

OPINION

In Canada, education holds the key to reconciliation

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

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Senator Murray Sinclair visits Lord Selkirk Regional Comprehensive Secondary School in Selkirk, where a mural of his likeness graces the main entrance on April 30, 2024.

SHANNON VANRAES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Murray Sinclair was chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and served in the Canadian Senate between 2016 and 2021. He is the author of the forthcoming book *Who We Are: Four Questions For a Life and a Nation*.

When I was 12, my family gave me a set of encyclopedias called *The Book of Knowledge* – alphabetized tomes containing hundreds of topics. For a young Indigenous boy growing up poor on the Red River in Manitoba, I was fascinated by the information about civilizations around the world. I learned about foreign cultures, world wars and different religions. I recall being particularly interested in what was going on in the Middle East and Africa at the time.

I remember, too, searching for me.

I sort of found something in the book marked with an “I,” in a short section titled “Indians.” It was fraught with stereotypical photographs and vague, general information about tribes – mostly those in the United States. Frankly, the section wasn’t really about Indians at all, but how they were footnotes in the great American story of conquest for land and power.

In no other volume was there mention of anyone who resembled me, my home, or the people and history that surrounded me. I recall reading the sections about the history of the First World War and the Second World War, because my father, uncle and brother all enlisted. I looked in the section on Catholicism – my grandmother and I faithfully attended mass many times throughout the week (alongside a virtual all-Indigenous congregation). But still nothing. I read the entirety of a very long (and boring) section on Canada. There was no mention of Indigenous peoples at all.

My experience in the classroom was not much different. I did very well in school and skipped several grades. I also excelled at athletics (winning Athlete of the Year in Grade 12 – still my greatest achievement). But what I learned in the classroom about Indigenous peoples, their histories and contributions to Canada, was the same as what I’d found in the pages of those encyclopedias: virtually nothing.

I felt that, despite my success, my education lacked relevance. In fact, I would say my success came at a price because in every part of my school experience, I learned that Indigenous peoples – and I, as a result – were irrelevant. I was taught to believe in the inferiority of Indigenous people and in the inherent superiority of white European civilization. In order to get the grades that I did, I was compelled to repeat that unconscious mantra.

The education system of my youth did not teach us to respect Indigenous people because it never told us anything about the Indigenous presence in this country, or the humanity of Indigenous people. In public schools, we were all educated to be the same, and if we rebelled, resisted or rejected that process, we were weeded out – or we weeded ourselves out. Of the Indigenous students I started grade school with, few graduated from high school. Even my brother and sister dropped out.

Though I and others succeeded in that system, it was not without cost to our own humanity, and our sense of self-respect. Schooling for Indigenous students was, and in many ways still is, traumatic, leading to the legacies Indigenous communities still grapple with today.

I grew up in an area just north of the city of Selkirk, Man., which was originally the southern part of our reserve community called St. Peter's. In 1907, at the encouragement of local farmers and civic officials, the government of Canada unjustly and illegally forced our community to leave and move a few hundred kilometres north to what is now Peguis First Nation. The land was then given to farmers and new settlers while hundreds of our families had to give up everything they spent generations building. They had to start life anew.

My grandfather tried to make a living in our new northern home for a short while before returning, settling our family on a riverbank plot he was able to buy because he was a fisherman and boat builder. Growing up, I heard whispers of this story, but it was only once I became a lawyer that I realized the injustice, violence and genocide of it all.

Reflecting back, virtually the entirety of my "learning" experience – not just educationally, but institutionally – was designed to keep me from knowing Indigenous peoples, histories and cultures. What I did learn, if anything, was incorrect, biased and downright harmful. As I became a lawyer, judge and eventually a Canadian senator, I learned that it wasn't just me who was raised in ignorance; it was every single Canadian as well.

A chronic, national and systematic erasure of Indigenous peoples has sanitized versions of Canadian colonization and history and has led to a profound misunderstanding of the contributions Indigenous cultures and communities have made to Canada from the past into today. Education has perpetrated some of the worst harm in our national history, creating damaging public attitudes and facilitating brutal, divisive policies. For instance, mainstream Canadians see the dysfunction that exists in many Indigenous communities, but have no idea how that happened, what caused it, or how governments, taxpayers and laws contributed to that reality through such actions and policies as residential schools. Indigenous peoples have experienced the worst parts of these actions, but Canadians have also been hurt by being coerced, manipulated and ultimately misled by the idea that Canada has travelled a just, inclusive and civilized path.

At the same time, if education got us into this mess, it will be education that will get us out of it.

Education holds the key to reconciliation. All students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, need to learn that the history of this country did not begin in 1534, or even with the arrival of Vikings centuries earlier. They need to learn about

the Indigenous nations and governments that Europeans met; about their rich linguistic and cultural heritage; and about what they felt and thought as they dealt with such historic figures as Champlain, LaVerendrye and the representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company. They need to learn why they negotiated treaties and that they negotiated them with purpose and integrity and in good faith. They need to learn why Indigenous leaders and elders now fight so hard to defend those poorly worded treaties, and why they have been ignored by consecutive generations of Canadian settlers and governments. They need to learn about what it means to live, work and thrive alongside Indigenous nations.

All children need to know their personal story – and particularly how every single one of us, Indigenous and Canadians, are implicated in each other's lives. We all need to know the stories of our families, our parents and our grandparents, our direct and indirect ancestors, and our real and mythological villains and heroes. The educational systems of this country bear a large share of the responsibility for the current state of affairs – but can also fix what has been broken.

What our education systems need to do is this: They must commit to teaching Indigenous and Canadian children – our children – how to speak respectfully to and about each other in the future. It begins with teaching them the truth about our history. Knowing what happened in the past – and how it continues to shape the present day – will lead to understanding. Understanding leads to respect. Reconciliation is about respect.

We also must not lose sight of the importance of ensuring that, firstly, Indigenous children are given an opportunity to develop their self-respect. That, of course, must come first because reconciliation can never take place without justice. I am pleased to see so many schools and their brave teachers, administrators and parents pick up this mantra and start to raise what is quickly becoming the most culturally competent and capable generation in history in this country.

A large part of this educational journey includes the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation on Sept. 30. On this day, all of us have an opportunity to build relationships with each other – and most importantly with the survivors of Canada's residential school system. Without the advocacy and determination of survivors, we would not have a day to reflect and walk together – or even a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When this day was first envisioned, it was intended to be a day of listening, learning and discussion – for Canadians to take a day out of their lives to engage in a process of change. Then,

afterward, to take their thoughts and desired actions and implement them for the rest of the year – because reconciliation is not a one-day affair.

It will likely take as many generations as it took to create the damage in the first place to reverse, heal and build a country we can all be proud of.

Reconciliation begins for each of us with one very simple concept – a goal that Indigenous peoples have always sought with newcomers: I want to be your friend, and I want you to be mine. When you need me, I'll have your back, and when I need you, you'll have mine. This was an idea reflected in the events at first contact, in the treaties, and occurs now in days like the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. It is a message simple to hear but deeply significant and complicated, and it will take a lot of work to implement it fully.

Yes, our country's history is complicated and it is not always easy to review, but no one makes it better by ignoring it or glossing over it; you make it better by helping one another, by learning and unlearning, and by resolving to be better. We must not abandon each other on this journey, no matter how hard it is; we need each other more than ever in the days ahead as climate change, conflict over economies and resources and global wars will challenge us more than ever. We are going to be in this country together for a long time. My ancestors knew that. But my ancestors believed, as do I, that we can walk together on this road, friends forever, without surrendering our sense of self. Quite frankly, Canada's treatment of [Indigenous peoples](#) is nothing in which this country can take any pride. But, I sense that we are on the cusp of something special as this country begins to come to terms with our history, and all of us – particularly young people, who desire and want change and are evoking it more than ever – are on the leading edge of that. Since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report and the 94 Calls to Action in 2015, I have been inspired by the public reaction to what we said, and I have been inspired by the efforts of so many segments of society to work to make things better.

I hope that all of us realize that we are not just the bearers of the burdens of history, but also the beneficiaries of our new awareness. We are not just inheriting the painful legacy of the past, but inheriting the awareness and knowledge of why and how things happened and, thus, the responsibility to do something about it.

Armed with that knowledge, I and so many of our ancestors now look to you to continue the conversation of reconciliation that we have begun. We are looking

to Canadians to join with their Indigenous relations and move this country of ours into a new and truthful sense of itself – to shed the cloak of pain and shame, and to walk together into a future where our children will be able to talk to and about each other in a more respectful way.

This is not a time for the timid. It is a time for the daring. I invite you to join in this challenge. I invite you to move forward and write a new book of knowledge for the future.

Let us dare to live greatly together.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-in-canada-education-holds-the-key-to-reconciliation/>

Justice Murray Sinclair is a great man. Another one is Tomson Highway, who in *Permanent Astonishment* takes a very different tack on Residential schools. (Tomson was just here again in the Flin Flon area, having been brought in after *Permanent Astonishment* gained notoriety to give another opposite perspective on residential schools.) Tomson I think makes clear that he is defending his own personal experience in residential school as demonstrating such schooling was beneficial to some kids (like him). Both are brave men.

Murray Sinclair and Tomson Highway are temperamental opposites I suspect. But it is interesting how both succeeded in the school systems of their times while so many did not. Some children are just designed for school. I saw it in rural Africa with 45 kids in a class with 25 desks and 20 marginally-useful textbooks. The front row would be lined with girls eager to do anything the teacher asked, and some boys would resolutely pay attention behind them.

The stridency of the attack on residential schools produced the expected backlash, with Nonindigenous and some brave Indigenous insisting “they weren’t all bad. Many teachers had good intentions and loved their students” with the odd Indigenous graduate maintaining that going to residential school saved him from poverty, hunger, and a broken family riven with alcoholism.

Who is allowed to speak to such matters in such arenas is contested. But as a White mainstream fellow, I can grant all the (crude) good intentions of some, but there is no doubt that residential schools—to put it as nicely as possible—were a bad idea, a very bad idea. They were also cruel and callous, a failure of humanity. The only consolation is that this stunted humaneness was society-wide with the disadvantaged of all kinds and colours exploited and discarded without compunction. Europeans came from a continent of nation states where there were no real norms of civility as nations jostled with one another grabbing territory and resources through merciless warring on land and sea. But Europeans abused and damaged Indigenous peoples worst of all. (cont’d)

“Killing the Indian in the child” was indeed a cardinal tenet of residential schooling. This intent is enough in itself to discredit this travesty perpetrated on Indigenous children and families. Another way—day schools on reserves—would have been better, and easier to implement. Children need to be with family and parents; and family and parents need to be with their children.

Mr. Sinclair, like many noneducators, sees hope in education. Indeed there may be, but sometimes as one of those educators working in communities with sizeable Indigenous components, I suspect that in the rancor aroused against residential schools, many First Nations people settled into nursing grudges from how much they themselves hated the schooling they received. Many families, and therefore Indigenous students, do not have faith in the current system, however better it is than all the schooling of the past.

Attendance and work ethic are not promoted or enforced. Further, many kids do not buy into the “deal” that schooling offers—submit and succeed on academic terms, and you will be rewarded in the future—because: (a) they are not sure they want that particular future; (b) they do not really believe it is a possibility for them; and (c) since their kin have learned how to navigate “social support” systems and tap into revenue streams, they are not sure there is any real point or need to do so. I will never forget the little Grade 8 girl in a relatively prosperous Northern community who, when asked to do some school work, replied “My mother has Grade 8 and makes \$80 000 [tax free] a year. Why should I do this?” Pointing out that if she got Grade 12 she might make \$120 000 a year would have been pointless. Our children “learn” all sorts of things from us of which we are heedless.

Lastly, some students, as they reach higher stages along the “assembly line” of grade “progression” have been rendered completely incapable of meeting the escalating expectations, no matter how “modified” or watered down they may be. They do not have any of the reading or math skills needed, and too many impediments have accrued in them that leave them rudderless and lost in academics and averse to the “hidden curriculum.” Tik Tok then claims them wholly. I find that even though social media is largely videos, kids immersed in this realm still cannot absorb and comprehend information presented in informational visual-auditory forms of any length or depth. Attention spans maybe are the culprit, but I think it more habitual ingrained avoidance of sustaining engagement with anything with depth or demanding subtleties.

Ever our masters assure us there was no other way. “The times were different and would not allow it.” We are still told there is no other way than the current status quo—“Truly addressing climate change would cripple our economies and leave us poor. Not catering to global investors will do the same”—but there always was a better way possible, and with sufficient resolve we could stand up to our oppressors now and give investors a “Canada” worth living in. TJB