

Child Rights in the Community Context

Special Issue: Rights of Indigenous Children

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Family support practitioners have the opportunity to help all children reach their full potential by protecting and respecting their rights. A list of children's rights can be found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Almost every country including Canada has agreed to these rights. All children have the same rights regardless of who they are, where they live, how much money they have, what language they speak, their culture or their religion. All children must be treated fairly.

It is important for practitioners to know that Indigenous children—First Nations, Inuit and Métis—continue to experience high levels of risk due to a combination of historical trauma, intergenerational poverty, as well as discriminatory and under-supported child welfare policies. Advancing reconciliation means renewing nation-to-nation relationships with Indigenous people based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership. Adopting a child rights-based approach when working with children can help advance reconciliation. This approach describes the relationships young people have with adults and with their communities in terms of rights. It explains why we are concerned with young people and how we should address issues that affect them. Using this approach can help enhance family resource programs' great work.

In this issue, family support practitioners can find: a youth poem titled WARRIORS by Hannah Battiste, action-oriented hopes for the future of First Nations youth living in remote communities, information on supporting children's rights, a condensed memoir of living in a residential school, Indigenous early childhood programs, and exemplary Inuit early childhood programs.

The contents of this newsletter are based on articles from the *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights (CJCR)*. For research citations, readers are encouraged to consult the original articles. References are available at the back of this newsletter.



Photo by Sherry Prenevost

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About the Poet

Hannah Battiste is a 19-year-old poet from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Her poem WARRIORS was originally featured in Volume 10 of the *First Peoples Child & Family Review* in 2015. Practitioners can contribute to the reconciliation process by listening to Hannah's words and gaining an understanding of the trauma endured by many First Nations people and of the inherent strength of their communities.

WARRIORS

By Hannah Battiste

You have walked for years
Proud of your choices
Proud of your language
Proud of the God you worship
You took a group of people
Not just any people
First Nations people
And you broke them down
Sent One here and Twenty Two there
You didn't take the time to understand
You took away their identity
You took away everything
And buried it in the ground
You watched them suffer
To this day they suffer
And all you do is laugh
You punished the child out of them
You punished the language out of them
You killed the person inside of them
You made something sacred to them vanish
Vanish like the happiness
Vanish like the families
Vanish like the love
They had in their hearts
They call First Nations warriors
Because we are strong
We are infinity
We are special
Some of us are still angry
Some have found forgiveness
Some have found faith
And some still hurt
We all know the stories that lay
Beneath their eyes
We feel the hurt
That you have caused
We do not understand
We do not forget
And it still hurts
But we have each other
Side by side
United as a team
of WARRIORS

Partnering with Children in Remote First Nations Communities

A recent project (Mamow Ki-ken-da-ma-win: Everyone Searching for Answers Together, 2011-2015), gave young people in remote First Nations communities in Ontario the opportunity to share the challenges and opportunities they face as well as their wishes, hopes and dreams for the future. Throughout conversations with young people, four key challenges and several areas of opportunity consistently arose. An opportunity to directly engage with their voices, readers can learn about their lives in order to help their wishes, hopes and dreams become a reality. Numerous quotations from youth and additional information about the project can be found in the *CJCR*.

Challenges

Boredom	A Sense of Hopelessness	Education	Land, Language and Culture
A lack of engaging opportunities and activities as well as inadequate spaces at home contributed to young people feeling bored. Many connected boredom with getting into trouble and thoughts of suicide.	The young people expressed a shared sense of isolation, hopelessness, feeling forgotten by their communities and yet still longing to belong. Adults in their communities were concerned that youth might contemplate suicide to alleviate the pain they were feeling.	The majority of youth said they would like to get an education and a job, but felt that their quality of education was substandard compared to schools in cities. Moreover, having to leave their communities to attend high school was identified as an obstacle to achieving their educational goals.	Retaining their language and culture was important to the youth. They expressed the need for a local community hub where they could learn elements of the academic curriculum in the context of traditional values and lifestyles.

Opportunities

Communication and Artistic Expression	Community Youth Centre
Young people want more communication with people living outside of their communities in order to reduce their feelings of isolation and increase their access to resources and services. Many currently use music and social media (often YouTube) to express themselves to individuals outside their community and to receive acknowledgement and encouragement.	Communities can take action by creating Community Youth Centres to give youth a safe space to spend their evenings. Meaningful opportunities for youth to meet and socialize can help reduce boredom.

“[First Nation] needs a youth council so the youth don’t feel alone, so they don’t need to be alone and left out” – Youth

“I think the youth need a little motivation. A role model to look up to, someone that can talk to the youth about things, such things as drugs and alcohol and also education” – Youth

“We need something to do, a place to socialize, to rid of boredom, a place to learn the skills and educate youth, to get to know each other, a place to be youth” – Youth

Youth Council

Creating a Youth Council, as suggested by the young people, is an effective way to provide opportunities for youth to voice their concerns, collaborate with youth workers to create programs for youth and participate in community decision making.

Mentors and Role Models

The young people highlighted that they need more mentors and role models to look up to. These individuals can educate, guide and help youth grow up to view themselves as people worthy of being looked up to.

It is important for family support practitioners to help provide the supports necessary for young people to achieve their hopes and dreams. Without listening to their voices and taking their thoughts into consideration, a brighter future for Canada's next generation will remain on the distant horizon.

Child Participation and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on First Nations Child Welfare

In 2007, the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society—a national organization serving Indigenous children and families—filed a complaint alleging that Canada's provision of child and family services on reserve was discriminatory according to the Canadian Human Rights Act. Studies showed that First Nations children were receiving about 70 cents on the dollar for child welfare services compared to other children.

One of the CRC's guiding principles is meaningful participation. This means that adults have a duty to listen to and act on children's perspectives in all matters that affect them. This process provides adults with a depth of understanding that is critical to working with—and on behalf of—children and young people. Meaningful participation is extremely important, especially when it comes to legal issues. Consistent with the CRC, the Caring Society argued that broadcasting would be the only way to ensure participation from the children most affected by the case, since many cannot afford to travel to view the proceedings in person. Together, Elders, First Nations leaders and First Nations child and family service agencies submitted written statements that convinced the Federal Court to allow the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) to broadcast the case.

Children and youth were among the first and most engaged followers of the First Nations child welfare case. The child welfare case may be about the rights of First Nations children, but its outcome affects all children and

youth. Non-Indigenous children have expressed that a Canada good for First Nations children makes a better country for all children. Research also indicates that children who participate in social change activities benefit greatly from the experience.

Young people, especially Indigenous children living in remote areas, need to be included in legal proceedings that affect their lives. Children have the right to know what is happening, form their own opinions and take part in peaceful change actions. Those who work with children have a duty to help them in these pursuits. This case provides a model for how community organizations can help children exercise their rights in order to ensure their basic needs are met.

In January 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that Canada is discriminating against First Nations children by underfunding child welfare services on reserve. Learn more about the case at www.fnwitness.ca.

A Residential School Memoir by Russ Moses

The Russ Moses residential school memoir describes Russ's childhood experience at the Mohawk Institute (A.K.A The Mush Hole). Russ Moses was a member of the Delaware band from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. He attended the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario from 1942 to 1947, during the height of World War II. In his memoir, Russ explains that Indian children were forced to work on the large farming operation in order to produce food for the war effort.

Russ was in fact the third generation of his family to have attended the Mohawk Institute. His father attended the Institute in the 1910's, when it was being run as a military-style boarding school. His grandfather attended earlier in the 1880's, when it was being run as a religious training school.

Guaranteed to elicit a strong reaction from those who care for the welfare of children, this summary of Russ' memoir is an opportunity for Canadian practitioners to take part in the reconciliation process by learning about residential schools and acknowledging the harm that was done.

Mohawk Institute 1942-1947

Russ was surprised that new students had to physically fight other students to establish their social position within the group. The Institute employed white people to supervise the children and beatings were given for even the tiniest of things. They usually worked on the farm for half the day, but if they were needed to help with the harvest sometimes they didn't attend school at all. Russ explains that formal education was sadly neglected.

In his memoir Russ describes the food as appalling. Breakfast included skim milk, two slices of bread, a small amount of oatmeal with worms or corn meal porridge. At lunchtime they received one and a half slices of dry bread and "rotten soup" which was made from scraps of beef and rotten vegetables. At suppertime they received two slices of bread and jam, fried potatoes and a baked bun. Russ witnessed children eating soggy food that was intended for the pigs because they were so hungry. Russ explains that he and the other "Mohawk" would go begging throughout Brantford. They would knock on doors and ask "Anything extra?" If they were lucky they would be given scraps from the households.

Russ describes himself and the children as the Indians who had to become exemplary Anglican Christians. They had to go to the chapel every evening and church twice on Sundays. For a long time, Russ thought his tribal affiliation was Anglican rather than Delaware. Boys were not allowed to talk to girls, not even their own sisters except for 15 minutes a month when they could meet in the visiting room. Any mail to or from a student was opened and read; money was removed and held in "trust" for the child.

Children were tired, hungry, lice-infested and treated as sub-human. They had to take cold showers in summer and winter. They were herded into the showers and if they did not stay underneath the cold water they were struck with a brass-studded belt. Russ witnessed Indian children having their faces rubbed in human feces. The normal

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punishment when small boys wet their beds was to have their faces rubbed in their own urine. Many children tried to run away and nearly all were caught and punished.

Russ says that sadness, pain and misery are his legacy as an Indian and that churches, Indian Affairs and the Canadian public share equally in the shame of letting this happen.

FRPs and Indigenous Early Childhood Programming

As Canada works towards a renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples based on mutual respect and equality, family resource programs will play a key role in ensuring Indigenous children can grow up in an environment that respects their rights and fosters healthy and whole identity development. Article 30 of the CRC says that Indigenous children have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, religion and language. Indigenous children used to be educated by their families and communities; however, school systems and early childhood programs have taken over a large part of this role. These formal institutions teach values, knowledge and beliefs chosen by the colonizing society. As a result, many Indigenous children grow up with few chances to exercise their right to learn and practice their own culture, religion and language. To help fix this situation, family resource programs (FRPs) can provide appropriate spaces for Indigenous-led educational programming.

A Focus on Language, Culture and Identity

While Indigenous cultures are as diverse as they are numerous, a shared focus on language, culture and identity unite their approaches to educating children. The care and education of children is a sacred responsibility for Indigenous people; learning in their original language is directly tied to children's individual and collective identities. In fact, Indigenous knowledge is often most effectively communicated through Indigenous languages. Unique culture-specific words, linguistic structures that mirror Indigenous world-views and even an emphasis on oral over written communication indirectly shape children's education. Stories and storytelling are also important to children's traditional education; it teaches them who and what they are, where they come from and how to interact with others, natural things and spirits. Language immersion helps Indigenous children define who they are, interpret the world around them through the lens of their own cultures and connect with individuals in their communities.

What FRPs Can Do

To honour Indigenous children's rights, FRPs can create (or alter existing) early childhood programs to focus on Indigenous language development. There are two key government-funded early childhood programs for Indigenous communities at the national level: The First Nations Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI) and the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program. Both programs

promote the cultural, spiritual, physical and emotional development of each child and require the involvement and participation of local Indigenous communities; FNICCI, in particular, is directed and controlled by Indigenous individuals. While not total immersion programs, these programs lay the groundwork for realizing children's rights in Article 30 of the CRC.

On the other hand, non-government funded "language nest programs" have been incredibly successful at the international level. Language nest programs are Indigenous cultural early childhood language immersion programs where young children can learn their cultural language through meaningful interactions with expert speakers. Some variations of this program bring grandmothers and Elders into the program as teachers. Control of these programs is often in the hands of the families and communities that create, govern and run language nests for their own children.

It is time to create the changes needed for Indigenous children and their nations to take their rightful place in Canada. FRPs can help Indigenous children thrive by providing appropriate early childhood language development programs.

Model Inuit ECE Programs

This article features two preschool programs for Inuit children that are inspiring examples of what happens when Inuit children's rights are respected. Both programs are based on the principles of *Inuit Qaujimaqatungit* (IQ), the ages-old experience-based wisdom of the Inuit people, which are similar to several articles of the CRC.

The IQ Principles and Children's Rights

Article 29 for example, which describes the aims of education, is similar to the *Inuuqatigiisiarniq* principle (respecting others, relationships and caring for people). Article 29 is also similar to *Tunnganarniq* (fostering good spirit by being open, welcoming and inclusive), which captures the essence of one of the CRC's principles: non-discrimination. *Ajiiqatigiinniq* (decision making through discussion and consensus) ensures that children have the opportunity to share their opinions and have them taken into consideration, as described in Article 12. And *Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq* (respect and care for the land, animals and the environment) is nearly identical to Article 29.1e, which states that education should help children

develop a respect for the natural environment.

Both of the preschool programs featured in this article use an educational approach based on the IQ principle, *Pilimmaksarniq* (the development of skills through observation, mentoring, practice and effort). Their programs put into action Article 30, which says that children have the right to enjoy their own culture, to practice their own religion, and to use their own language in community with other members of their group.

The Tumiralaat Program

The Inuit Children's Centre in Ottawa, Ontario runs the *Tumiralaat* program. As described by the centre's Executive Director, the program "offers children connections to their culture and connections to each other, elders and adults" and "cultural identity matters enormously to the children who attend." The centre gives families "a place to celebrate the beauty of childhood."

The Pirurvik Program

The Pirurvik Preschool in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, provides early childhood education that is based on the IQ principle

Pilimmaksarniq, which allows children to learn at their own pace. This approach to education is enriched by Montessori materials. These learning materials are 'hands on' resources that allow for self-directed development. As language development is key to early childhood education instruction, these materials aim to promote and enrich Inuktitut literacy and include: Inuktitut sandpaper syllabics, large moveable Inuktitut syllabics, Inuktitut Sounds bags, and small moveable Inuktitut syllabics. The IQ and Montessori approaches to education allow children to follow their natural curiosity by choosing topics that interest them.

Conclusion

These two early childhood education programs can serve as models for rights-based early years programming based on traditional principles. FRPs can draw inspiration from the Tumiralaat and Pirurvik programs by upholding the rights of all children. The wisdom of the Inuit people (IQ) is a great resource to draw on for designing early childhood centres for all Indigenous children as well as for others in our increasingly diverse society.

Photo by Sherry Prenevost



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The *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights* is an academic, peer-reviewed journal which aims to encourage a deeper understanding of the rights of children. You can access the journal at: <http://journals.carleton.ca/cjcr/index.php/cjcr>.



The Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights facilitates opportunities for youth to increase their civic and political participation by giving them the tools to be advocates for social change and by disseminating knowledge to educators, decision-makers, advocates and youth. Find out more about their activities at <http://www.carleton.ca/landonpearson>.



The images in this newsletter were kindly provided by Sherry Prenevost. They were taken as part of the Mamow Ki-ken-da-ma-win: Everyone Searching for Answers Together project. You can view more of Sherry's work at www.sherryprenevostphotography.com.

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