

Voices of Passion, Voices of Hope

Sharon McKay

“We need ‘Passion for Action’—we need to build with our strengths—we cannot wait for policy and funding decisions,” asserted Dexter Kinequon, emphatically summing up discussion of possible themes for the fourth Prairie Child Welfare Consortium (PCWC) Child and Family Services Symposium, held in Regina, Saskatchewan, September 12-14, 2007. Dexter’s declaration gave voice to the sentiments of hundreds of participants at PCWC symposia held biannually since 2001. It reflected the frustration of front line workers, service delivery administrators, in-service trainers, child welfare educators and researchers in the field. It served as a call for action, a focus on “what works” and an eloquent reminder of the fundamental passion that drives so many individuals and groups in the prairies, across Canada, and, indeed, around the world to work for the betterment of disadvantaged and at-risk children, youth, their families and communities.

Stories of harm and cruelty to children and youth are seen daily in the press; family and community issues underlying these stories are complex, multi-layered, and seemingly intractable; agency resources are severely under-funded; innovative and promising policy initiatives can

SUGGESTED CITATION: McKay, S. (2009). Introduction: Voices of passion, voices of hope. In S. McKay, D. Fuchs, & I. Brown (Eds.), *Passion for action in child and family services: Voices from the prairies* (pp. xvi-xxiv). Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center.

be seriously undermined by inordinate bureaucratic layers; and front-line workers may not have the training or education or the supervisory support to ensure best practices. Yet the story is not all negative. Numerous initiatives have been undertaken, particularly in the past decade, to try and turn around the individual, family, and community circumstances that have led to an escalating number of children in care.

This book introduces some of these initiatives, beginning with Dexter Kinequon's own personal story as a young Aboriginal boy dealing with his own troubled life circumstances as best he knew how. These experiences led Dexter to enter the field as a social worker and, ultimately, to become the highly respected agency director and nationally recognized advocate that he is today. His passionately delivered opening address to the 2007 PCWC symposia eloquently marries passion for action with positive, practical, and doable policy initiatives at the national level. We consider this address so important that it is placed, intact, following the introduction to this book.

Passion for Action in Child and Family Services: Voices from the Prairies is the second book to be produced by the PCWC. All but one of the chapters (Carriere/Richardson) are based on presentations made at the 2007 symposium. The chapters resoundingly echo the theme of the 2007 PCWC symposium: *Passion for action: Building on strength and innovative change in child and family services*. They reflect a consistent theme of the importance of "giving voice" to the issues and concerns, the ideas and experience, and the policy and practice recommendations that are proving to be effective and offer hope to the field.

"Giving voice" is a clear message contained in the two fundamental documents guiding the planning of the symposia: the U.N. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>), and *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families* (<http://www.reconciliationmovement.org>). An essential lesson learned from our four biannual symposia is that giving voice is a circular process. One needs to listen, to return to fundamentals, and to listen again. New and recurring voices need to be heard again and again. The fundamentals contained in the U.N. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and in *Reconciliation in Child Welfare* need to be consistently revisited.

In brief, the Convention calls attention to universal, legally binding children's rights, namely, the right to: survival; develop to the fullest;

protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child (see <http://www.unicef.org/crc>). Initiated in 2002 by the executive directors of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC), the *Reconciliation in Child Welfare* document is intended to address the lack of understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples that is a barrier to improving child welfare services for indigenous peoples in Canada and the U.S. As a first step, the two organizations, supported by the Canadian Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare and the Child Welfare League of America, invited 200 indigenous and non-indigenous leaders in the field from the U.S. and Canada to a three-day meeting in Niagara Falls, Canada, to launch the reconciliation movement in child welfare. At this meeting, the Phases of Reconciliation were exclaimed: *Truth-telling*—engage in courageous conversations about the history of child welfare and indigenous people; *Acknowledging*—acknowledge and learn from the harm that has occurred through mistakes in the past; *Restoring*—address the problems of the past; and *Relating*—work together in support of indigenous people taking care of their own children and youth. Alongside these, five guiding values, identified as “Touchstones of Hope,” were articulated: *Self-determination*—leadership from and by indigenous peoples; *Culture and Language*—culturally appropriate child welfare; *Holistic approach*—a lifelong approach, considering all cultural, social, environmental factors influencing the child’s development; *Structural interventions*—addressing known structural risks such as poverty and lack of economic opportunities; and *Non-discrimination*—ensuring equal opportunity in all aspects of the child’s life.

Together, the two documents provide fundamental principles and values to guide child welfare policy and practice throughout Canada and elsewhere in the world. The documents call attention to the urgent need to transform the child welfare system as we know it. Transformation requires innovative changes and capacity building through strengthening of policies and practices that we know are supportive of child and family well-being and that are effective in bringing about change. The challenge of transformation calls each of us to participate in visionary, troublesome,

courageous conversations about child welfare—to do our part to bring about necessary change in practices and policies that create barriers to quality service.¹ *Passion for Action in Child and Family Services: Voices from the Prairies* re-asserts the 2007 symposia theme. Best practices cannot wait for policy and funding decisions. The book reflects the intention of the Symposium to facilitate, strengthen and stimulate *passion for action*.

Following Dexter Kinequon's opening address, the book leads off with Bernstein and Schury's chapter specific to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child followed by three chapters that, while not referring specifically to the Reconciliation Movement, call our attention to the distinctive needs of indigenous children and youth and their families, needs that are frequently unrecognized by mainstream agencies, practitioners, and policy-makers (Carriere and Richardson; Bennett; Goulet, Episkenew, Linds and Arnason). In the same spirit of truth-telling, acknowledging and relating, four of the six remaining chapters speak to distinctive needs of special populations served by child welfare: high-risk youth (Smyth and Eaton-Erickson), refugee children, youth and their families (White, Franklin, Gruber, Hanke, Holzer, Javed, et al.), the children and families of those providing foster care (Twigg) and the needs of children with FASD (Fuchs, Burnside, Marchenski, and Mudry). Watkinson returns our attention to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, illustrating how she used the Convention and the Canadian Charter of Human Rights to launch a Supreme Court Challenge respecting children's right to legal protection from corporal punishment. The final chapter of the book "tells the truth" and "acknowledges the harm" resulting in the dire living conditions of children and families subsisting in deeply entrenched "spacially concentrated, racialized poverty" in the heart of two major Prairie cities, Winnipeg and Saskatoon (Silver). Aboriginal and visible minority families predominate in these inner-city neighbourhoods. The chapter documents pragmatic, locally based initiatives that hold promise for effectively addressing some of these living conditions and ends with a strong and forceful plea for a long-term

1 These words were spoken by Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director, First Nations Caring Society of Canada, in her keynote address to participants gathering at the "Reconciliation: Looking Back; Reaching Forward" event held in Niagara Falls, Ontario, October 26-28, 2005.

government strategy to invest in the infrastructure that supports these “home grown” solutions to inner city despair. This plea evokes Reconciliation principles of “Restoring” and “Relating.”

The first five chapters passionately argue for changes that, to some degree, may be viewed as contradictory to one another. A key issue is interpretation of the “best interests” of the child, a fundamental precept of the U.N. Convention, yet a right that two of the chapters demand be considered in the context of families and communities that have been seriously damaged by historic and modern-day injustices (Carriere and Richardson; Bennett). On this question, Bernstein and Schury emphasize that the Convention should not be viewed as an international treaty that sets children’s rights against parental rights, but rather as a treaty that “identifies the special/specific rights of children related to their developmental needs and complementing their basic human rights.” Related to this point, the authors note that Canada’s Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights recognizes that the protection of Aboriginal children’s rights is intricately related to the protection of Aboriginal communities’ future. Yet, from the Children’s Advocate Office view, Saskatchewan’s family-centered philosophy has had “devastating and life limiting” effects on children. A clear “children and youth first” philosophy and principles to guide policy, practice and legislation in the province is strongly recommended. A family-centered philosophy “at all costs” is condemned. A sustained focus on child-centered permanency planning is strongly recommended.

Bernstein and Schury acknowledge that decisions made in child welfare work are complex and often highly contested, and that “there is no one simple answer when it comes to the rights, best interests and care of children who have experienced abuse and neglect.” The *Reconciliation in Child Welfare* document augments our understanding of the complexity of such decision-making. Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities across Canada experience daily the effects of historical traumas enacted upon Aboriginal peoples. Present-day child welfare policies and practice continue to fuel historical harms by failing to understand the significance of culture and community to indigenous identity and well-being. Along with other social/political/legal systems in the country, child and family serving systems are called upon to redirect their efforts in such a way that indigenous people are treated respectfully and in the context of their own cultural practices and identity. Only in this way will

Aboriginal communities and their families be assured of restoration to a healthy state of well-being. It is imperative for the very survival of many communities that this work be done.

Bennett, Carriere and Richardson, Silver, and Goulet, Episkenew, Linds and Arnason situate their chapters in the context of past and present colonizing practices. Doing so places the chapters in the truth-telling and acknowledging phase of reconciliation. Carriere and Richardson expand our understanding of the significance of connectedness to culture and history as part of Aboriginal children and youth's developing personal identities. The authors challenge traditional application of attachment theory in child welfare decision-making, arguing strongly that practitioners must ensure that children know their family and history and that "retaining kinship ties is part of overall community health and strength."

Speaking of the intimate relationships between Aboriginal children and their mothers, Bennett asserts that the rights of Aboriginal parents are being ignored and that this state of affairs is leading to a further undermining of the confidence and capacity of Aboriginal people to raise their children. Rebuilding parental capacity is essential to the healthy development of children and youth and the rebuilding of communities devastated by social ills. In Bennett's words,

current child welfare practices too often contribute to intergenerational traumas that have been forced upon and experienced by Aboriginal families since early contact with Europeans. There is an urgent need for a new response system that seeks to ensure the safety of children and also ensures that balance in the family is restored as quickly and painlessly as possible in times of crisis. The need for healing for both children and their families as a result of their experience with the child welfare system is paramount but to date little attention has been paid to this aspect.

Goulet, Episkenew, Linds and Arnason pay attention to the prevention side of child welfare work, exploring the theory and application of drama and Forum Theatre to First Nations youth and their communities. The authors document their experiences using Forum Theatre workshops as the foundation of their research with Aboriginal youth whom

they describe as being “embedded in community and family systems damaged by colonialism and, consequently, find[ing] it difficult to see themselves as agents of change.” This chapter discusses the potential for drama to be used as an approach with youth, the process and methods used in their own workshops, and lessons learned. The authors conclude that drama is one way to engage youth in examining the potential of healthy choices for leading to different, healthier realities.

While *Reconciliation in Child Welfare* focuses specifically on Aboriginal children and youth, their families and communities, the guiding values outlined in the document, along with recognition of the Rights of the Child, apply universally to all children and youth, whatever their personal ethnic and cultural background. White, Franklin, Gruber, Hanke, Holzer, Javed et al. speak of the challenges encountered in their work with refugee families, due to the strong influence of their own “Western ways of doing and thinking.” Their project, designed, in part to assist with reducing the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder, became one of “creating safe spaces, nurturing relationships, community building, and having fun.” The project team met the challenges of working with several different languages, diverse cultural practices, and lack of literacy skills in reading and writing by paying close attention over the project to respecting the voices of participants, parents and children. In a sense, the project became self-determining, which the Reconciliation Movement describes as involving leadership from and by indigenous leaders.

Self-determination is a key factor in Smyth and Eaton-Erickson’s work with high-risk youth in Edmonton, whom they portray as the “disconnected” youth, whose connections with supportive others are fragile at best. Members of this population frequently live on the streets, are seen as defiant and manipulative, tend to engage in behaviours that seriously jeopardize their safety, and exhibit extreme distrust towards social workers and other helpers. Yet, the authors believe strongly that underlying these difficulties, the youth want connection. The High Risk Youth Unit is a project developed for the purpose of reaching out to such youth in Edmonton. Case studies and guiding principles offered in the chapter reflect the authors’ strong belief that, given respect, the opportunity to express their own opinions and ideas, and the steady commitment of the practitioner and the agency, the needs of these young people can be better met. Of particular importance is the belief that through innovative

engagement strategies high-risk youth can be given hope for the future.

Twigg points to the serious lack of attention paid to the needs of foster carers' own children and families. His chapter places the current crisis in foster care (shortage of placements, inadequately trained foster parents, changing needs of children being fostered) in the context of child welfare history and the slowly evolving recognition that the chronic lack of carers is a systemic issue urgently in need of redress. He argues that recruitment and retention of future foster carers is highly dependent on provision of support, recognition, training, and adequate financial compensation.

A startling finding from the 2005 research of Fuchs, Burnside, Marchenski, and Mudry is that one-third of children in care in Manitoba fall within a broad definition of disability. This finding exposes a previously overlooked feature of child welfare, one that is in all likelihood similar to that of other provinces and territories. The researchers focus on the 17 percent of this population who are diagnosed or suspected of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). As background context for a second phase of the original research, their chapter discusses the disabling effects of FASD, and significant care responsibility of child welfare agencies in Manitoba for these children. The chapter discusses implications for policy, practice and research and puts forward some directions for further research.

Children's right to legal protection from corporal punishment is not fully protected in Canada. Watkinson, through her own research, was successful in obtaining funding from the federal Court Challenges Program to research the constitutionality of Section 43 of the Criminal Code as it relates to the equality rights of children. She discusses how the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child were subsequently used to launch a Supreme Court challenge to Section 43. The challenge was not without controversy, and the decision of the Supreme Court was only partially successful, but it did result in a significant limitation to the scope of Section 43. Watkinson discusses further research respecting the public's knowledge of the case and suggests actions social workers can take to interrupt the "normativeness" of physical punishment.

Jim Silver's chapter draws our attention to one of the single most disturbing factors affecting the quality of life for Canadian children and

families—that of deeply entrenched “spatially concentrated racialized poverty.” His extensive research places such poverty in the context of historical factors that have progressively led to the vacating of inner-city neighbourhoods except for those people who cannot afford to live elsewhere, primarily those of Aboriginal and marginalized ethnic populations. Four broad socio-economic forces—suburbanization, de-industrialization, in-migration and colonization—have had long-lasting effects on the development of these neighbourhoods. Silver effectively argues that this situation has resulted in a largely unrecognized segregation of populations in our larger cities. Yet, there are reasons for hope. Taking Winnipeg and Saskatoon as examples, Silver points to new forms of development, indigenous to the inner city. He describes numerous small community-based organizations, led by highly skilled and passionate inner-city people who are building an anti-poverty infrastructure using many diverse and creative ways and means. But if this work is to be truly transformative, stronger, more long-standing support is needed. Silver concludes with four suggestions as to where we can go from here.

Returning to the theme of our symposium, *Passion for Action in Child and Family Services*, the chapter authors have written “from the heart,” reflecting their passion and sense of urgency for action about issues near and dear to them. Based on thorough research, each chapter expands our understanding of child and family needs across the prairies and beyond our borders. Importantly, each chapter points to actions that are being taken, need to be taken, and can be taken towards transforming current approaches and policies to better serve vulnerable and at-risk children, youth and their families in our part of the world. *Passion for Action* is the driving force required to bring about such transformation. It is our hope that the voices of this book will fuel such passion in each of our readers. For this reason, we follow this introduction with Dexter Kinequon’s powerful opening address to our fourth PCWC Symposium. In his own modest, humble way, Dexter relays the factors that drive his own passion to commit his talents and skills ceaselessly towards bettering the future for today’s children and their families.