

# Colonialism vs. truth and reconciliation

## ROOTS OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN MANITOBA

In 2017, Canada celebrated 150 years of existence. An existence based on the dispossession of Indigenous people and on the idea that settlers had the inherent right to claim land and resources. Colonialism persists due in part to the reluctance of potential allies to engage in the process of reconciliation because it is difficult and uncomfortable; however, those who benefit from the marginalization of oppressed people must also participate in reconciliation; otherwise, it cannot be successful. Colonialism abides today in the laws that erode Indigenous rights regarding land, status, basic human rights, and most notably the child welfare system, which has removed thousands of Indigenous children from their families and communities (Council of the Federation Secretariat, 2015, p. 7).<sup>1</sup> This article provides a brief examination of the current state of overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care in Manitoba. It suggests that the current child welfare system in the province serves to isolate these children from their families and cultures, and it asserts that proposed changes to the system in the province are a step toward reconciliation.

To understand child welfare in Manitoba, we must first touch on the history of residential schools in Canada. Residential schools were a tool of colonialism, a means of assimilating Indigenous people into settler society, removing barriers to land and resources that had not yet been possessed by settlers (Barker, 2014; Crosby & Monaghan, 2017). Indigenous children were transported to school locations that were often unknown to their families, and were forbidden from speaking their own languages. “Children were abused, physically, and sexually, and they died in the schools in numbers that would not have been tolerated in any school system anywhere in the country, or the

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world” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, p. v). There were many more students who survived residential school, but they lived with dysfunction, grief, and despair as a result of the abuse they suffered at the hands of the priests, nuns, and teachers who ran the schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b).

## CHILD WELFARE TODAY

In Manitoba and across Canada, the child welfare system is considered to be an iteration of the residential school system, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care “has its roots in the historical disadvantages experienced by Indigenous peoples, including the negative effects of colonization and the inter-generational impact of the residential school system which separated children from their families and subjected many children to maltreatment” (Brownell et al., 2015, p. xi). In this sense, colonialism continues to have a strong effect on Indigenous families in Manitoba through the child welfare system, which negatively impacts Indigenous families at statistically higher rates than any other culture in Canada. The 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada, 2013) found that only 23 percent of Manitoba children are Indigenous, yet as of March 31, 2016, 87.6 percent of the 10,501 children in care in Manitoba were Indigenous (Manitoba Family Services, 2016, p. 92).

Indigenous children often come into care for reasons related to neglect (failure to provide proper care) rather than abuse (physical or psychological maltreatment). Incidents of neglect in child

welfare are closely linked to poverty rates, which are higher for Indigenous people both on and off reserve than for non-Indigenous people (Assembly of First Nations, 2009, p. 37). Poverty contributes to the neglect of children because, statistically, “children from low income families are many times more likely to experience neglect” (Council of the Federation Secretariat, 2015, p. 11). Indigenous families living in poverty on and off reserve are more likely to derive their primary source of income from social assistance or other government benefits and are less likely to have caregivers who are employed full time (Sinha et al., 2013). “These households [are] also more likely to face the challenges to providing the assets which foster healthy child development which are linked to low incomes associated with social assistance/employment insurance/other benefits as the primary income source” (Sinha et al., 2013, p. 62). Today, Indigenous children and youth in care in Manitoba face marked grief and isolation from their families, communities, and cultures (Office of the Children’s Advocate, 2016). They are expected to transition to new environments with little or no guidance from the adults in their lives, and they experience childhoods impacted by a lack of secure relationships with caring adults and guardians, often as a result of multiple placement moves (Office of the Children’s Advocate, 2016).

The experience of Indigenous children, youth, and their families in Canada is an overwhelming challenge to the process of truth and reconciliation. Hope for healthy Indigenous families cannot become a reality as long as the structural issue of poverty continues to be ignored. All Canadians, whether they work in child welfare or not, must insist at all levels of government that the root causes of neglect-driven child welfare interventions be addressed with judi-

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ciously applied social programs that keep Indigenous people from living in abject poverty. Child welfare issues such as neglect due to poverty can no longer be the sole responsibility of an overburdened system that was created to remove Indigenous children from their families and did not address the root causes of the concerns that bring Indigenous families to the attention of agencies (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). Children should not be coming into care because their families are poor; rather, families should be “provided with the economic and social supports necessary to safely care for their children and youth” (Blackstock et al., 2006, p. 11).

## CHILD WELFARE TODAY: PREVENTION AND PARTICIPATION

Currently, the Manitoba government is moving toward providing child welfare agencies in the province with block funding that would enable agencies to spend money on prevention services with families, instead of funding agencies based on the number of children removed from their families (Malone, 2017). Prevention services include traditional Indigenous customary care arrangements and community-based prevention models. Other possible solutions include community consultations, promoting legal guardianship outside the child welfare system, and reunifica-

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tion through the family group conferencing model, which has experienced success with Indigenous populations in both Australia and in Manitoba, and more funding for intervention and prevention services from the province (Malone, 2017). There are many paths toward reconciliation in Canada, but the commonalities they share are that they must be Indigenous-led with full participation and support from non-Indigenous citizens and all levels of government.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must “acknowledge and accept responsibility for redressing the wrongs done to Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities, regardless of their degree of direct involvement” (Blackstock et al., 2006, p. 9) and commit to working together toward improved outcomes for Indigenous families involved in child welfare systems. Non-Indigenous Canadians must remember that their assumptions regarding the oppression of Indigenous people are

not without bias when they attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility for reconciliation. As Canada celebrates 150 years of Confederation, it is important that citizens become conscious of the ways in which colonial laws, “Canadian values,” and the stories we tell ourselves about the history of our country negate the suffering and oppression that Indigenous people continue to experience (Denis & Bailey, 2016). 🍁

## NOTES

1. In 2011, for the first time, the National Household Survey counted foster children in each household, and found that there were 29,590 children in care across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013).

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