

What happens when you create a culture of respect, trust, and innovation in school library spaces?

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We cannot overlook the narratives of the Indigenous peoples as we think about the delicate issue of truth and reconciliation in school libraries.

For my entire childhood, I was raised in Northern Ontario. Nipissing First Nation is a place that my ancestors have called home for more than 10,000 years. My great-grandfather, Ernest Couchie was one of the longest-serving chiefs of Nipissing First Nation. He was known as a well-respected community leader who embraced the values of humility, honesty, and fairness. The community was his family; in fact, he used his earning from a taxidermy business he also operated to not only provide for his own children, but other children and families who were in need.

In 1928, an Indian Agent came to the house and forcibly removed his children, including my granny, Irene. The Indian Agent took the children further north to the Spanish Residential School. At this school, the children faced isolation, abuse, and were shamed out of speaking the Nipissing dialect of Nishnaabemwin.

These horrific acts continued against the children for over 100 years. The last school closed in 1996.

At the same time, many First Nations communities across Canada faced other acts of assimilation and oppression. Many of those stories involve injustices that are buried in legislation and policies that were created to take away our basic human rights including, but not limited to, our culture, our language, and our women and children. At one point in

time, community members were prohibited from participating in traditional ceremonies. They had to ask permission and get a pass to leave the reserve. If a First Nation's woman married someone who was not of First Nation's ancestry, they lost their status, which also meant they lost their connections and right to their traditional lands. Truly, we had no voice, and no say. In fact, we couldn't even vote in elections, obtain a post-secondary education, or hire lawyers, until the 1960s.

Today, there is a growing awareness about the realities that Indigenous peoples still face. The legacy of the residential schools and the "60s Scoop" remains. Third World housing, infrastructure and social conditions exist in many First Nations and Inuit communities. Disproportionate incarceration rates exist. Huge gaps in graduation rates exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A population of Indigenous women and girls have gone missing or have been murdered. Gender discrimination still exists. And treaty relationships and obligations still need to be honoured and healed.

Growing up, I can recall going to the school library, and being encouraged to explore the sections, but found myself detached, disheartened, and disconnected after reading a series of books about Indigenous peoples found in an inappropriately titled area, *Peoples of the Past*. The books lacked respect, depth, and truth. The stereotypical images and words hurt. They were not reflective of the histories, cultures, and lived realities. It was not a culturally safe experience.

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