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"Reimagining" the Child Welfare System

REINA FOSTER

"Boozhoo, Debigo'giizhigook nidizhnikaaz, makwa nidodem, Obishikokaang nidoonjibaa."

My name is Reina Foster, an Anishinaabekwe from Lac Seul First Nation in Treaty #3. I am the former Youth Chief in my community and dream of being the first female Lac Seul Chief. I have been heavily involved with Feathers of Hope, a First Nations youth initiative through the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. My passions include Child Welfare, Youth Justice, and Law. I hope to go back to college to study in the Community and Justice Services program.

The child welfare system is a form of discrimination against Indigenous children, as it is an outcome and a continuous legacy out of the Indian Residential School (IRS) and the 60s Scoop eras. It is a known fact to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who understand what every Indigenous child has been through, will go through, and is going through, within the child welfare system. Many people consider the child welfare system the "millennial scoop." By 2002, over 22,500 Indigenous children were in foster care across Canada, but as of 2010, it is estimated that approximately 27,000 Indigenous children were in care. This number of Indigenous children is higher than the number of children that were taken into Residential schools and in the 60s Scoop.¹

At the tender age of two, I had a taste of the Canadian child welfare system. I was placed into child care with my brother who was not yet a year old. Our parents struggled and abused alcohol and drugs throughout our childhood. There were times where we would be able to visit them and there were times where we were able to go back home. But back into the system we went, the child care system was our familiar. Although the child care system ensures children the protection from any possible abuse from their parents, the protection can only go so far.

I have experienced firsthand the abuses that Indigenous children go through within child care. More than a decade ago, I had watched my younger brother be physically abused and I could not do anything about it. Being as young as we were, I do not recall telling anyone about what happened in that placement. But one thing I do recall ... is feeling powerless and unprotected. If any form of abuse still occurs in child care today, children and youth need to know that they have a safe place within the system; that they can trust their foster family, child care worker, and child care agency. Nearly two years ago, my brother and I placed ourselves into child care again as we saw that our mother could not care for us. It was a very difficult act to go through, but our safety is what mattered most. Not only did we reclaim our protection, we had to relive the anxiety and reopen wounds that we thought were closed. However, it was this experience that shifted and balanced my negative thoughts with a positive outlook; the bad experiences that I have faced personally and witnessed in others are why I have negative opinions about it. The support, opportunities, and care that I was given in different home placements are why I have positive opinions about it.

My vision for the future of the child welfare system, is that we should not need to keep having these same conversations, that we do not need to "re-form" or to "re-imagine" child

¹ Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg: HighWater Press, 2016) at 183.

welfare, that we fully implement Jordan's Principle and that we drift away from the mindset and concept that the system is a "humanitarian crisis." We continuously keep talking about reforming or re-imagining child welfare. Perhaps nothing has changed? Perhaps it is not working? Has the government directly spoken to the youth in care? These are questions that need to be considered.

At the Feathers of Hope: Child Welfare forum in May 2015, tears were shed because youth opened up, spoke their truth, and recommended important ideas that would help improve the child welfare system for *them*. This is because adults had given them a safe space to talk about how they were in foster home placements that did not care for them, how the foster home placement did not meet their cultural needs, and how they needed involvement in their home community. In some cases, Indigenous children have been sent far from their respective communities into the homes of non-Indigenous people, leaving them to grow up questioning their identity. However, in some cases, it is the opposite. "There were efforts made to turn power over to First Nations to keep children in their communities... ."²

In my home community, Lac Seul First Nation, Chief Clifford Bull believes that the importance of keeping our children in care within the community's confines cannot be overly emphasized. He says that children should not be sent away to far-off destinations. "We do not want to see the sad residential school legacy continue to happen with our children, they need to be raised in their own home communities where they feel that connection with community and land."

"It takes a community to raise a child" is a norm in First Nations communities. Keeping First Nations children in their communities is the best way to ensure that they remain grounded to their culture, identity, and families. It was at the request of our parents that my brother and I remain close to home and remain together. However, even though we were in our home community and lived with people we knew, that was not enough to protect us from the emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse that we faced. In order to create a system that keeps our children in our communities, we need to ensure that the foster family is suited to take care and protect their own.

In an interview with CBC's *The House*, Cindy Blackstock stated, "*The fortunate thing is the federal government has an opportunity to... make sure we don't raise another generation of First Nations kids who have to recover from their childhoods.*" I can speak in the most honest terms, that I grew up way too quickly than I should have, that I am constantly self-reflecting on my younger days, and that I am aware of what happened to myself and my brother. I feel as though I owe myself for what I lost as a child and I am recovering and healing from the hurt, inequalities, and injustice that I have faced. The most important thing is that this drives me to ensure that my children do not experience what I endured and that they do not have to grow up with a government that constantly fails them as Indigenous children and youth. The best thing to do is to hope and push that the federal government is able to walk in the same direction as us. If not them, who? If not now, when?

² *Ibid.*