbezhgomi, 2019, p. 5), that delivers services to seven First Nations on Manitoulin Island in Ontario and to First Nations people living in Sudbury. With a vision to “honour and support [their] family’s and community’s inherent authority to care for their children based on unity, traditions, values, beliefs and customs,” Kina Gbezhgoma strives for their “services [to] ensure children are protected and stay connected with their culture, language and community while strengthening family and community relationships” (Kina Gbezhgomi, 2021). The agency developed in 1981 in response to high numbers of children removed from their First Nation and placed in government care. The agency is overseen by an Elder’s Advisory Council. Each community that Kina Gbezhgomi serves has its own specific protocol agreement with the agency that articulates how the agency and community can best work together to serve children and families (Kina Gbezhgomi, 2019).

Principles developed collaboratively with participating First Nations are used across all services, including that prevention and child welfare services use cultural traditions and practices that strengthen cultural identity and connectedness for children and their families (Kina Gbezhgomi, 2021). Kina Gbezhgomi hosts culture and knowledge camps for children, youth, and families, and culture days, workshops, and celebrations for community members. They prioritize the health of the entire community and family in order to keep children healthy and strongly connected to their culture, with a high likelihood of being able to remain in their community.

Splatsin First Nation

In 1980, the Splatsin First Nation passed a by-law that asserted community control over their own child welfare services (Splatsin, 2020). The by-law contends that “there is no resource that is more vital to the continued existence and integrity of the Indian Band than our children” (Splatsin, 2020, p. 19). Chief Christian of the Splatsin Nation describes how the by-law initiative enabled the community to adopt a culturally informed, community-based approach to their own child welfare, and resulted in less than 5% of their children being taken into government care (Christian, 2010). He states, “Splatsin Nation represents a unique example of a community that was able to reclaim the right and responsibility of child welfare, providing a successful example of a Nation that has found a way to support children and families outside of harmful governmental policies” (Christian, 2010, p. 12). The federal government subsequently disallowed similar by-laws by other communities (Walkem, 2015).

Inuuqatigiit Centre for Inuit Children, Youth and Families

The large population of Inuit children and families living in Ottawa can feel connected to an Inuit community through participation in a variety of Inuit-led cultural activities offered at the Inuuqatigiit Centre for Inuit Children, Youth and Families (ICICYF) (2020a), where Inuit languages

and dialects are often used (ITK, 2018). The Inuuqatigiit Centre weaves Qaujimajatuqangit (Inuit traditional knowledge) throughout their wrap-around services, which include:

> [l]icensed childcare, Head Start, kindergarten, Early On Centre, after-school programs, student support, youth programs, healing circles, individual support and counselling, court accompaniment, advocacy with child welfare, police, education, systems navigation, referrals, mental health programming, cultural community events, [and] on the land culture camps (ICICYF, 2020b, para. 2).

Families involved "have reportedly fewer child apprehensions, less disruption to children who have been apprehended from their families, [...] greater consideration for Inuit culture in apprehensions [and] improved relationships between child welfare authorities and urban Inuit families (Scott, 2013, p. 26).

The Native Child and Family Services of Toronto

The Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) was established as a child welfare organization in 2004 and was the first off-reserve children's aid society serving an urban Indigenous population (NCFST, n.d.). Working within an Indigenous cultural framework, NCFST provides child welfare services in addition to an extensive array of prevention services that include pre-natal programs, a community kitchen, mental health and addictions support, child-care, family violence prevention, and much more (NCFST, 2020). NCFST draws from many cultural traditions representing the diversity of Indigenous peoples in the urban setting and includes respected community Elders as team members (NCFST, 2020). The agency emphasizes cultural connections, the development of positive Indigenous identities, and community strengthening through cultural activities. Using NCFST not only as a site of child welfare and social services but also of cultural connection and programming effectively reduces the stigma attached to being involved with child protection services (Scott, 2013). Services are offered with the understanding that healing and restoring communities and families is foundational to the health and wellness of individuals. The community-based, community-strengthening, culturally grounded approach is seen as the key to the success of NCFST (Scott, 2013).

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Family and Community Wellness Centre

The Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Family and Community Wellness Centre (NCNFCWC), established in 2001, is based in Nelson House, Manitoba, and provides wholistic wellness programs through public health, child and family services, early childhood education, mental health supports, and other community programming (NCNFCWC, n.d.-a.). Innovative programming aims to reduce high numbers of children being taken into care. For example, the Intervention and Removal of Parent program aims to reduce trauma typically experienced by children during apprehensions (NCNFCWC, n.d.-c). When a child is considered at risk, the parents instead of the children, are removed from the

home. The child(ren) remains in the home, with extended family members or practitioners employed by the wellness center moving in to care for them (NCNFCWC, n.d.-c). Parents receive numerous practical and social supports, including counselling and programs to connect to Indigenous traditions and culture. The land-based Rediscovery of Families Program supports parents and children to build on their own strengths and work towards reunification (NCNFCWC, n.d.-c). Through the program, "[t]he family is introduced to traditional practices and living on the land while being supported by counsellors and guidance of [their] Ketiyatisak [old people in the community]" (NCNFCWC, n.d.-c, p. 14). Through these Indigenous-led child and family services, the NCNFCWC has significantly reduced the number of children in care (NCNFCWC, n.d.-b). In 2016, the program received national media attention for being at risk of losing funding due to having an insufficient number of children in care (Kavanaugh, 2016).

Akwe:go Urban Aboriginal Children's Program

For over three decades, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) has offered the Akwe:go Program, which immerses children aged 7 to 12 years in Indigenous cultural knowledge and provides social, emotional, and other supports to participating children and their families (OFIFC, n.d.). The program is currently the focus of a 20-year longitudinal study. Findings to date suggest correlations between culturally based programming and resilience, a significant increase in children's sense of belonging and pride in their Indigenous identity, participation in First Nations cultural practices and languages outside of the program, use of First Nations medicines and food, and increased self-esteem (Maracle, et al., 2014; OFIFC, 2020).

Legislated and Draft Child and Family Services Laws

Several Indigenous communities are drafting legislation regarding child and family services. All available examples prioritize connections to community and culture for Indigenous children and families. For instance, the Huu-ay-aht First Nation *Bringing our Children Home Report* is built around a primary goal "to keep children safe, healthy, and connected to Huu-ay-aht's home, culture and values" (Huu-ay-aht First Nations Government, 2021). Huu-ay-aht children and youth living both on and off reserve, many of whom have previous experience with child welfare, have expressed their "deep and strong desire to maintain connections with their families and the Huu-ay-aht community and culture" (Hwitsum et al., 2017).

Cowessess First Nation signed the first agreement with the Government of Canada under *Bill C-92* in July 2021. The Cowessess Miyo Pimatisowin Act states that: "[...] cultural continuity is essential to the well-being of a child, a family and the Cowessess First Nation" (Cowessess First Nation, 2021, p. 16). However, as Dangerfield (2021) notes, while funding to develop services is mentioned in Bill C-92, there is a concerning lack of commitment. In another example, the Anishinabek Nation (2019) Draft Child Well-being Law similarly states, "Where there is a reference in this Law to the best

interests of a child/youth, all relevant factors must be taken into consideration in determining the best interests of a child/youth… with a recognition that traditions, culture, values and language must be respected in making that determination" (p. 8). Similarly, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (2019) has advanced a *Bringing our Children Home Act* that states:

> We are reclaiming our collective sovereignty and jurisdiction for the care and protection of our children in every way in order to ensure we safeguard their well-being, provide them with a cultural shield according to our respective Anishinaabeg, Anishinininwak, Dakota Oyate, Denesuline, and Nehethowuk/Inninwak identity, culture, traditions, values, customs and languages (p. 3).

However, as the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (2019) and others have emphasized, there is no federal funding commitment for Indigenous communities to begin the process of developing laws, including engagement, ratification, and implementation. To create enduring change, there must be legislated guarantees of funding. Without this, Bill C-92 is at risk of becoming more "hollow words" (Wilyman, 2020). As well, federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments must work toward successful partnership, as not all parties were included in developing the new legislation. There is a particular need to resolve jurisdictional ambiguities; it is not clear to whom Bill C-92 applies (e.g., does it apply to First Nations children living off reserve?)

Discussion and Conclusion

As one part of a necessarily multi-faceted solution to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care, providing child and family services within each community's self-defined cultural framework can promote Indigenous children and families' cultural connectedness, positive cultural identity, and capacity to contribute to the resurgence of Indigenous communities in Canada. To succeed, Indigenous communities must have authority over child and family services to ensure that these are culturally safe, relevant to their particular cultures, circumstances, and histories, and prioritize keeping children within circles of care in their own communities (Metallic, 2018). Indigenous leaders, scholars, and organizations call for child and family services that: (a) are designed and delivered within an Indigenous cultural frame; (b) promote cultural connection and Indigenous identity; (c) act preventively by strengthening community capacity; and (d) grant Indigenous peoples authority to manage their own child and family welfare programs (Kavanagh, 2019). These aspirations are illustrated by the foregoing examples of Indigenous child and family service organizations. As Ullrich's (2019) framework suggests, maintaining cultural connectedness goes far beyond a simple checkbox of cultural activities. The examples demonstrate the multiple, ongoing relational ways that communities and organizations are keeping children and families culturally connected while also providing practical supports to address issues stemming from socio-economic conditions and intergenerational trauma.

Cultural and community connectedness are primary considerations in Bill C-92 with regards to assessing what is in the best interest of an Indigenous child. In principle, Bill C-92 provides a legal framework for courts to no longer view "culture [a]s a secondary consideration that may be defeated by a more paramount principle" (Matarieh, 2020, p. 29). Yet, it remains to be seen how courts will interpret this legislation and ideas about "best interest" (Forester, 2020). Further, as previously noted, funding and technical support must be committed to enable communities to begin developing their own laws and planning their own child and family services and approaches (Dangerfield, 2021). Doubts about funding are well-founded in light of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's (CHRT) 2016 ruling against the Canadian federal government for chronic and systematic underfunding of services for First Nations children (FNCFCS, 2021). The CHRT has since had to issue 19 additional orders, at the time of writing, due to the federal government's non-compliance in addressing the problem and compensating children and families (Olijnyk, 2021).

Research over two decades has investigated the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care (e.g., Blackstock et al., 2004; Sinha et al., 2011; Sinha et al., 2013; Trocmé et al., 2003; TRC, 2015a). Yet, we found few studies documenting the process and outcomes of Indigenous-led, culturally based solutions. While non-formal reports indicate that Indigenous organizations are trying to conduct their own evaluations, a funding stream for the evaluation of Indigenous child and family services is needed. In their review of Indigenous child protection literature over 25 years, Sinha et al. (2021) emphasize the critical need not only for more research, but also "[t]he investment of sustained public resources in Canada to synthesize, summarize, and publicly disseminate findings from existing research related to Indigenous child welfare involvement" (p. 22) in a centralized, Indigenous-led process that brings together both the non-formal and published, peer-reviewed literature, in a cohesive, accessible (e.g., no paywall) forum.

Given the abundant evidence of the ongoing failure of non-Indigenous child and family services to reduce the numbers of Indigenous children in government care, the lack of rigorous evaluations of Indigenous-led child and family services should not be a barrier to shifting authority and funding to those Indigenous communities that have the political will and community capacity to lead their own services. As the foregoing discussion highlights, there are many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations across Canada that have the political will and community capacity to turn child welfare practice on its head, to go from extracting children from communities to reinforcing cultural connectedness and circles of care for children within their own communities. Local, Indigenous-led child and families services, grounded in cultural values and forms of interaction can preserve and enhance positive Indigenous identity and sense of belonging, which are critical for Indigenous children, families, and communities to survive and thrive.

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