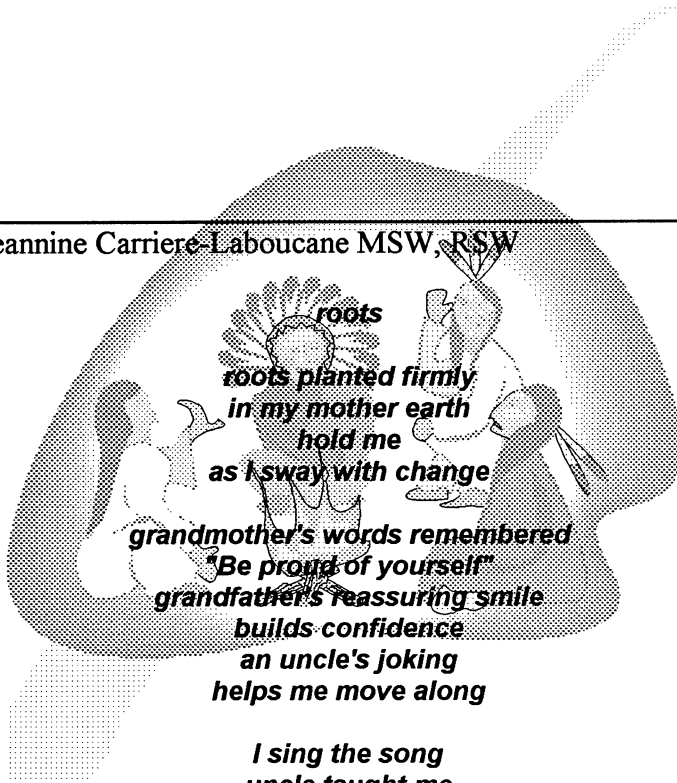


Kinship Care: A Community Alternative To Foster Care

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**roots
roots planted firmly
in my mother earth
hold me
as I sway with change**

**grandmother's words remembered
"Be proud of yourself"
grandfather's reassuring smile
builds confidence
an uncle's joking
helps me move along**

**I sing the song
uncle taught me
remembering aunty's legends
and
dance with the circle
knowing my roots
grow deep**

ed edmo 1985

Introduction

I realized the importance of kinship connection and family preservation the first time I met one of my birth family members at age twelve. As an adopted child, I often felt I was living in a borrowed state of being. In someone else's family, borrowing someone else's name and culture. Meeting my birth family and recognizing my connection to the Metis community gave me a sense of belonging for the first time in my life. In my later life as a social worker, I witnessed a disproportionate number of aboriginal children coming into the care of provincial authorities. In working with many aboriginal youth, I would be told of their longing to be with family and community. I believe that kinship care must be viewed as a valuable resource in the continuum of child welfare services because it provides children with a sense of who they are and their important place in family and community.

Kinship care is not a new concept in First Nations communities; it is often the oldest form of "foster care". Kinship care is a long-standing tradition which involves relatives caring for other relatives. This arrangement was informal in nature. When children required an alternative placement they were cared for within the extended family and all family members participated in caring for these children. It was not left to one or two individuals (Y.T.S.A. 1992). What is currently proposed by some First Nations communities however is a more formal system of child care. As more First Nations agencies manage their own child welfare programs, some are proposing kinship care as an alternative to provincial foster care programs. Two such agencies, the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (Y.T.S.A.) in Alberta and the Squamish Ayas Men Men Program in Squamish, British Columbia have both developed kinship care or "custom" care programs in their communities.

Y.T.S.A., established in 1985, oversees child welfare services for five First Nations in Alberta. The agency has a double bilateral agreement with the federal and provincial governments. Under this agreement the province of Alberta maintains delegation of authority and band workers work alongside provincial workers in child protection matters. Discussions are currently being held to undertake delegation for one of the First Nations represented by Y.T.S.A.. The Y.T.S.A. Custom Care program was developed in 1988 and piloted this year.

The Aya Men Men program at Squamish First Nation in B.C. was established in 1995. A phased-in program for child and family services was implemented in 1993 through an agreement with the province of British Columbia. Under this agreement, the Squamish First Nation is able to deliver a full range of child and family services including intake services, family care and group residential care, short-term and special care agreements, patriation, family support, community development and the kinship care program.

The resources afforded to both programs by federal and provincial governments differs greatly and this has an impact on the success of kinship care for children. This is a serious implication because some literature on kinship care warns that if kinship care homes break down, children will be more psychologically damaged than in regular foster home breakdown. Children, expect more from their families (Schaaf 1992).

Literature Review

Much of the literature on kinship care comes from the U.S. where several jurisdictions have employed this intervention as a model of alternate care. In Illinois and New York, for example, approximately half of the children placed in out-of-home care by child protective agencies are in kinship homes (Dubowitz, 1994). The Child Welfare League of America (C.W.L.A., 1993) has developed a Kinship Care Policy which determines some of the necessary components and practice standards of successful kinship care programs. From a social support perspective, the literature emphasizes the need for support services and adequate financial assistance to kinship caregivers. This includes providing kinship parents with assistance such as emotional support, health coverage, homemaker and respite services, transportation, day-care, counseling, and help with stress management (C.W.L.A., 1994). Sawyer and Dubowitz (1994) studied 372 children in kinship care homes in Baltimore and report that:

many children in kinship care manifest similar educational problems to children in foster care and maltreated children who are not placed out of home, but substantially greater difficulties compared to their peers in an urban public school system (Sawyer and Dubowitz, 1994 p.596).

Thus, the fact of care provided by a relative does not negate the need for therapeutic or support services. The relevance of these studies is that although they examined other populations, the basic principles are transferable to First Nations programs. Many of the studies focused on African-American families who face poverty and racism. Conditions in First Nations communities include high unemployment, deplorable housing, marginal access to services and poor health conditions which need to be addressed (Frideres 1993).

The ways in which kinship care is viewed and the supportive services necessary for its success must be considered in light of the following:

- Most importantly, kinship care is no longer viewed as a temporary means of child care. In First Nations communities, it may be a means to bring children home to their family and community after long absences or a series of foster home placements.
- Children placed in kinship care homes will have emotional needs and behaviours which may require specialized training, support and other resources to maintain these family placements and ensure the success of kinship care programs.

Oral Traditions in Qualitative Interviews

Those who work with First Nations communities need to honor protocols and processes which are respectful of cultural traditions. In my research, I recognized that my own quest for knowledge and information could not supercede this requirement. When I began to search for participants in this study, I first approached agency staff and asked about protocols in their communities. At Y.T.S.A. I was advised I would need to meet with the Board of Directors which includes Elders from each community. I made offerings when I was told this was appropriate. At Ayas Men Men I followed their suggestions as to what would be respectful and that I would need to build relationships with people first.

My methodology led me to a model which I visualized as a collage or quilt design. The symbol that emerged when I heard the stories and reviewed the themes, was a traditional star-blanket which

features a quilted four-pointed star in its centre and was traditionally given to honor a great chief or warrior. Quilting has been a woman's way of visiting, telling stories and passing along information while making something beautiful and useful with friends and family. Thus I chose to represent various themes provided by the participants through stories and metaphors in a quilt model (see figure 1).

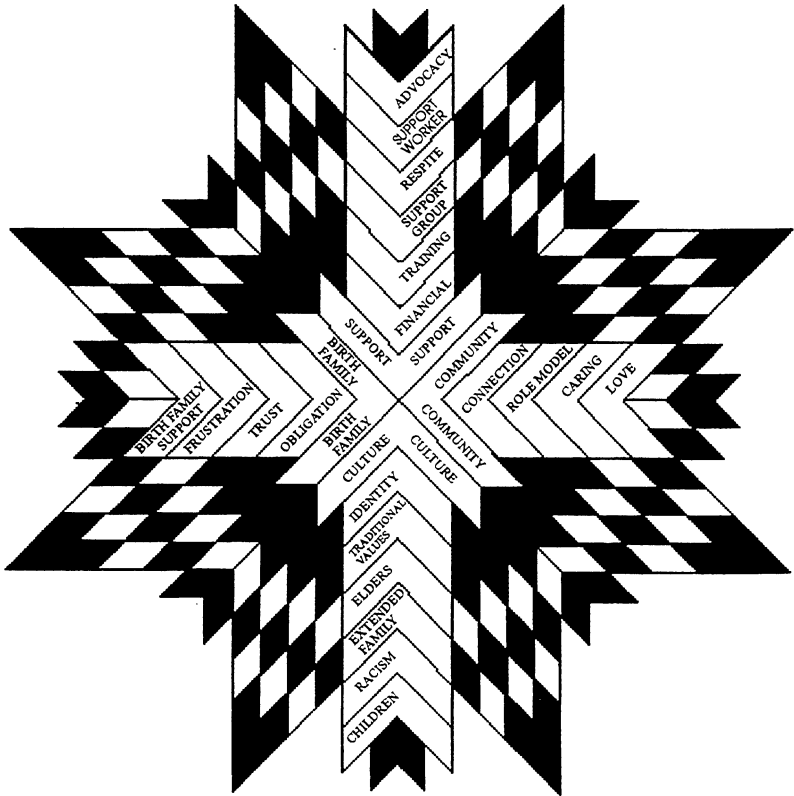
Having reviewed some of the methodological considerations, the following information reflects what people shared with me. I visited two First Nations communities and spoke to relatives providing care for other relatives' children. As mentioned earlier, the Squamish Nation in B.C. offers an array of support services to its kinship caregivers. At the Enoch Cree Nation in Alberta, the resources are not in place to address the priorities addressed by caregivers in that community. The issues identified as priorities however, were the same in both communities. In gathering the information, I chose an interview format to give caregivers an opportunity to reflect on their personal achievements and contributions they were making to their present and future communities. Lee Maracle (1990) states that "words are not objects to be wasted - they represent the accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples". Maracle, a First Nations poet and writer encourages the use of story and metaphor in the context of academic research. The survival of story and conversation transmits values and history. The story of kinship care in these two communities transmits important knowledge through meaningful, informed experiences.

Of the six families interviewed, four were made up of two parents, while two were female-headed, single-parent families. All were currently providing care to one or more children of relatives. These children were mostly younger and most of them had been in the provincial foster care system at one time or another in their lives. One family was raising a relative's child who was severely disabled. Four main themes were identified in both communities as being important considerations:

- Working with birth family,
- Support,
- Community and
- Culture.

Figure 1

Star Blanket Quilt Model



A number of sub-themes were also identified and varied in both communities. I attribute this to the type of service being provided such as notable differences in financial support, training and advocacy. For the purposes of the article, I will focus on the main themes which participants identified as important considerations in kinship care.

This inquiry was in many ways a spiritual process for me and it was important that I do things "in a good way" as the Elders often say. For example when I met the participants for the last time, I gave them gifts for they had given me many gifts through their stories. At the end of my research journey I hosted a feast to give thanks once again. These are not everyone's ways but they were ways my spiritual teachers have told me about and encouraged me to use.

Birth Family

This was an area which appeared as most challenging to most participants. One participant felt rejection from her brother who didn't come and visit anymore after she began caring for his child. Another person said she felt interference from her relatives who came to her home and told her how to raise the children. One person said what she found frustrating was when relatives dropped by unexpectedly under the influence of alcohol and demanding to see their children.

Support

All participants in both communities spoke of the need for an array of support services in kinship care. The types of support discussed were financial, peer support, respite care and training. There was a remarkable difference in the discussion of this theme and its sub-themes in each community which I attribute to the significant differences in overall funding and monitoring arrangements. The Squamish participants appeared generally satisfied with the rates they were receiving and described it as timely and adequate. The Enoch caregivers were dissatisfied with both the amount of the rates and timing of receiving payments. The Squamish caregivers receive a rate comparable to provincial foster care rates, pro-rated per child with basic maintenance being covered as well as any extra support required such as home-makers, babysitters, transportation, respite care and other needs which may arise. At Enoch caregivers are paid

basic maintenance being covered as well as any extra support required such as home-makers, babysitters, transportation, respite care and other needs which may arise. At Enoch caregivers are paid approximately \$400.00 per month regardless of any special needs or age of the child.

Other forms of support seen as essential were training, advocacy through the agency staff, respite care, and support groups which were viewed as a valuable form of validation and community peer support for the Squamish caregivers. At Enoch, the participants said they did not know who else was providing care on the reserve. The Enoch caregivers appeared to feel abandoned by the provincial child welfare system although there was much acknowledgement and loyalty towards the Enoch Child Welfare Service staff who were described as helpful.

Community

The importance of community is a value which was maintained as crucial on both reserves. In spite of program differences, both sets of participants vocalized this as a basic principle in program development. Kinship care was viewed as working "toward the goal of all" said one participant. One person said it was important to see program staff at community events and spoke of the importance of kinship care as giving back to the community. Seeing family and community getting healthier was mentioned by another participant as the main feature of kinship care as opposed to the children being raised "out there" in non-aboriginal foster homes.

Culture

The theme of culture was discussed by many participants as a means to improve self-esteem, develop a sense of community and preserve the identity of children. In this context, culture is used to describe a common language, history and tradition which helps to form the identity of band members. One person describes kinship care as preserving traditional values such as sharing food and a place to sleep for people in need. Including the teachings of Elders in the training and in other areas of the program was seen as important. An Enoch participant said that aboriginal children should be raised in aboriginal homes and kinship care could provide the cultural continuity and positive identity to children in need of alternate care.

Analysis of Interview Data

There are several implications raised in my discussions with caregivers and in pursuing research on kinship care and First Nations communities. As I spoke with participants, it became apparent that each of them had an unshakable belief in the value of community and family. This was obvious in their discourse on their local community agency, the staffing of that agency and what it represents as a means to autonomy and local control. The participants had pride in the accomplishment of the agency and seemed to feel they had some ownership in its development. Most of them knew or were related to staff at the agency which increased their sense of trust and commitment. The participants' choice in working with locally-based resources was clear.

Kinship care is a step towards rebuilding communities and maintaining local control of resources for First Nations. This can be viewed as a bridging mechanism which preserves the identity and culture of children through community care. These programs require support; however, one of the inherent conflicts of child-care is the issue of financial remuneration. In my practice with the foster care system I recall saying many times that if we provided birth families with the type of financial and emotional support we provide to strangers, or foster parents, it would be one of the best forms of prevention and cost-saving measures for child welfare services.

I believe that we need to view kinship care as a valuable option within a range of services available to children requiring alternate care. As with foster care, kinship care does not have the capability to meet the needs of all children. Assessment must be a key process to evaluate the viability of kinship care for each child. Another issue which needs to be settled is the whole jurisdictional debate between provincial, federal and First Nations governments. In order to implement kinship care success-fully, First Nations communities need to be assured of consistent funding and support for these programs, based on community-driven standards. Standards in First Nations communities are often based on resources available to them. As mentioned earlier, poverty is a factor which needs to be considered. With many families on waiting lists for housing, the community standard may be that families need to live together as a temporary measure. Does this prevent a child being placed with relatives because an outside agency determines that each child requires a bedroom? This is an example where community standards

need to be considered as one factor in many. Notwithstanding, kinship care must provide for the safety, nurturance and development of children. To ensure this, an array of support services must be provided to include but not be limited to:

- financial support equivalent at minimum to provincial foster care rates,
- advocacy through support workers and other staff,
- training at every level including staff and caregivers,
- peer support through interaction with other caregivers,
- regular respite care,
- support services to birth families and maintenance of extended family relationships during kinship care. Birth family support must also include services which facilitate children going back to their family of origin.

Conclusion

To establish general guidelines for practice and program development for kinship care, I propose that First Nations kinship care policies be developed by First Nations practitioners and community representatives as an independent strategy that preserves the integrity and autonomy of First Nations. There is a lack of First Nations social policy in Canada. Kinship care provides an opportunity for dialogue on these issues including the review of child welfare legislation as it pertains to First Nations children. Child welfare law in most provinces is based on the best interests of children. In First Nations communities, the Euro-Canadian interpretation of the best interests notion has been used to separate families and communities. The best interests principle must be reconceptualized to make child welfare laws less divisive. As social work practitioners, we must rethink the definition of family if we are to adequately meet the needs of First Nations children.

The care of children is everyone's responsibility. As some of the male participants in my interviews demonstrated, men also do caring work. Kinship care has the potential to change the status quo in child welfare legislation, to improve local economic resources and honour the culture, traditions and structure of First Nations communities. At best, it can provide First Nations children with a foundation of love, caring and pride in themselves, their family and community. In my opinion it can't get much better.

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