

WALKING TOGETHER

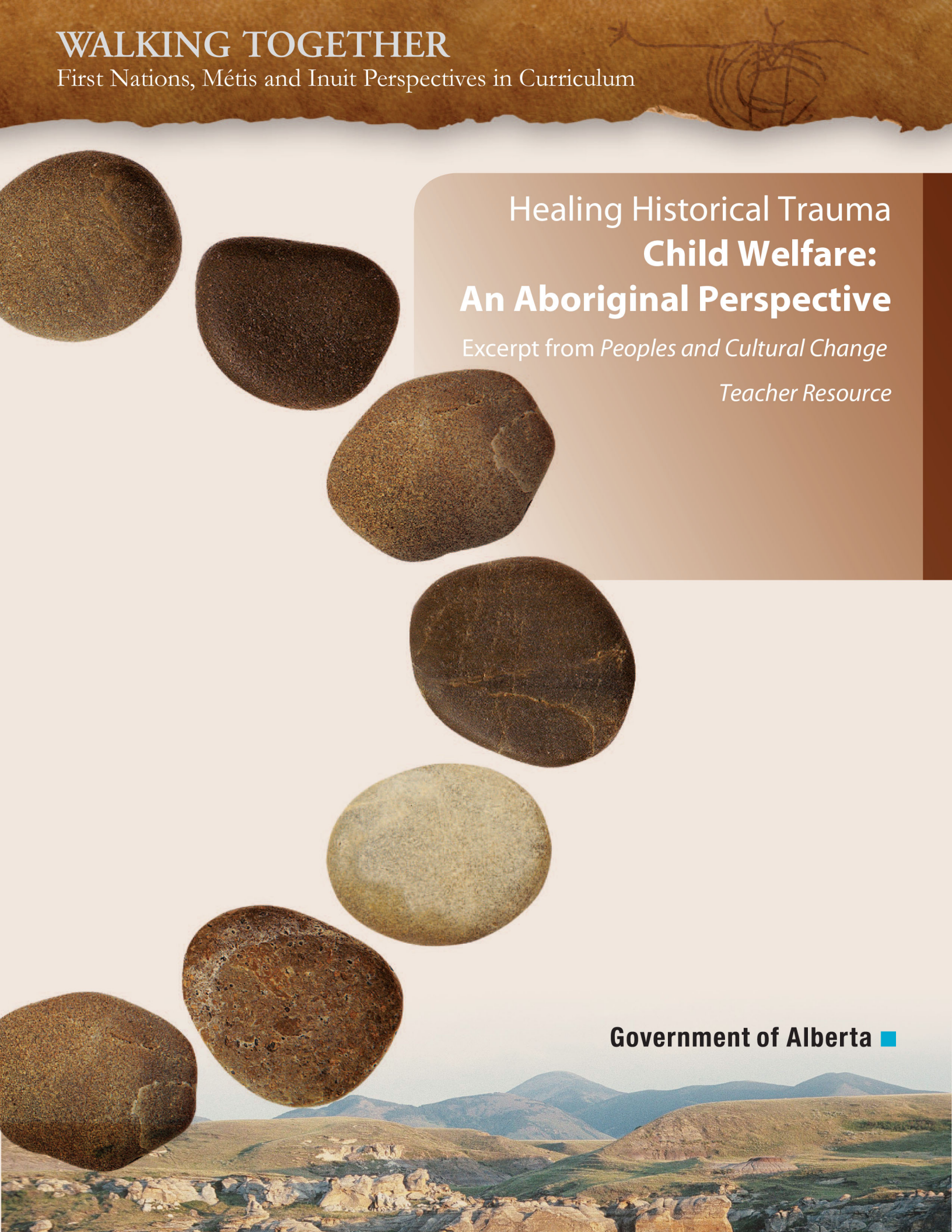
First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Healing Historical Trauma Child Welfare: An Aboriginal Perspective

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Teacher Resource

Government of Alberta ■





CHILD WELFARE: AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change Teacher Resource*

CHILD WELFARE: AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

[In 2000] history was made when a judge from Alberta's Court of Queen's Bench drove hundreds of kilometres to the Enoch reserve north of Edmonton to grant the final adoption orders for three former foster children. The ceremony was done with none of the courtroom's usual dourness. Instead, it was a blend of native and mainstream customs, with the chiefs and Elders and burning sweetgrass of Aboriginal tradition mixed with the staid courtroom formalities of granting an adoption with legal clout.

— Margaret Philp, "The Land of Lost Children," *Globe and Mail*, 2002, on the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency

Between 1960 and 1990, more than 11 000 First Nations children were placed for adoption. In some cases, children were removed from communities by the busload, to be placed in far-off non-Aboriginal families. During the "sixties scoop," the number of Aboriginal children in child welfare systems across Canada soared from almost none to more than 30 percent. In *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*, the 1983 report that revealed this situation, Patrick Johnson stated that

Many experts in the child welfare field are coming to believe that the removal of any child from his/her parents is inherently damaging, in and of itself . . . The effects of apprehension on an individual Native child will often be much more traumatic than for his non-Native counterpart. Frequently, when the Native child is taken from his parents, he is also removed from a tightly knit community of extended family members and neighbours, who may have provided some support. In addition, he is removed from a unique, distinctive and familiar culture. The Native child is placed in a position of triple jeopardy.

In 1985, a Manitoba report on child welfare revealed that First Nations and Métis children were routinely being shipped to adoptive homes in the United States and other provinces. Of the 25 percent of children placed outside the province, almost all were Aboriginal.

This excerpt on child welfare ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Peoples and Cultural Change Teacher Resource*, Toronto, ON, 2004, pp. 413–414.

CHILD WELFARE REFORM

Beginning in 1981, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs began to enter into tripartite child welfare agreements with provincial governments and tribal councils or regional groups representing First Nations. Child and family services established under these agreements operate under delegated authority and must adhere to provincial regulations, though they are funded by the federal government.

Alberta's Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (formerly called the Child Welfare Act) that includes provisions stipulating consultation with the chief and council of an Aboriginal child's community before permanent wardship hearings and that culturally appropriate services be provided. It also specifies that an Aboriginal child must be informed of his or her status.

Today an increasing emphasis is placed on supporting greater Aboriginal control in the development and implementation of child and family services. There are now seventeen First Nations Child and Family Services agencies in Alberta.

CURRENT ISSUES

Child welfare falls under provincial jurisdiction, while matters involving Aboriginal peoples fall under federal jurisdiction. The national funding formula results in an inequity between funding level for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal providers and excludes people without "status." Services in urban areas are often insufficient. In cases training of social workers is inadequate.

There have also been observations that although Aboriginal agencies are increasingly involved, they are still forced to operate within a provincial child welfare institution that is based on a non-Aboriginal worldview and value system. There is a greater need for attention to the extended family and community as a whole.

CUSTOM ADOPTION

The Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency, which is often held up as a model for other such agencies, began running a custom adoption program in 1999. Its adoption program integrates traditional practices with Alberta's legal requirements, finding permanent First Nations homes for children who have been in foster care for a long time. Through this agency, the Alexander, Alexis, Enoch, O'Chiese, and Sunchild First Nations are returning to the traditional Cree practice of involving Elders and the community in the process of providing care for a child when a parent or extended family members are unable to do so.

Under the open spirit of this traditional style of adoption, families take part in deciding who might adopt their child, and they continue to play a role in the child's life. Custom adoptions are finalized and celebrated with a special ceremony involving Elders, the family, and the community.