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Working Together for the Best Interest of the Child

May 28, 2014



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Saskatoon, SK - On May 7 and 8, the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy (JSGS) hosted a conference aimed at exploring issues, challenges and initiatives associated with child care.

Cheryl Milne, chair of the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children and director of the Asper Centre for Constitutional Law at the University of Toronto, kicked off the conference at a Wednesday evening reception held at the Diefenbaker Centre, where she reflected on 2014 as the 25th Anniversary of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. Her principled approach to defining the sometimes malleable concept of 'best interest' focused on conceptualizing 'best interest' to include the realization of the full set of rights embodied in the UN Convention, including the right of children to be heard by decision-makers and the right to have government inform children of their rights.

The following day consisted of three keynote presentations by Bob Pringle, provincial child advocate, Nicholas Bala, law professor from Queen's University, and Judge David Arnot, judge and chief commissioner with the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, as well as four themed panel sessions featuring an array of distinguished speakers and two World Café dialogue sessions. Among the 150 participants were representatives from across legal, social services, education, health and policy sectors. Some of the major conference themes included: preventing recidivism by young offenders, nutrition and health, poverty and different approaches to addressing the significant and complex problems faced by youth.

In his impassioned address, Professor Bala spoke on his experiences in dealing with youth who have fallen through the cracks of the justice system, only to reoffend. "[W]e have to recognize that almost everybody is going to get out. And so the question is – what can maximize the likelihood they're not going to re-offend? And longer sentences are not going to reduce the likelihood of them not re-offending," said Bala. In order to reduce rates of youth crime in Canada, Bala suggested that improvements be made to provide greater access to mental health services and to reduce child maltreatment and poverty.

Following his keynote address, Bala joined a panel of experts to discuss Canada's criminal justice system and legislation such as the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*. Their discussion highlighted some of the alarming statistics regarding youth recidivism and stressed the importance of how programs such as rehabilitation, community-based programs and group therapy, can assist in preventing re-offences.

The second panel focused on the upbringing of children in unstable or crisis situations, the effects of poverty and the stigma surrounding mental health in children. The speakers described some of the significant challenges and complexities faced in providing services to children in crisis. Too often, the lack of financial and professional support meant that children's basic needs were going unmet or entirely ignored. Furthermore, the panelists described how a lack of availability or inconvenient access to healthy food meant that children's basic nutritional needs were not being satisfied.



In the second keynote address, Bob Pringle, provincial child advocate, addressed how few supports there are for the many children in need. "All our children have a right to do well, and to have a good quality of life," said Pringle. One suggestion he put forth was for social workers to place greater focus on understanding the family (as a whole) in order to fully address the needs and concerns of the child. Pringle referenced the various policies in place, and stated that the government needs to provide proper resources and programs for mental health and addictions support in order for said policies to be effective.

The third panel, "*Children's Well-Being*", included JSGS's own Cassandra Opikokew-Wajuntah, PhD student and associate director of the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre. Although her studies focus more on the healthcare of indigenous people overall, she went into depth about First Nations' strategies for child rearing that are having significant success, particularly within reserves. Opikokew-Wajuntah also referenced a study (conducted in 1998 by Chandler & LaLonde) that examined widely varying suicide rates across 80 First Nations bands in BC. Each community was scored on seven factors: self-government, involvement in land claims, band control of education, health services, cultural facilities, police and fire services. In her talk, she described how the communities with all seven factors had the lowest suicide rates while those with none measured the highest.

Other experts in panel three spoke on how poverty affects the children's well-being and how strong leadership, more support and early intervention can help set our children on the right path. "We can't repeat the same things that have failed us. We need to think of new ways to tackle this problem," said Nazeem Muhajarine, professor, University of Saskatchewan College of Medicine, and director of the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit.

Corey Neudorf, chief medical health officer with the Saskatoon Health Region, added that more time needs to be spent in investing and assessing the troubled child's life. He also believes that investing in proper parenting courses, committing to ongoing evaluations, increasing access to early child development and increasing investment in early child preventative health, would significantly improve the quality of life of children.

The final panel focused on looking at children as learners and leaders, and included commentary by individuals such as Patricia Prowse, student first advisor, Ministry of Education, Government of Saskatchewan. Based on research conducted through visits to many of the elementary schools in the province, Prowse found that children want to learn and are invested in their futures; however, they feel that they aren't being taught in the most effective way (i.e., would prefer inquiry-based learning). Other panelists referenced the importance of providing children with love and support throughout their development, so that children are less likely to turn to

bullying as an outlet and more likely to develop healthy coping mechanisms.

David Arnot, Q.C., judge and chief commissioner with the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission provided closing comments at the conference. Speaking to the crowd, Arnot stated that, "Children's rights are human rights," and that children are no different and deserve the same benefits as adults. As part of his remarks, Arnot described the four pillars (litigation, mediation, systemic advocates, and citizenship education) that his office is working on to help children have a voice within their community.

Throughout the day, two world cafés were held to provide an invaluable opportunity for conference participants to come together and discuss the various problems and strategies that they are facing in their field. Inequalities and frustrations within the system were a common topic, though there was also a great deal of solution-oriented thinking and strategy sharing that took place.

[Click here for a complete list of speakers.](#)

This article was co-authored by Jacqui Quennel and Rebecca Hoiseth, two U of S undergraduate students and employees of the Diefenbaker Canada Centre.

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