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First Nations Students' Lived Experiences

in Ontario Secondary Schools

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Introduction by Dawn Zinga & Sandra Styres

The transition to high school can be a challenging time for students as it marks a shift in what is required of students as well as a change in their social groups as more students come together in a single school. While all students will experience challenges during this transition, First Nations students face additional challenges not experienced by many of their peers. Furthermore, the experiences of First Nations youth in Ontario schools are not universal experiences. There are a number of factors such as where the students live and the school they are attending that influence the kinds of challenges they may experience while attending high school. This special e-book offers insights into the complexity of these challenges and how educators and schools might better address the needs of First Nations students in ways that improve the educational experiences of all students.

We will explore the experiences of First Nations students who live in First Nations communities and attend high school outside their community as well as the experiences of First Nations students who live in urban centers and not in their First Nation community. There are challenges that both groups face such as discrimination and racism but there are other challenges that each group faces that are specific to their lived experiences. The following articles are drawn from research conducted with First Nations youth attending high school in various parts of Ontario (see Styres, 2010; Zinga & Gordon, 2014; Zinga et al.,

2010). It is important to note that there are also some regional differences as some challenges faced by First Nations youth are a function of the realities of their specific locations.

High schools are typically seen as the standard gateway to higher education for all students. A student's experience in high school and the courses that they successfully complete can open up pathways to college and university. Unfortunately, if students do not receive appropriate guidance and support around course selection and successful completion then the result may be a series of closed doors and lost opportunities. It is disturbing to note that national and provincial trends indicate that many First Nations youth ages 12-18 leave school without completing high school resulting in a 40% drop-out rate among First Nations youth aged 15 and over in comparison to 13% rate for their non-Indigenous peers. (Statistics Canada, 2008). There are a number of reasons that First Nations students drop out of high school not the least of which are the particular challenges they face when attending high school.

The provincial and national trends underscore the importance of understanding the challenges faced by First Nations students and working to make positive changes in provincial schools to address these challenges. Access to education is a right for all students within the Canadian



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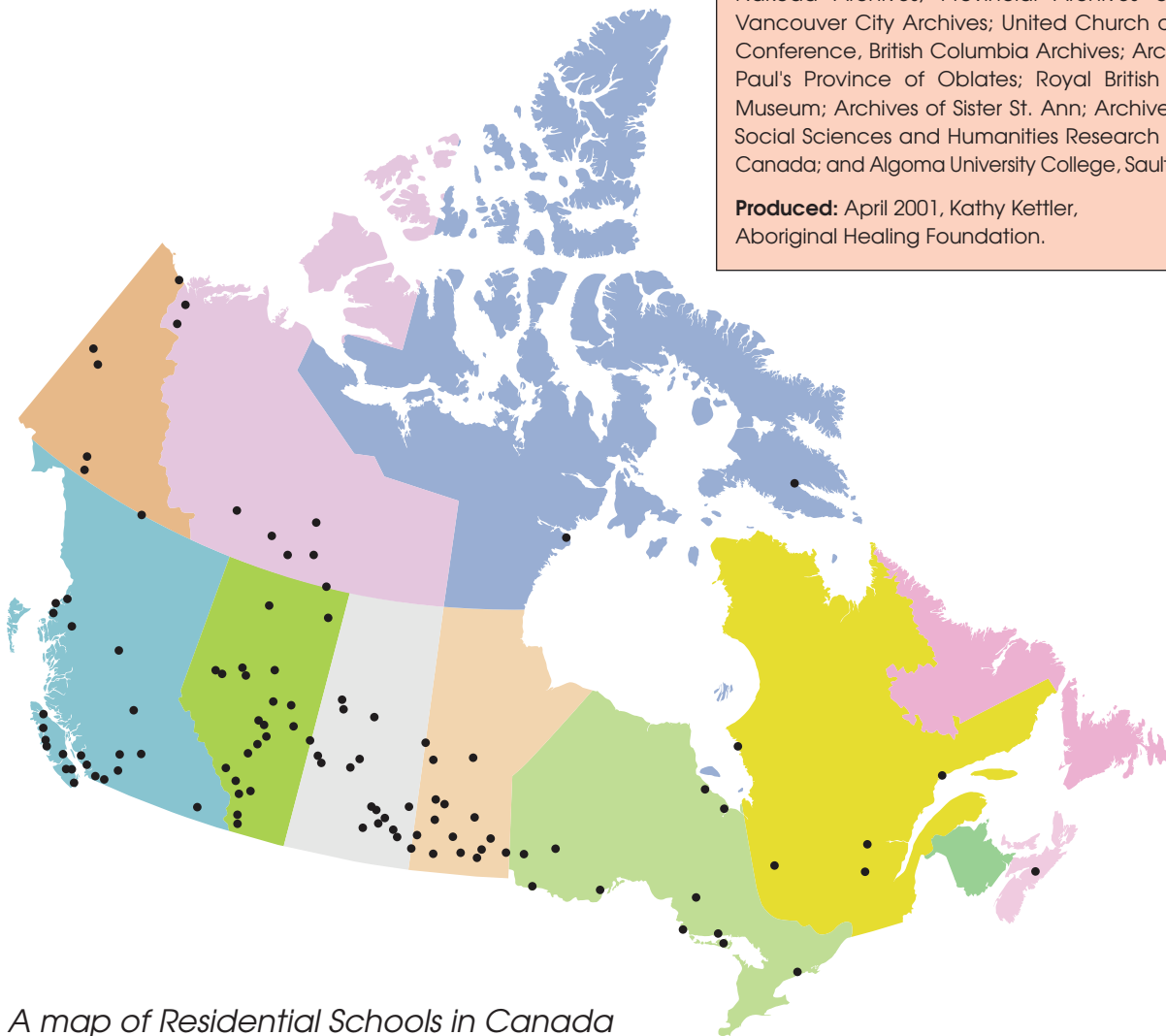
constitution, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Furthermore, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has highlighted the importance of education in its calls to action by mandating the need for strategies for addressing the educational funding and attainment gaps for First Nations students. Despite the challenges that First Nations students face, the National Household Survey reported that 8.7% of participating First Nations individuals had a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2013). If challenges and barriers experienced in secondary school were addressed these educational achievement rates would soar and the gaps in educational achievement would disappear.

Challenges Faced by First Nations Students Travelling Out of Their Community to Attend High School (Dawn Zinga)

Think back and remember what your first day in high school was like and then imagine what it would have been like for you if you were a First Nations youth. This might be an unfair request as most of us cannot think outside our own lived experiences and do not understand the challenges faced by others around us who are outside our own culture-sharing group. It is this lack of understanding coupled with beliefs such as 'treat others how you would like to be treated' that leads to harmful actions and beliefs that are perpetrated against others. The belief that you should

Sources: McCord Museum; Claims and Historical Research Centre, DIAND; National Archives of Canada; Archives Deschâtelets; Archives of Ontario; General Synod Archives of the Anglican Church; United Church of Canada Archives; University of Victoria; Provincial Archives of Manitoba; Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Conference of the United Church of Canada Archives; Anglican Diocese of Calgary Archives; Calgary Office of Parks Canada; Nakoda Archives; Provincial Archives of Alberta; Vancouver City Archives; United Church of Canada Conference, British Columbia Archives; Archives of St. Paul's Province of Oblates; Royal British Columbia Museum; Archives of Sister St. Ann; Archives of Yukon; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and Algoma University College, Sault Ste. Marie.

Produced: April 2001, Kathy Kettler, Aboriginal Healing Foundation.



A map of Residential Schools in Canada

treat others as you would like to be treated is premised on the idea that however you would like to be treated is the correct or only way. It normalizes a particular experience that positions all other experiences outside what has been established as the 'norm'. Society as a whole would be better served when individuals seek to sincerely find out how others would like to be treated and gain a better understanding of the varied lived experiences of individuals who make up said society.

In many ways, high schools are microcosmic societies. All schools draw from the larger society and reproduce dominant worldviews and understandings of reality through the curriculum and the ways that the school is run, including rules and norms. For First Nations youth, these dominant worldviews are not welcoming and misrepresent back to First Nations youth and communities a view of Indigenous cultures and peoples that are frequently denigrating, isolating, essentializing, and quite frankly, insulting. All students need to see themselves

The students believed that if the curriculum included more information about treaties and the history of First Nations and Canadian settler relationships that racism and discrimination would be reduced.

reflected and welcomed in respectful ways with education systems but students who are not within the dominant or mainstream group do not experience this validation of their lived experience but instead often experience an invalidation of their realities. By exploring the experiences shared by students living in their First Nations communities and attending school outside those communities we will develop an understanding of the challenges faced by First Nations youth in Ontario high schools and how educators and schools could implement changes.

Six Nations of the Grand River Territory (Six Nations) is a First Nations community located within Southern Ontario and has over 2,000 elementary and secondary school students. It is located close to Hamilton, Brantford, and Caledonia. Most of the high school students are enrolled in school in Brantford or Caledonia with some of the high school students attending a private immersion school located within the community that offers schooling at the elementary and secondary level. The majority of the elementary students attend one of the community's five elementary schools with a small number being enrolled

in private or provincial school outside the community. The elementary schools within the community use the provincial curriculum but within a culturally appropriate framework that is absent within the provincial high schools. The Six Nations students are also used to knowing the majority of the students with whom they attend school so they are transitioning into a larger school with hundreds of students who are unknown to them.

In research gatherings about their lived experiences attending high school outside Six Nations, the First Nations students spoke about their experiences of racism and discrimination within the high schools. Sometimes this took the form of explicit racism while other times it was expressed through the attitudes of the educators, staff, and non-Indigenous students in the schools. They also spoke about the challenges of being bused long distances to attend school and how that made it more difficult to engage in school clubs and athletic programs. Parents spoke about their perceptions that the school staff and educators did not care about Six Nations students. They believed that the school board was more invested in the transfer payments made by the federal government to pay for the education provided by the provincial schools. Essentially, these payments are made to cover the educational costs for the Six Nations students as the federal government is fiscally responsible for First Nations education but provinces and territories retain the rights to provide education. The transfer payments are non-refundable at a certain date in the fall and Six Nations parents claim that once that date has passed the high schools express less interest in the Six Nations student attendance.

Parents indicated that education was important to them and that they wanted their youth to be successful and happy.

Six Nations students stated that the land claims disputes near Caledonia had resulted in heightened racism and discrimination but that there were also some positives about their school experiences. They valued teachers who were tough and expected a lot from them while supporting them when they needed help. Students also spoke about the First Nations support staff in the schools and the benefits of being involved in athletics programs. The students believed that if the curriculum included more information about treaties and the history of First Nations and Canadian settler relationships that racism and discrimination would be reduced. They also felt that schools would be more welcoming places for them if their cultures and worldviews were respected within the high school.

First Nations students in Northern Ontario shared similar concerns about their high school experiences in research gatherings. They also experienced racism and discrimination and attributed those experiences to the schools mirrored long standing attitudes and tensions that existed within the community. Some of the First Nations students who were able to live in their First Nations communities while attending high school also expressed concerns about being excluded from school events and athletics. The First Nations students who live in fly-in First Nations communities in Northern Nishnawbe Aski (NAN) Territory are unable to live in their communities while attending high school. Those students attend high schools that offer residential facilities or board with families in provincial communities with high schools. Like the Six Nations students they have difficulty adjusting to attending a school with many people they do not know. This is further complicated by the necessity of living away from home to gain a high school education. The northern First Nations students are removed from their support

networks as their families and community are several hours away and they are living in a new community with strangers. Some students spoke about connecting with their boarding families and making lasting connections while others reported that they never connected.

NAN students spoke of the challenges they faced being away from home and being immersed in a culture that was different from their own. Like the Six Nations youth, they did not see themselves reflected in the curriculum except on the rare occasions when they had a First Nations teacher or a teacher who worked at incorporating appropriate cultural frameworks into the curriculum. They also reported that the schools they attended often applied rules differently to First Nations students than to other students. In addition to the belief that rules were applied more often to First Nations students, they also reported that First Nations students were more at risk for getting in trouble due to the difficulty in adjusting to a new community far away from home. On the positive side, NAN students reported that NAN personnel worked closely with some schools to provide programming and supports within the schools that made some student feel as if they had a bit of their community with them. They also valued teachers who invested in them and pushed them to succeed while respecting their cultural norms and protocols.

What became very clear from the research gatherings with southern and northern First Nations students was that high schools were very challenging places that frequently did not validate First Nations students' cultures and lived experiences. This seemed to be magnified in cases where students were required to attend high schools and live away from their families and communities. It is also clear that First Nations students are capable of

succeeding despite these challenging conditions although many struggle to do so. The heart of the issue is the high school climate which usually does not validate their cultures and lived experiences and at times can be a hostile place. It is the structures and climates of high schools that need to be addressed. Educators who invest in First Nations students and are willing to gain an understanding of cultural protocols and norms can make a difference in the school experiences of First Nations youth. Supportive programs based in the schools that are designed in consultation with First Nations community members can also make schools easier to navigate and more welcoming. Curriculum changes are also essential as all of the First Nations students spoke about the need for accurate education about treaties and relationships between First Nations and Canadian settlers to help eliminate racism and discrimination. There are steps that can be taken to re-imagine education and make changes to improve educational experiences for all students, the question that remains is whether or not provinces and territories are willing to take those steps.

First Nations Urban Youth (Sandra Styres)

Statistics tell us that in Ontario, Canada 78% Aboriginal population now live outside their First Nations communities – 61% in urban centres and 17% live in rural communities that are outside their First Nations communities. This population is moving into urban centers at an increasing rate seeking options that may not be available or are limited in their First Nations communities such as access to higher education; better employment opportunities; as well as safe, adequate, and/or available housing. First Nations youth living in urban centers represent broad and multi-layered complex diversity



of experiences and lived realities. They often struggle with understanding who they are as Onkwehonwe (First or Original Peoples) within the mosaic of urban First Nations experience particularly where there is limited or no access to traditional teachings.

In the 2010 “Ehse:gwé:ni> – You will Succeed” report, 38 urban First Nations youth were interviewed regarding their experiences within mainstream education. The youth were very articulate in describing what they did not like and what they wanted changed. Themes of racism, discrimination, deficit theorizing, stereotyping, being a fixed relic of history, and being treated as one homogenous group were some of the criticisms of current schooling. The participants felt that teachers were ill prepared with little or no comprehension what it means to have First Nations students in their classrooms in



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general but particularly urban First Nations students whose lived realities were distinct from the students who came from a First

Nations community. Further, it was seen that teachers assume that Canadian nationalistic symbols apply to all peoples who reside in Canada (eg. flag, national anthem, etc) – and that these symbols are the unifying force that represent and bring all people groups together. While there is some progress, particularly in light of the release of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Report with its 94 Calls to Action, there continues to be issues related to under-

standing the heterogeneity of First Nations peoples and their unique position and cultural location within the nation of Canada. Further, there is little or no inclusion of First Nations peoples as the First or Original peoples of this nation within curricula and related textbooks, particularly in texts written in First voices – Indigenous authors. In other words, what are Indigenous people saying about the issues of pressing concern to them.

Each of the student participants stated that they wanted teachers to take an active interest in them and to have high

expectations of them. They wanted to connect

with their teachers – they wanted to have a relationship with an invested, caring individual who is interested in them and whether or not they succeeded. A large majority of the student participants indicated that they were struggling and experiencing challenges to staying in school. Urban First Nations youth asserted that courses and course content were not respectful of or relevant to their lived realities or their dreams of a successful future. One First Nations student stated, “if you don’t fit the system then you feel like you don’t fit at all.”

Conclusion (Sandra Styres & Dawn Zinga)

Many First Nations students feel that the mainstream education system hinders rather than supports their knowledge and understanding of their languages, culture and overall identity formation. As well, many First Nations students, families and communities concur that the school system does not support parents in assisting with student achievement. Tutors are expensive so many low-middle income families cannot afford to hire private tutors when they are struggling to pay rent and utilities, as well as provide food and clothing. Many First Nations students indicate that they are quite often “pushed” through the elementary public school system and as a result feel inadequately prepared academically or emotionally for high school, higher education, or indeed for the realities of workplace environments.

There is an overall perception among many First Nations students, families and communities that there is a lack of genuine caring teachers in an uncaring education system and that teachers are

generally uninformed and do not take seriously the issues of pressing concern to First Nations peoples. It is clear that positive and respectful teacher/student interaction can have a profound effect on students’ willingness to stay in school and be successful. Having someone, specifically a teacher, who cared if they were in class, consistently demonstrated that care, and followed up with them, contributed to the First Nations student wanting to be in that learning environment.

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An education for every child

The Ministry for Education in Ontario answers Adjacent Government's questions on the importance of every child in Canada benefiting from world class education...

Education in any country is important and it's key that every child has the chance to achieve their full potential. In Canada, it is no different and the Ministry of Education in the province of Ontario strives to provide education and support to pupils of all communities. Here they outline to Adjacent Government their commitment to every child in the province and steps that have been taken to reach these goals.

How important is it for each child in Ontario to benefit from education?

Vibrant communities and a prosperous society are built on the foundation of a strong education system, and the task of the government is to help the province of Ontario's 2 million students reach their full potential.

In 2014, the Ontario government launched [Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario](#). Its 4 goals are: Ensuring Equity, Promoting Well-being, Enhancing Public Confidence and Achieving Excellence. The vision reaffirms the province's commitment to helping all learners in the province's education system develop the knowledge, skills and characteristics that will lead them to become personally successful, economically productive and actively engaged citizens.

Ontario's publicly funded education system partners with parents, guardians and communities to help develop successful graduates. With a provincial five-year graduation rate of 85.5% – we now have 190,000 additional students who have graduated since 2004 – students who would not have done so had the rate remained at the 2004 level.

How does Ontario's Ministry of Education support schools and pupils in First Nations?

In keeping with our Aboriginal Education Strategy, the ministry continues to focus on reaching 2 primary objectives: improving student achievement and well-being among First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, and closing the achievement gap between Indigenous students and all other students in Ontario.

The government is also committed to continuing to build positive relationships with Ontario First Nations and working in a spirit of mutual respect through all interactions. Although the Ministry of Education does not provide direct funding for the operation of First Nation schools, the ministry works in partnership with First Nations and the federal government to achieve the goal of the Aboriginal Education Strategy.

“Ontario’s investments in its publicly funded education system are paying dividends. The province’s strong graduation rate and international test scores confirm our success. But we are not complacent; we know that more work needs to be done to continue improving Ontario’s system and help every student reach their full potential.”

We know that strong partnerships between the ministry, school boards, schools, educators, families, students and community organisations are essential in our work. To reach our goals, we have taken important steps in making system-wide changes

including targeted funding, professional development and the integration of First Nation, Métis and Inuit perspectives into the curriculum.

How important is it for all young Canadians to understand Indigenous histories and culture?

All students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are enriched by learning about the histories, cultures and perspectives of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada. Also, students are more engaged in their learning when they see their own communities and cultures reflected in the curriculum.



Since 2003, the Ontario Ministry of Education has engaged a broad range of Indigenous stakeholders and academic experts during the curriculum review process to ensure that the curriculum is more inclusive of First Nation, Métis and Inuit histories, cultures, contributions and perspectives.

Thanks to the contributions of our First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners, every Ontario student is building a greater awareness and understanding of Indigenous histories, cultures and perspectives. The teaching of the histories, culture and perspectives of Indigenous people – including residential schools – is now a mandatory part of the teacher training curriculum.

In 2014, Ontario sent First Nations and Treaties maps to every elementary and secondary school in the province to help raise awareness about treaties. These maps and the accompanying teaching resources are helping students to learn about the significance of the treaties and the shared history of First Nations and non-Indigenous Ontarians. Our province has designated the first week of November as [Treaties Recognition Week](#) to promote public education and awareness about treaties and treaty relationships.

How can this help to develop greater community throughout the country?

Ontario's diversity is one of the province's greatest assets. Embracing this diversity and moving towards inclusivity and respect will help us reach our goal of making Ontario's education system the most equitable in the world. Everyone in our publicly funded education system –



regardless of background or personal circumstances – must feel engaged and included.

How important is integration in schools in order to bring together different communities?

Ontario schools need to be places where everyone can succeed in a culture of learning and high expectations. The government's work over the past decade has been focused on helping all children and youth reach their full potential by giving them the tools to help overcome obstacles. We are seeing the results, which includes a culture shift in schools that recognises diversity as a contributor to success, and not a barrier. The fundamental

principle driving this work is that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or other factors.

“We know that strong partnerships between the ministry, school boards, schools, educators, families, students and community organisations are essential in our work. To reach our goals, we have taken important steps in making system-wide changes including targeted funding, professional development and the integration of First Nation, Métis and Inuit perspectives into the curriculum.”

How does the ministry support Achieving Excellence throughout Ontario with investments such as the recent \$7M for First Nations Métis and Inuit students?

Ontario’s Aboriginal Education Strategy sets the foundation for improving achievement among Aboriginal students in provincially funded schools and supports life-long learning beginning in the early years and continuing through postsecondary, training or workplace opportunities. In 2016-17, Ontario’s targeted investments for Indigenous education will be more than \$71mn.

Some of the more recent investments will help provide all school boards with a new senior-level position dedicated to supporting First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education initiatives. This initiative clearly demonstrates Ontario’s support for the

education recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In addition, this new position will promote a greater awareness of Indigenous histories, cultures, perspectives and contributions among all students, while developing greater community and family engagement.

Ontario’s support for Indigenous students is part of the province’s overall annual education budget, which is estimated to be \$22.9bn for 2016-17.

How can investments such as this help to deliver world class education for all?

Ontario’s investments in its publicly funded education system are paying dividends. The province’s strong graduation rate and international test scores confirm our success. But we are not complacent; we know that more work needs to be done to continue improving Ontario’s system and help every student reach their full potential. Equity remains a key goal of our education system, and through our many investments in education, we are committed to helping all of our students achieve success in school and beyond.



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