The Harm of Assumptions: An Indigenous Perspective

Quinn Healy

Actor Alan Alda (1980) once said, "Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won't come in."

Through making efforts toward reconciliation and cultivating relationships with Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people are beginning to scrub their windows and let the light in—the light that is Indigenous culture and ways of knowing and being.

Nevertheless, many assumptions about Indigenous people persist. Those assumptions guide some in how they think about and construct Indigenous identities. Assumptions, especially toward youth, can be incredibly harmful.

This article explores how assumptions about Indigenous learners formed, which assumptions about Indigenous learners continue today, and how we can create more hope and an environment that promotes and celebrates Indigenous success in education.

The issue of assumptions and stereotypes imposed on Indigenous people—both laterally and, primarily, by non-Indigenous people—is much larger than can be fully addressed here, yet the conversation is necessary.

My Positionality

Before continuing, I must share my positionality in relation to this work.

I am a Cree/Euro woman, reclaiming her Indigeneity in real time.

Reclaiming who I am as an Indigenous woman, finding and meeting immediate family, and cultivating relationships that allow me to hear stories of lived experiences are opening my heart and eyes to the realities faced by Indigenous people and guiding me to where I want to be, personally and professionally.

The Statistics and the Assumptions

Statistics regarding Indigenous people paint a picture of the inequalities and dichotomies that exist in the settler state known as Canada.

With regard to education, Statistics Canada reports that 91 per cent of non-Indigenous youth (aged 19–30) have a high school diploma or equivalent, but only 46 per cent of Indigenous youth who live on reserves do. For off-reserve Indigenous youth, the percentage is higher (73 per cent) but nowhere close to their non-Indigenous peers (J Layton 2023).

These low rates of graduation contribute to assumptions that Indigenous youth are lazy and incapable and that they lack the intelligence of their non-Indigenous peers.

The statistics tell a story—but not the full story. What is missing are the people, their stories and their lived experiences, as well as acknowledgement of the impacts of Canada's racist and colonial history.

When that history is understood, as well as how violence and oppression toward Indigenous people have been maintained, it becomes clear how stereotypes and assumptions are constructed and then perpetuated over time.

How We Got Here

As discussed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC 2015), Canada was built as a nation through racist and colonial acts committed against Indigenous Peoples.

In 2014, the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH), now known as the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, published a fact sheet on anti-Indigenous racism in Canada. As the fact sheet emphasizes,

> Inaccurate or inadequate education about Canada's colonial history and its role in creating the disadvantages currently facing Indigenous communities essentially transfers responsibility for economic and social problems to Indigenous peoples' presumed failure to evolve, rather than to the socially and economically damaging effects of colonialism and racism (Harding, 2006). (p 4)

The NCCAH (2014, 2) defines *racism* as follows:

> Racism is a social injustice based on falsely constructed, but deeply embedded, assumptions about people and their relative social value; it is often used to justify disparities in the distribution of resources (MacKinnon, 2004). Racism manifests in multiple ways that allow some groups of people to see themselves as superior to others and to claim and maintain multiple forms of political, sociocultural, and economic power.

Colonialism, which "involves imposing a culture on a group of people while attempting to erase their own existing culture" (Houle 2022a, 6), is a form of racism. When they first encountered Indigenous Peoples in the 16th century, Europeans established reciprocal relationships. However, they soon began using any means necessary to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into Eurocentric society and ideals.

Structural racism is the way "economic, social and political institutions and processes of a society . . . create and reinforce racial discrimination (Jackson, McGibbon, & Waldron, 2013; Lawrence, Sutton, Kubisch, Susi, & Fulbright-Anderson, 2010)" (NCCAH 2014, 5). Many institutions and structures across Turtle Island—including housing, health care, education and law enforcement—involve deep manifestations of racism against Indigenous people.

In Canada, structural racism has its roots in the *Indian Act* of 1876, which imposed strict control over Indigenous people and perpetuated stereotypes of incompetence (NCCAH 2014). This act laid the groundwork for policies that have left many First Nations communities with substandard housing, overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure, which have contributed to ongoing health and social inequities (Olsen, Merkel and Black 2021).

Moreover, the structures in place serve to reinforce and perpetuate assumptions. For example, many students who live on a reserve attend school on the reserve up to a certain point. Once high school approaches, they may have to commute every day to an off-reserve high school, or even move away from their family home and relocate to a new city. This is not the experience of most urban and rural non-Indigenous students. Students living on reserves are, thus, at a disadvantage in accessing the provisions for furthering their education (J Layton 2023).

One policy of the *Indian Act*—the residential school system—is an overt example of structural racism. In the late 19th century, knowing that education was a powerful tool with a national reach, the federal government created residential schools as institutions of assimilation and then mandated attendance for Indigenous children.

Residential schools were built on negative stereotypes about Indigenous societies (Young et al 2010). While Indigenous students were forced to attend residential schools, where they were stripped of their culture, European students heard a narrative that perpetuated the idea that Indigenous people were savages who needed to become like "us" (TRC 2015).

This overt narrative continued for over 150 years, meaning that the harmful, hateful stereotypes used to excuse the atrocities committed against Indigenous children and their families have had an impact on about seven generations.

In June 2008, Jack Layton, then leader of Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP), offered an apology in the House of Commons to residential school Survivors:

> It was this Parliament that enacted, 151 years ago, the racist legislation that established the residential schools. This Parliament chose to treat First Nations, Métis and Inuit people as not equally human. It set out to "kill the Indian in the child." That choice was wrong. Horribly wrong. It led to incredible suffering. It denied First Nations, Métis and Inuit the basic freedom to choose how to live their lives.

Many effects of the residential school system continue. The damage caused by residential schools created intergenerational trauma that is still visible in the lives of Indigenous people (NCCAH 2014), and "even when children were permitted to leave residential school, there were no supports for re-entering their communities so the transition was not always smooth and family relationships could often not be reestablished" (p 9).

Residential schooling, interacting with other forms of social and cultural displacement, has contributed to

generations of family disruption and social turmoil that have fostered and been fuelled by racialized stereotypes and discrimination, institutionalized racism, and systemic social exclusion (Milne and Wotherspoon 2020). Trauma responses include "alcohol and substance abuse, violence, parenting problems, depression and suicide (Nagy & Sehdev, 2012)" (NCCAH 2014, 9).

Today, the children and grandchildren of Survivors sit in our classrooms, fearful and mistrusting of engaging in the system that once broke their people. As the NCCAH (2014, 9) notes,

> It often falls on children to absorb the feelings of loss and frustration felt by their parents and grandparents. Even though these children did not experience the trauma of residential schools first hand, they are experiencing it indirectly through the effects on their families and communities (Volkan, 1997).

The history of residential schools presents a difficult reality for today's Indigenous learners, who must grapple with the knowledge that Indigenous children and youth have sat (and, in some cases, continue to sit) in classrooms that teach a history that is not true. These narratives distort the truth and attempt to position Indigenous youth as being at fault. They perpetuate the harmful assumption that Indigenous youth lack the desire for something better.

How Assumptions Harm Indigenous Learners Today

As the NCCAH (2014, 2) notes, harmful assumptions "not only [degrade] the autonomy of Indigenous peoples and their legitimate right to be self-determining, but [have] damaged the self-concept of countless generations of people who unfortunately, at times, internalize such demeaning stereotypes (Harding, 2006)."

These assumptions are the result of maintained colonial structures that position Indigenous people as "other." For well over 200 years, racism has been "experienced by [Indigenous] individuals, families, communities, and nations through interactions and structures of the everyday world" (NCCAH 2014, 2).

Indigenous people have been subjected to structural racism from all facets of a colonized school system. Today, we are the first generation of Indigenous people who did not attend residential schools. However, I have been taught that it takes seven generations to heal from trauma.

Literature on how Indigenous people may feel victimized in the school setting exists, but little primary evidence has been collected. Scholarship has missed opportunities to create an understanding of Indigenous experiences that could combat negative assumptions.

However, one informative study exists that sought to investigate microaggressions toward Indigenous postsecondary learners, through the collection of primary documentation. Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani (2019) asked Indigenous postsecondary students in Canada about their experiences with microaggressions. The language used in the questions incorporated the stereotypes and assumptions affecting Indigenous students as they navigate the education system. The following themes emerged: *"overt discrimination; assumption of intellectual inferiority; assumption of criminality; invalidation or denial; second-class citizen; racial segregation;* and *myth of meritocracy"* (p 41). The researchers concluded that the participants had been subjected throughout their schooling to conscious acts of racism, including mockery, name-calling, physical violence and exclusion from education.

The assumption of the intellectual inferiority of Indigenous students fosters the belief that they have lower academic potential or lower expectations of themselves as learners than non-Indigenous students. One participant in Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani's (2019) study shared that, no matter what he did, one of his high school teachers always found a way to belittle him or discredit his accomplishments, implying that the barriers were too great to overcome. He internalized the message that he was not qualified to receive acceptance to university, which negatively affected his sense of self-efficacy.

Another participant shared how when he disclosed the reserve he was from, people immediately assumed that he was affiliated with a gang. In another situation, a non-Indigenous client refused to let an Indigenous bank teller complete a transaction (Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani 2019).

These acts of discrimination, rooted in race, are harmful, alienating and lonely. A person can take only so much projection before internalizing the beliefs and assumptions other people hold about them.

Painting all Indigenous people with the same brush is problematic. Generalizations foster the false assumptions that all Indigenous people are the same and that they all follow the same traditions and customs. A pan-Indigenous view minimizes the complexity and diversity of Indigenous experiences, encouraging stereotypes and minimizing empathy and understanding from non-Indigenous sources.

After a particularly violent racist encounter, one participant in the study said, "You could try to tell them how that makes you feel but they will never be able to grasp it. They'll never be able to transcribe it properly into their understanding" (Canel-Çinarbaş and Yohani 2019, 53).

Reconciliation and Decolonization in the Classroom

We need to scrub our windows while also acknowledging the statistics regarding Indigenous learners. Data from Statistics Canada show that Indigenous youth have lower graduation rates and higher poverty and unemployment rates (J Layton 2023; Statistics Canada 2021). The weight of these statistics is heavy.

However, hope for this generation of Indigenous youth emerges through education and a foundational knowledge of Indigenous cultures. As the late Chief Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, often stated, "Education is what got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it." This education seeks to value and understand the power of relationships and how they can foster true reconciliation.

In Canada, Indigenous youth and their families have for hundreds of years been made to feel shame about their cultures—shame created and perpetuated by the education system. It is no wonder, then, that fear, uncertainty and trepidation accompany Indigenous families into the educational context. Reporting on a study by Milne and Wotherspoon (2020), Boklaschuk (2020) notes, "The legacy of settler-colonialism and residential schools in Canada continues to fuel distrust of the education system by some Indigenous parents and hinders the goal of reconciliation in this country."

Trust has been deeply broken and, going beyond land acknowledgements, relationships between Indigenous families and non-Indigenous teachers and other members of the school community must be cultivated in a way that demonstrates reciprocity. In Boklaschuk's (2020) article, Wotherspoon says, "Fostering a dialogue between the school system and Indigenous organizations and community members is key to developing trust and ensuring schools are perceived as a safe space for all students in the future."

As Young et al (2010) discuss, Indigenous teachers also experience "being excluded or silenced by dominant historical, institutional, and social narratives positioning them as not 'real' teachers" (p 285). These teachers themselves were once students experiencing either residential schools or colonial curricula. In a tragic anecdote, one of the authors, Mi'kmaq teacher Jennifer Williams, shares, "I feel embarrassed for my attempts to embrace my cultural traditions, and for not knowing them to begin with" (p 297). Not only can I relate to this, but I believe that Indigenous students and teachers probably have those feelings of shame all the time, and that can breed loneliness and isolation.

Along with mutual and reciprocal relationships, decolonization and the disruption of power relations that perpetuate Eurocentric beliefs are fundamental in the classroom. Decolonization efforts help eradicate assumptions and stereotypes.

Decolonizing starts with the self and then can be applied outwardly, such as in the classroom. Houle (2022b) discusses how when teachers have an understanding of their own biases and how to relearn ideas, they can help shape what happens in schools. Teachers must continually revisit what they think they know and re-examine their lesson plans, school and classroom events, and materials in light of their new insights and experiences. By decolonizing their thinking, teachers will be better prepared to construct an understanding of Indigenous learners as they are, not as how they are assumed to be.

Houle (2022a) notes that, in her experience, teachers approach decolonization with interest and a willingness to change. If they resist, it is usually because they are unaware of the goals of reconciliation and what it entails.

This resistance can halt the work of reconciliation. Ideally, reconciliation would be facilitated by teachers taking active steps in their journey. Yet I have heard seasoned colleagues label reconciliation as "a new teacher problem." This is discouraging and may be more common than one may think. Perhaps those teachers do not see much Indigenous representation in their classrooms, or perhaps their bias privileges one view over other world views (Brant 2017).

Regardless of any resistance or trepidation toward the work required for reconciliation, a sense of urgency is imperative if this work is to be done. Consistent effort in cultivating reconciliatory initiatives can and must be developed not only in schools but in all aspects of Canadian society.

Decolonization is some of the most valuable and most transformative work we can do. Like seasons, life and the Medicine Wheel, all things are cyclical and can be revisited, but the learning never stops. Teachers are helping shape the future.

Survive to Thrive

Preservice teachers today receive an education that includes the truth about Indigenous histories and current realities. It is encouraging to think of a future with willing teachers who desire to do better and who are excited to learn and teach about a population that Canada has mishistoried, as well as to move forward in a way that benefits Indigenous learners.

Young et al (2010) share a trend that gives us further cause for hope. They discuss how, after leaving residential schools, Indigenous children were encouraged by their

families and communities to come home for healing and to not leave again. Today, if Indigenous youth desire more education, they are encouraged to leave the reserve, fulfill their dreams and then come back home.

This shift in the narrative about education and reserve living is a beautiful reflection of the rebuilding of trust. New "intergenerational narrative reverberations" (Young et al 2010, 285) are being created through every Indigenous person who achieves their goals and shares this spirit with their families. Though it is not the responsibility of Indigenous people to challenge stereotypes, the increase in Indigenous representation will begin telling a new story of people who were here, are still here, and are thriving for themselves and their communities.

Returning to the statistics, the data reveal positive trends, in small increments, toward increased high school graduation and entry into postsecondary education among Indigenous youth (J Layton 2023). Statistics also show that Indigenous youth are a fast-growing population in Canada (Statistics Canada 2022, 2023).

As more non-Indigenous people understand Canada's history, strive for reconciliation and unlearn misconceptions, hope builds for current and future generations of Indigenous youth.

Conclusion

Collective wounds are difficult to heal. For Indigenous people in Canada, the support and care needed to heal the hurt are the responsibility of everyone.

The horrific history endured by Indigenous people is part of Canada's story, but it no longer has to be part of the present or the future. While time is needed to heal, hope can be found in the stories, in the statistics, and in teachers' decolonization efforts (both in the classroom and in their own thinking).

What is so exciting for the future is that education is available, accessible and interesting. If relationships are to be cultivated and maintained so that a new narrative, free of harmful assumptions, can emerge, all Canadians must understand not only the history of Canada and how assumptions about Indigenous learners came to be but also how we remain hopeful.

Bibliography

Alda, A. 1980. "62nd Commencement Address." *Commencement Addresses.* Paper 7. http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/commence/7.

Boklaschuk, S. 2020. "Indigenous Parents Fear Bias, Unfair Treatment in K–12 School System, New Study Shows." College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, February 20. https://artsandscience.usask.ca/news/articles/4877/Indigenous_parents_fear_bias_unfair_treatment_in_K_12_school.

Brant, K. 2017. "'But How Does This Help Me?': (Re)thinking (Re)conciliation in Teacher Education." Master's thesis, University of Ottawa. https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/36972/5/Brant_Kiera_Kaiatanoron_2017_thesis.pdf.

Canel-Çinarbaş, D, and S Yohani. 2019. "Indigenous Canadian University Students' Experiences of Microaggressions." *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* 41, no 1 (March): 41–60. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-018-9345-z.

Fournier, S, and E Crey. 1997. *Stolen from Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Furniss, E. 2001. "Aboriginal Justice, the Media, and the Symbolic Management of Aboriginal/Euro-Canadian Relations." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25, no 2: 1–36. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/86h0785c. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Gagné, M-A. 1998. "The Role of Dependency and Colonialism in Generating Trauma in First Nations Citizens: The James Bay Cree." In *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma,* ed Y Danieli, 355–72. New York: Plenum Press. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Haig-Brown, C. 1988. *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School.* Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Harding, R. 2006. "Historical Representations of Aboriginal People in the Canadian News Media." *Discourse and Society* 17, no 2 (March): 205–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506058059. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 2, 4.

Houle, A. 2022a. "Decolonization: Professional Requirement and Moral Imperative." *Fully Alive* 6, no 2 (Spring): 5–12. www.rmecata.com/uploads/1/3/7/7/13772550/rmec-fully_alive_vol6no2.pdf.

———. 2022b. "Entry Points to Decolonizing Schools: Value, Healing and Flourishing." *Fully Alive* 7, no 1 (Fall): 5–11. www.rmecata.com/uploads/1/3/7/7/13772550/rmec-alive_vol7no1fall_2022.pdf.

Jackson, J, E McGibbon and I Waldron. 2013. "Racism and Cardiovascular Disease: Implications for Nursing." *Canadian Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing* 23, no 4 (Fall): 12–18. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 5.

Kirmayer, L, C Simpson and M Cargo. 2003. "Healing Traditions: Culture, Community and Mental Health Promotion with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples." Supplement, *Australasian Psychiatry* 11, no S1 (October): S15–S23. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1038-5282.2003.02010.x. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Lawrence, K, S Sutton, A Kubisch, G Susi and K Fulbright-Anderson. 2010. "Structural Racism and Community Building." In *Tackling Health Inequities Through Public Health Practice: Theory to Action,* 2nd ed, ed R Hofrichter

and R Bhatia, 143–61. New York: Oxford University Press. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 5.

Layton, J. 2023. "First Nations Youth: Experiences and Outcomes in Secondary and Postsecondary Learning." *Education Indicators in Canada: Fact Sheet* 18. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2023001-eng.htm.

Layton, J G. 2008. "Apology to the Survivors of Residential School." Speech, House of Commons of Canada, June 11. Posted June 11, 2008, by NDPVIDEO, YouTube. Video, 9 min, 45 sec. https://youtu.be/AVAxVhnqTaw.

MacKinnon, C A. 2004. "Difference and Dominance." In *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism,* ed L Heldke and P O'Connor, 148–63. Boston: McGraw-Hill. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 2.

Milloy, J S. 1999. *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879–1986*. Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Milne, E, and T Wotherspoon. 2020. "Schools as 'Really Dangerous Places' for Indigenous Children and Youth: Schools, Child Welfare, and Contemporary Challenges to Reconciliation." *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 57, no 1 (February): 34–52. https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12267.

Nagy, R, and R K Sehdev. 2012. "Introduction: Residential Schools and Decolonization." *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 27, no 1 (April): 67–73. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjls.27.1.067. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH). 2014. *Indigenous Experiences with Racism and Its Impacts.* Prince George, BC: NCCAH. www.nccih.ca/docs/determinants/FS-Racism2-Racism-Impacts-EN.pdf.

Olsen, S, G Merkel and K Black. 2021. "The Blueprint to Address Systemic Racism in First Nations' Housing." *Policy Options,* April 8. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/april-2021/the-blueprint-for-systemic-racism-in-first-nations-housing/.

Statistics Canada. 2021. "Study: Indigenous Youth in Canada." *The Daily,* December 1. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211201/dq211201b-eng.htm.

———. 2022. "Indigenous Population Continues to Grow and Is Much Younger Than the Non-Indigenous Population, Although the Pace of Growth Has Slowed." *The Daily,* September 21. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220921/dq220921a-eng.htm.

———. 2023. "Canada's Indigenous Population." StatsCAN Plus, June 21. www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/3920-canadas-indigenous-population.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). 2015. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Winnipeg, Man: TRC. https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.

Volkan, V. 1997. *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. Cited in NCCAH 2014, 9.

Young, M, J-L Chester, B M Flett, et al. 2010. "Becoming 'Real' Aboriginal Teachers: Attending to Intergenerational Narrative Reverberations and Responsibilities." *Teachers and Teaching* 16, no 3: 285–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540601003634370.

Quinn Healy is a passionate educator who lives, works and plays on Treaty 7 territory, where she resides with her beautiful family. She is traditionally from Saddle Lake Cree Nation, in Treaty 6. She holds an MEd from the University of New Brunswick, where she focused her research on supporting teachers in bringing Indigenous knowledge systems into their classrooms with confidence, care and authenticity.