

## 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

# Cultural Permanence for Indigenous Children and Youth: Reflections from a Delegated Aboriginal Agency in British Columbia

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Volume 10, Number 1, 2015

Special Issue: Custom Adoptions

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077185ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077185ar>

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Publisher(s)

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

ISSN

1708-489X (print)

2293-6610 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Bennett, K. (2015). Cultural Permanence for Indigenous Children and Youth: Reflections from a Delegated Aboriginal Agency in British Columbia. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 10(1), 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077185ar>

### Article abstract

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## **Cultural Permanence for Indigenous Children and Youth: Reflections from a Delegated Aboriginal Agency in British Columbia**

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### **Abstract**

*The article discusses cultural permanence for Indigenous children and youth from the perspective of the executive director of Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services (NIFCS), a delegated Aboriginal child welfare agency that serves nine Indigenous communities from three First Nations on British Columbia's northwest coast. Through increasing cultural knowledge, NIFCS aims to enhance its practice to meet the holistic needs of children and youth in care, in particular, to ensure that children and youth maintain connections with their families, extended families, and communities. NIFCS provides experiential opportunities for children and youth to know about, and learn their languages, spiritual teachings, and cultural traditions from their Elders, families, and communities. Ultimately, NIFCS's goal is for the children and youth in its care to be strongly connected to their roots and experience a sense of belonging. This paper looks at connectedness and cultural diversity in the context of cultural planning for permanence, relates these concepts to NIFCS, and outlines promising practices within NIFCS.*

**Key words:** connectedness, belonging, cultural diversity, cultural identity, cultural planning, cultural permanence, custom adoptions, customary care

### **Dreaming a Better Future for Indigenous Children**

Some time ago, I dreamt I was standing under a tree with brilliant green foliage and many red fruits. I reached up and held a tree limb in my hand to pick one of the fruits. To my surprise and amazement, many children tumbled out of the tree and started running in all directions. I frantically tried to gather them all together, and with the exception of two adolescent boys, I succeeded. In my dream state I felt disappointed that I was not able to hold onto the boys and keep them safe, but over time, I came to understand that the boys brought me an important lesson about self-determination. First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples in

Canada strongly assert the right to self-determination and are working toward it as decolonizing action and resistance against colonial rule. As articulated by Indigenous leaders in the Tsawwassen Accord (2002),

Our children and our families are the cornerstone of our futures.... Our inherent right of self-determination will only be achieved through the recognition of our inherent jurisdiction for our children and families. (p. 2)

My heritage is African West Indian. I grew up on a small island in the Caribbean called St Vincent and the Grenadines, and I immigrated to Canada as a young adult. My partner and I have four children of mixed Caucasian and African ancestry. I have lived in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, for the past 16 years. As a non-Indigenous executive director of a delegated Indigenous child welfare agency in that small city, it is part of my professional practice, as encouraged by Indigenous literature, to pay attention to all ways of knowing, including dreams. Leanne Simpson (2008) says, “The importance of visioning and dreaming a better future based on our Indigenous traditions cannot be underestimated. But according to our traditions, those visions or messages from our ancestors and the Spirit World will be lost if they are not acted upon” (p. 84).

In my work at Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services (NIFCS) on BC’s northwest coast, I want to act on my dream that children and youth in NIFCS communities and care will experience meaningful, lifelong family, community, and cultural connections and have healthy, positive outcomes in all domains of their lives. Like other agencies that serve Indigenous children and families, NIFCS strives to promote well-being, connection, belonging, and cultural permanency for the Indigenous children and youth who come into our care. Like other agencies, we seek to overcome the barriers to positive outcomes for children and youth in our care. These barriers include an absence of clearly articulated policy, guidelines, and training to support cultural plans of care, and insufficient government funding to support cultural connections.

This article highlights policies and practices that service providers and Indigenous child welfare agencies can activate to promote ongoing connections and cultural permanence for Indigenous children and youth in care. I begin by contrasting the ideas of *permanence* in mainstream child welfare with practices of *cultural permanence* in Indigenous child welfare. Next, I describe the context of delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies in British Columbia and situate NIFCS and our work within this context. After highlighting the importance of cultural identity, in the main part of the article I discuss *cultural planning for cultural permanence* for Indigenous children and youth, both in general terms and more specifically in relation to NIFCS. Within this discussion, I contrast Western and Indigenous perspectives on connectedness and belonging and consider the challenges of meeting the needs of specific children, families, and communities from the perspective of an agency that serves nine diverse communities within three distinct First Nations. Toward this end, I outline promising practices within NIFCS and the communities we serve.

## Permanence vs. Cultural Permanence

Berrick (1998), writing in the mainstream US context, explains that the child welfare goal of permanence:

is typically defined in legal terms to include three forms of custody: (1) reunification with a biological parent, (2) adoption, in which legal rights to parenthood are severed with the biological parent and are fully transferred to an alternative adult, or (3) legal guardianship, in which authority for the child is transferred from the parent to an alternative caregiver. (p. 78)

This definition stands in stark contrast to ideas about “adoption” in Indigenous communities, where sharing children is part of traditional law and where, “when the situation is warranted,” children are “given to others with honour bestowed on all parties” (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010, p. 101). Bertsch and Bidgood (2010) explain:

The practice of sharing children with those who can best care for them involves cultural titles and tribal positions along with birth family consultation. In lifelong planning for children, they are not estranged from their community, birth families or culture; as a result, First Nations languages have no traditional word for adoption. (p. 101)

In British Columbia, the term *cultural permanence* is defined in relation to Indigenous children and youth in care as the child or youth’s right to experience stability and continuity of meaningful relationships with their family, extended family, community, and culture (Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network, 2011). The concept is now included as an important aspect of permanency by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). As utilized by the University of Victoria’s Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network (ICWRN), the term cultural permanence refers to practices of customary care, including custom adoptions as well as informal means to ensure that Indigenous children and youth in care develop or maintain permanent connections with their families, communities, and culture. These practices are part of (or the result and/or goal of) a child’s *cultural plan of care* (CPOC). Formal arrangements such as custom adoption, kinship care, and guardianship, as well as informal practices for cultural permanence like homecoming ceremonies for off-reserve children or youth may take place within MCFD or under the jurisdiction of a delegated Aboriginal agency. In the next section, I provide some context for the latter.

## The Context of Delegated Aboriginal Agencies in British Columbia

Since the early 1980s, many Indigenous communities in Canada, including BC, have embarked on taking back responsibility from government to care for their own children. In BC, the province delegates authority to child- and youth-serving agencies through a graduated three-tier process that comprises basic voluntary services, guardianship services, and full child protection services. Currently, there are 22 of these agencies in BC at different levels of delegation. Each agency negotiates the level of delegation with MCFD based on standardized operational readiness. Some agencies are funded by the province to provide services to Indigenous and Métis clients in urban settings. Other agencies are funded both provincially and federally to provide services on and off reserves. Ten of the 22 delegated agencies in BC are fully delegated, which means that they can assess and investigate child safety situations for abuse and neglect and have the authority to remove children from the parental home and place them in foster care. In MCFD terms, delegation is an initiative to “address the [high] number of Aboriginal children in care” (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2013, para. 1). It is important to note that First Nations tend to view delegation as an interim measure on the path toward self-governance.

NIFCS received partial delegation from MCFD in 1999. While it does not have full child protection delegation, the province has delegated the agency to assess for voluntary and support services, provide guardianship functions for children and youth in permanent care, and provide support services to foster

parents. The agency currently provides these services to its member Nations, which include Tsimshian, Haisla, and Tahltan people, whose Elders and leaders guide NIFCS with traditional teachings.

NIFCS's mission is "to provide community based and community driven child and family care services that protect and preserve the unique cultural identity of every child and family in the bands we serve" (Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society, 2008). NIFCS has participated in several initiatives to promote community-based plans, including community participatory research through *Touchstones of Hope* (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown, & Formsma, 2006), a reconciliation movement to redevelop Indigenous child welfare on the basis of community-developed visions of healthy children and families informed by the Touchstones of Hope guiding values of self-determination, culture and language, holistic approach, cultural interventions, and non-discrimination.

NIFCS also conducted a partnership project with the Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network (ICWRN), University of Victoria, on custom adoptions. As part of this initiative, ICWRN and NIFCS cohosted meetings in Prince Rupert, BC in August 2013 and in Terrace, BC, in October 2013 called "Cultural Permanency for Our Children." Highlights of these meetings, which were funded in part by the Victoria and Vancouver Foundations, are captured in a video titled "The Terrace Training Sessions" (Indigenous Child Well-being Research Network & Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society, 2014).

Before I move on to discuss cultural planning for cultural permanence, I want to briefly highlight the importance of cultural identity to Indigenous children and youth in care.

## Cultural Identity

For Indigenous people, culture is the essence of who they are (Carrière, 2007; Hart, 2007; Smith, 2012; Thomas, 2005). Therefore, cultural identity is central to the issues discussed in this article. The cultural identity of Indigenous children and youth in care cannot be ignored because their well-being depends on cultural healing (Carrière, 2010). Jeannine Carrière (2007) emphasizes that knowledge of oneself and one's existence with others gives meaning to being part of a larger community. This perspective on tribal identity was supported by several adoptees who participated in Carrière's (2007) study with Indigenous adults who had been adopted into non-Indigenous homes when they were children. Her 18 study participants stated that identity and loss were the two main issues they struggled with. Loss became the study's core category; it was expressed to some degree by each of the adoptees and was often manifested in their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Carrière found that all of her participants had a "drive to seek out their birth family" and "a longing to know who they are, where they come from, and where they belong in this world" (p. 41). One of the adopted participants in Carrière's study expressed her need for belonging and identity in these words:

For me, I grew up thinking that I was a nobody, like I didn't know my identity. So, when I was a teenager, I went through identity crises because that's when I started realizing I was different. There was something different about me. (Molly, cited in Carrière, 2007, p. 50)

Another participant shared that when she was 12:

that's when I started questioning, I wanted to know more about native people. There was a Hudson Bay store, and I knew they did all their groceries. I was always going there to sit on a bench and watch them. I wanted to know things. I wanted to be a native person so badly. (Mama Bear, cited in Carrière, 2007, p. 50)

Many Indigenous children and youth in care experience separation and loss on a daily basis because of a lack of meaningful connections in their lives. Evidence suggests that the loss of identity for children and youth who have been removed from their families and communities creates spiritual dissonance, which impairs their physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health (Carrière, 2007). Conversely, strengthening a young person's cultural identity holds potential to restore health and cultural pride. Anderson (2000) proposes a theory of identity formation for Indigenous people that includes resisting imposed definitions, rejecting negative stereotypes, reclaiming Indigenous traditions, translating tradition into the contemporary context, and acting to create a positive new identity. Within the context of cultural permanence for Indigenous children and youth in care, taking action to strengthen cultural identity must be a key component of cultural planning. This idea is explored in the following section.

## Cultural Planning for Cultural Permanence

Within MCFD, a plan of care is defined as “an action-based planning tool for children in care” that is completed by the child's worker with involvement of the child, the family, the extended family, *the Aboriginal community if the child is Aboriginal*, the caregiver, service providers, and significant people in the child's life (Turpel-Lafond, 2013, p. 8, emphasis added).

A cultural plan of care (CPOC) is “a critical element in ensuring that children remain connected to their traditions and cultural heritage” (Turpel-Lafond, p. 3) and it is a requirement of BC's *Child, Family, and Community Service Act* (Government of British Columbia, 2007). Nonetheless, and despite the fact that Indigenous scholars and leaders (e.g., Sinclair, 2007; Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002) stress the importance of community involvement in decisions affecting the children of their communities, the BC Representative for Children and Youth, Mary-Ellen Turpel-Lafond, observed in her March 2013 report to the BC legislative assembly that there has been little to no involvement of First Nations communities in creating cultural plans for their children and youth. Further, of the 60 Aboriginal children whose files were audited for Turpel-Lafond's report, *only three had a cultural plan*. Turpel-Lafond describes this finding as “a clear violation of the rights of B.C. children in care” (p. 96) and she attributes it to social workers' lack of knowledge of “what a cultural plan should look like or how to write one” (p. 53). She states:

It is evident that extensive training is required for workers to be able to write effective cultural plans and develop strategies that help preserve the child's unique identity and maintain connections to their community. It is also critical that their community is actively involved at all stages of the planning. The most common statement found in the audit across Aboriginal children's CPOCs under the culture, identity and religion domain was for the child or youth to attend a potlatch or other cultural ceremony. Cultural planning for Aboriginal children and youth in care should be much more comprehensive and meaningful than this. (p. 54)



Permanency is the overall goal and context for cultural plans. According to Turpel-Lafond, permanency planning is not just about placement; it is about strengthening the child's relationships, cultural identity, and sense of belonging. The impact of the loss of identity and belonging that Indigenous people have experienced and the need for connection with extended families, communities, and cultural practices is discussed in this article's next section.

## Connectedness and Cultural Planning for Permanence

Connectedness is central to well-being (Bowlby, 1973; Carrière, 2005). By connectedness, I refer to ongoing strong relationships between a child and the child's birth parent(s) (whenever possible) as well as with their extended family and community and with Indigenous culture, teachings, and spirituality. Carrière (2007) asserts that, for children and youth in care, connectedness should be used as a determinant of health, just as environment, genetics, and social conditions are determinants of health. She states that in First Nations cultures, children grow up in their community, receive cultural and spiritual guidance from their Elders, and have opportunities to participate in ceremonial events. This becomes the foundation for identity and strength in their development (p. 114). Indigenous children and youth in care have an equal need for this strong foundation that cultural connection can provide. Elders and other traditional teachers have a crucial role in passing on cultural teachings and values. This is important knowledge in working with Indigenous children and youth.

Building on family and cultural strengths demonstrates respect for a child's personhood (Carrière & Richardson, 2013, p. 9). It is crucial in child welfare practice with Indigenous children and youth that interactions between service providers such as social workers and children or youth and parents, family, extended family, and community members promote belonging, self-esteem, a sense of connection, and a sense of self-worth. They must also uphold the rights of the Indigenous child as outlined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and reaffirmed by the Secretary General of the United Nations (United Nations General Assembly, 2012), including the right to know one's people, one's land, and one's language and to live in one's culture.

While both Western and Indigenous authors agree on the importance of connectedness and belonging for children in care, Western and Indigenous perspectives on connectedness tend to be quite different, and I highlight some of these differences below.

## Connectedness and Belonging: Western vs. Indigenous perspectives

Individuals and cultures experience, perceive, and react to the world—and to people, things, and ideas within our worlds—in distinct ways. For example, Western perspectives on child development emphasize bonding and attachment to a primary caregiver, usually the mother. In contrast, an Indigenous approach sees connectedness as it relates to extended family, cultural traditions, norms of collective care giving, and access to resources and supports within the extended family and community. With this approach, planning processes should be family led (Richardson & Wade, 2012) with meaningful input from the child's Indigenous community (Carrière & Sinclair, 2009; Green & Thomas, 2005, 2009; Turpel-Lafond, 2013).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors who have addressed connectedness in relation to Indigenous children and youth express similarities in terms of content and definition; however, they differ, in some cases drastically, in philosophical assumptions, context, and approach. For example, non-Indigenous developmental psychologist and attachment theorist Gordon Neufeld (2008) and Lakota professor emeritus Martin Brokenleg (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002) agree that child and youth connectedness could be supported by a helping adult who offers warm, consistent, stable attachments and acts as a bridge to make connections possible. However, Neufeld posits a more interventionist use of individual clinical methods and strategies to deal with connection and connectedness, while Brokenleg and other Indigenous authors suggest a more collectivist, contextual, cultural approach that includes extended family and community (HeavyRunner & Sebastian Morris, 1997).

Indigenous peoples see connectedness holistically. As HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997) explain, the traditional Indigenous family unit is the extended family, where each child has an abundance of blood and clan relatives to share the responsibility of child rearing. Indigenous people's identities are connected not only to large numbers of people, but to land, space, and time. As an example of how the two different worldviews demonstrate connectedness differently, Westerners tend to introduce themselves in an individualistic way, outlining their achievements and accomplishments. In contrast, most Indigenous people introduce themselves in relationship to their clan, house, band, family lineage, and Nation(s) (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Carrière and Richardson (2009) assert that an Indigenous perspective on cultural connectedness and identity is more appropriate than attachment theory for Indigenous children and youth. They suggest replacing the term *attachment*, a unidirectional construct, with the more mutual and multidirectional term *connection* or *connectedness*. According to these authors, the child's cultural connections and sense of belonging can also be nurtured through relationships with land, Mother Earth, spirit, ceremony, and the ancestors. Being connected in these ways can bring a child a sense of purpose and belonging.

## Connectedness and Cultural Planning for permanence Within Delegated Agencies

The Aboriginal Operational and Practice Standards Indicators (AOPSI; Caring for First Nations Children Society, 2005) used by MCFD and delegated agencies in BC state that when placing Indigenous children for adoption or in foster care, preference should be given first to relatives and then to Indigenous families or members of an Indigenous community. Given the overwhelming agreement by Indigenous leaders and scholars (e.g., Carrière & Sinclair, 2009; Gray & Coates, 2008; HeavyRunner & Sebastian Morris, 1997; Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002) on the importance of Indigenous cultural identity and the positive impacts on health and well-being of connection to culture, family, and community, an important question to ask is how delegated agencies like NIFCS can foreground culture in plans of care to address issues of loss, identity, and belonging for children and youth in care. For many youth in NIFCS's care, loss is acted out through oppositional behaviours, anxiety, depression, attempted suicide, and substance abuse. The typical mainstream response to such behaviours is to refer the child or youth to a mental health clinician who specializes in Western approaches, such as cognitive or talk therapy. Many Indigenous youth resist this kind of help. When I have asked young people why they do not want to go to therapy sessions, some of them have said to me, "I don't know what to say." We expect youth to have the vocabulary to articulate



their internal and external complexities, but most do not. Further, every child who has been assessed by a psychologist or psychiatrist has diagnostic labels listed in their files. Recommendations for care never include identity and culture as protective factors in promoting well-being. Being in care is usually listed as a reason for misbehaviour and dysfunction, but I have yet to see culture and cultural strengths as a recommended avenue to well-being.

To determine how well NIFCS has been accomplishing its goals of promoting meaningful, lifelong family, community, and cultural connections for the children and youth in our care, the agency conducted a self-evaluation in March 2013 (Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society, 2013). Children and youth filled out surveys and participated in a focus group discussion about their experiences of connection to culture, family, and social workers. This discussion was intended strictly to hear directly from the children without any adults present so they could speak without hesitation about their daily experiences of being in foster care. Many youth and children reported “trust” when their social worker engaged them in experiential visits to cultural communities or participating in cultural activities (e.g., making regalia) with other children in care. All of the child and youth participants in the discussion indicated a strong interest and desire to deepen their cultural connectivity. For some, that meant more meaningful time with biological parents and family. The young people pointed to birthdays, naming ceremonies, feasts, funerals, and other family events as examples of when visits would be appropriate and should be facilitated by their social worker. For others, it meant a consistent relationship to their traditional territories to learn more about the way of life of their people. Hunting, fishing, and dancing were named as important means to strengthen their identities as Indigenous children and youth (Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society, 2013, p. 54).

According to Richardson and Wade (2008), the whole family that surrounds a child in care must be able to take part in planning for cultural permanence. Cultural planning is about belonging, about saying to a child, “You belong to us.” It is about the wholeness of the child and taking children where they belong. Illustrating this web of connectedness, one grandmother said in the NIFCS survey, “Every child in this community is my grandchild.”

Importantly, connection to culture is not a simple matter of exposing the child or youth in care to First Nations ceremonies or cultural activities. Children need to connect in meaningful ways to their own specific culture(s) and relations. For NIFCS, it is important that these knowledges and principles are articulated in the agency’s values, mission, mandate, and policies, and that resources are allocated toward implementing cultural practices and activities that are so important for the children in our care.

## Cultural Diversity and Cultural Planning for Permanence

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across what we know as Canada are incredibly diverse, with different languages, cultural practices, teachings, worldviews, and so on. HeavyRunner and Sebastian Morris (1997) caution against applying a singular cultural perspective to every Indigenous child and youth because of this diversity. However, they assert that, in spite of tribal differences, different Indigenous groups share certain core values, beliefs, and behaviours. These include child rearing as the responsibility of an extended family, veneration of age/wisdom/tradition (respect for Elders), respect for nature,

generosity, respect for others, composure/patience, the relativity of time, and nonverbal communication (p. 61). Further, Indigenous literature on child well-being is united with regard to the importance of holistic connections for promoting positive outcomes for children and youth (Gray & Coates, 2008).

One of our greatest challenges as child, youth, family and community service providers in conducting culturally appropriate planning is in the area of diversity (Gray & Coates, 2008; Turpel-Lafond, 2013). Many workers find it daunting to meet the specific local needs of the children, families, and communities they are working with.

The three First Nations that NIFCS serves have different words in their languages to express a similar concept of oneness despite diversity. The Tsimshian word *sayt k'uulm goot* (Sai-KOOLUM-gaawt) means “with one heart”; in Haisla, *haisla'go* (Hai-zla-GOH) means “we should get together as a community to do something”; the Tahltan word *dahdze'lige* (Dah-ze-THLIGAH) means “we are like one” or “like one heart.” This teaching is common across Indigenous groups. It does not mean we are all the same, but we are all interrelated. As such, it is our ethical responsibility as service providers to figure out how to work across differences and to meet the specific cultural needs of every child we work with.

It is also important to note that for Indigenous children and youth in care, diversity does not apply only to cultural identity. A child or youth may have a disability, be overweight, be gay or two-spirited, or be different from peers in other ways. There is a need for service providers and caregivers to empower youth to hold onto their identity and become resilient through connecting to family, community, and cultural strengths.

As service providers, we are encouraged by Blackstock (2009) and others to practice in such a way that we do not behave as solution givers in isolation from Elders and community knowledge holders. How can we support each child and youth to find their place of connectedness in relation to themselves, their families and extended families, their communities, and their culture? In the next and final section, I highlight promising practices within NIFCS that have implications for other agencies serving Indigenous children and youth in care.

## Promising Practices

NIFCS works collaboratively with the communities it serves to bring children home from outside their geographic locations through homecoming and transition ceremonies. For example, between the months of June and September 2014, NIFCS staff collaborated with three of our communities, Kitkatla (Gitksan Nation), Lax Kw'alaams, and Kitimaat (Haisla Nation Council), to bring children home from around the province of BC and from other provinces to meet their families and extended families and to participate in community cultural activities. The majority of these children were visiting the land where their parents grew up. It was heart-warming to see that many caregivers and service providers and some birth parents accompanied children and youth to their communities and participated in the cultural activities. This collaborative work among the agency, communities, and other service providers who are part of the children's lives is proving through experience to achieve better outcomes for children and youth in care than the mainstream child welfare system achieved. NIFCS borrows this value from Indigenous knowledges that speak to the value of the interconnectedness of all things and all peoples.



*Faith in the cape she wore at her transition ceremony lovingly made for her by two NIFCS workers.*



*Faith displaying the Raven Clan crests on her cape.*

As another example of this kind of collaboration, NIFCS recently held an aging-out ceremony at the agency for a youth who spent 11 years in care. Like most Indigenous youth in care, Faith had experienced multiple placements and disconnection from her family and community. To plan the ceremony, we first met with Faith and sought her views and input to identify family members whom she would like to attend a family meeting to help plan her transition ceremony. Approximately 25 family members attended the meeting, including Elders from Faith's maternal community of Kitkatla and her paternal community of Lax Kw'alaams. Together we planned and discussed what the cultural ceremony would look like. Then the whole agency staff got involved in planning for the big day. Two workers made a cape with Faith's crest; one worker made a genogram and another built a PowerPoint presentation with music and pictures from Faith's years in care from beginning to end, including a variety of school, community, and other pictures of herself and the two children she had while in care. One worker invited all of the family friends, community Elders and relatives, professionals in Faith's life that she wanted to be there, representatives from MCFD, a professional photographer, Faith's siblings and their foster parents, Faith's parents and grandparents. Forty adults and a dozen small children attended the event. We provided food and honoured Faith with a cultural kit, her cape, and a laptop. Speeches were made by her younger brother, who was also in care, her uncle, who is a chief, and two Elders. When Faith's brother spoke, there was not a dry eye in the room. His words were touching, sincere, and filled with bittersweet memories of their time in care together, when the only constant in their lives was each other.

Two other youth will be leaving care by the end of this year, and NIFCS staff has been directed to continue this practice of honouring each youth in our care as they transition into adulthood. One of our goals as an agency is to provide meaningful opportunities for youth like Faith to draw on cultural strengths and cultural resiliency. When NIFCS and ICWRN held the participatory action research forum on custom adoptions in Terrace, BC, in November 2013, Faith bravely stood up in a room full of Elders, service providers,





*NIFCS staff wearing t-shirts with cultural permanence logo at Faith's transition ceremony.*

academics, and other children and youth in care to share her experiences of being in care. When asked what things had helped her most in her journey through foster care, Faith replied:

I think that things that helped me the most were school and family and friends. I know when I was younger, 8 up until I was about 10 years old, I only focused on school and it helped a lot.

In response to a question about who had helped her the most, Faith said this:

I think the one person that helped me the most throughout everything is my younger brother. I think I was 8 and he was 7 when we first got into care. Everywhere we went, we went through so many homes. Through every home that we went to my brother was the only one that was with me. We moved from town to town and home to home and we changed schools a lot. Until we got used to the homes that we were in and the schools that we started going to we pretty much only had each other. Now there's my son to help me. He really helped me to get motivated to go back to high school. I'm graduating this year.

Faith shared her own personal story of being an Indigenous youth in care:

It's not easy. When I first got to high school there's a lot of times where your parent has to sign forms, permissions forms or something. I



*Faith with her former foster parent and NIFCS worker who made her cape.*

wouldn't know whether to give it to my foster parent or my social worker. I remember one time asking who I give it to (...) They were shocked that I was in care and a lot of kids started trying to talk about me being in care. There weren't very many kids that were racist, but there was

some. Because I'm Native and I'm in foster care, they would talk about how our parents don't take care of us or how a lot of us end up in foster care. They never knew our story, but they made a lot of assumptions. In Grade 8 and 9 I was going through a lot of struggles and I wasn't in school very much. So when I did show up, they would talk and it would make me not want to go to school. So I was in and out of school up until now, and I'm really surprised and happy to say that I'm graduating this year.

It's not all bad, even though I went through all of that struggle with school or friends or moving from home to home. A lot of kids in care go through the same things. It's really how you handle it—does it build you up to be stronger or not? I wasn't always able to say that. I used to think, "Oh poor me, I'm in foster care," but now I think it really helped me meet a lot of people and go through a lot of things and it made me stronger.

Faith talked about the difficulty of keeping her culture while in care, especially given that she moved around so much between placements. She said that the rediscovery camps she attended in her hometown every summer helped, and that although family visits were often difficult to arrange, they were "really memorable."

Finally, Faith was asked what the adults need to know to support Indigenous youth in care. This is her reply:

I've been through a lot of homes and they all tried to support me, like I've been hearing all day today that the children do get lost. It's really hard for people to help find you if you don't want to be found because you just get lost feeling sorry for yourself. That's what happened to me. I didn't want to be found. My gran and my family and a lot of people, a lot of people that weren't even related to me. I had people at my school, like teachers and the school counsellors talking to me and trying to get me to go to school. They kept trying to get me to stop running away from home and going down a really, really bad road. A lot of people said, "I can't help you if you don't even want to help yourself." It's really hard to try and help support children when they're hurting, but if you never give up on them, later on when they find themselves, they don't forget that.

As the director of the agency responsible for Faith, her words moved me to take action to find ways to support and empower her resilient spirit. Her insights also helped me to think about ways that NIFCS could better support all of the children in our care. The staff, team leaders, and I discussed ways to develop a plan of care to meet Faith's individual needs. For example, we supported a visit to her maternal grandparents in Vancouver this summer, and we supported her and her brother's participation in two homecoming events in Kitkatla and Lax Kw'alaams. Faith's worker met frequently with her in the months leading up to her leaving care, ensuring that she connected her to resources in the community, including other professionals, housing, and finances, and supporting her plans to continue her education. Staff also consulted with Faith to plan the transition ceremony described above. We learnt from Faith's interview that it is important to her for others to see her through her own eyes. She stated, "I remember being treated different a lot when I was in Grade 8 and 9. They didn't see me, they just saw that I was First Nations and in care." Based on these words, when we honoured Faith's transition into adulthood with a cultural ceremony, the focus was not on her aging out of care or being in and out of care. Being a child in care does not define who Faith is as a person.

For Indigenous children and youth, connectedness and belonging goes beyond maternal bonding and the nuclear family. Each child is connected to a wide extended family, with specific ties to clans and houses. It is important for Indigenous children in care to know their clan and house name, the names of their symbols, and the name of their specific language, even if they do not speak it. It is important for them to know the dances, participate in the ceremonies, and understand their community's teachings and values that guide thoughts, attitudes, and interactions with everyone and all of nature. Children in care need to know who they are in relation to their relatives and ancestors.

Birth parents, extended family, Elders, and trusted community members need to be involved in guiding service providers, caregivers, and foster parents in the customary laws of the community and engaging Indigenous children and youth in customary activities. Elders are a valuable source of strength and cultural knowledge who can assist with centring culture at the heart of practice. Many agencies incorporate Elders' participation in their offices to assist in conflict resolution by applying customary ways of restoring harmony and balance. NIFCS encourages and requests the involvement of Elders in many ways, including inviting Elders to meet with children in care to tell them stories about their cultural history, spiritual teachings, values, and traditions.

NIFCS can promote connections with culture and community in many other ways. For example, we can involve children in games that help build identity. We can provide opportunities for them to learn about roles models of courage and resiliency. We can invite Indigenous artists to teach children and youth cultural art. We can take them on community visits several times a year, and take them to cultural museums to teach them how to make regalia and learn about their crests, dances, clans, and houses and build confidence and cultural pride. NIFCS could establish a library of Indigenous literature, artifacts, games, videos, life books, journals, Indigenous colouring books, music, books, and toys. We could have cultural camps for children and youth, bringing youth from different Nations and communities together to learn from each other and to build appreciation and tolerance for diversity. At these cultural camps, the communities NIFCS serves could be invited to collaborate on designing, planning, and implementing the activities for the camp. The children and youth would learn traditional lessons and values about hunting, food gathering, local medicines, and their local environment and its history.

Children and youth in care need to have cultural plans that clearly document how their individual needs will be met for connectedness, identity, and belonging, and what activities, programs, and services will promote their well-being and restore balance to their fragmented lives. The ultimate goal is for Indigenous children and youth to thrive, to have cultural pride, to have positive self-esteem, to be resilient to cope with the stress of being in care, and to learn about cultural resiliency from role models in their lives and from stories about individuals who have demonstrated resiliency in their lives.

There is, of course, a great need to fund specific policies and programs that promote cultural identity, customary care arrangements, and extended family and community connections. Present funding levels are inadequate to plan for these needs; however, according to Simpson (2008), Elders and communities—without funding—have always passed on their knowledge and teachings to the younger generations because of their own sense of cultural responsibility, commitment, and care for what has sustained past generations and will sustain generations in the future. This commitment on the part of Elders and communities does



not absolve governments who act in the capacity of legal guardians of the responsibility to adequately fund cultural programs and activities that promote the well-being of Indigenous children and youth. As the executive director of a delegated Indigenous agency, I am well positioned to be a strong advocate for funding and to work with a full First Nations board to ensure that customary cultural practices are funded.

## Conclusion

The article has provided an overview of Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services (NIFCS), which serves nine Indigenous communities from three First Nations on British Columbia's Northwest Coast. Through increasing cultural knowledge, NIFCS aims to enhance its practice to meet the holistic needs of children and youth in our care, in particular, to ensure that children and youth maintain connections with their families, extended families, and communities and are given opportunities to know about and learn their languages, spiritual teachings, and cultural traditions from their Elders, families, and communities. Ultimately, NIFCS's goal is for the children and youth in our care to be strongly connected to their roots and experience a sense of belonging. In pursuit of this goal, we look to the communities' Elders for guidance in customary laws and practices of caring for children. We are heartened by the spirit and commitment of Elders and cultural teachers who are leaders and strong advocates in supporting cultural connections for the children and youth of the communities NIFCS serves. We are grateful to the Lex Reynolds Adoption and Permanency Trust Fund (Victoria Foundation) and the Vancouver Foundation for the opportunity to collaborate with the Indigenous Child Well-being Network at the University of Victoria to explore and document customary laws and practices that support well-being and cultural permanence for the children and youth we serve. Dahdze'lige—we are like one. It is good to get together and do something as a community.

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