

INVISIBLE MINORITY

By Kathy Simcoe

Until recently, I never considered myself racialized, navigating an identity “a little bit Indian” amid adoption and disconnection from my birth family. My first teaching role in a First Nation school exposed me to stark educational disparities, contrasting my privileged public school experiences. This journey has driven my commitment to Indigenous education, highlighting the necessity of allies and cultural competence in creating meaningful change.

Until recently, I would never have considered myself racialized, as my identity has never been that simple, always existing somewhere between the cracks. Being “a little bit Indian” was casually mentioned to me as a child by my adoptive parents. At the end of the 60’s Scoop era, their belief, backed by the Canadian government, was that I was better off where I was, with no knowledge of my birth family. It was not until adulthood that I learned that I qualified for status under the Indian Act, yet people had no idea unless I told them. From there on, I thought of myself as an invisible minority.

“WHITE-PASSING”

I acknowledge that being a “white-passing” Indigenous person has afforded me certain benefits, such as seldom if ever experiencing overt racism associated with colour. I essentially had the luxury of being able to choose whether to be Indigenous. However, this social capital came at the cost of a cultural identity.

My first teaching job at my home First Nation school had been an overwhelming eye-opener to the disparity between the

privilege that I had enjoyed in the public school system and the reality for those educated on a First Nation.

I felt too demoralized and ill-equipped to do much good, with little cultural exposure or knowledge other than what I saw on “North of 60.” Sure, I had along my journey attended a few powwows, a sweat lodge and learned how to make dreamcatchers and moccasins, but I felt very much like a *pretendian*.

Most days, I can appreciate that more and more educators are seeking ways to infuse traditional knowledge in their practices. I listen to people outside of education also looking for answers about Indigenous issues. But on a day when I feel the weight of my full-time classroom teaching job and extra-curriculars, I concur with Niigaan Sinclair’s words, in his article “Those People, Our People.”, *“It’s important to talk with people where they’re at but frankly, it’s exhausting to constantly do the work schools, government and society should be doing.”*

Being a lone Indigenous teacher means, on one hand, there is little danger of being criticized for getting it wrong, but on the flipside, there are few opportunities for

collaboration, and mentorship.

However, I would not want to suggest that my experience has been simply a lonely road. Albeit relatively late in life, I have sought out many cultural learning experiences and met many mentors through the MTS Workshop on Workshops, a Cultural Competence and Confidence course, and Blanket Exercise training to name a few.

I sometimes wonder how my own school experience would have been different had I had even one Indigenous teacher as a mentor, or at the very least some positive representation of Indigenous culture other than what I saw highlighted by the media.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION DISPARITIES

From listening to teachers involved in Indigenous education from around the province, I have come to realize there is a disparity not only between urban and rural divisions, but also from one rural school division to another.

Some divisions have Indigenous Education support staff, some do not. Also, if a rural

high school has feeder schools from First Nations communities the need for Indigenous education is clear, and supports are more likely to be put in place.

For rural divisions with no First Nations communities nearby and a less visible Indigenous population, the need is seen to be less significant. This stems from a myth that where there are few Indigenous students and families, there is less need for Indigenous education.

Indigenous education is not just for the benefit of Indigenous students. As Justice Murray Sinclair states, *“Teach children about the History of Canada (...) so that everyone knows why things are the way they are. . . because no one owns this History, it belongs to all of us.”*

The more you learn about colonization, systemic racism, and decolonization, the more impatient a person can become at the slow rate that the wheels of education turn.

The other good news is that I have, over my relatively short career in education, seen more and more allies and advocates emerging. There is more capacity and understanding with regards to Indigenous

education and education for reconciliation.

With so few Indigenous teachers in the field, allies and advocates are crucial for the work to continue. It is important to be mindful as non-Indigenous allies of when to follow, when to walk alongside, but to avoid walking in place of Indigenous people by leading the charge.

Naturally, there remains for non-Indigenous teachers, the fear of getting it wrong. Therefore, it is very important that space is created for more training and for institutions to be open to diverse ways of educating our youth as well as our educators.

COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS IN EDUCATION

Our colonial foundations in education have dictated that education must be delivered only by professionals trained in that same colonial framework. However, the traditional role of community members has been to teach and support, and they are often an untapped resource.

Finally, know that even with the best laid plans, mistakes are inevitable, so if you make

a mistake make it one of commission rather than omission.

Regardless of how I am identified by others, as a racialized person, visible or invisible, I have chosen my path. It is to weave Indigenous perspectives and education for climate change into my subject areas to build capacity in my students. Another is investing my time in helping to build capacity in my colleagues in my role of catalyst teacher for Treaty training for our division.

Finally, in my current role as Indigenous Voice and Action chair for our local teachers’ association, I have found true allies. We have formed an Indigenous Voice and Action committee through which we are working to address needs and offer support to members looking for ways to bring Indigenous ways of knowing into their practices.

The effects are not always noticeable and are rarely immediate. The same could be said for supporting and mentoring other educators. Often it feels like words and actions fall on deaf ears, and it seems like a long, lonely stretch of road. However, we are all travellers, and unbeknownst to us, our actions just may become part of someone else’s journey. **T**

