



LEVEL
YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

Indigenous Youth in Care Rights to Culture and Community: How We Can Do Better

ASTRAEA LALIBERTE-LA RUE

CONTENTS

3	About The LEVEL Initiative
5	Biography
6	Executive Summary
7	Problem Definition and Background
9	Recommendations and Next Steps
10	Conclusion
11	Bibliography
12	About Vancouver Foundation

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), & səliilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

ABOUT THE LEVEL INITIATIVE

LEVEL is a youth-engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth population in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL CONSISTS OF
THREE PILLARS OF
WORK TO ADVANCE
RACIAL EQUITY:



ABOUT THE LEVEL YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are disproportionately impacted by certain public policies and are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the hən̓d̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tseil-Waututh peoples, and of the sn̓íchim-speaking Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

¹ <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>



ASTRAEA LALIBERTE-LARUE

Weyt-k. Astraea en skwest. Hello, my name is Astraea Laliberte-LaRue. I am from the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Indian Band. I am currently a student at Thompson Rivers University, studying to complete my Social Work degree. I am honoured to be a part of the Youth Policy Program, and am grateful for the new knowledge and relationships I have gained. A goal of mine is to help the people in my home community by being a role model for its youth. I will continue this path by furthering my education in policy and Indigenous culture. *Kukwstsétsemc.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Existing policy in the Child, Family, and Care Services Act includes cultural rights for Indigenous youth in care, however this legislation is not effectively meeting youth-in-care needs. Youth in care still lose connection to their cultures. Often this is facilitated by “inappropriate placement” choices. Inappropriate placement refers to non-Indigenous homes or homes that are not culturally suitable. Some reasons that lead to inappropriate placements are the lack of training, Indigenous homes, and understanding/knowledge about the youth-in-care cultures. Some shifts have been made, but they are not very strong or consistent, and have not resulted in substantially improved outcomes. Currently, there are opportunities to partner with organizations and adjust policy language that could result in more positive practice shifts. As well as strengthening the existing policy in legislation around cultural rights for youth in care, so that cultural-identity rights are upheld more consistently through the foster-parent training and guidance programs, which is already in place. To do this we need to create a policy to ensure that the rights concerning Indigenous youth in care are being addressed and practiced, by training foster parents in Indigenous culture, traditions, and language; also, by specialty training on how to attend to children who have suffered from trauma. A system of accountability needs to be provided that ensures social workers are recording their actions, and also ensures their clients are learning about, and are involved in, cultural activities.

PROBLEM DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

What I am asserting is to create an awareness to the issues with which Indigenous youth in care are continuing to struggle. First Nations children are overrepresented in the child-welfare system. To this day, over half of the youth in care are Aboriginal. Considering that 7.7% of the population of children in Canada are Indigenous, the amount of youth in care that are Indigenous is by far overrepresented. This issue has been highlighted for many years, and throughout my research I was able to backtrack to 15-year-old articles discussing this issue. The most recent article I will be referencing is from the National Post on November 30th, 2018. It states, “upward of 40,000 Indigenous children are in state care in Canada – more than half of all children in care across the country” (National News, Justin Brake). The over-representation in itself is a whole other issue that needs to be assessed, addressed, and resolved. Although this issue of overrepresentation is problematic in itself, there are other problems that arise from it. An example of this is the trauma that occurs in children who are physically removed from their biological homes, and placed into strangers’ care. The results of this trauma include emotional distress, separation anxiety, and self-identity issues. The rates of suicide attempts are extremely high in Indigenous youth. “The suicide rate for First Nations male youth (ages 15-24) is 126 per 100,000 compared to 24 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous male youth,” and “for First Nations females, the suicide rate is 35 per 100,000 compared to 5 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous females” (Health Canada, 2010). Drug addiction and alcoholism are also struggles foster children are susceptible and vulnerable to. A loss of self and cultural identity plays a major role in the chances of addiction occurring in youth in care. “Identity problems are most likely to occur among marginalized individuals and groups” (Aboriginal Cultural Identity, pg. 9). The emotional stress and trauma experienced by youth in care is one of the main causes of these self-destructing challenges. Community, family support, cultural knowledge, and traditions are all prevention tools that are being abandoned. “There are certain social conditions which can help create a positive and healthy environment for both a community and its individual members. These are identified as ‘cultural continuity’ and include: land control, health services, and control of cultural activities” (Centre for Suicide Prevention). This “policy ask” is for an awareness of Indigenous youth in care to their rights for culture and community connection. Historically, Indigenous youth were separated from their communities, families, and cultural roots, which is continuing today via the child-welfare system. Children in care lose connection to their cultures. Often this is facilitated by culturally inappropriate placement choices. The comparison of Indian Residential Schools to the Child-welfare system is incredibly accurate. When Residential Schools were active, it was not uncommon for Aboriginal children to be placed there by child-welfare authorities (Supporting Resilience through Structural Change, pg 16). Indigenous youth are continuously taken away from their families and communities, despite concerns voiced by youth and community members. “Children have found themselves placed in foster care with no valid or legitimate explanation” (Aboriginal Cultural Identity, pg 17).



RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Generally there are specific rights that should be upheld by those working with the children and youth in care. Existing policy in the Child, Family, and Community Services Act, Part 4, Section 70, explicitly states, "Indigenous children have the right to: (a) receive guidance, encouragement, and support to learn about and practice their Indigenous traditions, customs, and languages, and (b) belong to their communities" (BC Law). Although this legislation is in place, these rights are not being practiced; therefore, they are not meeting the Indigenous youth-in-care needs. Glugwe Walkus is an Indigenous youth who was placed into care at the age of eight, and his opportunity to learn and grow in his culture was undervalued. He states in an article, "I missed out on that opportunity to get passed down that knowledge that they would have been able to teach, good or bad" (The Discourse). In this quote he is referring to his community Elders, and family members. The fact that Indigenous youth in care are still not having these laws honoured proves that cultural genocide is still present.

1. Raise payment rates for Indigenous foster parents.

- a. This idea supports the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls for Action to "provide adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so" (pg.1).
- b. Higher payment rates provide the ability to care for children (less economic stress)
- c. Provides foster parents with the confidence that they will be able to provide everything the child will need (emotional/spiritual support, and cultural knowledge.)

2. Provide mandatory cultural training program for foster parents (Indigenous and Non-Indigenous) who foster Indigenous youth in care.

- a. "Information suggests that many Aboriginal children who reside off-reserve continue to be placed in non-Aboriginal homes." If an Indigenous child is placed in a non-Indigenous home, it is essential that the foster parents learn/participate in the youth in care's cultural heritage.
- b. It is the lack of knowledge about Indigenous history and culture that inhibits foster parents from actively honouring their responsibility to "respect the culture and religion of any child in [their] care" (Foster Family Handbook, pg 26).
- c. Indigenous Perspectives Society (IPS) offers training to social workers, "which incorporates competencies and skills that an individual must possess in order to carry out the various responsibilities of a Voluntary Services, Guardianship, and Child Protection delegated social worker." This kind of thorough training that is assigned to social workers, would now be mandatory for guardians (foster parents) and would only strengthen the Indigenous youth in care support network.

3. Assign a supervisory agent position to ensure ministry employees are upholding the rights of Indigenous youth in care. The duties of this position include:

- a. Weekly follow-ups with their assigned social workers and reviews of the documented connections made with youth in care concerning their community and cultural activities. If the above is not being addressed, initiate a plan of action.
- b. Supporting guardians in Indigenousizing the foster home. For example, Indigenous books, art, clothing, language, music, and opportunities to invite Elders or mentors to the home.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the main focus of this “policy ask” is to ensure that Indigenous youth in care have the opportunity to maintain, learn, and practice their culture. First, if we looked at the issue of “inappropriate placement,” policy option one would be beneficial because there would be more Indigenous homes available for Indigenous youth. Second, referring back to policy option two, if the child is living in a non-Indigenized home (potentially Indigenous or non-Indigenous foster homes), foster parents participating in mandatory training on how to implement First Nations culture provides a better opportunity for the youth in care’s rights to be honoured. Third, providing a system to ensure that social workers are held accountable for the youth in care by implementing a supervisory agent to safeguard the rights of those youth in care.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls for Action. (2015). http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- Foster Family Handbook 5th Edition. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/foster-parenting/foster_family_handbook.pdf
- “No more scooping children”: Canada, Indigenous leaders announce plan to co-develop child welfare legislation, National News, Justin Brake. <https://aptnnews.ca/2018/11/30/no-more-scooping-children-canada-indigenous-leaders-announce-plan-to-co-develop-child-welfare-legislation/>
- Indigenous kids need better access to culture while in government care. <https://www.thediscourse.ca/urban-nation/indigenous-kids-culture>
- Child, Family, and Community Services Act, BC LAW. http://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/96165_02#section14
- Center for Suicide Prevention. <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/resource/indigenous-suicide-prevention/>

ABOUT VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.



LEVEL

AN INITIATIVE OF **vancouver**
foundation

200-475 W. Georgia Street,
Vancouver, BC, V6B 4M9
604.688.2204

level@vancouverfoundation.ca
www.levelvf.ca

 @LEVELVF

 @LEVEL_VF

 @LEVEL_VF