



GAIL STROMQUIST

When Will They Learn? Indigenous kindergarten and the teachings of our Elders

The intention of the Canadian government for a century and a half has been to assimilate the Indigenous population. For nearly a century, Indigenous children were removed from their homes and placed into residential schools where their cultural practices and their language were forbidden. This sad legacy has had and continues to have devastating effects on our Indigenous communities

The last residential school closed its doors less than two decades ago. As disturbing as this is, the fact that so few people knew about the existence of these schools for decades worsens the blow and speaks to the intent of keeping this concealed. Not only was there a systematic, well planned process to assimilate the Indigenous population, but also a cover up to keep this sad part of our history swept under the carpet. Few teachers in our schools today were educated on the true history of the treatment of our Indigenous children. It is a sad history that we share.

Our hidden history, though, is being revealed and people want to know more. This is crucial to understanding why the current education system does not work for our Indigenous children and families. When we no longer hear comments such as “get over it, that happened a long time ago,” then we will know that there is an understanding of the extent and depth of the fallout from this attempted genocide.

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We must continue to promote the decolonization process. The status quo is not okay. A case in point:

EAGLE was an Indigenous kindergarten program in British Columbia infused with cultural teachings, through teachings from local Elders as well as Elders from other Indigenous communities. Teachings that possess and honor Indigenous perspectives were integral to the success of the program. Programs like this were needed and put in place to address the needs that were not being met in a mainstream system that often promotes opposing values and teachings. Our Elders have made it clear they don't want our children reproducing the dominant system.

Many of the children who attended the EAGLE program were children in care. Over half of our children in care are Indigenous and many of these children are in care as a result of the residential school legacy. For some of these children, this connection to the Elders and other cultural teachers was the only exposure to cultural teachings they would receive.



Teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, implementation of full day kindergarten for all students within two years eliminated all public school Indigenous Kindergarten programs. Those in charge of education policies continue to look for the magic solution to the “Indigenous problem,” of low graduation rates. Yet while dangling that carrot, they strip away what has worked for the better part of the last decade in programs such as EAGLE.

There are no quick solutions to problems that run so deep, problems created by deeply oppressive measures expressly designed to “remove the Indian from the child.” Yet when the decision makers don’t see immediate results, programs are pulled. One has to wonder how truly committed our educational leaders are to improving Indigenous Education when quick fixes are so often applied to problems that require long term commitments.

Cultural presenters and Elders from our community often share about the sense of belonging that was created in the EAGLE class, the strong positive sense of identity that they see in the children who have been a part of the program as they succeed through the later years in school. When cultural teachings are integral to your program, one is honoring a different worldview of educating, building a strong foundation for our children and creating a path for success to graduation and beyond, a path that honors walking in both worlds.

So within the last two years of full day kindergarten implementation, what has happened? Families and teachers were assured that everything was going to be okay. They were assured that there would be Indigenous content in all kindergartens for all children. Suggestions from educational “leaders” were made to create a box of Indigenous materials to have in kindergarten classes. What follow-through has

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there been and how does a box replace teachings from our Elders? When did our Elders' teachings become a commodity? At what point do educational leaders lose their vision on what's best for our children. It seems they become lost in their ability to assess who prospers and who loses in maintaining the status quo.

Even this small effort to provide a cultural grounding and space for Indigenous students has been swamped in the flood of programs aimed at the more than 90% of students who are not Indigenous.

When we talk about taking two steps back for every step forward, it's clear where we are on this one. When will they learn?

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