



Indigenous Child Welfare Research  
Network  
University of Victoria

*You should know that I trust you... Phase 2*



**PREPARED BY JEANNINE CARRIERE, PHD**

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## BACKGROUND

In 2007, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) Adoption Services management team provided funding to explore how the *Cultural Planning Policy* (MCFD, 1996) has impacted the adoption of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal families. This resulted in a three phase study of which Phase 1 *You Should Know That I Trust You: Cultural Planning, Aboriginal Planning and Adoption*. The report can be located on the MCFD website at: <http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/adoption/publications.htm>

Phase 1 is a summary of interviews and recommendations provided by non Indigenous<sup>1</sup> adoptive parents on the cultural planning policy and process in British Columbia (BC) as it pertains to the adoption of Indigenous children. In Phase 1 we also interviewed some Indigenous service providers and practitioners who had experiences in preparing cultural plans.

Phase 2 is a summary of a qualitative online survey conducted with adoption, guardianship and Roots workers in BC. Further in the report we shall describe our methodology and include the survey tool (Appendix B). We shall begin however with contextual background information on adoption and Indigenous children which was prepared by Rachele Dallaire, who focused on practice issues with adoption and Indigenous children rather than an exhaustive overview of the abundant literature on adoption and Indigenous children.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study we use the word Indigenous to describe First Nation, Metis and Inuit peoples however the word Aboriginal may be used from time to time as it is a term that is used widely in government documents and other literature.

## **RESEARCH TEAM**

### **Principal Investigator**

Dr. Jeannine Carrière is Métis and originally from the Red River area of southern Manitoba. She has been teaching social work since 1994 in Alberta and at the University of Victoria, School of Social Work in the Indigenous Specialization since 2005. Her research interests include Aboriginal adoptions, identity issues and advancing Indigenous knowledges. Dr. Carrière has been a practitioner in Aboriginal child and family services for over twenty five years and has conducted several research projects including her PhD work entitled *Connectedness and Health for First Nation Adoptees* (2005). In 2008 Dr. Carrière received the Adoptions Activist Award from the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC).

### **Research Assistant**

Rachelle Dallaire is Metis of French, Ojibway and Mohawk ancestry originally from Northern Ontario and came to BC in 2005. As a child Rachelle travelled extensively throughout Northern, Southern and Central Ontario at the hands of the child welfare system and Rachelle states those experiences inform her passion for Aboriginal child welfare. Rachelle holds a BSW currently completing an Indigenous Masters of Social Work Program at the University of Victoria. Rachelle is currently the Associate Director for Caring for First Nations Children Society of BC and states that regardless of her education and employment, her greatest source of pride in her life is her beautiful eight year old daughter, Chantale Marie. Chantale has taught her everything she wants to know about what it means to be a loving and giving spirit and honors her deeply for having blessed her life.



## **Adoption and Cultural Planning for Indigenous Children**

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### **Best Interest of the Child from a Cultural Perspective**

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In the mainstream child welfare system, the best interest of the child has been and continues to be entrenched in the Canadian family justice system. Richard (2007) states that the challenge in determining the best interest of the child occurs when interests are defined and determined via the Anglo European lens. Many difficulties arise as a result. The most obvious challenge is the mainstream strategy of separating the child's best interest from their family and community. The argument made by Richard (2007) is that the two are interdependent in such a way that the relationship cannot be severed. In the event these best interests are separated, disservice is done to the child and community. Richard argues that the best interest of the child cannot be properly or fairly assessed unless it is culturally defined.

Many reasons appear in the literature for the shift that occurs in children as they grow and develop with a confused sense of identity lacking culturally appropriate source and supports (Carriere, 2007, 2008; Carriere and Scarth, 2007; Richard, 2007; Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon, 2006; Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services, 2006). These writers agree that without a culturally informed plan of care, Indigenous children are at risk and their permanency placements are at risk of failing.

Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon (2006), remind us that according to UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, in Article 20.3, all Indigenous children have a

fundamental right to their culture, language, and appropriate cultural context. In light of this fundamental right, it is also in the best interest of the child to have a cultural plan which best suits the child, their community and family. In law, however, the test for best interest of the child is specific to the child while negating the interests of the family and community (Hertlein, undated). Bunting (2004) cautions that questions of cultural identity need to be taken seriously and that “judges should resist neat equations or formulae for assessing the weight of culture in court decisions around child placement. She states that “no simple presumptions or tests can capture the complexity and fluidity of children’s heritage as well as their families’ and communities’ interests” (p.140).

The courts are not equipped or culturally versed to effectively determine the most beneficial and culturally appropriate permanency option for Indigenous children. Hertlein states that without a focus being applied to Indigenous cultural planning, Indigenous children will continue to be removed from Indigenous communities at an alarming rate, perpetuating the cycle of colonization. Bunting (2004:147) reminds us that “identity whether ethnic, national, cultural, sexual or racial is very personal and at the same time it is a collective matter,” and further that, “Aboriginal communities and First Nations in Canada in particular are self governing in some respects and have authority over child and family services in some regions.” She suggests that a “preferable approach to assessing the importance of children’s heritage in the context of the best interests test is to identify parents who are most willing to facilitate an open culture- one that allows children to explore their cultural heritages and histories throughout their lives.”

While some legislation has attempted to bridge the cultural gaps when serving the best interest of the child, much work has yet to be done. Cultural planning can be challenging when plans are completed by those who may not understand the full cultural context of an Indigenous

child's identity (Kamn, 2009). A good example is the family justice system taking on this task. This barrier has been identified yet little research can be found to address the damage done when an appropriate and specific cultural context is not considered in cultural planning. An example of this disservice is adopting a Cree child into a Mohawk family and believing that the child's right to her Indigenous identity has been met. The effects that have been noted in the few resources which are available are stunted identity formation and adoption breakdown (Sinclair, 2007). This raises the question of how adoption workers can best address the best interest of the child through a cultural lens.

### **Cross Cultural Adoption Breakdown; Why Does it Happen?**

Within Indigenous child welfare agencies, it has been observed that meeting specific cultural needs is a strong gauge for predicting adoption success (Carriere, 2007; MCFD, 2008; Richard, 2007; Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon, 2006). Meeting cultural needs, however, must be conducted for each individual child and honoured according to individual identities. Cultural planning must also be conducted by culturally appropriate sources (Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services, 2006) which possess the culturally competent skills to effectively assist in permanency planning for Indigenous children. In the event that this protocol is not followed, the erosion of Indigenous families will continue to happen at a startling rate.

Ignoring the cultural context for Indigenous children is an approach that is dangerously indifferent to the rights of Indigenous children as confirmed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 23. Howe (2008) warns us that "to deny the reality that continuing racial

hostilities and inequalities abound in our society because of a belief that society is ‘color blind’ is irresponsible and unethical” (p. 7).

While permanency solutions are ideally established in a timely manner it is crucial that adoption agencies and child welfare agencies do not confuse this with negating cultural context and cultural planning in lieu of a timely adoption. After all, the success of any permanency placement is contingent on healthy identity development and formation.

Bertsch (2008) states that “the lack of understanding is evident not only in how social workers related to Aboriginal people and their culture, but in how they assist adoptive parents in Aboriginal transracial adoption (p. 51). How can adoption workers play a role in ensuring healthy Indigenous identity formation in Indigenous adoptees? The participants in this study gave many important suggestions and reflected that their role is critical in contributing to an Indigenous child’s identity formation through the process of appropriate cultural planning. Identity politics are often the backdrop of child welfare practice with Indigenous children. Several stakeholders hold varying viewpoints on the importance of identity and cultural connectedness. It is important to understand this issue from an Indigenous perspective.

### **Identity Formation from a Cultural Perspective**

Richard (2004) outlines the barriers to developing a strong identity for Indigenous adoptees and proposes that they require connections to their cultural background and community in order to develop a strong and healthy sense of self as adults. Richard (2007) shares that many adoptees have told him that when being raised in white families, the ‘subtle messages’ they received from their environment is that the Indigenous world is not caring or loving and the white world has so much more to offer.



This is complicated in some situations where a child has doubts about the love and support from her adoptive family while wondering why her biological family did not want her. Sinclair (2007) states that these painful challenges are often accompanied by facing racism while being raised in a white adoptive family that is ill equipped to assist or understand these experiences. Silburn, S., Zubrick, S., Lawrence, D., Mitrou, F., De Maio J., Blair, E., Cox A., Dalby, R., Griffin, J., Pearson, G., Hayward, C. (2006) and the Halton Multicultural Council (2008) suggest that First Nations children removed from their communities experience many challenges in developing healthy Indigenous identities. They encourage us to examine wellbeing from an Indigenous perspective.

Carriere (2008) reminds us that for Métis children the danger of the loss of identity in the child welfare system is constant. She states that “our reality as Métis people is that we have some issues with identification and membership at the political level for Métis adults in our nation, so how can we be confident that the needs of Métis children are being met in such a complex environment as the child welfare system?” Carriere also cites Leclair, Nicholson, and Hartley (2003) who point out that, “our stories and our differences are deeply embedded in the stories of those who wrote our histories,” and further, “some of our attempts to expand and displace these histories have failed because we place too much reliance on what has been written about Métis” (p. 61).

To immerse a child into a cultural context years after removing them and negating culture can cause its own set of challenges. Carriere (2007) found similar findings with the Indigenous adoptees she interviewed. In her study, many adoptees reported feeling overwhelmed by the information they received when they connected to their birth family and community years after

being adopted. Carriere also found that identity loss was a major theme in the adoption of Indigenous children.

The question then, is ‘what measures can be taken to enhance the chances of success for permanency planning options with Indigenous children?’

### **Cultural Planning Policy and Practice**

In jurisdictions other than British Columbia, there are legislative and policy statements that have been developed to direct practice in the adoption of Indigenous children however cultural planning is silent in most. Many ‘grey’ areas in adoption practice exist in Canada that demonstrate an ongoing need for research that informs practice to address the cultural needs of Indigenous children. There are Canadian jurisdictions that have attempted efforts including the *BC Child, Family, and Community Services Act* (1996) and *BC Practice Standards For Adoption* (2003) *British Columbia*, and the *Alberta Policy Directive for First Nation Adoptions* (1997). At the international level, there is *The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle of Australia* (2002) the *Adoption Act for Queensland* (2009) and the legally enforced contracts in some states in the U.S. that are relevant sources to examine.

In the province of Alberta, the provincial government employs the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act which allows a judge to review a written petition for adoption and approve it without ever meeting or hearing any parties speak to the process. (<http://www.child.gov.ab.ca/home/525.cfm>). The process is completed via a “desktop order” and is intended to expedite the adoption process. Many issues arise in consideration of a process such as this example of legislation. One of these issues is the lack of individual attention to culture and the risk of homogenizing Indigenous identities and cultures. No cultural planning is

conducted, generated or considered. The argument made by the Alberta government is that the process of establishing permanency options occurs in a more efficient manner. This implies that processes such as cultural planning may impede this efficiency.

Resisting the pace of this practice, the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) in Alberta has developed a 'Permanency Planning Action Plan' which essentially is a file review tool to determine the best options for permanency for their member children in care. This process is captured with the use of forms and planning meetings. Through this process during the implementation year in 2005, YTSA reviewed 110 child files of which 35 resulted in an adoption plan. The staff at YTSA utilize a Cultural Connectedness Planning form that identifies the commitment to cultural planning and the responsibilities of the child's First Nation community and caregiver. This plan is reviewed on an annual basis (YTSA, 2005).

The Law Reform Commission of New South Wales (Australia, 2007) has documented their concerns regarding the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles in Australia and indicates they believe the principles have not been maintained in practice as the majority of Indigenous children are placed outside their communities and outside their families. They go on to say that that information regarding the procedure followed for placing Indigenous children is "not readily available" and that they feel the policy for placing Indigenous children has overall been "ineffective". (<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lrc.nsf/pages/RR7CHP2>). This is consistent with the findings of this study where workers are expressing that Indigenous children should remain in their home communities or at minimum they should maintain connections to their home community through cultural planning.

There are 22 states in the US. with enforceable contact agreements between adoptive families and birth families. For the agreements to be enforceable, they must be approved by the

court that has jurisdiction over the adoption. All parties wishing to be included in the agreements must agree in writing to all terms of the agreement prior to the adoption finalization. The court may approve the agreement only if all parties, including a child over the age of 12, agree on its provisions, and the court finds the agreement is in the best interests of the child. Disputes over compliance and requests for modification of the terms must also be brought before the court.

Any party to the agreement may petition the court to modify, order compliance with, or void the agreement. The court may do so only if the parties agree or circumstances have changed, and the action is determined to be in the best interests of the child. In California, Minnesota, and Oklahoma, when the case involves an Indian child, members of the child's tribe are included among the eligible birth relatives. California, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, and Maryland have provisions for sibling participation in an agreement.

(<http://laws.adoption.com/statutes/postadoption-contact-agreements-between-birth-and-adoptive-families.html>) One must examine the outcomes of this legislation however to determine if the lives of children have been improved through such measures. According to Mabry and Kelly (2006) due to the currency of these laws, there are no longitudinal studies that can effectively assess the impact of this practice on children and families (p. 695). Without sufficient data for a thorough analysis it is unclear that legislated cultural planning is an option for adoption in British Columbia and as such perhaps is better situated as a policy.

The question that remains however is why is the BC Cultural Planning policy not effectively reflected in the practice as it relates to the adoption of Indigenous children? Many arguments are made regarding practice dilemmas as experienced by many social service practitioners which include lack of resources, lack of funding, lack of Indigenous adoptive

families, children remaining in care for extended periods of time and the lack of community support in cultural planning.

A number of child welfare specialists and agencies have determined that permanency options including adoption are necessary in planning for children that are not returned to their biological families. From a cultural perspective, however, this issue is widely debated and opposed especially as it relates to cross cultural adoption of Indigenous children. No consensus has been reached that there are legislative and policy examples that guarantee culturally competent services, practice, or service delivery for Indigenous children adopted outside their immediate birth community and family. Richard (2007) states that research will not necessarily provide us with answers when it comes to the question of whether Indigenous children are best served by being adopted into non-Indigenous homes. Instead, this task requires the creative work of Indigenous voices to explore what works and what does not work (Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services, 2006). Those who have written about cultural planning agree that effective cultural planning is required in order to provide Indigenous children with the opportunities for growth and build healthy identities.

Statistics are consistent in most jurisdictions across Canada demonstrating that the number of Indigenous children in care and waiting for adoption is extraordinarily high (Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services, 2006). One must question why that is. Richard (2007:102) states that Indigenous children “are the least likely children in care to be returned to their families and home communities” and “least likely to be adopted and most likely to experience multiple foster care placements.” Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon (2006), suggest that this is a direct result of poor cultural planning on behalf of Indigenous children in care.

At times when cultural planning occurs it comes too late after children have been shuffled through the child welfare system. Most often, cultural planning does not occur until the adoption phase, sometimes years after a child has been in the care of child welfare authorities. This is consistent with the findings of Phase 1 of this study where participants encouraged MCFD to look at cultural planning when an Indigenous child comes into first contact with the child welfare system (MCFD Cultural Planning, Aboriginal Children and Adoption, 2008, p.61)

Many issues arise within the relevant literature as it relates to the issue of cross cultural adoption of First Nations children and the cultural planning around it. Some of these issues include looking at the best interest of the child from a cultural perspective, looking at the percentage of cross cultural adoption breakdowns, identity formation from a cultural perspective (Carriere, 2005, 2008; Carriere and Scarth, 2007; Richard, 2007; Sinclair, 2007), cultural connections which include language and community (Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon, 2006), and whether cultural planning is an effective tool for enhancing the success rates of adoptions of Indigenous children into non Indigenous homes. Richard (2007) strongly opposes cross cultural adoption of Indigenous children based on his experience in the social service field and hearing the stories of children adopted into non-Indigenous homes.

Other authors offer viable options such as kinship agreements (Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon, 2006) and open adoptions (Carriere and Scarth, 2007) as a form of cultural planning for children. Regardless of the recommendations put forward by Indigenous communities, birth families, adoptive families, Indigenous agencies, and adoptees, the consensus from stakeholders is that cultural planning is a necessary and integral piece of effective permanency planning for Indigenous children. Fulcher (2002) describes this practice as a duty of care.

## **Cultural Planning as a tool for Enhancing the Success Rate of Cross Cultural Adoption**

Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services (2006) stated that there is little funding and few supports for agencies, families, and children, in order to generate and commit to cultural planning. Having said this, the need for cultural plans is a feature of a successful model of caring for Indigenous children in permanent ways. Among the recommendations made by community in the report as generated by Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services (2006) was the need for a council to sit as consultants in the cultural planning process. This council would sit in partnership with the child, family, agency supports, community supports and other partners in order to plan a permanency option within a cultural context for Indigenous children. The framework for this permanency planning group would be, “grounded in Indigenous community knowledge” (p.5).

While the goal is to provide adoptive families with cultural plans in order to keep Indigenous children connected to their culture, the system continues to fail Indigenous children in care. Adoptive families report that they cannot find resources to support themselves through the self education process and there are no funds to keep children connected with home communities which may be miles away, sometimes provinces away (Times Colonist, 2008).

Carriere and Sinclair (2009) note that cultural planning can be addressed by a framework that is guided by the following principles:

1. Resources should be directed to family preservation
2. Eliminate Indigenous transracial adoption or place children with extended family
3. Educate potential adoptive parents
4. Educate child welfare workers about adoptive parent selection
5. Recognize that adoption is a privilege
6. Collaborate with Indigenous agencies on behalf of Indigenous children
7. Adopt siblings together
8. Promote ongoing ties between adoptive families and Indigenous cultural resources

9. Promote openness in order to help maintain birth and cultural knowledge
10. Support the child to acculturate and maintain cultural ties
11. Provide elder support in raising their grandchildren  
(In *Walking This Path Together: Anti Racist and Anti Oppressive Child Welfare*. Fernwood Publishing. 2010. 266-268.)

These principles provide a framework that ideally supports the adoption of children in their extended family network through the elimination of Indigenous transracial adoption. Currently we find ourselves in a climate where in Canada, transracial adoption of Indigenous children continues to exist and some would say be necessary. Until Aboriginal agencies are willing and funded to develop adoption programs we propose that a cultural planning process must consider the option that Aboriginal and non Aboriginal adoptive parents will adopt Aboriginal children.

The background information in this review outlines that cultural planning is required in order to guide Indigenous adoptees in their journeys to maintain their identities. Having said this, adoption services must also explore the possibility of alternative options in permanency planning which may be more suitable and more conducive to healthy identity development.

In most policy documents on Indigenous adoption there appears to be little information that assists adoption workers in navigating the real challenges such as time constraints, lack of funding, unmanageable workloads, and lack of professional and family supports to birth and adoptive families.

### **Alternatives in Adoption of Indigenous Children**

Alternatives to cross cultural adoptions of Indigenous children have largely been placed on the shoulders of Indigenous communities. Since the beginning of their time, Indigenous communities have practiced the very recommendations which are now being made to keep children in their tribal communities. As suggested by Carriere, (2007) Richard (2007) and



Wright, Heibert-Murphy, Mirwaldt and Muswaggon (2006), Indigenous communities have always provided care to their children by relying on aunties, uncles, grandparents, and elders to play the role of caregivers. This care giving model is more commonly referred to as ‘kinship care agreements’ or a ‘kinship care program’. In more informal arrangements, it is simply referred to as ‘caring’ for Indigenous children.

Interestingly, some ministries in Canada have ‘borrowed’ and adapted kinship care as models for practice claiming these programs as their own original ideas however we know that kinship care has been a traditional system of care for Indigenous peoples since time immemorial (Peacock in Strega and Carriere (Eds.), 2009). Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services (2006) suggest some strategies for permanency planning. These include open adoptions, custom arrangements, extended cultural planning and collaborative community initiatives that build capacity and promote social supports. The Ministry of Children and Family Services Development in British Columbia have also supported custom adoption as an alternative to closed adoption and as a form of cultural planning for children ([http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/adoption/custom\\_adoption.htm](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/adoption/custom_adoption.htm)).

Atkinson (2010, p. 47) reports that “custom adoption buffers the impact of being raised by a family that is not one’s family of origin” and that “being raised in their own First Nation or Aboriginal communities by other Aboriginal people also enables children to learn how to cope with racism because they are taught the strategies necessary to survive the racism perpetrated by Canadian society (in Aski Awasis Children of the Earth: First Peoples Speaking on Adoption. Fernwood Publishing). Custom adoption is being revived in Canada as two First Nation agencies lead the way. The Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency in Alberta and Lalum’utul’Smuneem

Child and Family Services in British Columbia have created community based approaches to customary adoption recognized in adoption policy and practice in their respective jurisdictions.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural planning remains a key ingredient to decolonization. There continues to be a gap in what the western world sees as appropriate and necessary for Indigenous children and what Indigenous communities see as necessary for their children. Too often, Indigenous children are placed in non-Indigenous permanency placements with little planning. “In these situations what we are really doing, whether unconsciously or not, is asking Indigenous peoples to fit within our cultural paradigm- to have the intercultural dialogue on our terms, not theirs” (Regan, 2005).

As described here many jurisdictions have recognized that Indigenous children must remain connected to culture during permanency planning. Agencies such as those mentioned in this review have begun the work of outlining what this work might look like. The models of cultural planning do not resolve all the issues that come with searching for culturally appropriate permanency options for Indigenous children in care. What cultural planning does however is provide a framework by which Indigenous children can remain connected to their ancestors, birth family and community. Much work is still required to ensure that the rights of Indigenous children seeking permanency options are met. Many hurdles still lie ahead as it relates to non-Indigenous adoptive parents and the guidance they require in order to support Indigenous adoptees in their cultural journeys. We are grateful to the workers who answered the call to come forward and give us their wisdom from a front line perspective in cultural planning in British Columbia.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection**

The report includes the feedback from participants who completed an online qualitative questionnaire (Appendix B) and reflected on their journey as adoption practitioners in the province of British Columbia. We decided to use an online questionnaire for several reasons. First using an online format would facilitate the distribution to all adoption and guardianship and ROOTS workers in BC as they have access to a computer. This was facilitated by the office of Adoption Services where staff sent the questionnaire electronically to the workers. Anne Clayton, Director of Adoption Services encouraged adoption workers through an accompanying memo and follow up memo. The confidentiality of workers who responded was preserved as participants were asked to send the completed survey directly to the Principal Investigator, Jeannine Carriere at the University of Victoria (see Appendix A)

Workers were also encouraged to get in touch with Jeannine Carriere with any questions or concerns previous to completing the questionnaire and a deadline of December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 was provided. Approximately 60 questionnaires were emailed and 19 were returned which in a qualitative study is appropriate.

### **Data Analysis**

Completed questionnaires were scanned using a thematic analysis that is a method that requires a systematic review of transcripts or questionnaires. Appendix C is a table that was developed by Rachelle Dallaire to facilitate the review of questionnaires in order to develop themes. The table reflects the numbers and types of responses to each question which facilitated the development of major findings for this report which are highlighted in the next section.

Jeannine Carriere utilized a qualitative approach in examining themes arising from each category from transcripts. Quotes were selected to support findings. To facilitate the review of findings we have structured this section into 2 that contain both numerical identifiers and a qualitative section followed by overall recommendations.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings have been organized under each question to identify their significance. The first section is quantitative in nature.

### **Quantitative Summary**

1. *What is your role at MCFD?*

This question was asked to establish the range of respondents. Of the 19 participants 8 of them identified as adoption workers and 2 adoption team leaders. Two participants identified themselves as adoption/guardianship workers another 2 identified as guardianship workers. Three identified as team leaders and the survey was completed by one current and one past Roots worker.

2. *How long have you been with MCFD?*

Fourteen participants have been with MCFD for over ten years.

3. *How many cultural plans have you done?*

Overall, participants have completed approximately 120 cultural plans with some participants having to approximate their numbers.



## Qualitative Summary

4. Please describe the steps you take when assisting with a cultural plan for an Aboriginal child.

There are three major steps identified by the majority of participants which are:

1. Contact Aboriginal community for input
2. Contact biological family for input
3. Review plans with the adoptive parents, clarify their role and level of commitment

Other common themes identified by some of the participants are:

1. Individualizing cultural plans
2. Contacting biological family for input
3. Contacting band for input
4. Facilitating group planning with biological family, foster parents, band, FN community, and adoptive family
5. Contacting foster family for input
6. Review plans with the adoptive parents, clarify their role and level of commitment
7. Finding culturally specific community ...resources including elders
8. Connecting children back to their biological families
9. Researching cultural protocol and resources
10. Supporting colleagues involved in the process
11. Involving Métis Commission and agency when necessary
12. Working with and contact with the Regional and Provincial Exceptions Committee
13. Reviewing genograms
14. Referral to Roots worker/program

## Quote

Some participants gave an extensive description of their work which begins with the establishment of the child's Aboriginal ancestry. Working with an Aboriginal agency seems key and as one participant states "I try to establish whether their agency supports adoption or not and I acknowledge the concept as a Western process and try and emphasize the need for permanence for the child. If the agency is willing to engage in a cultural plan, I usually fill out my part and ask them to determine what elements of their culture is important for the child. I give them whatever guidance they need as some agencies don't know what to put in the cultural plan and

some do. I now try to give lots of time for this. Earlier in my career I would have an unrealistic goal of trying to get the plan submitted for the next Exceptions committee...”

5. What have been the most rewarding aspects of this work?

8 participants stated that reconnecting child(ren) to native/home community, or connections was the most rewarding aspect of cultural planning work. Other common themes include:

- Learning about various Indigenous cultures and ceremonies.
- Seeing adoptive families follow through on commitments to preserve culture.
- The cooperation between birth families and adoptive families.
- Adoptive families being welcomed into First Nation communities.

**Quotes**

What was most rewarding was “attending a ceremony to sign the cultural plan with family and band members where the children were given to (the adoptive family) but still recognized as being part of their Aboriginal community. There was singing, and drumming, and the two children being adopted were in ceremonial garb”

Another participant stated that what is most rewarding in this work is “seeing cultural connections improve dramatically over the years of my career- the availability of mentors and cultural activities in the community has increased, the number of different ways to access culture have increased.”

Three participants acknowledged that the witnessing of Aboriginal children being adopted by Aboriginal people is amazing and how rewarding it is to see connections being made. One of these participants said “it is hearing youth say after a visit to their community that the hole in their heart has been filled, that they now know where they come from and where they belong.”

6. What have been the most challenging aspects of this work?

The amount of time it takes to find an appropriate home for Indigenous children and complete the adoption process is the most challenging for most participants. Other areas that were challenging are:

- Getting foster parents and adoptive parents to incorporate culture in a child(ren)'s early upbringing and placing value on this.
- Engaging the biological family, adoptive family, and Aboriginal community to follow through on their commitments.
- The mistrust between First Nations and MCFD.
- The lack of financial resources to implement more cultural resources.

**Quotes**

One participant described a challenge as “many caregivers (foster parents more than adoptive parents) continue to see culture as something you add into a child’s life once they are old enough to have an intellectual understanding of it and if they want it rather than something that surrounds the child from the moment of conception” Another participant added that what they find “incredibly challenging is learning that the family actually isn’t as proactive as they said they would be when they were engaged in the cultural plan.”

7. What do you consider best practices in cultural planning for Aboriginal children?

The following were points raised by a number of participants:

- Cultural connections

Stressing the importance of specific culture

- Children remaining within family (when possible)
- Collaborative effort from family and community for the best interest of the child
- Children remaining with home community (or maintaining connections to home community)
- Cultural planning starts at the time a child comes into care, not at the time of adoption

## Quotes

One participant is clear that best practices “would include meeting the child’s cultural needs (as has been indicated by extensive research) in a clear and purposeful manner, such as prioritizing Indigenous adoptive parents to come forward for Indigenous children permanently in the care of the Ministry” and could be facilitated through an Indigenous committee that “would recommend adoption changes from the MCFD adoption website to adoption application forms to essential information points which must be communicated to each Indigenous person who inquires about adoption.” Another participant states that practices should be based “on the strength of their Aboriginal heritage” and suggested that cultural planning needs to be adjusted based on their blood quantum.

### 8. How can MCFD support your work in cultural planning for Aboriginal children?

The following were observed as priorities

- Effective training for social workers and anyone involved in the adoption process of Aboriginal children (including community, adoptive families, and team leaders
- More funding for Aboriginal children to exercise access to cultural resources and events

## Quotes

One participant observes they “would like to see more Aboriginal homes recruited and preferably different legislation that does not even touch the status issue- like no “A” list.”

Another participant would like to see that practice shift “so that social workers at intake and family service are making culture a priority in planning for children.” The issue of time was a primary concern in cultural planning as one participant described “MCFD can support the work in cultural planning by ensuring the guardianship workers and adoption workers have the time to do the work in a meaningful way and the training to do it”.

\*\* The following questions are grouped specifically addressed the Exceptions committee with both quantitative and qualitative information.

9. Does your region have a Regional Exceptions Committee?

9 participants stated yes and 7 stated no - three were unsure.

10. What is your understanding of the role of the Exceptions Committee?

Review applications for exceptions to place First Nation children in non First Nations home

- Ensure cultural plans are effective

**Quotes**

One participant describes the committee as “another set of eyes looking at the situation to determine our plan is best for Aboriginal children.” Another participant explains this further as “they ensure greater uniformity of practice throughout the province and that overworked social workers don’t end up accepting the most easily available adoptive home for a child over the more time consuming best possible available adoptive home for a child.”

11. Do you have any recommendations for the Provincial exemptions committee?

- Make the process more effective and time efficient
- Clarify expectations
- Communicate in a clear and more personal manner for parties involved

**Quotes**

Some participants encourage the Exceptions committee to be more personal by having families meet with the committee and “that if the committee saw their family in action, they would not have any doubts about their commitment to the Aboriginal children.” One participant encouraged the committee to examine cultural planning from a standpoint that each plan “should be unique to each child- they should not be generic- there should be no template.” Another

participant asked the committee to put some faith into what is presented and explained that “the committee has to trust the family and communities to write and take ownership of the plans they have established for the child.”

*12. What is your feedback on the average time it takes to complete a cultural plan?*

- Time consuming
- Creates challenges in completing other work

**Quotes**

The time it takes to complete a cultural plan was viewed as consistently too long by each participant. One person said that “sometimes I am concerned that the Aboriginal children are being passed over as it is simply too difficult to get the work done and it is easier to place non Aboriginal children” Another participant said it can take up to 6 months “sometimes longer, depending on how long it takes to identify and engage the appropriate band members” One participant also cautioned that it may not be a one time event and believes that “as the child grows so does the cultural plan- it changes with the child and should be reviewed and updated.”

*13. Do you have other recommendations cultural planning for Aboriginal children and adoption?*

- Involve Roots initiative much earlier in the process
- Focus on recruitment, support and training for foster and adoptive parents
- Be cautious of matters of equity
- Legal binding of cultural planning

**Quotes**

There are some thoughtful and practical comments made in addressing this question. One participant stated was that “we also have to be careful not to alienate our adoptive/foster parents who are already doing a fantastic job of keeping Aboriginal children connected to their culture.”

This was expressed as part of the frustration when the Exceptions Committee keeps asking for more information for the cultural plan. This participant also said, “Adoptive families have a lot of fear of the Committee and I don’t think this is useful.” Another participant stated that “while it is absolutely necessary for Aboriginal children not to lose their connection to community, we are often dealing with children whose own families have no or little connection to an Aboriginal community, so we are building something for these children through the Exceptions process that no other children, Aboriginal or not receive.

For children adopted into an Aboriginal home there are none of the same expectations creating two distinct streams for Aboriginal children. One participant emphasized the need for other permanent options rather than adoption and that the cultural planning process would be facilitated if a ROOTS worker was involved earlier. Several participants spoke of the need to have a legally binding process for cultural planning and as one participant pointed out “as it is now there is no guarantee that what is written in the plan will be followed through after the adoption residency period is finished.”

*14. Are there any final comments you would like to make at this time?*

- The need for more training for everyone involved
- Revise and simplify the process of cultural planning
- Work with regional committees rather than provincial committee

**Quotes**

Follow up is mentioned by some participants as a means to ensure the plans are being maintained. One participant suggested a monitoring period of “one year after the child is placed in the adoptive home.” Another participant wrote about the need to simplify the process by planning earlier on and if adoption planning done at the time of a Continuing Custody Order for example, “perhaps social workers in conjunction with team leaders, the Aboriginal community,

management etc. could perhaps be trusted that the decisions they are making are in the best interests of these children. Perhaps approval could then be simplified, or at the very least be done through a regional exceptions committee rather than a provincial committee.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this section, we outline the summary of recommendations made by participants during Phase 2 of the Cultural Planning, Aboriginal Children and Adoption. For the purposes of clarity, we have divided recommendations into three categories: Policy, Practice and General. Following these recommendations, is a discussion on how these recommendations may be implemented to address cultural planning, adoption and Aboriginal children in British Columbia.

### **Policy**

The following is a summary of policy recommendations.

1. The need to examine cultural planning as a legally binding process
2. The Cultural planning policy should require this work to begin earlier at the child's entry into the child welfare system
3. The Cultural Planning Policy needs to be reviewed to make the process more efficient and less time consuming
4. The Exceptions committee needs to clarify expectations and communicate more clearly
5. The policy needs to facilitate a regional process rather than a provincial exceptions process.
6. Increase in financial resources to provide the support necessary for all aspects of cultural planning
7. Increase the number of ROOTS workers and resources for this practice.

### **Practice**

Considerations for best practices as suggested by participants in this study include:

1. More training for everyone involved: workers, birth families, adoptive parents.



2. Practices that ensure Aboriginal children remaining with home community or maintaining connections to home community.
3. Collaborative skills used to maintain relationships with families and communities
4. Openness to community input, ceremonies and relationships
5. Ongoing contact and support to adoptive families
6. Working to approve and support Indigenous adoptive families

## **General**

These recommendations do not necessarily fit into areas of policy or practice however we wish to acknowledge the insight that workers shared with us in other areas of cultural planning work. For example when describing rewards of cultural planning work the following were highlighted:

1. Learning about various Indigenous cultures and ceremonies.
2. Seeing adoptive families follow through on commitments to preserve culture.
3. The cooperation between birth families and adoptive families.
4. Adoptive families being welcomed into First Nation communities.
5. Indigenous children knowing who they are and where they come from

This implies that creating a cultural planning process is supported by these participants with the view to ensure these are optimal outcomes in the cultural planning process for Indigenous children in British Columbia. This brings to mind the extended family concept described in Phase 1 and the conceptual model of the “Extended Family Tree of Life” (MCFD Cultural Planning, Aboriginal Children and Adoption, p.64, (See Appendix D). This concept resurfaces in Phase 2 through suggestions in the five points above that emphasize the relationships and collaboration of all those involved with the adopted child.

## **DISCUSSION**

Reflecting on the outcomes of Phase 2 we need to consider the context for inquiry. The participants who responded, the role they play and the regional context in which they work were all factors that influenced the discourse of respondents. These factors are important considerations for any study.

In this particular study those who responded are adoption, guardianship and Roots workers in the province of British Columbia who have a cumulative workload history of over ten years with MCFD. As a group they have completed over 120 cultural plans for the adoption of Indigenous children. Their collective wisdom is greatly appreciated and what follows is an analysis and synthesis of major findings with suggested considerations for policy and practice in adoption, cultural planning and Indigenous children.

### **Major Finding 1: Cultural planning legislation or policy?**

This is not an easy question to answer. What would be the benefits and barriers through legislating cultural planning? In other jurisdictions there appears to be lack of data on the outcomes of children to support this approach. In Australia, the implementation of cultural planning is fairly recent, and in the U.S. there are no longitudinal studies to identify the potential success of legislated cultural planning.

Frustration with the inconsistencies of cultural planning may lead us to view legislation as necessary in order to guarantee commitment and success. We also know the drawbacks of legislative requirements in child welfare practice. For example the National Indian Child Welfare Act in the U.S. had advanced the notion of family and community best interest in adoption and

child welfare services however the outcomes of NICWA has also been rife with litigation and court involvement, furthering the divide between tribal members and the strong lobby of the non tribal foster care and adoption community. Thoma (2006) reports that over 300 cases have ended up in some court or another since the implementation of NICWA and that “the scarcity of data on outcomes for children subject to the law, along with variations in how individual states, courts, social workers, and tribes interpret and implement ICWA, make it difficult to generalize about how the law is being implemented or its effect on American Indian children”

(<http://www.liftingtheveil.org/icwa.htm>)

For Indigenous peoples legislation has not always been the answer. For example the *Indian Act* in Canada has not been particularly helpful to First Nation peoples and we know some of the unfortunate outcomes from that particular legislation.

At this time, without some compelling evidence to the contrary it seems that enhancing the policy to encourage efficient and appropriate practice in cultural planning appears to be a better option for the adoption of Indigenous children in British Columbia.

### **Major Finding 2: Improving Practice**

In this study participants made several recommendations for improved practice in cultural planning. The core issue within these recommendations appears to be a need for enhanced knowledge in relational work with Indigenous communities and planning for children. This can be facilitated through increasing opportunities for dialogue with Indigenous communities, agencies and resource people to discuss the cultural planning process. It is perhaps time to consider a forum for these discussions and a means of connecting adoption, guardianship workers and roots workers with members of Indigenous communities across BC to discuss this area of practice. There are pockets of conversations that happen at child welfare conferences

around this topic but BC has a Cultural Planning policy that is vitally important to Indigenous children, youth their families and communities. A gathering to have some challenging conversations around these matters relating to the policy and ensuing practice may prove beneficial in advancing practice in cultural planning.

Through this phase and phase 1 we have heard from adoptive parents, Indigenous and non Indigenous practitioners that there is a need for increased connection between workers, families and communities. There were some participants in this study who felt that the cultural planning work may be resolved by turning over these services to Indigenous agencies. If it were only that simple! There are complexities in this suggestion including funding limitations and ideological differences of opinion that are as diverse as the geography of British Columbia.

What has become clear to date however is that the practice of cultural planning is not formula driven and requires some flexibility. Is it time perhaps to take a closer examination of standards for cultural planning that will hopefully ensure some consistency in practice? Competency based practice is always a bit iffy and it is a misnomer that one can become ‘culturally competent’ in someone else’s culture however the Aboriginal Operational Practice Standards in BC is one location where perhaps cultural planning and adoption can be safely deposited as an expectation for all workers who are engaged in cultural planning for Indigenous children in care and in adoption. Another suggestion that was discussed in a recent University of Victoria MSW project paper was the idea of self assessment in cultural competency development (Harding, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

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2.. Harding, L. (2010). *Self Assessment in Cultural Competency Development: An: Aboriginal Child Welfare Orientation*. Unpublished Project Paper Submitted for a Masters in Social Work. University of Victoria

The notion of self awareness is embedded in Harding's paper as she collected information from Indigenous agencies to compose an outline for cultural competency development training provided through the Caring for First Nations Children Society in Victoria. Perhaps further discussions with MCFD and this agency to discuss how this approach might fit with training needs for cultural planning work and the various stakeholders involved such as adoption workers and adoptive families would be enlightening. Whatever training is provided however requires the input of Indigenous agencies and their respective cultural teachers who are their Elders and community healers. It is worthy of exploration albeit with an emphasis on the need to be cautious and respectful.

### **Major Finding 3: Exceptions Committee**

In both Phase 1 and Phase 2 the role and procedures of the Exceptions Committee were commented on by participants. These appear to be unclear to the adoptive parents and Indigenous practitioners who participated in Phase 1 and to the adoption, guardianship and Roots workers who participated in Phase 2. Resolving this may be a simple manner of communicating the process differently. One suggestion would be for the committee to review its structure and mandate and perhaps revise their literature and distribution of their written descriptions of their work. It might be that the committee might benefit from hosting some focus groups with stakeholders such as adoptive parents and workers to discuss mutual concerns.

Some of the recommendations from this study included a suggestion for regional committees to streamline the process. This suggestion seems reasonable and in following this approach the committee procedures could be expanded to include a more 'personal' approach discussed in Phase 1 where the committee might be able to meet more applicants and workers face to face.

Lastly, participants in this study mentioned a time lag or issues of efficiency with the committee. If this is the case then another practical solution may be to expand the committee in order to process more applications for exceptions.

#### **Major Finding 4: Cultural Planning or Cultural Safety?**

With concern for a legislated process and enhanced practice in cultural planning as described above, perhaps consideration can be made for the principles of mandated cultural safety that is currently being discussed in other disciplines. Cultural safety was introduced in New Zealand in nursing education out of concern for structural inequities in the health care system and “designed to draw attention to the power imbalances between Maori and the dominant health care culture” (in Smye, V., Josewski, V. and Kendall, E. 2010, p.5)<sup>3</sup>

This report describes cultural safety as adhering to the following principles:

- An understanding of colonial and post colonial forces (on the lives of Indigenous peoples)
- Relationship building and collaboration through a commitment to principles of reciprocity, inclusivity, respect, collaboration, community development and self determination
- Culturally safe communication and language.
- A recognition of Indigenous knowledges and practices.

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3. Smye, V., Josewski, V., Kendall, E. (2010). *Cultural Safety: An Overview*. Draft Prepared for the First Nations, Inuit and Metis Advisory Committee Mental Health Commission of Canada. Ottawa.

This model informs cultural planning from the premise that cultural planning is an opportunity to engage in important processes with Indigenous families and communities that affirms their rights in terms of planning for their children and solidifies an agreement that has contractual overtones without legislative barriers. By following these principles the cultural planning process can become a mutually developed, respectful process that honours Indigenous histories, self determination through the best interests of Indigenous children within a context of family and community and affirms the rights of adoptive families within that context as opposed to separate and distant caregivers for Indigenous children.

If cultural safety is viewed as a necessary component to permanency planning then the implications include training needs for the continuum of care provided including foster care. Twigg (2009) discusses the continuing demands on foster parents and suggests “that as long as the child welfare system remains as it is, it can be expected that 60 percent of children in care will be in foster care,” and furthermore that, “If the needs of these children and their families are to be met, a trained and dedicated cadre of foster carers are required” (p.181).<sup>4</sup> The cultural safety language is sometimes challenging to non Indigenous practitioners but it is a breath of fresh air to those who have been patiently navigating a system based on western notions of child welfare practice.

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4. Twigg, R. (2009). Passion for Those Who Care: What Foster Carers Need. In Eds. McKay, S., Fuchs, D., Brown, I., *Passion for Action in Child and Family Services*. Regina: University of Regina Press. 165-184

## **CONCLUSION**

We hope that these recommendations are considered for the future development of the MCFD Cultural Planning Policy and the work of the provincial Adoptions Exceptions Committee. We are grateful for having participated in this work and look forward to Phase 3 in which we shall interview Indigenous youth for their views on cultural planning. Thanks again to all those who gave up their time to assist in this study. We know that this is important yet challenging work and it is much easier to write about than to actually try and meet these challenges every day in practice. For this reason we hope we have brought some ideas and suggestions forward with a good mind and good heart. For all our relations,

Jeannine and Rachelle



## APPENDIX A



Jeannine Carriere, PhD  
Associate Professor, School of Social Work  
University of Victoria  
P.O. Box 1700 STN CSC  
Victoria, BC  
V8W-2Y2

### LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR IMPLIED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study entitled **Strengthening Cultural Plans for Aboriginal Children and Adoption, Phase 2** that is being conducted by Dr. Jeannine Carriere at the University of Victoria. The contact information for Dr. Carriere is as follows:

Phone: 250-721-6452  
Email: [carriere@uvic.ca](mailto:carriere@uvic.ca)

#### **Background**

This research is being funded by the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) Adoption Services Branch. During Phase 1, non Aboriginal adoptive families of Aboriginal children and Aboriginal community representatives were interviewed to get their perspectives on the *Cultural Planning Policy*. The report from Phase 1 is available on the MCFD website for your information.

During Phase 2, I hope to receive your valued feedback through the attached questionnaire in order to reflect the experiences of adoption and guardianship workers in this important area of practice.

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

1. To determine the effectiveness of the current cultural planning policy in the adoption of Aboriginal children and youth in British Columbia.
2. To explore the strengths and/or challenges to cultural planning for Aboriginal children and youth in British Columbia
3. To develop recommendations for practice in cultural planning with the overall goal of facilitating positive outcomes for Aboriginal children in adopted families.

**Importance of this Research**

This research will assist to evaluate the Cultural Planning Policy and make recommendation to enhance this policy and practice in the adoption of Aboriginal children. Since its inception in 1996, there has not been an opportunity to review its effectiveness. We hope that by involving major stakeholders in the review, that the policy can be examined accordingly and revised if necessary.

**Participant Selection**

You have received this email as you are involved in adoption as either an adoption social worker or guardianship worker. Your name and information will not be used in any documents related to this research and I will be the only person who knows of your involvement.

**What is Involved?**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include completing the attached questionnaire and returning it to me via email by January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010. I will complete the analysis and compile a report by March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010. You can expect to spend a maximum of two hours in completing the questionnaire and you are free to choose whatever location you feel will offer you the most privacy and ability to concentrate.

**Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

**Benefits**

The benefits include the contribution to best practices in the adoption of Aboriginal children in British Columbia and other jurisdiction. This will be achieved through revisions to the cultural planning policy and related practices.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate I have outlined the dates by which I would appreciate receiving your completed questionnaire. If you choose to withdraw from the research you may do so at any time and your information will not be used in the final analysis and report. If you decide to withdraw from the research however please do so prior to the drafting of the final report which is due on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010.

**Anonymity**

As described earlier your name will not appear in any information related to this research such as reports or other publications. I will be the only person who sees the names of participants as they contact me for information or send in their questionnaires.

**Confidentiality**

Completed questionnaires will be kept on my computer at the University of Victoria which is password protected.

**Dissemination of results**

The analysis of completed questionnaires will be correlated into a final report to MCFD Adoption Services. This will be in the form of a thematic analysis without participant information. You may request an executive summary of this report once it is complete. The summary can be emailed directly to you if you indicate your desire to receive it from me as Principal Investigator. Results may also be discussed at conference presentations and in written articles published by me as the Principal Investigator

**Disposal of Data**

Completed questionnaires will be deleted one year after the completion of the final report for the project.

**Contacts**

If you have further questions about this study please do not hesitate to contact me through the contact information at the beginning of this Information and Consent Letter.

In addition you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you may have by contact the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca))

By completing and submitting the questionnaire, **YOUR FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT IS IMPLIED** and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

*Please retain a copy of this letter for your reference*

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Strengthening Cultural Plans for Aboriginal Children and Adoption**

#### **Questionnaire to Adoption or Guardianship social workers for MCFD**

**\*\*Please use as much space as required for your answers**

- 1. What is your role at MCFD? : Guardianship worker \_\_\_\_\_ Adoption worker \_\_\_\_\_**
- 2. How long have you been with MCFD? \_\_\_\_\_**
- 3. How many cultural plans would you estimate that you have been involved with?  
\_\_\_\_\_**
- 4. Please describe the steps you take when assisting with a cultural plan for an Aboriginal child.**
- 5. What have been the most rewarding aspects of this work?**
- 6. What have been the most challenging aspects of this work?**
- 7. What do you consider best practices in cultural planning for Aboriginal children?**
- 8. How can MCFD support your work in cultural planning for Aboriginal children?**
- 9. Does your region have a regional Exceptions Committee?**
- 10. What is your understanding of the role of the Provincial Exceptions Committee?**
- 11. Do you have any recommendations for the Provincial Exceptions Committee?**
- 12. What is your feedback on the average time it takes to complete a cultural plan?**
- 13. Do you have other recommendations on cultural planning for Aboriginal children and adoption?**
- 14. Are there other comments you would like to make at this time?**

Cross Cultural Adoptions in First Nations Communities

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Thematic Data Analysis  
Presented to  
J. Carriere of  
Human and Social Development  
Social Work Department  
University of Victoria

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Phase Two

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by  
Rachelle Marie Dallaire  
January 2009

**Number of Surveys Submitted : 19**

**Question;**

1. What is your role at MCFD?

**Responses;**

<b>ROLE/POSITION</b>	<b>NUMBER OF PEOPLE</b>
Adoption/Guardianship Workers	2
Roots Worker/Practitioner	1
Adoption Workers	8
Adoption Team Leaders	2
Team Leaders	3
Guardianship Workers	2
Previous Roots Worker	1

**Question;**

2. How long have you been with MCFD?

**Responses;**

<b>AMOUNT OF TIME</b>	<b>NUMBER OF PEOPLE</b>
1 year	1
2 years	1
3.5 years	1
9 years	2
10 years	1
11 years	2
12 years	3
13 years	1
14 years	1
17 years	1
18 years	1
21 years	1
22 years	1
24years	1
35 years	1

**Question:**

3. How many cultural plans have you done?

**Responses:**

<b>NUMBER OF PLANS</b>	<b>AMOUNT OF PEOPLE</b>
3	3
4	2
4-5	1
Less than 6	1
6	2
6-7	1
Estimated 12	1
Estimated 15	2
20	1
30	1
30+	1
40	1
10 stand alones/100 embedded into plans of care (estimated)	1
Estimated 120	1

**Question:**

4. Please describe the steps you take when assisting with a cultural plan for an Aboriginal child.

**Responses (thematic analysis);**

<b>TASK</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Contacting biological family for input	4 adoption workers, 2 team leaders, 1 Roots worker, 1 previous Roots worker
Contacting foster family for input	1 team leader, 1 Roots worker
Contacting band for input	5 adoption workers, 2 guardianship workers, 1 Roots worker
Facilitating group planning with biological family, foster parents, band, FN community, and adoptive family	2 adoption workers, 1 team leader
Maintain regular contact with social worker	1 Roots worker
Attend meetings including family Group Planning/Conferencing	1 Roots worker
Review plans with the adoptive parents, clarify their role and level of commitment	1 team leader, 4 adoption workers, 2 guardianship workers

Finding culturally specific community ...resources including elders	1 adoption worker, 1 previous Roots worker
Individualizing cultural plans	2 adoption workers, 1 guardianship worker, 1 team leader
Connecting children back to their biological families	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker
Supervising adoption workers by providing input, addressing concerns, and educating regarding the importance of cultural plans	1 adoption team leader
Supervising Roots workers by providing input, addressing concerns, and educating regarding the importance of cultural plans	1 team leader
Help establish trust with the social worker	1 team leader
Connecting involved parties via IT when geographically necessary	1 team leader
Incorporating holism	1 guardianship worker
Emphasizing need of permanence for the child(ren)	1 guardianship worker
Contacting FN agencies for input and direction	1 adoption worker
Researching cultural protocol and resources	1 adoption social worker, 1 previous Roots worker
Making recommendations on final copy of cultural plan	1 adoption worker
Supporting colleagues involved in the process	1 adoption worker, 1 guardianship worker
Involving Metis Commission and agency when necessary	1 adoption worker, 1 guardianship worker
Working with and contact with the Regional and Provincial Exceptions Committee	1 team leader, 3 adoption workers
Feel this process as nothing to do with them as they are involved in a different capacity	1 adoption team leader
Reviewing genograms	1 adoption social worker, 1 guardianship worker, 1 previous Roots worker
Referral to Roots worker/program	2 adoption workers, 1 team leader
Involving the child when necessary	1 previous Roots worker

### **Common Themes Identified;**

1. Individualizing cultural plans
2. Contacting biological family for input
3. Contacting band for input
4. Facilitating group planning with biological family, foster parents, band, FN community, and adoptive family



5. Contacting foster family for input
6. Review plans with the adoptive parents, clarify their role and level of commitment
7. Finding culturally specific community ...resources including elders
8. Connecting children back to their biological families
9. Researching cultural protocol and resources
10. Supporting colleagues involved in the process
11. Involving Metis Commission and agency when necessary
12. Working with and contact with the Regional and Provincial Exceptions Committee
13. Reviewing genograms
14. Referral to Roots worker/program

**Question:**

5. What have been the most rewarding aspects of this work?

**Responses;**

<b>ASPECT</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Creating permanence for children	1 Roots worker/practitioner, 3 adoption workers, 1 guardianship worker, 1 team leader
Learning about FN cultures	1 Roots worker/practitioner, 1 adoption worker, 1 team leader
Working with FN communities, bands and families	1 Roots worker/practitioner,
Observing FN adoptive parents learn about their own FN culture through the adoption process of a child	1 adoption worker,
Cooperative process of biological and adoptive families	1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker
Child(ren) meeting biological family for the first time	1 team leader, 1 guardianship worker
Reconnecting child(ren) to native/home community, or connections	3 team leaders, 2 guardianship workers, 1 adoption team leader, 1 adoption worker, 1 previous Roots worker
Accessing FN resources through a variety of venues	1 guardianship worker
Indigenous children being adopted by Indigenous parents	1 adoption worker
Adoptive parents being welcomed into FN communities	2 adoption worker, 1 team leader
Adoptive parents placing value in cultural plan and following through on their commitment to honor the plan	1 adoption worker, 1 team leader, 1 guardianship worker
Developing relationships	1 adoption worker

**Common Themes Identified;**

1. Creating permanence for children
2. Learning about FN cultures
3. Cooperative process of biological and adoptive families
4. Child(ren) meeting biological family for the first time
5. Reconnecting child(ren) to native/home community, or connections
6. Adoptive parents being welcomed into FN communities
7. Adoptive parents placing value in cultural plan and following through on their commitment to honor the plan

**Question;**

6. What have been the most challenging aspects of this work?

**Responses;**

<b>ASPECTS</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Dealing with disagreements between adoptive and biological families	1 Roots worker/practitioner
Dealing with effects of colonialism on FN, Metis and Inuit families	1 Roots worker/practitioner
Trying to deal with trust with family members when the cultural plan is not legally binding	1 Roots worker/practitioner
Finding resources for families	1 adoption worker
Limited scope of the plans and seeing little come of the plan	1 adoption worker
Consistent contact person with the bands to assist with the plans	1 adoption worker
Training guardianship staff	1 adoption team leader
Engaging the biological family, adoptive family, and Aboriginal community to follow through on their commitments	1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker, 2 adoption workers
Getting social workers to establish relationships with the families and community	1 team leader
Social workers being result driven and rushed	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker
Getting foster parents and adoptive parents to incorporate culture in a child(ren)'s early upbringing and placing value on this	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker, 1 team leader, 1 previous Roots worker
Mistrust between FN communities, bands and MCFD	1 guardianship worker, 2 adoption workers, 1 team leader
Lack of financial resources to implement more cultural resources	1 guardianship worker, 1 team leader, 1 adoption worker

Guardianship workers not believing that adoption is a good option	1 adoption worker
Guardianship (or adoption) workers believing there is too much paperwork involved	2 adoption workers
Guardianship workers believing that Caucasian parents are better parents than FN parents and transmitting these messages subtly	1 adoption worker
Guardianship team leaders not believing that adoption is a good option	1 adoption worker
MCFD adoption recruitment is geared to non-Indigenous applicants with little cultural competence	1 adoption worker
Finding skilled adoptive families for FAS/FASD children	1 adoption worker
Length of time it takes to find an appropriate home for FN child(ren) and complete the adoption process	4 adoption workers, 2 team leaders, 1 guardianship worker
Working with the changing expectations from approval committees and wait time	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker
Lack of follow up from bands	2 team leaders
Keeping workers focused on the importance and value of the plans	1 team leader
Cooperation from all involved	1 adoption team leader
Agency cultural competence	1 adoption worker
Time and distance to get key players together	1 team leader, 1 guardianship worker
Sibling separation	1 team leader

### **Common Themes Identified;**

1. Engaging the biological family, adoptive family, and Aboriginal community to follow through on their commitments
2. Social workers being result driven and rushed
3. Getting foster parents and adoptive parents to incorporate culture in a child(ren)'s early upbringing and placing value on this
4. Mistrust between FN communities, bands and MCFD
5. Lack of financial resources to implement more cultural resources
6. Guardianship (or adoption) workers believing there is too much paperwork involved
7. Length of time it takes to find an appropriate home for FN child(ren) and complete the adoption process
8. Working with the changing expectations from approval committees and wait time
9. Lack of follow up from bands
10. Time and distance to get key players together

**Question;**

7. What do you consider best practices in cultural planning for Aboriginal children?

**Responses;**

<b>BEST PRACTICE</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Stressing the importance of cultural connection for Aboriginal children	1 Roots worker/practitioner, 1 adoption team leader
Stressing the importance of specific culture	1 Roots worker/practitioner, 1 adoption worker, 1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker, 1 previous roots worker
Cultural connections	1 adoption worker, 1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker, 2 team leaders
Child's input	1 adoption worker
Children remaining within family (when possible)	1 adoption worker, 2 adoption social workers, 1 team leader
Children remaining with home community (or maintaining connections to home community)	2 adoption workers, 1 team leader, 1 adoption social worker
Cultural planning starts at the time a child comes into care, not at the time of adoption	1 team leader, 1 adoption team leader, 1 adoption social worker
Collaborative effort from family and community for the best interest of the child	2 team leaders, 3 adoption social workers
Educating caregivers	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker
Maintaining contact with biological family	1 guardianship worker, 1 team leader
Positive cultural role models	1 guardianship worker
Adoption families being of the same race and culture	2 guardianship workers,
In the event an adoptive home is not available which matches the child's culture that a child be adopted by a culturally sensitive family rather than to sit in care	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker
New adoption procedures as directed by an independent Indigenous committee	1 adoption worker
Cultural plans with substance, not just "sugar coating" cultural connections	1 adoption worker
Ensuring adoptive families are committed to following through	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker
Working with one consistent group which can ensure that cultural plans are effective	1 team leader
Consulting community in cultural plans	1 adoption team leader, 1 adoption social worker
Use of Dr. Brokenleg's Circle of Courage	1 team leader
Roots at the forefront of the process	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker

**Common Themes Identified;**

1. Stressing the importance of cultural connection for Aboriginal children
2. Stressing the importance of specific culture
3. Cultural connections
4. Children remaining within family (when possible)
5. Children remaining with home community (or maintaining connections to home community)
6. Cultural planning starts at the time a child comes into care, not at the time of adoption
7. Collaborative effort from family and community for the best interest of the child
8. Educating caregivers
9. Maintaining contact with biological family
10. Adoption families being of the same race and culture
11. In the event an adoptive home is not available which matches the child's culture that a child be adopted by a culturally sensitive family rather than to sit in care
12. Ensuring adoptive families are committed to following through
13. Consulting community in cultural plans
14. Roots at the forefront of the process

**Question;**

8. How can MCFD support your work in cultural planning for Aboriginal children?

**Responses;**

More Roots workers/practitioners	1 Roots worker, 2 guardianship workers, 1 team leader
More funding for Aboriginal children to exercise access to cultural resources and events	1 Roots worker, 2 team leaders, 1 adoption team leader
Recruit foster parents from Aboriginal communities	1 Roots worker, 1 guardianship worker, 1 team leader
Recruit Aboriginal social workers and Aboriginal Roots workers	1 Roots worker, 1 team leader
Provide regional consultants who are culturally competent	2 adoption workers
Bridging between social workers and the bands	1 adoption worker, 2 team leaders
Effective training for social workers and anyone involved in the adoption process of Aboriginal children (including community, adoptive families, and team leaders)	1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker, 4 adoption workers, 1 team leader
Shifting practice to ensure cultural planning is done much earlier	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker

Smaller caseloads	1 guardianship worker, 2 adoption workers
More efforts to keep children in the home communities	1 guardianship worker
Use Caring for First Nations Children Society to train foster and adoptive parents	1 adoption worker
Be realistic in expectations for ongoing connections	1 team leader
Learn from experience about what (doesn't) works	1 team leader
Do not allow the committee to take so much time	1 team leader
Understanding for challenges faced by MCFD staff	1 adoption worker
Post adoption financial support	1 team leader
Bridging biological family connections	1 team leader
Expediating the adoption process	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker
Expanding and supporting the Roots initiatives	1 previous Roots worker

**Common Themes Identified;**

1. More Roots workers/practitioners
2. More funding for Aboriginal children to exercise access to cultural resources and events
3. Recruit foster parents from Aboriginal communities
4. Recruit Aboriginal social workers and Aboriginal Roots workers
5. Provide regional consultants who are culturally competent
6. Bridging between social workers and the bands
7. Effective training for social workers and anyone involved in the adoption process of Aboriginal children (including community, adoptive families, and team leaders)
8. Shifting practice to ensure cultural planning is done much earlier
9. Smaller caseloads
10. Expediting the adoption process

**Question;**

9. Does your region have a Regional Exceptions Committee?

**Responses;**

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>NOT SURE</b>
<b># OF PEOPLE</b>	9	7	3

**Question;**

10. What is your understanding of the role of the Exceptions Committee/

**Responses;**

<b>UNDERSTANDINGS</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Review applications for exceptions to place FN child in non-FN home	4 adoption workers, 1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption/guardianship worker, 2 team leaders, 1 previous Roots worker, 1 Roots worker/practitioner
Ensure cultural plans are effective	6 adoption workers, 2 adoption team leaders, 3 guardianship workers
Support and guide social workers in generating plans	1 team leader, 1 guardianship worker
Ensuring protocol has been completed in determining options of permanency	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker, 1 team leader
Creates uniformity within the province as it relates to adoption process for FN children	1 guardianship worker, 2 adoption workers
Liaison between MCFD and FN community	1 adoption worker, 1 guardianship worker
Make recommendations	1 previous Roots worker

**Common Themes Identified;**

1. Review applications for exceptions to place FN child in non-FN home
2. Ensure cultural plans are effective
3. Support and guide social workers in generating plans
4. Ensuring protocol has been completed in determining options of permanency
5. Creates uniformity within the province as it relates to adoption process for FN children
6. Liaison between MCFD and FN community

**Question;**

11. Do you have any recommendations for the Provincial exemptions committee?

**Responses;**

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Make the cultural plan legally binding	1 Roots worker/practitioner
Make the process more effective and time efficient	3 adoption workers, 1 guardianship worker, 1 team leader, 1 adoption/guardianship worker
Empathy for the children	1 previous Roots worker
Ensure plans are culturally specific and individualized	1 previous Roots worker
Be more visible	1 team leader

More feedback on challenges and successes	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker, 1 guardianship worker
Clarify expectations	3 adoption workers, 2 adoption team leaders, 1 guardianship worker
Consistent communication	2 adoption worker, 1 adoption team leader, 1 guardianship worker
Dispense with the Regional Committee	1 team leader
Bridge the gap between MCFD and bands	1 team leader
Families meet directly with the committee	1 adoption worker
Use of photographs of children and adoptive families in decision making	1 adoption worker
None at this time	1 guardianship worker, 1 adoption worker
Rely more on MCFD recommendations	1 team leader
Be more realistic in their expectations	1 adoption team leader

### Common Themes Identified;

1. Make the process more effective and time efficient
2. More feedback on challenges and successes
3. Clarify expectations
4. Consistent communication
5. None (recommendations) at this time

### Question;

12. What is your feedback on the average time it takes to complete a cultural plan?

### Responses;

FEEDBACK	REPORTED BY
Time consuming	1 Roots worker/practitioner, 7 adoption workers, 1 previous Roots worker, 1 guardianship worker, 2 adoption team leaders, 2 team leaders, 1 adoption/guardianship worker
Creates backlog on workloads	1 Roots worker/practitioner
Delays progress	1 adoption worker
Can be quick at times	1 adoption worker
Needs to be started earlier	1 adoption worker
Plan generation is important	1 adoption worker
More support and collaboration is required	1 adoption team leader
Bands take too long to get back in touch with those involved	1 guardianship worker
Labour intensive	1 adoption worker
Social workers rush just to get them done	1 adoption worker
Depends on who is doing it	1 guardianship worker



Length of time to complete the plan is contingent on level of familiarity and training of the staff completing the plan	1 adoption team leader
Good communication with involved parties will expedite the process	1 adoption worker
The length of time involved has not been an impediment to placing children successfully	1 adoption worker

**Common Theme Identified;**

1. Time consuming

**Question;**

13. Do you have other recommendations cultural planning for Aboriginal children and adoption?

**Responses;**

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>REPORTED BY</b>
Giving children tools and skills to develop cultural connections and self knowing	1 adoption worker
Have workers who work only on cultural planning from the time a child comes into care	1 adoption worker
Cultural plans should be reinforced through legislation and be legally binding	1 previous Roots worker, 1 team leader
Child development research to be given equal priority as a political agenda	1 guardianship worker
Cultural consultants on a volunteer basis when no historical connections are available	1 team leader, 1 adoption worker
Focus on recruitment and training for foster and adoptive parents	1 team leader, 2 adoption workers
Explore permanent options outside of adoption since many FN communities do not support adoption	1 team leader
Involve Roots initiative much earlier in the process	2 team leaders, 1 adoption worker, 1 guardianship worker
Homecoming ceremony for children	1 team leader
Ongoing training for foster parents	1 team leader
Educate bands on what the purpose and importance of cultural plans is to engage their full cooperation	1 adoption worker
Policy reflected in practice	1 adoption worker, 1 team leader

Have more resources to work with	1 adoption worker
Need a user friendly template to complete effective cultural plan	1 adoption worker

**Common Themes Identified;**

1. Cultural plans should be reinforced through legislation and be legally binding
2. Cultural consultants on a volunteer basis when no historical connections are available
3. Focus on recruitment and training for foster and adoptive parents
4. Involve Roots initiative much earlier in the process
5. Policy reflected in practice

**Question;**

14. Are there other comments you would like to make at this time?

**Responses;**

<b>COMMENTS</b>	<b>MADE BY</b>
MCFD workers need to be more educated about cultural plans	1 team leader
MCFD workers need to be given cultural sensitivity training	1 team leader
MCFD workers need to work with adoptive families after the completion of the adoption process to ensure the plans are being followed	1 team leader
Focus on recruitment and training for foster and adoptive parents	1 adoption worker
To present the results of this study to Lesley du Toit, Deputy Minister, Children's Youth Representative, and Steven Harper for consideration	1 adoption worker
Honour the good work as conducted by successful adoptive families	1 adoption worker
Please make the planning process for children simpler	1 guardianship worker
Do studies on children who have experienced the exceptions process and assess outcome	1 team leader
Assist adoptive families financially with cultural connections which require extensive travel	1 team leader
Ensure that bi-racial children are not only defined by their FN heritage	1 team leader
This is a challenging practice but would be	1 adoption worker

exciting to see policy and practice better align themselves	
Cultural plans are mostly not followed, would be more effective to re-assess way in which we generate cultural plans then to just crate one that is not realistic or viable	1 adoption worker
Cultural plans should be reinforced through legislation and be legally binding	1 guardianship worker
Cultural plans are time consuming and cumbersome and the adoptive family is not held accountable to follow them	1 guardianship worker
Plans need more input from biological family, community, elders, and adoptive families	1 previous Roots worker
Allow children to learn from example from their home communities	1 previous Roots worker
Have workers who work only on cultural planning from the time a child comes into care so that permanence options can be achieved quicker	1 adoption worker
To ensure time efficient permanent options, deal only with regional committee as opposed to provincial committee as well	1 adoption worker

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## APPENDIX D: EXTENDED FAMILY TREE OF ADOPTION

Adapted with permission from the Canadian Council on Learning First Nation Holistic Learning Model (2007)

