

## First Peoples Child & Family Review

An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

# Editorial: Aboriginal Victim or Valor: Understanding the Past to Change the Future

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## Editorial

### Aboriginal Victim or Valor: Understanding the Past to Change the Future

Marlyn Bennett and Andrea Auger

We live by many metaphors. For instance, it has been said many times over that in order to know where we are to go in the future, we need to understand our past. The collection of articles in this issue of the *First Peoples Child & Family Review* journal (Volume 5, Number 2, 2010) does just that. What emerges from these articles is an understanding of how Aboriginal peoples' were historically victimized and how the contemporary discourse in this issue reveals amazing strength in people who exhibit resilience and who are emerging quickly as valors in the recovery of their Aboriginal identities and evidencing what it means to be "living the good life" (Pimatisiwin or B'maadisiwin). This discovery of Aboriginal valor is aided by the collective voices and the various research efforts of the Indigenous scholars, women and allies whose works appear in this issue.

The first article, *Investigating the linkages between FASD, gangs, sexual exploitation and woman abuse in the Canadian Aboriginal population: A Preliminary Study* (pp. 9-22) by Dr. Mark Totten was co-written with the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). Unlike most NWAC publications, this article does not focus on storytelling methods but rather utilized western, academic approaches to understanding the intersections between FASD, sexual exploitation, gangs and extreme violence in the lives of young Aboriginal women (30 years of age and younger). Through collaborative approaches, the author and NWAC, developed a network with experts on FASD, local service providers, and others dealing with Aboriginal youth involved in sexual exploitation and gangs, to identify a broad based research approach to understanding the linkages. There is little data on these particular linkages. Through an exploratory review of the literature, Totten explores the connections between sexual exploitation and FASD, gangs and FASD, sexual exploitation and gangs and how these particular issues insect in the lives of Aboriginal girls and women.

The emerging data in Totten's article indicates that many young Aboriginal women experience extreme sexual slavery and extreme violence in gangs, and that a disproportionate number also suffer from Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Totten notes that "Aboriginal girls and women are significantly more likely than any other group in the country to die at a young age from suicide, homicide or serious illness" (p. 9) in addition, "they suffer disproportionately elevated rates of sexual and physical abuse as children and adults; rates of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) appears to be elevated in the Aboriginal

(particularly the First Nations) population, which is directly linked to higher rates of drug and alcohol use and addictions at a young age; and, they make up the large majority of all individuals in Canada who are involved in the sex trade and sexual trafficking" (pp. 9-10). Totten suggests that gangs (primarily organized by males) are responsible for the sexual exploitation and slavery of Aboriginal women and girls. The involvement of Aboriginal women and girls (with and without FASD) in gang activity is increasing and is directly related to their vulnerability and marginalization in Canadian society. Given the findings, Totten advocates for more comprehensive programming for FASD and gang prevention to ensure the numbers of missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women and girls does not continue to rise. Future research needs to be participatory in nature and make use of in-depth interviews and storytelling with families members of FASD youth who have suffered extreme violence and who have been sexually exploited and gang involved. In particular, little is known about gang-involved male youth who are trafficking and sexually exploiting women and their reasons for engaging in such exploitative activities.

*Indigenous youth conflict intervention: The transformation of butterflies* (pp. 23-33) draws upon the author's observations on why his daughter was so drawn to her Aboriginal identity unlike his experience growing up unaware of who he was as an Aboriginal person until he was in his teens. Paul Cormier's article covers the literature from the field of peace and conflict studies and the literature on violence and peace in relation to an Aboriginal context. In particular, he focuses on the effects of poverty and the resulting violence that Aboriginal people begin to feel as children through to adolescence and adulthood. A summary discussion on structural violence perpetrated against Aboriginal children in historical and contemporary education systems in Canada is also highlighted. Alternative forms of education such as that offered at Ka Ni Kanichihks, an urban Aboriginal organization in Winnipeg, focus on peace building activities, which encourages healing, and reconciliation for Aboriginal children, youth, family and community. The transformations of youth engaged in these peace building activities are compared to the transformations of butterflies. Cormier highlights Ka Ni Kanichihk, where his daughter and many Aboriginal youth and woman have transformed because it is a place where they can safely navigate and learn their culture. Ka Ni Kanichihk seek to "honour the spirit of their ancestors" by offering cultural learning in an environment

of peace. This is consistent with Indigenous traditions and offsets the structural violence Indigenous people have faced as a result of colonial domination. Through the use of Indigenous traditions, Ka Ni Kanichihk and other similar Aboriginal organizations have sought to build a culture of peace grounded in the traditions of Indigenous knowledge to ensure a place of safety that lends to rediscovery and identity negotiation for Aboriginal peoples.

Kreitzer and Lafrance take a similar approach to working with Aboriginal peoples as envisaged in Cormier's article. In *Co-location of a government child welfare unit in a traditional Aboriginal agency: A way forward in working in Aboriginal communities* (pp. 34-44), Kreitzer and Lafrance describe the co-location of a provincial family enhancement unit in Alberta within an Aboriginal organization as one of many family enhancement approaches offered under the differential response approach to child welfare.

In *Case Study of the Development of the 1998 Tribal State Agreement in Minnesota* (pp. 45-52), Evelyn Campbell highlights the effectiveness of American Indian women who strengthened the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in the state of Minnesota. Through the use of historical retrieval and case study, we learn about the efforts of five Native American women who were instrumental in the creation of the Minnesota Indian Family Placement Act (MIPFA) through a Tribal Statement Agreement with the State of Minnesota. The Agreement addressed how American Indian children should be cared for under the requirements of the ICWA and the MIPFA. The ICWA 1978 was designed to protect American Indian families, their communities, and tribes against further disintegration due to the systemic removal of their children by state and county agencies. The MIPFA 1985 was passed to address the removal of Indian children from their "cultural heritage" due to being placed in non-Indian foster homes. This article evidences the way one group of Indigenous women in the United States worked to address the lack of compliance regarding these two specific pieces of legislation. Their work resulted in mechanisms for holding counties accountable and encouraging appropriate treatment of American Indian children and families in the State of Minnesota.

Wesley-Esquiaux's article, *Narrative as Lived Experience* (pp. 53-65), is a narrative reflecting the story of the history of Aboriginal peoples. The narrative considers the destructive era of contact and the colonization that ensued between the Indigenous peoples of the Americas with the earlier European settlers. These contact and colonial stories inform the present where historic narratives have been replaced by stories of inequality and continued domination. The historic processes that interrupted the lives of Indigenous peoples continue to reverberate across Canada as many harms of the past manifest inter-generationally in Indigenous communities. The hurts generated since the beginning of contact have not yet been resolved, nor does Wesley-Esquiaux posit, that they have been well represented in story telling or printed into our collective present. Wesley-Esquiaux's article primarily focuses on the realities of the past from the role of infectious diseases perpetrated against Indigenous peoples; the impact of historic trauma; the role of residential schools in the abuse of Indigenous children and families and the loss of culture and language; loss of identity and the role of acculturation in the devaluing of oral traditions; and the undervaluing of storytelling as a means of conveying every day meaning and constructing strong identities. Wesley-Esquiaux

shares intimate stories from her mother and stepfather, about their painful residential school experiences and the resulting violence many Aboriginal people experienced as a result of this history. She learned to handle the pain of these stories in a way that helps others integrate similar experiences and find peace in their hearts.

Wesley-Esquiaux expresses concern for Aboriginal youth who are confused by the dichotic "mythology" of yesterday and the reality of today. These dichotomous stories, she notes, stem from "the loss of communal cohesion and family support in First Nations across Canada" evolving out of the "non-sensical nature of the colonial domination" and "has exacerbated an ongoing and increasingly hurried descent into a cultural transition." She notes the latter has led to more loss and deeper social uncertainty for Aboriginal peoples. To stem this confusion and the loss of identity, Wesley-Esquiaux suggests a need to "artificially and/or deliberately create, co-create or re-create community and family closeness especially where there has been a loss of identity for our young, or when a community has grown too quickly, whether it is urban or rural" (p. 62). More than anything, Wesley-Esquiaux indicates that the dichotomous stories in Aboriginal communities reveal a tapestry of recovery and strength; there is a movement from victimization narratives to those focusing on resilience and pride. They have become tales of 'victorization' and wellness where the "light of traditional knowledge and historic truths are brought forth to shine and illuminate the path for a collective future" (p. 63). This can only be done through the learning and application of traditional knowledge. Aboriginal people, she notes, need to become actively engaged in 'victorizing' their own lives and further, they must take a role in re-scripting old stories of victimization so that new narratives can emerge.

Cindy Blackstock sheds light on the importance of quantitative research for Aboriginal peoples in advancing policy goals for Indigenous child health and welfare in her article entitled *First Nations children count: an Indigenous envelope for quantitative research* (pp. 66-73). In this article Blackstock outlines the broad goals of Indigenous research and then focuses on how quantitative research has been used and represented in the translation of Indigenous realities in child health and child welfare. Aboriginal research methods not only consist of storytelling and ceremony but also include scientific and numeric approaches in reflecting the Aboriginal reality. This is reflected in the work of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS). Blackstock notes that First Nations have reported for many years that the child welfare system has been removing disproportionate numbers of First Nations children from their homes. However, without research "evidence" these claims were often minimized until CIS produced quantitative evidence supporting these claims. As a result, non-Aboriginal child welfare authorities now more seriously consider the overrepresentation of First Nations children in the child welfare system. Blackstock envisages that quantitative research can be used in an Indigenous way that invokes the spiritual, the emotional, the physical and the cognitive elements conducive in the pursuit of knowledge and important for contextualizing information and providing more knowledge pathways than typical western approaches alone can convey.

Kathy Absolon's article *Indigenous wholistic theory: A knowledge set for practice* (pp. 74-87) begins by examining how she came to write about Indigenous wholistic theory. She speaks to the application of

traditional knowledge by presenting specific elements of Indigenous wholistic theory specifically designed to help guide Indigenous based social work practice.

Indigenous Wholistic theory is rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, worldviews, cultures and traditions. It is also anti-colonial and multi-layered. The theory encompasses the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical elements of being and factors in the seven generations of past and future. It is a relational and earth based ancestral concept that derives from the teachings of the land, sun, water, sky and all of Creation. It offers a multilevel strategy, circular in nature, and has been practiced for thousands of years. The word "Wholistic", as spelled, denotes concepts based on completeness, balance and is circular and cyclical in nature. Absolon is clear to state that this sacred knowledge is based in oral tradition and takes years to understand and know. It can be applied across all individual, family, community, organization and institutional levels. She provides an orientation to Indigenous Wholistic Theory through the use of the Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions (*Waabinoong* – in the East; *Zhaawnoong* – In the South; *Niingabiioong* – In the West; *Giwwedinoong* – In the North) including the Centre of the Wheel, where all four directions come together. Through the use of illustrations, Absolon lays out each of the theoretical underpinnings of the four directions including the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical elements of Indigenous wholistic theory. The teachings of the directions are presented as a framework to inform practice. Each teaching ends with a summary of the elements in point form. This framework considers the connections and the fact that "we are all related" (p. 76). In particular Absolon notes that the dynamics of our realities are based on interrelationships and interconnections with others, all of which influences us individually and collectively. Absolon forewarns that the teachings offered in this article are much more complex than presented. It is acknowledged that understanding and learning about Indigenous wholistic theory is simultaneously complex and simple. In addition Absolon recognizes that these teachings are diverse and will differ depending on the context, teacher and Nation. Moreover, it is a living theory based on the living cultures, traditions and the worldviews of Indigenous ancestors, both past and present. It is precisely because of this connection that Absolon believes it is a theory with potential for healing our families, communities, nations, the earth and ourselves. Indigenous wholistic theory focuses on balance, harmony and *B'maadisiwin* (living the good life).

The themes of interconnectedness, interdependence and holistic elements of Indigenous knowledge, as highlighted previously in Absolon's article, are also reflected in the following article *Indigenous knowledge, community and education in a western system: An integrative approach* (pp. 88-95), written by Master's student, Danika Overmars. She believes that in order to support Aboriginal students' experiences and ensure success in the educational system, restoring and honouring Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing is paramount. Her article outlines how community based education can provide an avenue for integrating Indigenous knowledge into Western based educational systems. In understanding how to do this, Overmars provides an overview of the literature on Indigenous knowledge to help readers understand it and how it is constructed differently from western ways of knowing.

A summary review of the failings of western education in the Aboriginal population, both on and off reserve, is presented along

with statistics demonstrating the differences in levels of educational attainment, dropout rates, school problems and socio-economic concerns surrounding the educational gaps. Overmars notes that while education was a part of the oppressive history it can potentially serve as part of the solution including the integration of Indigenous knowledge into Aboriginal curriculum and meaningful community based interaction. Community based education gives communities an opportunity to provide input into their children's education. In turn, children gain experience from interacting with the community, and begin to develop meaningful relationships, which presents more access to community resources. Community based models of education allow for enhanced contact between student and elders engaging children in learning Indigenous ways specific to their community and assists in keeping Indigenous knowledge contemporary. Other advantages of community based models of education include a focus on issues that are relevant to Aboriginal students which could potentially encourage students to engage more fully in the learning process. Implementing a community based approach to education has its challenges. The nature of such an approach would require more funding to a system that is already underfunded for Aboriginal populations. There is also a concern that such an approach might be too extensive. Further, students may not be able to achieve on standardized testing, jeopardizing their ability to pursue further educational opportunities. Acquiring appropriate and skilled teachers to facilitate a community-based model of education might be a challenge along with how to train them. The diversity of Aboriginal communities also makes it unlikely that one model or template will work equally well in all communities.

Steve Koptie's article, *Inferiorizing Indigenous Communities and Intentional Colonial Poverty* (pp. 96-106), is a reflective topical autobiography. Reflective topical autobiography (an autobiographical method) belongs to the genre of testimonial research and is located within the postpositivist interpretive research paradigm. In this article Steve examines his life-work in a deeply reflective and narrative way. Steve was influenced to write from this perspective as a result of reading the works of the late Irihapeti Ramsden, an Indigenous scholar from New Zealand. Irihapeti pursued her PhD studies from what she termed a "reflective topical autobiographical journal of self-discovery" primarily to "understand how her ancestors became the poorest members of colonial New Zealand" (p.97). Koptie also uses this approach in understanding misrepresentations and misconceptions that most Canadians have about both Indigenous peoples and the true history of colonial Canada. Koptie's understandings of Canadian injustices are informed by many years of community development and healing work in northern Aboriginal communities of Ontario and out of his need to understand the pathology of colonization and the poverty experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada. His article is a narrative exposé written to encourage Aboriginal peoples to reflect and share their experiences through written word. It is a way of breaking the colonial stronghold that keeps Aboriginal people hostages of the past rather than as victors in the present and in the future.

*Quels sont les facteurs favorisant ou inhibant la réussite éducative des élèves autochtones?* (pp. 107-116) by Hélène Archambault, is a qualitative research piece exploring factors that encourage or prevent success in education of First Nations students in Québec. The first half of Archambault's paper outlines the circumstances allowing for



success in First Nations communities in Québec. In recent years, First Nations education has become a government priority in the province. In addition, there are interventions at an earlier age and communities that focus on early childhood education children have more success. Also, parents and Elders are influential and play large roles in the education of their children. The research also shows that student-teacher relationships impact educational outcomes. For example, when the teacher-student relationship includes trust, cultural respect and respect in general, First Nations children are more likely to succeed. Archambault also shows that culturally relevant and “cooperative learning models” assist in furthering education for First Nations children. The last factor in encouraging success in children’s education is First Nations control of education, including the establishment of schools for First Nations children, run by First Nations communities. The second half of this research paper considers negative determinants affecting learning of Québec’s First Nations children. Before presenting factors, Archambault provides statistics with regard to the educational situation of the First Nations population in Québec. Statistically, First Nations children have a higher incidence of learning difficulties and are grade levels behind the national average. Further, First Nations students have much lower high school graduation rates.

The inhibiting factors preventing favourable outcomes for First Nations children in Québec are broken down into three main categories: personal, academic and psychosocial. Personal factors affecting learning include different learning styles and different languages. From the academic perspective, First Nations children are less likely to succeed due to circumstances around their teachers: a shortage of qualified teachers; educators are often rotated between communities; and many non First Nations teachers do not participate in community activities. As for the psychosocial factors affecting education, the most prominent reason for failure in educational outcomes for First Nations children are the socioeconomic conditions including lack of employment opportunities, substance misuse, family violence and poverty.

In their study, *Le dépistage des retards de développement chez les jeunes enfants d’une communauté des Premières Nations* (pp. 117-123), Carmen Dionne, Suzie McKinnon and Jane Squires present quantitative data collected by utilizing Bricker and Squires’ Ages and Stages Questionnaire [ASQ]. The purpose of this research was to study Mohawk children between the ages of 29-60 months in order to gauge the pertinence of ASQ as a culturally relevant developmental assessment tool for First Nations children. Participants included 213 Mohawk children and their teachers from the Step by Step Child and Family Centre in Kahnawake Québec.

Dionne, McKinnon and Squires pursued this research because current detection tools of learning disabilities are not culturally relevant for First Nations children. ASQ however has been utilized in Western Canadian provinces and been proven successful. ASQ is a questionnaire given to caregivers or parents in order to assess children based on 5 key areas: communication, gross motor skills and fine motor skills, problem-solving and personal-social skills. For the purpose of their study, the research team sent a socio-demographic questionnaire to parents prior to the session to obtain permission and to make culturally appropriate modifications to the ASQ questionnaire and process. Once the process was underway, children and teachers

completed questionnaires. There were also teacher discussion groups to answer the following questions: are class activities conducive to the questions presented in the questionnaire?; does ASQ fit with Step by Step’s child assessment and intervention philosophies?; is the material accessible?; is ASQ relevant to Mohawk culture and the community of Kahnawake?; and does it give an general overview of the child’s development?

From the discussion group results, the teachers reported that the tool would be more effective one on one due to the noise. Another suggestion included completing the ASQ questionnaire twice, once at the beginning of the year and once at the end. On another note, teachers thought the questions better prepared them when working with students. Overall, teachers found ASQ to be a useful tool.

As for methodology with the questionnaires, the research team used Cronbach’s alphas which measures consistency and reliability of results in the five key areas and for each age group of Mohawk children, including 36, 42, 48 and 54 months. Globally the numbers demonstrated that ASQ was an effective tool to use in early detection of developmental challenges in the sample First Nations population represented by the Mohawk children at the Step by Step Child and Family Centre.

This issue of the journal bears witness to the intersection of FASD, gang involvement and the sexual exploitation and violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women, the transformation of Aboriginal youth through the lens of peace and conflict studies, and the use of various research methods that focus on narrative approaches to understanding the transformation of Aboriginal people from victims to survivors to people of valor. Through this collection of works we learned to understand the importance of storytelling and qualitative types of research approaches that provide context to the realities of Aboriginal peoples. Equally important are quantitative data collecting techniques in advancing Indigenous evidence since they highlight patterns of need and inform policy aimed at health, education and welfare of Indigenous children and youth. The importance of community based approaches to education and the peace building processes of Aboriginal organizations have been highlighted as some of the programs that are, and have been, successful in engaging Aboriginal children, youth and communities. Our allies in Québec have also provided an understanding of the factors that encourage or prevent success in education of First Nations students in Québec and how current detection tools around learning disabilities are not culturally relevant for First Nations children. They have provided further understanding about efforts to make culturally appropriate modifications to these tools. All of these articles have been aided by Indigenous knowledge and theories about Indigenous ways of being. This knowledge has helped sustain and transform Aboriginal peoples from that of victim to that of valor. This collection of articles evidence a reality that is predicated on healing and which illustrates the diversified paths and stories that lead to the ongoing valorization of Indigenous in North America.