



**NAOMI JACKO, DAN SCRATCH,
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One Positive Moment a Day at Inner City High School

When I walked through the doors of Inner City High School in Edmonton, Alberta on my first day five years ago, I was filled with anxiety, stress and a hope that I could be a teacher these students deserved. Many of the students who attend Inner City High have faced, and continue to face, significant barriers to achieving their educational goals. Poverty, addictions, racism and many other forms of oppression complicate the paths students take to graduating high school. On top of these barriers, many youth have had extremely negative experiences with the traditional education system. Most youth at Inner City High School have been suspended numerous times, expelled or have dropped out from their past schools; for many, coming to Inner City High School is their last opportunity to graduate during their teenage and young adult years.

Inner City High School emerged out of the Inner City Drama Association in 1993 to provide marginalized youth in Edmonton's inner city with arts-based and academic educational programming. To respond to the needs of our students, Inner City High focuses on utilizing its support staff and teachers to best help students achieve their goals. The school offers students support in finding housing and addictions counselling, and even has an onsite food bank. The school serves two meals a day to students free of charge, and operates an

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after-school outreach program to give youth a safe and fun place to go when classes end.

On top of this — and this is perhaps the most important part of Inner City High — teachers and students are able to create a more equal and authentic relationship due to establishing a relaxed environment and allowing student voices to be a part of the school's structure. Three times a day, staff and students sit down together in a school-wide circle to discuss any comments, questions or concerns that staff or students have. In the circle, staff and students are on the same level and all voices are treated with the same amount of importance and respect, regardless if they are coming from a teacher or a new student. It is within this structure — where students' basic needs are met, their voices are empowered, and they have an opportunity to redefine their relationships with staff and teachers — that we can start to see the transformation in students towards academic and life success.



Students participating in a fast for the Moosehide Campaign to raise awareness about missing and murdered Indigenous women.

As part of my teaching practice, I have found it valuable for youth to participate in events and projects that are happening in our community. I believe learning should never be confined to the

four classroom walls and is at its best when it can incorporate the experiences and knowledge from the community in which the school resides. During my years teaching at Inner City High School, students had opportunities to consult with the city of Edmonton on the impact of poverty on education; made two documentaries about sexual exploitation in our community; participated in the Moosehide Campaign to raise awareness and end violence against women and children; and organized the first “Indigenous Youth Leadership Conference” that brought together youth from Edmonton’s inner city and downtown neighborhoods to engage in a day of learning and community building. When we recognize the potential, skills and strengths that students bring to the classroom on a daily basis instead of focusing on what they “can’t” do, we can then start to work with students to help them rebuild their confidence and set them on a path to achieving their goals.

I am fortunate that in working with my students I have the privilege of seeing all of the positivity they create for themselves. In education circles we often create a false narrative that underprivileged students need to learn to be more resilient and have more “grit” to overcome their barriers to achieve success. I would argue that my students are the *definition* of resilience and grit, as they overcome sometimes insurmountable odds to just walk through the school’s doorway. Despite all the negative experiences they have had with teachers, schools and society in general, they still recognize that an education is worth fighting for.

With this in mind, at the beginning of the 2015-16 school year I had the idea of posting one photo a day on our school’s Instagram account to showcase all the positive moments that my students create. I wanted to challenge the negative stereotypes that many of my students face from the general public and help create a new narrative. Essentially, I wanted to push against the deficit view we often have of marginalized students, and create a strength-based public lens on Instagram to showcase how students find success in schools and also excel with academics when given the proper support and relationships.

The task was challenging, as I was unable to be in all places around the school to capture all of the positive moments. However, with the help of students, we were able to capture over 200 photos that describe what happens within the walls of our school.

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Throughout this project, I had opportunities to sit down and chat with students about their experiences. In these conversations students often spoke of their challenges with the school system's authoritarian approach to interacting with students. Under traditional teaching frameworks, students detailed how forming relationships with teachers and the larger school community were strained. Students often discussed how the barriers they faced outside of school were not considered when they were getting disciplined for attendance or behavioural issues.

Unfortunately, my students' experiences are not isolated. Schools can often perpetuate the attitudes and values of the dominant culture, and students who do not fit that dominant mold can come up against barriers and misunderstandings in their educational experiences. This is why it is of the utmost importance that schools abandon the traditional and historical authoritarian approach to operating schools and move towards a more democratic, just, and equitable form of education. When we operate our schools and classrooms in a more relational way that empowers student voice and builds community, we can then begin to move towards establishing equitable relationships with and between students that will create the conditions for all students to find place and purpose within our schools.



Inner City High students celebrating International Women's Day with a group photo!

My students possess unique talents, intellect and abilities that will no doubt make them valuable members of society. However, these same students found they were not able to demonstrate these attributes in many of the schools and classrooms of their past. If we are to move forward with the idea that all students deserve quality schools and instruction, we have to embrace the ideals of an equitable education system that identifies how the issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and colonialism impact students experiences in our classrooms.

The role of a teacher can be tremendously challenging in ways that students may not always see or understand; however, that does not give us the right to dismiss their voices and concerns.

As teachers, we must do the work required to build strong and authentic relationships with students. Once we have that, everything else will be easier to accomplish. In that spirit, one of the most effective ways in which I have improved my instruction is by co-creating the conditions and environment of the classroom with students and trying my best to incorporate their need and contributions into how the classroom operates. I strongly believe that if we are going to value students' voices, we need to use our roles as teachers to elevate student perspectives and actually listen to what they have to say, even if what they are saying can provide us with some discomfort.

With that in mind, below are excerpts from three of my students outlining their thoughts on education, society and how we can be better teachers.

~ Dan Scratch

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**Students' comments have been slightly edited for grammar but no other changes to comments have been made.*

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A student photo of social justice projects taken on in the school including an LGBT timeline, a Moosehide Campaign pin and information card, a student-created handbook for Inner City High students and the school's first ever handbook created in 1993.

My Journey Through Schools

By Naomi Jacko

Throughout my experiences with the school system I have had many ups and downs. I've been to four elementary schools, three junior highs and three high schools, all of which were dispersed throughout different parts of the city. There was a wide range of students and teachers, with teachers having very different methods of teaching. Unfortunately, not many of them really worked for me and sometimes did not work for my fellow peers either. It wasn't because my teachers were not necessarily good at their jobs but because it was only the content that they were concerned with, in contrast to actually trying to help us interpret why we were learning what we were, and how that reflects on our lives today and on the lives of the generations to come.

Much of the academic content in schools lacks significance related to Indigenous sovereignty and the importance of holding ties to your culture and its customs. Those types of topics are incredibly important given that a large majority of Canadian citizens reside on designated Treaty lands, and many textbooks contain very little information on Indigenous history. Thus, whenever any of my teachers actually did make the effort to educate me more about Indigenous history in Canada, I appreciated it. Even for

more difficult topics like residential schools or the genocide of the Beothuk people, it is essential that we discuss incidents like these because it happened, and today many people are still recovering due to intergenerational trauma. Furthermore, for us to successfully reconcile the past as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples we have to first acknowledge these past wrongs and together grow from it, even if it causes feelings of discomfort. I do believe that our education system unintentionally upholds colonialism by only teaching the biased, Eurocentric curriculum that starts with early settlers and the social relations that branch off after their arrival, rather than teaching students about the rich history that lies before that: the Indigenous people's history.

All through my schooling I have been taught by many teachers who were either very generic, passive and sometimes seemingly prejudiced. Alas, I have had quite a few teachers and fellow students who have put me down or constantly compared me to other students, which led me to be very discouraged and insecure. Pedagogical cruelty robbed me of my desire to learn — or so I thought. But in all honesty, I never lost it. It was just masked by those callous teachers' inclination to hold me down, or by those unenlightened bullies who tried to extinguish my ambitions.

However, I have had many teachers who genuinely cared about me and my well-being as well as my success as a student. Teachers who really pursued reconciliation among Indigenous peoples and who truly promoted equity in their classrooms. I admire many of their efforts especially considering that it seemed to be a difficult task to achieve at times.



Inner City High student Naomi Jacko sits at a computer working on a research paper.

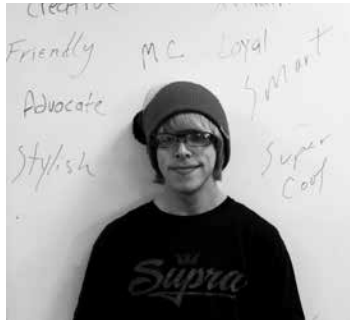
Before I came to Inner City High School, most of the teachers I encountered rarely tried to build relationships with me because they actually cared about me as an

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individual, rather than just my individual success. Most people wouldn't believe how much that significantly helps a student flourish. There are many students who are insecure and go home to bad households, and it takes so much off of a student's shoulders and puts them at ease when they have a comfortable and welcoming learning environment to come to. That includes the attitude of the teacher and how they convey their concern for the students and the issues that they might be facing elsewhere from school, as well as other physical, mental and emotional issues that could be affecting their schooling.

Coming to Inner City High School helped me realize how much I want to intrinsically help others as well as preserve the environment. I've become more conscious of the fact that we need to unify and take a stand together to further strive for social justice. That includes my responsibility as a steward of these Treaty lands and the spiritual conduct I must have to be able to lead people towards a more liberated, just, and equitable society. For example, having a social justice class incorporated in any school curriculum everywhere is essential for building a world that is bound for sustainable prosperity.

Lastly, I want teachers to consciously realize that they too are on this journey of constant learning and enlightenment. Enlightenment can be gained through the knowledge of their students, rather than through any professor at any college, or through any book on any shelf. I realize that this may be troubling to grasp, but if teachers consciously take that in, they will have better luck with the long term success of their students.



Attitude and Respect

By John Thompson

The attitude of the teacher makes a substantial impact on the classroom environment, from attendance to student participation and, consequently, tests scores. All of us, regardless of age, can recall the classes we loved and the teachers who made those subjects come alive; although unfortunately for most of us, when we think of school, what comes to mind is the classes we avoided, the teachers that made us feel small and the days we wondered, “Why am I even here?”. Through my education I have had both types of teachers, through all grades and different schools, and the defining factor I’ve noticed is respect.

When we as students are viewed as equals instead of being expected to fall in line, it makes a dramatic difference in our interest and willingness to learn. When I came to Inner City High School, I was startled at the relaxed environment and how the staff and students interacted like a big community, working towards the common goal of graduation and success. What made the largest impact on me was the respect between staff and students. Part of this is that everyone is on a first-name basis with each other, leading to a greater sense of belonging and family.

Positive teachers have a great impact as a student is more likely to attend a class where they can escape the realities of their daily lives in a safe and respectful environment. The bond between teachers and their students is something special. When this student-teacher bond grows deeper through the pride they both feel — when a struggling student grasps a concept or when the class comes alive about what they’re

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learning — it does wonders for the students. Throughout my education, teachers were people you had to obey; they demanded respect and structured the order of our day. Those who didn't listen were punished, labeled delinquents and made to feel like they were making the whole class fail.

Inner City High Student John Thompson poses for his student profile on the school's Instagram account.

From the very beginning, teachers must be taught to respect their students, their struggles and their talents as education is most effective when both teacher and student share a feeling of mutual respect and trust. This bond can extend further than purely educational success, but also to a personal level where students feel comfortable talking about the struggles they face daily: at times what youth really need is someone removed from the situation to confide in.

In today's society, youth are facing an enormous set of challenges such as racist, classist, and homophobic discrimination. Frequently, our problems are looked at as trivial and solutions are assumed to be simple, although with the ever-changing dynamic of present situations, what may work at one time has the potential for escalation at another. No longer is there such thing as a "quick fix"; for most often the root of our issues stems from underlying and largely unresolved societal issues. In the end, what we need as a society is mutual respect and support for one another instead of the free-for-all we currently reside in. We can start by implementing this in our schools.

My Life in Schools

By Calen Little Mustache

In retrospect, spending 12 years in school in Canada was quite the experience. I had many substantial friendships and partnerships during my school years. As I look back, I ponder the question regarding my feelings in those years of school — did I feel welcome? Was the treatment of teachers to students acceptable? Did I really learn anything important?

Well, upon initial contact with school and education, I was just a boy having really no idea what I was doing or what the point of school was at the time. But, in my opinion,

schooling from kindergarten to grade 6 had to be the most fun and interesting. In those times every student was involved, no matter what. In this ever-growing multicultural society, I was introduced to a wide variety of cultures and religions I had no idea existed until I entered elementary school. Everyone was accepting and kind including teachers, students, parents and guardians alike.

Throughout my junior high years, however, I started to experience a different side of other students as well as teachers. The teachers were far more grumpy and judgemental than elementary teachers. At first, junior high school was welcoming, but as time went on the teachers began act as if they were miserable and just worked for the paycheck rather than educating students. It seemed that in junior high, as well as high school, that many teachers were subjective and quick to judge, and failed to educate young people. I felt as if teachers gazed upon me and other students as ill-mannered and psychologically unstable children with extremely uneducated and barbaric frames of mind. To the “educators”, we spoke in nothing but ridiculous jargon and had repulsive manners as if we had no care of what to live for.

However, if teachers took some extra time with further analysis of students’ lives, goals and ambitions they would be able to understand that students like myself are fully capable of academic work, we just have a strong resistance towards authoritarian treatment. To make things more plain and simple; if teachers were to use their power to understand the complexities of students that comprise schools, they could inspire many to become great and useful parts of our society.



Calen Little Mustache poses for a photo on his graduation day from Inner City High School.

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I have found that Inner City High School is the greatest school I have ever been to. The teachers are far more accepting and welcoming than what I'd experienced in any of the schools I have attended in my life. Every staff member at this school cares for each and every student as well as their co-workers to the fullest extent. Many of the students that attend Inner City High come from broken families, have been living in brutal conditions on the streets, or are in the foster care system. Although some of the foster families these kids have are acceptable, many of them lived their lives as if they are meaningless.

In my opinion, all students have a feeling of welcoming and kindness because of the teachers and staff as well as other students that are part of the school. I have come to realize that these teachers are the greatest I have ever had. All are intelligent, knowledgeable, and accepting of every student. If I had to describe the atmosphere of the school I would say that we are all one big family among support staff, teachers and students. Everyone watches out for each other and embraces each individual's uniqueness to the full extent. That is the most important quality of the school and it showcases the comfortability and tranquility of the environment.

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The perspectives of these three students are just a snapshot of what many students experience. Inner City High School allows teachers to engage in teaching from a social justice and democratic framework that allows them to forge true and authentic relationships with students. Perhaps, as we move forward together, we should embrace this type of model in our classrooms in order to bring out the unique talents in all of our students. If relationship building is one of the keys to engagement and student success, then we also have another responsibility to advocate against austerity measures in education, to ensure that we have proper class sizes and time to build these all important relationships with students.

Together, teachers and students can work to build a student-teacher relationship that fosters respect, trust and equity. In my attempt to teach in this way, I was able to gain a perspective into my students' lives that enabled me to become a more thoughtful and critical teacher. I am so glad I had the opportunity to document this journey on our school's Instagram account by capturing one positive moment a day at Inner City High School.

NAOMI JACKO is a Grade 11 student at Inner City High School in Edmonton, Alberta. Naomi is a strong community leader who is passionate about environmental justice and Indigenous issues and was a key organizer in establishing the first ever “Indigenous Youth Leadership Conference” in May of 2016 that brought together youth from inner city schools and organizations in Edmonton.

DAN SCRATCH is a social studies teacher at Inner City High School in Edmonton, Alberta. His teaching practice is grounded in a social justice framework that allows education to be used as a tool to empower youth to become critically engaged citizens who use their power to transform their lives and the world around them

CALEN LITTLE MUSTACHE graduated from Inner City High School in June, 2016. He will be attending post-secondary school within the next year in order to become a social worker and to build on his success of being a strong Indigenous role model for youth. Calen hopes to give back to youth in his community by volunteering at Inner City High School in the fall to help build on the after school ball hockey program.

JOHN THOMPSON is a Grade 12 student at Inner City High School in Edmonton. John is a student leader at the school who is always working to make the school community more unified. John is also an MC and plans to attend post-secondary school to become a social worker.

Inner City High Schools Instagram account can be found here: <https://www.instagram.com/innerscityhigh/>.