

INDIGENOUS YOUTH AND EDUCATION -- SUMMER PROJECT ADDENDUM

by Kamryn Woloschuk, a 19 year old university student from Thunder Bay studying psychology.

Introduction:

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I have been a Team Leader and Peer Mentor with the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC). From June to September, 2021, I was the co-ordinator for a special project titled *Engaging Youth - Making a Difference*.

In July and August 2021, the RMYC ran a summer employment program for students. With funding from Pathways to Education, Carleton University, the Friendship Centre, YES Employment Services and Matawa First Nations, we hired and worked with forty-two students from different races, cultures, sexualities and religions ranging in age from 12 years to 20 years old. We taught them job skills through practical hands-on activities such as planning and organizing community events. We also discussed personal growth topics such as self esteem, self-confidence, character, setting goals, prioritizing issues and creating work-plans.

We had peer mentors and created a safe space for dialogue on topics that included: education, wellness, safety, careers, two-spirit identities, children's rights and responsibilities, mental health, food security, homelessness, the environment, multiculturalism, racism and reconciliation. The youth set guidelines for a safe and welcoming climate, rules to respect each other's pronouns, giving warnings before possibly triggering stories, no swearing, putdowns and so forth. We encouraged them to talk about their cultures, racial stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination in society and the world in a different way than they do at school.

As part of the summer jobs program, the RMYC ran a summer school pilot project with Lakehead Public Schools, and we registered 20 Indigenous students who had struggled with on-line learning and missed getting credits. We specifically targeted First Nations students because locally they have a startlingly high dropout rate of eighty per cent (80%) as reported in a recent study by John Hodson and Nadine Hedican @ 2021: "Educational Challenges for First Nation Children in Thunder Bay Schools – Let the Dreaming Begin".

Several donations enabled the RMYC to provide bus tickets, meal cards, refreshments and personal hygiene supplies for the summer school students. Two hours of their work-time was set aside for schooling each day to work with peer tutors and other supports. Attendance was monitored, and only two siblings grieving the loss of their mother dropped out of the program.

Reviewing the issues and analyzing problems:

There were check-ups with the students to piece together how they performed and their struggles with schooling in general and virtual learning in particular. To hear the truth about why teenagers are having difficulties, you must work hard to build trustworthy relationships with them, which is one of the RMYC's strengths. We held sharing circles for the students to openly share their feelings about the mainstream Eurocentric education system in the city. I took notes which I compared with what transpired at the Coming Together to Talk with Youth forum. The following are my reflections on what I heard from the students:

- First of all, the dark history of Indian Residential Schools in Canada. Many Indigenous students knew about what happened, or had at least heard whispers of it. But now that it is coming into the mainstream news and is impossible to ignore. Children their age or younger than them were sent to schools far away from their homes to be assimilated into white colonial culture. They could not help but remember this every time they think of schools now, which continue to teach them a white, colonial mindset.

- They are under-represented in academic settings. They can often be the only Indigenous person in their class, which leads to feeling like an outcast. They are afraid to ask for help when they don't understand the work. They struggle to find partners for group projects and feel misunderstood and misrepresented. They do not see many who look like them or has the same history as them among school staff besides their native language teachers.

- School feels stressful with the high school workload and there is added anxiety when moving from a homogeneous reserve to a multiracial city where racism is rampant and culturally insensitive students judge you by stereotypes and you face racial discrimination. Indigenous students struggle to fit in and it is scary to not have a partner in class for group assignments or have to sit and eat alone at school.

- First Nation students coming from a reserve tend to have trouble making non-Indigenous friends in the city. Feeling left-out can lead to a lack of motivation to attend class.

- Anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other mental health and developmental issues plague a majority of Indigenous students. These issues can be from intergenerational trauma, external racism, sexual abuse, unnoticed genetic issues, poor physical health, neglect, food insecurity and lack of nutrition due to the cost of food on reserves, insomnia, or a variety of other issues Indigenous communities face in Canada. They often are not placed into comprehensive therapy or offered support from adults until it becomes a crisis, which can look like suicide attempts, overdose, homicide, gang activity, etc.

- They experience racism from teachers who are not culturally competent -- like a substitute teacher saying "This is why I don't like teaching your kind" -- when Indigenous students told her that she mispronounced Ojibwe words, or made all of the Indigenous students in class sit in the back corner, away from the other students.

- They experience racism from their classmates, or overhear racist comments from classmates. It can be in the form of "jokes", which teachers do not comment on or correct.

- When Indigenous students suffer from poor mental health, which they often do, it is less likely to be acknowledged as such, noticed or accommodated by teachers or staff.

- Two students said that the Indigenous Culture Room at their school is not respected by the school or other students. It is placed inside the library, so they can't use traditional drums or speak loudly. After lunch, it is locked and inaccessible to the students who need it. And when they have a ceremony with a feast, white students come in and just take food without talking to any of the Indigenous students or respecting the ceremony happening.

- Many Indigenous students feel that their teachers and counsellors often recommend that they take applied or even locally-developed courses without doing a diagnostic test or asking them what their future goals and interests are.

- Indigenous students feel they have been sent to the 'office' for minor things like standing up for themselves against racists, or wearing their 'hoodie' in class due to shyness. They say teachers would rather punish them than help them, and together with other racially marginalized students are unfairly targeted when it comes to rules like the dress-code.

- Oftentimes, Indigenous students are made to feel that school is not "for them" because they cannot do the hard work and will fail.

- It can be hard when no one from their family has graduated from high school because they cannot ask their parents for help with their school work. Many also feel that if their parents and older siblings did not graduate, how can they?" Also, if parents/grandparents have a negative outlook towards school because of residential schools (residential assimilation camps), that outlook is passed down and will be present in the students as well.

- Although it can be hit or miss depending on the family, oftentimes Indigenous families are damaged and broken. If the family is not healthy, then they do not help you to wake up for school, help you to study or even care if you are attending school. They worry about their own issues first and are struggling with trauma, or could be self medicating to numb the pain and too drunk or high to even notice their children's struggles due to their own addictions.

- Poverty is common and a lack of food or other basic necessities affects school attendance when students fear that relying on breakfast, lunch and used clothes at school can result in investigations by children's aid societies and apprehensions. Homes are overcrowded and noisy to do home-work, while frequent suicides and grieving can lead to dependence on substances. Inadequate counseling services to deal with problems and mental health issues cause students to miss school and eventually drop out when they fail to catch-up.

- Unstable households lead to unstable behavioural patterns to do well in the education system. Some parents/guardians billeting them in boarding homes are not good role models to teach and foster healthy habits. This creates indifference to school because students are not well supported and left feeling insecure, dumb or stupid when they miss classes and get left behind. With no guidance, they struggle to form healthy and productive study habits.

- School feels exhausting, sometimes unnecessary, like they could be somewhere else (maybe with family, hunting or living the traditional way). Sometimes they have a neutral feeling, like it's nice to have education, but the climate at school does not feel welcoming. They may want to learn but the school environment becomes too negative to endure.
- Feelings of shame and humiliation come up when students cannot answer questions and teachers try to force them to answer "for their own good", or to shame them for not studying.
- Indigenous history is not taught properly, and is only an elective, but white history is mandatory creating gaps and misinformation that make Indigenous students feel inferior.
- If there are not "enough" Indigenous students they will not run native language classes.
- Transitioning from small underfunded reserve schools brings up a lot of frustration when First Nation students move to large multicultural city schools they are not familiar with or do not know anyone. This can generate anxiety and triggers without warning.
- It's a cultural issue, not just an individual matter. When an Indigenous student is struggling at school, their peers are having similar experiences and are not likely to lift each other up or encourage each other to study. Moving to the city just changes geography, not values, habits or behavior. Peer pressure lures them to drink or get high, play video games all night and sleep-in, and hangout doing things they are used to doing together on reserves that distract them from focusing on school. They support each other in ways that they have learned and are used to -- to cope with problems, pain, stress and intergenerational trauma.
- Indigenous students experiencing extreme physical and verbal bullying in elementary school grades see the bullies facing no serious repercussions besides a "talking to". Not addressing this can lead to resentment being carried through to high school and impacting their success.
- Schools did not hold memorials for Indigenous students who passed away, offer grieving support, or acknowledgement during announcements. These are significant developments that should serve to educate students about residential schools and enhance reconciliation.

Personal Comments and Recommendations:

From the sharing circles and other casual discussions with the students, everything adds up, creating an impossible weight to carry every single time Indigenous students go to school and step into the classroom. They feel that this is “not for them” and it is too frustrating to even try to fit in. They start to believe that they physically and mentally cannot do it even if they love education. This leads to anger, shame, skipping school, using substances to avoid guilt. Once these outlooks are formed, it is very hard to reverse them, especially if teachers and staff at school do not understand the Indigenous students’ mindset, history and their life on reserves. So even in a more comfortable social environment like the RMYC summer school, they experience negative feelings bubbling up and feel discouraged doing school work. They feel scared to ask for help, lack motivation to continue and lose hope to succeed in school.

As a co-worker and friend, I see how smart and creative Indigenous students are. We need to make the school system work with them not against them. Change is happening in schools but to accelerate progress and graduation rates the following ideas can make a difference:

- Have high-schools on reserves or close to reserves for easy access to familiar supports.

- Native language classes need better funding. They should be inclusive and encouraged for everyone. There should be no discrimination to non-Indigenous students interested in learning the Indigenous languages.

- Indigenous youths as well as all other students should be given more chances to share their cultural practices and learn about each other in safe welcoming spaces. Not all students get the chance to participate in multicultural activities the RMYC plans and organizes to promote multiculturalism, challenge cultural stereotypes, combat racial prejudice and discrimination. Cultural diversity and acceptance should be taught, promoted and celebrated in schools.

- Some teachers on reserves are still in training and culturally incompetent to understand First Nations students and help them to get started on their education journey. Schools on reserves need to do a better job to prepare students for higher education or trades for the changing work world -- or not much will change in high school graduation rates.

- Indigenous studies should be mandatory and true Indigenous history taught in class to correct myths and misconceptions created by the one-sided Euro-centric perspective taught in the existing education system. This is in line with the development of culturally appropriate curriculum as mentioned in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

- Better student counsellors are needed on reserves and there should be proper orientation for students who will be moving to urban centres to successfully transition into city schools. Past urban high school graduates in the community can share their stories and coach new students how to adapt and stay safe in the city, ways to catch-up and thrive in urban schools to graduate. However, they will need to be connected with significant others and positive peers mentors who advocate on their behalf and support them throughout high school.

- Increase Indigenous representation in schools with Indigenous teachers not just teaching native languages and culture.

- Having Elders in schools as a resource to educate everyone about Indigenous traditions.

- Assignments including Indigenous aspects and characters to raise awareness of Indigenous culture from young ages, and ZERO tolerance for racism of any kind.

- More land based learning, more field trips to Indigenous organizations, Indigenous lands, etc. for ALL students to learn about indigenous history and appreciate their culture.

- Ask indigenous students what they want to learn, what their goals are and support them to enhance success and break the cycle of school dropouts and failure. If they don't know, engage them and explain in culturally appropriate terms.

- Indigenous culture room accessible at all times with mental health supports and Elders

- All school staff and teachers must learn Indigenous history, colonization and the Indian Act, as well as residential schools, the 60's Scoop and the impacts of intergenerational trauma on mental health, performance, achievement, substance abuse and so forth.

- Encourage classes to promote on traditional ways of life, like having Indigenous dishes in “foods” class, as well as opportunities to learn about hide tanning, hunting & trapping, and spirituality. Indigenous students do not see colonial perspectives of success as their version of success, but may not have the resources to learn traditional things from parents or family.

- The urban environment is very different and challenging for Indigenous students. We need to keep them busy and safe by providing safer friendly spaces to hang out and healthy extra-curricular activities after school. The RMYC uses a youth-to-youth approach and trains young leaders and peer mentors who use their influence to engage other students in positive activities. This has been our strategy to enhance the success of Indigenous youths.

- Teachers, school staff, and peer leaders such as student councils should attend professional development workshops to connect with the Indigenous students and how to uplift them. They should actively engage First Nations students to get their input on what teachers, staff and school boards should do to make them feel welcome, stay in school and graduate. Involving them to be part of the solution to the problems they are facing will make a difference in their lives and their future.

- Indigenous students need more mentorship programs with peer role models ‘Student Ambassadors’ to build self esteem, self-confidence, and establish relationships for guidance and one-on-one nurturing support. Residential schools broke Indigenous families and the intergenerational impacts have ripple effects among children and youth. Consequently, many students come from broken dysfunctional families, and when they go home at the end of the day, there may not be someone there to ask “How was school? Are you okay?” and so forth.

- It is important to find good caring boarding homes for students to stay in the city while studying away from home. It is important to screen homes and work with boarding parents to provide parental supervision and ensure that the student feels comfortable to open up and say what is bothering them. Boarding parents should also encourage students they are billeting to attend school regularly, get the supports they need from the school, and link with groups such as the RMYC for after school activities. Joining clubs at school, and participating in sports and recreation can keep students busy, safe and enable them to meet new friends.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Our education system has been desegregated since the last Indian Residential School-- Gordon's *Indian Residential School* located in Punnichy, Saskatchewan -- was closed as recently as 1996. In spite of having integrated schools, the outcomes still reflect disparities along racial and income lines and this needs to change. According to a news article in the Toronto Star (May 16, 2014): *"The number of Aboriginal youths dropping out of high school has improved somewhat from 48% to 41%. However, this number is still appalling when you compare it to the overall Canadian dropout rate of 10%. On reserves, the dropout rate is 58%! Achievement in the Prairies (and Northwestern Ontario) was generally worse than the national average."*

Statistics Canada and reports by Correctional Service Canada reveal that eighty-nine percent (89%) of young offenders in the federal correctional system have below grade 10 education and 65% less than grade 8. The high numbers of school drop-outs make youths vulnerable and susceptible to a life of crime. Many end up in the justice system that is costly to society, feeds negative cultural stereotypes, racial prejudice and discrimination, perpetuates poverty and threatens our safety and security.

Schools may not have the capacity to provide everything diverse students they serve need to realize their true learning potential, but they can build relationships with community groups for supplementary resources to support students. The RMYC and Pathways to Education are collaborating with Indigenous groups to complement what schools are doing by advocating to close the gaps that exist. We believe in peer mentoring and the need for safer spaces for Indigenous students to learn basic study skills without feeling ashamed for not knowing how, and offering on-going support to build such skills into habits that will help them to succeed.

We are therefore appealing to the Minister of Education, school boards, Chiefs, community leaders, entrepreneurs, decision and policy makers to pull together and provide the financial resources, material as well as human supports to enhance the wellness, safety, graduation and achievement of Indigenous students. We believe that education is a strong foundation to build better lives for Indigenous youths today, and for future and successive generations.



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December 7, 2021

Kamryn Woloschuk
Team Leader and Peer Mentor
Regional Multicultural Youth Council
Multicultural Youth Centre
511 Victoria Avenue East
Thunder Bay, Ontario
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Dear Kamryn Woloschuk:

Thanks for your letter containing the report you prepared for the Regional Multicultural Youth Council on helping Indigenous youths stay in school and graduate. I appreciate hearing your findings and ideas.

You can be sure that I'll keep your comments in mind. I've also forwarded a copy of your letter to the Honourable Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education, and the Honourable Greg Rickford, Minister of Indigenous Affairs, for their information. I'm sure that they, too, will carefully consider your views.

Working with the people of this great province, we'll build a brighter future for Ontario.

Thanks again for contacting me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Doug Ford', written over a white background.

Doug Ford
Premier

c: The Honourable Stephen Lecce
c: The Honourable Greg Rickford