

Teaching needs a transformation. For Indigenous kids with a history of heartache, these small changes led to big gains

By [Shree Paradkar](#) Atkinson Fellow
Thu., Sept. 5, 2019 timer 12 min. read

Education Without Oppression — the 2018-19 [Atkinson series](#) — examines the continuing marginalization of Black and Indigenous students in Canada. It analyzes the challenges and breakthroughs nationally and in the cities of Baltimore, Md.; Lucknow, India; and Napier, New Zealand.

“Education is what got us into this mess, but education is the key to reconciliation.”
— Justice Murray Sinclair

EDMONTON—If the activist Cindy Blackstock were to have her way — and she did have her way on this one — Peter Henderson Bryce would be hailed as a Canadian hero.

Bryce, a white man, was a doctor-turned-whistleblower on residential schools whose deeds stand in defiance of common wisdom that the racism in Canada’s past was simply a reflection of values prevalent at that time.

Bryce was the federal chief medical officer who [raised the alarm](#) on the disastrous state of residential schools in 1907 when he found the schools had child mortality rates ranging from 25 to 69 per cent. His findings were ignored by the government. He continued to criticize the Department of Indian Affairs and went on to publish his findings in the *Evening Citizen* (now the *Ottawa Citizen*). Funding for his research was withdrawn, and eventually, he was forced out of public service.

In 1922, Bryce wrote a book, titled *The Story of a National Crime: Being a Record of the Health Conditions of the Indians of Canada from 1900*

In April, while speaking to a First Nations, Métis and Inuit education gathering in Edmonton, or Treaty Six territory, Blackstock contrasted Bryce’s “moral courage” with the “moral cowardice” of his nemesis, Duncan Campbell Scott. Scott, the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, not only dismissed Bryce’s findings but in 1920 made attendance at residential schools compulsory. Scott was bestowed the title of “[Person of National Significance](#)” and was awarded honorary doctorates from two universities.

Scott was buried in the same cemetery as Bryce, but his grave is marked with a large monument and flourishing praise on the plaque.

Blackstock was instrumental in bringing a correction to their graves. While Scott’s plaque notes he was a Canadian confederation poet, it reads, “he is also notorious for his 52-year career in the department of Indian Affairs. As deputy superintendent, Scott oversaw the assimilationist Indian residential school system for Aboriginal children, stating his goal was ‘to get rid of the Indian problem.’ In its 2015 report, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission said that the Indian residential school system amounted to cultural genocide.”

A historical monument was erected in 2015 to recognize Bryce’s commitment to the health, safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children.

“Dr. Bryce’s grave is now the most visited grave in Beechwood Cemetery,” Blackstock said to cheers from the audience of Alberta educators.

She told them in her keynote address: “You have a chance to raise more Bryces and raise a lot fewer Duncan Campbell Scotts.”

“The wounds of history are still bleeding,” Cathleen Anne Tenning, a member of the Stz’uminus First Nation on Vancouver Island, said at Canada’s History Forum in Ottawa in 2016.

This, she said, was evidenced not only in Indigenous graduation rates “but in other devastating realities that can no longer be ignored.”

According to the 2011 [National Household Survey](#): 29 per cent of Indigenous people (age 25 to 64) had not completed high school, compared with 12 per cent of non-Indigenous people.

Tenning, who received the 2008 Governor General’s Award for excellence in teaching Canadian history, [included in those realities](#) the high number of Indigenous children in care, families still living in poverty, the ongoing cycles of violence and addiction and the rate at which Indigenous youth are taking their lives through suicide.

First Nations youth experience suicide rates [five to seven times higher](#) than non-Indigenous youth, and Inuit youth are at 11 times the national average, according to Indigenous Services Canada.

Shelly Hamelin is a supervisor of student services at Northland School Division in Alberta. Four years ago, when she was the principal of a school in the tiny community of Fort Chipewyan, she came across a student in the hallway, having a rough day, not going into class. Hamelin said she tried to persuade the girl to go back, explaining why learning how to read was important and how she would grow up one day and run her own home.

“And the child said, ‘No, I’m not. I’m not gonna grow up. I’m not going to be here. I’m going to be dead by 15.’ ”

She was 10.

“And she looked out the window and pointed to the graveyard across from the school and said, ‘That’s where I’ll be.’ ”

“It was devastating,” said Hamelin, who quickly sought mental health support for the girl. Although Hamelin is not in the same school today, she still keeps tabs on her. “We’re one year away from when she said she would not be here.”

At the Edmonton gathering, Justice Murray Sinclair, chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and now a senator, asked educators to hold up phones with photos of their favourite child or grandchild aged 5, 6, 7 or thereabouts.

“Now imagine,” he said, “that the government took that child away for no reason other than wanting the child to not be like you.”

The residential schools run by the government and Christian churches that operated from 1831 to 1996 were the cornerstone of colonial policies that included war, starvation, disease and relocation designed to “assimilate” native peoples into European societies so Europe could claim ownership over the land and its resources.

There was no secrecy around [Canada’s intention of assimilation](#), or eradication of native ways of living.

“I want to get rid of the Indian problem,” the aforementioned Scott said when making residential schools compulsory for Indigenous children. “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.”

As Jesse Went, a broadcaster, writer and director of the Indigenous Screen Office, told the educators, “I am the embodiment of what Canada hoped to achieve through the previous 150 years of Indigenous policy. From the colonial nation state to an assimilated First Nations man with a settler father and an Anishinaabe mother, divorced from my community, from my culture, from my language, from our stories and from our lives.

“This was, after all, the goal of residential schools, the most pernicious and diabolical assault on Indigenous peoples.”

Said Colinda Clyne, an Anishinaabe woman who is an Ontario curriculum lead for First Nation, Métis and Inuit education: “The colonial assimilation experiment has been so successful that many students don’t self-identify as Indigenous.”

According to the [Toronto school board census portrait](#), “Aboriginal people are much less visibly different from others in a very diverse city like Toronto, and are often ‘hidden in plain view.’

“This cultural anonymity can act as a shield against racism as many Aboriginal people choose not to self-identify in order to avoid the risk of racial stereotyping and discrimination.”

When Indigenous students hide their identities to escape the racist implications of inferiority, teachers have to practise assuming there are more Indigenous students in their classes than they know.

A map created by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society used census data and input from Indigenous groups to show Indigenous history. Schools that wish to use it as a learning tool can rent it free of charge. Some Indigenous people say more consultation is needed to make the map representative of their history.

The Truth and Reconciliation report was released in 2015, based on interviews with more than 6,000 witnesses. Its 94 calls to actions were a rare moment of reckoning on Canada’s conscience.

Many provincial governments, including Ontario, publicly committed to implementing the recommendations on education, including making “age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada” mandatory for school students.

Saskatchewan developed [an online resource](#) named Supporting Reconciliation in Saskatchewan Schools to help educators learn and teach that curriculum.

The Alberta government pledged to professionally develop teachers with foundational knowledge and formed a Joint Commitment to Action in 2016 among associations of teachers, superintendents, university deans and school boards. So, progress, perhaps? The first steps of a long journey?

•

“Canada has known about the inequalities with First Nations kids for 112 years, and they’re still at the first steps,” Blackstock said.

The wounds of history are still bleeding.

“When the nuns at St. Joseph’s (in Thunder Bay) would torture (my grandmother), hitting her, whipping her, striking her tongue with a ruler or freezing it to the flagpole outside because she spoke Ojibwe,” Went said, “the goal was not just to stop her from speaking our language, but to stop me as well and to stop my children from speaking it as well.”

Rote reading of land acknowledgments at school every morning does not remedy these effects of ongoing colonization.

It requires schools to embrace decolonial thinking. “Decolonization” has become a buzzword in education, even before its meaning has been unpacked, and is used as an inaccurate stand-in for anti-racism, or equity, or more vaguely, interchanged with Indigenous resistance.



Pam Sparklingeyes is the program manager for Indigenous Learning Services at Edmonton Catholic Schools. At first, she said, school administrators didn't realize how important it was "to set aside a whole room in their building for the use of Indigenous students." **SHREE PARADKAR / TORONTO STAR**

Scholarly views of decolonization range from a political process that seeks to return sovereignty to Indigenous peoples to a social reframing of narratives about Indigenous cultural practices to individual healing journeys.

What decolonization is not, though, is a footnote.

It's not an addendum to the process of equity. Indigenous peoples are not an ethnic minority seeking inclusion in the existing structures. They have their own nations, own governance, own laws that pre-date the establishment of Canada, and they continue to be pushed out of their own lands for the benefit of settlers.

Decolonizing is not just about obligations to embedding Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. It's also about valuing that knowledge, acknowledging other worldviews and growing the number of Indigenous leaders in our school systems.

Decolonization is about sharing power, about collaborating rather than jostling for supremacy. It's not enough to "include" Indigenous people in existing structures. Those structures have to alter.

What would altered structures look like?

There are at least two examples of education agreements between First Nations and federal and provincial governments. One is the [Mi'kmaq Education Act](#) that passed in Parliament and Nova Scotia legislature in 1998, which gives participating First Nations jurisdiction over elementary and secondary schools as well as management responsibilities for post-secondary programs.

The other is the [2017 agreement](#) between Anishinabek First Nations and the Government of Canada that gives full educational authority to participating nations.

Both emphasize language, culture and identity in their curriculum. [A report in 2014](#) found the Mi'kmaq system in Nova Scotia had high school graduation rates among First Nation students at nearly 88 per cent, compared to the national average of 35 per cent.

Change is possible within provincially funded schools, too.

Donita Large is the graduation coach for the Braided Journeys program at the Archbishop O'Leary High School in Edmonton. Large meets one on one with students who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit and looks at their specific needs.**SHREE PARADKAR / TORONTO STAR**

One example is the award-winning Braided Journeys [graduation coach program](#) in place at 14 schools of the Edmonton Catholic School District that has increased school retention and graduation rates for First Nations, Inuit and Métis students.

The program chiefly altered the physical structure of the school by offering Indigenous students a safe space.

“It wasn’t always a welcome approach,” said Pam Sparklingeyes, program manager for Indigenous Learning Services at Edmonton Catholic Schools. “Administrators needed to be convinced that it was important enough they needed to set aside a whole room in their building for the use of Indigenous students.”

But it is essential.

“The Braided Journeys room was like my home away from home,” said Sean Grey, an alumnus from Blessed Oscar Romero High School. “I felt it was a place I could calm down. I made friends I still talk to, to this day.”

Grey also struggled financially, which meant access to food was very important.

“I was hungry throughout the day and we could get a snack between classes ... Access to medicines also helped me during anxiety attacks.”

Donita Large, a graduation coach for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students at Archbishop O’Leary High School in Edmonton, said “for some of our students they spend a lot of time in the Braided Journeys room.”

In this school, a storage room with a wall of windows was converted into a space with tables, chairs, computers, a fridge, a microwave and books. “As they continue to grow in confidence,” said Large, “they start to reach out to other parts of the school. We see they feel they’re grounded in both worlds.”

Grey had transitioned from a small school on her reserve to the city. “As an Indigenous person I felt out of place. I didn’t recognize anybody and didn’t see anybody I could connect with. I felt an

immediate connection when I went into that space (the Braided Journeys room) because people were talking about sweet grass and sage and I felt connected to my Indigenous roots.”

She is now a student of Aboriginal education at the University of Alberta.

Sean Grey is an alumna of Blessed Oscar Romero High School in Edmonton for whom the Braided Journeys room was "like my home away from home."**SHREE PARADKAR**
/TORONTO STAR

Another structural change was in staffing itself.

All 14 schools have at least one full-time staff member such as Large dedicated to working one-on-one with students who self-identify as Indigenous, to facilitate transitions from junior high to secondary and then on to post-secondary education. Larger schools also have a part-time coach.

Large said she hosts welcome events and meets one on one with students who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit and looks at their specific needs.

At Archbishop O’Leary, the coaches conducted smudge ceremonies in the Braided Journeys room on Monday mornings. “At the beginning I used to have to deal with other students making comments,” said Large.

So she worked with the principals and teachers and the school came together to tackle that.

“Before we had this model, there was a lot of helicopter type of work,” said Sparklingeyes. “It was a lot of part-time liaison type work. And in that type of model it was really hard to build relationships, and what we know in our culture is that relationships are important.”

“This year we decided to have staff smudge ceremonies so all the staff are aware and participating. So that they, too, can educate and talk about what we’re doing and why we do it. So it’s not about one Indigenous person in the school trying to explain things to 1,700 students. It’s very much a team effort.”

At St. Joseph High School when the program started in 2009, [the graduation rate](#) for Indigenous students who had stayed in school for three years was 14.9 per cent. By 2011, it stood

at 43.8 per cent, surpassing the provincial rate for Indigenous students, which was at 40.2 per cent.

The school district saw consistently higher third-year high school completion rates for Indigenous students than the rest of Alberta, with 57.8 per cent graduating in 2017 compared to 53.3 per cent provincially.

That year, Sparklingeyes said, schools with the Braided Journeys program saw an Indigenous graduation rate of 75.5 per cent.

Education Without Oppression — the 2018-19 Atkinson series — examines the continuing marginalization of Black and Indigenous students in Canada. It analyzes the challenges and breakthroughs nationally and in the cities of Baltimore, Md.; Lucknow, India; and Napier, New Zealand.



Shree Paradkar, a *Toronto Star* race and gender columnist, is the 2018-19 recipient of the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy. The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy awards a seasoned Canadian journalist the opportunity to pursue a yearlong investigation into a current policy issue. The project is funded by the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the *Toronto Star*.