

**Evaluation of
*Reconciliation: Looking Back, Reaching Forward, Indigenous
Peoples and Child Welfare***

**A Research Project for the First Nations Child and Family Caring
Society of Canada (FNCFCSC)**

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The research report 'Reconciliation: Looking Back, Reaching Forward, Indigenous Peoples and Child Welfare' is a formative evaluation of a three-day interactive conference that was held on October 26, 27 & 28, 2005 in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The research was conducted by four Carleton University Masters of Social Work students on behalf of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCS), with the goals of evaluating the impact of the conference on the attitudes of participants, and the extent to which the conference achieved the following strategic objectives:

1. Participants can speak to and evaluate the degree to which mainstream and Aboriginal child welfare organizations understand their perceptions of the history of social work and its impact on Aboriginal children and youth;
2. They can identify the values and beliefs that underlie both Indigenous and mainstream approaches to child welfare;
3. They can identify the principles for a renewed approach to child welfare respecting Indigenous children at national and local levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In keeping with the commitment to honouring and validating Indigenous knowledge, the research team employed the Medicine Wheel as both a thematic and theoretical framework to guide the literature analysis and overall research project. The discourses in Aboriginal child welfare are highlighted according to the four directions of the Medicine Wheel as follows. The Eastern Direction signifies the gift of vision and new beginnings, and includes a discussion of the history of Aboriginal child welfare with regard to residential schools and their legacy of oppression, racism and cultural imperialism. The Southern Direction is guided by relationships and involves a critical evaluation of Canadian social policy for Aboriginal children. The Western Direction denotes a time of transition, with a particular focus on the evaluation of some key conferences aimed at generating dialogue and promoting collaboration to advance the reconciliation movement in Aboriginal child welfare. Finally, the Northern Direction represents forward movement. Here the concept of reconciliation and its implications for child welfare are reviewed.

METHODOLOGY

Using a convenience sample of participants from Canada only, the research team coincidentally interviewed 8 Aboriginal and 8 non-Aboriginal child welfare professionals, Indigenous leaders and/or child advocates, representatives of provincial/territorial political organizations, housing administrators and policy analysts. A Balance Score Card Evaluation was used, and all interview responses were recorded, transcribed and coded. This report draws on literature and statistical material to compliment the qualitative research findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overall, participants said that the conference did have an impact on them. For many, the conference provided them with an opportunity to learn about and/or increase their understanding of Aboriginal history. It enabled them to better assess how past and current policies continue to affect Aboriginal peoples. Still, for others, the conference highlighted the need for innovation in the provision of services for Aboriginal children, families and communities within the context of child welfare (i.e., customary care), making it clear that the return of complete jurisdiction over the lives of Aboriginal children to Aboriginal peoples is critical for the preservation of Aboriginal culture and identity.

Participants also reported that the conference made exceedingly clear that the struggle for self-determination is not isolated, but universally shared. It reinforced, and quite powerfully, the need for capacity-building in Aboriginal communities. The cultivation of such capacity is deemed to be pivotal for the recognition of the legal and sovereign rights of Aboriginal peoples and their ability to care for their children. The fact that the conference allowed the participants to see the progress that has been made thus far, while at the same time making space for them to reflect on what needs to be done to move forward has proven to be the most significant impact of the conference.

Notwithstanding the above research findings, a few respondents did comment that the conference had no significant impact on them. One participant stated that the conference did not shed any new insight or knowledge on the issue. Some respondents articulated that the conference only facilitated the layering of stories, without offering a clear direction forward. In this manner, it failed to discuss the practicality of how best to improve Aboriginal child welfare. Still others viewed this conference as not necessarily targeting the right group of people. It was suggested that the conference be tailored to non-Native frontline workers, as it served as an excellent introduction into Aboriginal child welfare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines the recommendations put forward by the research participants with respect to future conferences and the evaluation process. The recommendations have been categorized under “Broad” and “Practical” considerations.

Broad Considerations

- Create opportunities for future, similar conferences and avoid “one-shot deal” type of gatherings.
- Follow up on the suggestions and information discussed at the Reconciliation conference.
- Establish concrete outcomes, develop a timeline and an evaluation process to gauge progress and build on momentum that will quickly move along the path towards reconciliation.
- Invite provincial child welfare authorities to future conferences to speak about specific child welfare legislation.
- Make room for a healthy discussion on cross-cultural approaches that can be applied universally within child welfare practice.
- Create and expand opportunities for networking with local, national and international colleagues at future conferences.
- Establish a clearinghouse for information sharing.

Practical Considerations

- Provide adequate support for conference participants who may be affected by the sensitive nature of the discussions, and ensure that support personnel are visible and accessible throughout the conference.
- Ensure that conference facilitators receive ample training prior to the conference in order to better facilitate discussion groups.
- Future conferences need to be more pragmatic in terms of direction, specifically addressing the ways in which practitioners are to incorporate Aboriginal values and beliefs in their practice.
- Practical tools for practitioners would also be helpful in developing models conducive to Aboriginal values that would improve their work with Aboriginal children, families and communities.