

**“Why won’t they mix?”: Barriers to Indigenous/non-Indigenous Youth  
Relationships in Yukon High Schools**

by

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**“Why won’t they mix?”: Barriers to Indigenous/non-Indigenous Youth Relationships in  
Yukon High Schools**

Education is what got us here, and education is what will get us out.

Honorable Justice Senator Murray Sinclair

**Abstract**

The Yukon territory is home to fourteen First Nations, eleven of them self-governing. Close to 25% percent of the Yukon’s population is Indigenous. In the 5 high schools of the Yukon’s capital city of Whitehorse however, interactions and relationships between the indigenous and non-indigenous students are often perceived as minimal and uneasy, as observed by parents, staff, and the students themselves, with social groups often divided between indigenous and non-indigenous youth. Using a non-traditional narrative approach focusing on the lived experiences of students, parents and staff, this paper seeks to examine and identify possible barriers to relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous youth in the schools, while collecting from project participants recommendations to better foster relationship building and connection between students, in support of a more welcoming, inclusive and culturally relevant high school community for Indigenous youth.

**Preface**

I embarked on this project in the hope of better understanding relationship barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in the Whitehorse high schools, and to determine if racism was a factor of influence. Asking if racial prejudice existed in the schools was—I soon realized from the responses of the Indigenous people I consulted—a pointless question, and a show of the naivety and ignorance of a non-Indigenous person. I was initially very hesitant to pursue this topic of research and uncomfortable about being yet another non-Indigenous individual researching Indigenous issues, despite the fact that it was the observations of my children of mixed Dene ancestry that set me on this course. Before pursuing this inquiry any further, I sought guidance from Indigenous friends and acquaintances, as well as from contacts within Yukon First Nations governments and organizations. First and foremost, these preliminary conversations helped establish whether or not this project would be of value and benefit to the Indigenous communities of Whitehorse and Yukon and was relevant to needs identified by Yukon First Nations in regards to Indigenous youth and education. I also sought guidance as to whether it was appropriate for me to do this work, and if so, to request permission from leadership within the Yukon First Nations community to proceed. The feedback I received was favorable and provided direction as to what would be most helpful to further understand about the state of youth relationships in Whitehorse high schools.

Two statements from these preliminary conversations particularly stood out to me on a more personal level; a staff person at the Council of Yukon First Nations stated that as much as it would be ideal for all research relevant to Yukon First Nations to be conducted solely by its

citizens, with the tremendous workload at hand of furthering self-determination, self-government, and of closing the socio-economic gap, Indigenous governments and staff were already going full-throttle. Therefore, if for the time being bits of work were undertaken by non-Indigenous individuals with the approval, involvement, and guidance of Yukon First Nations, then this could be acceptable, as long as the projects were properly conducted. A statement from a young Indigenous project participant also stood out: at the start of our conversation, we chatted about the project and its intent, and he commented that if my intended audience was non-Indigenous people and my purpose was to educate and inform, then this was a good thing. He pointed out the fact remained that the burden of educating non-Indigenous people as to the horrors of Canada's colonial history, the ongoing trauma from the legacy of the residential schools, and the systemic racism that remains embedded within Canadian society continues to rest on the shoulders of Indigenous people. This was tedious, untenable, and unfair. So, if I was contributing to these educational efforts, then it was a good thing to do, as a non-Indigenous person. These words felt like approval to carry on, as long as I proceeded carefully and mindfully, within the guidelines set for me by the Yukon First Nations advisors I consulted.

It is inevitable that my understanding of this topic is incomplete, and that I made mistakes during the completion of this thesis research project. I am a student, new to this level of research, and I am a non-Indigenous first-generation Canadian woman; I do not have either the lived experiences nor understanding of what daily life is like for an Indigenous person in Canada. I come from a line of immigrants; my grandparents on both sides were Italian peasants that immigrated to France with their young families in the 1930s, fleeing the poverty of Italy's

countryside, the dark stirrings of fascism and the looming second world war. My mother in turn immigrated to Canada in the 1970s, landing in Montreal and further distancing herself from her - and my- roots, being the only member of our large extended family to cross the Atlantic and establish herself in North America. I grew up with a foot in 2 continents, never fully feeling I belonged in either one. As young Canadian student, my understanding of the colonial history of this country was limited to the rudimentary selective elements that I was taught in grade school. It was not until my undergraduate degree that post-colonial studies and critical theory broadened my horizon and expanded my understanding of the darker underbelly of Canadian history. It should not have taken that long.

### **Methods**

Using a non-traditional narrative approach focusing on the lived experiences of Indigenous students, this thesis project identifies and examines barriers to relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous youth as observed in Whitehorse high schools. This thesis also presents recommendations from former students, family members and school staff on how to better foster relationship building and connection between students and create a more welcoming, inclusive and culturally relevant high school environment for Indigenous youth.

This project is situated within a transformative paradigm while drawing on principles of indigenous research methods which guided my work as a non-Indigenous researcher. The writings of indigenous scholars such as Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson further framed my methodology to follow an approach grounded in indigenous community accountability and relationship-building. Elements of Gordon Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew,

1998) and Herbert Blumer's Group Position Theory (Blumer, 1958), and as further developed by Lawrence Bobo (Bobo, 1999, Bobo & Hutchings, 1996), provided a theoretical framework against which I examined the experiences shared by this project's participants. Allport's Contact Theory explores both the benefits and limitations intergroup contact can provide in decreasing pre-existing racial prejudice a dominant population group demonstrates towards a marginalized or negatively perceived group, while Group Position Theory provides an understanding of the collective processes of perceived threat felt by dominant population group in interactions with subordinate groups, and the social mechanisms at play in the construction and maintenance of these perceptions ( Bobo, 1996). Concepts drawn from Whiteness Studies and Critical Race theory further provided insights in the dominant white population's continued resistance to improving the relationship with and the overall socio-economic health and well-being of, the Indigenous people of this country. These theoretical models, in their discussions of power dynamics underpinning race relations, provided an analytic approach to help deconstruct and understand how race-based power structures manifest in social contexts and interactions between different populations groups; in this case, Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in high school in a northern Canadian social environment.

### **Accountability**

Prior to commencing this project, I reached out to contacts within the Yukon First Nations community to seek input and confirm whether the topic of research would be of interest and of benefit, to inquire about protocols, and request permission to proceed. I consulted with the Education Department staff at the Council of Yukon First Nations and Ta'an Kwäch'än Council,

and corresponded via email with the administration and leadership at Kwanlin Dün First Nation. I asked local Indigenous contacts if they would be willing to serve as advisors for this project and review my work to ensure it is conducted correctly and of benefit to Yukon First Nations (Castellano, 2012). I met separately with five different Yukon First Nations individuals and reviewed my project proposal with each of them. During these conversations, I requested permission to complete this project, remaining fully prepared to step away if they considered it inappropriate for me to proceed. In the course of these preliminary consultations, I was advised that as the project concerned the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, as long as I remained aware of my position and particular lens as a non-indigenous woman and mindful of the colonial history of academic and research abuses, this work could be of use Yukon First Nations. It was agreed that I would be providing copies of the completed project to the Council of Yukon First Nations for distribution amongst all Yukon First Nations departments of Education, as well as to the First Nation Education Commission and any project participants interested in reading it. As I applied for research clearance from the Yukon Department of Education they will also be provided with a copy of the completed work. However, in the spirit of Critical and Indigenous research methodologies, my ultimate responsibility as a researcher is to the Yukon Indigenous community, not to academic or government institutions (Denzin, 2008).

As part of my preliminary conversations I collected input on the area of inquiry that could best support the work underway within the Yukon First Nations education departments and re-framed my scope of work accordingly. As there remains a significant gap in graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, I was instructed that any information that could

feed into efforts to close this gap would be of benefit. Although my intent at the onset of this project was to proceed with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that would ideally result in a short film collaboratively developed with local youth, I quickly realized that due to the sensitive nature of some of the information discussed, and Whitehorse being a small town with considerable interpersonal connections, the use of film or audio would be too delicate and had the potential to negatively impact participants. I decided to proceed instead with unstructured conversations with young adults, family members and high school staff who would be willing to share their experiences and insights on barriers to youth relationships in the high schools, and I would subsequently present the completed research in written form using a non-traditional format with a narrative story-based approach. Despite not being able to proceed with the PAR I had originally planned, I strove to keep this project as collaborative as possible, to the best of my ability and within the constraints of my project—namely, the timeline and academic requirement of my Master’s program—in the hope of completing work that would nonetheless be community-based, grounded in critical dialogue and in a shared spirit of social transformation (Denzin, 2008).

My research process would follow the 4 Rs of Indigenous Research (Barnhardt, & Kirkness, 1991; Wilson, 2008). Respect: for the Yukon First Nations and their citizens who agreed to speak with me, for the stories and lived experiences that they shared, for the land and the traditional territory where I live and work, for the painful history of generations past, and the necessary redress for generations to come. Responsibility: I sought permissions from Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta’an Kwäch’än Council on whose traditional territory this project

takes place, as well as the Council of Yukon First Nations as the Indigenous regional organization. To ensure I was responsibly transferring the information that was shared, I had follow-up conversations with project participants to review transcripts and compiled results and confirm I was presenting an accurate picture of their stories and lived experiences, and completed revisions as per their recommendations, as owners of the information. To the best of my ability, I double checked every step of this project with Indigenous advisors to confirm I was still proceeding according to their delineated scope of work. To ensure that the work was relevant, I engaged in preliminary conversations with members of Yukon First Nations and the organizations listed above for confirmation that this work was of interest and benefit to them, and to refine and clarify the area of study. In the spirit of reciprocity, I was transparent about my purpose and shared about my own identity and experiences throughout. I will be providing access to all of my research and copies of completed documents to the Council of Yukon First Nations (and through them to other Yukon First Nations they represent), Kwanlin Dün First Nation, and Ta'an Kwäch'än Council. I have also been asked to present the completed project and its findings to the Yukon First Nations Chiefs Committee on Education.

This research project proceeded under the guise of a transformative paradigm following principles of Indigenous methodologies to guide my work as a non-Indigenous researcher in a spirit of decolonization of the academic process. The writings of Indigenous scholars Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson emphasize an approach grounded in community, accountability, relationship, sharing and listening (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). Kovach and Wilson both stress the importance of building connections within the community; in their opinion,

information cannot nor should it be separated from its context, and cannot be objective and detached from its people and place of origin (Wilson, 2008). From these readings, I understood that I should include myself within the research process and constantly be mindful of my position and personal subjectivity as a non-Indigenous person, and my inevitable ignorance of many aspects of the Yukon Indigenous community I hoped to collaborate with.

Instead of interviews I engaged in unstructured conversations with fifteen individuals from the community—recent high school graduates, young adults, family members and educational staff—who agreed to be contributors to this project. Twelve were Indigenous people from the Yukon, three non-Indigenous. Most of the project contributors I connected with through existing relationships, or through “snowball” networking. Our conversations had as point of departure their experiences within the mainstream high schools in Whitehorse, and their recommendations as to what would improve the high school experience for Indigenous students, but the project contributors guided the discussion process. In the spirit of respect, reciprocity, and relationship-building, I also shared of my family’s and my own experiences, as and when warranted. Once this cycle of conversations was completed, I performed a thematic analysis of the transcribed texts to identify patterns and find commonalities within the lived experiences shared by former students, family members and high school staff (Kovach, 2009). I proceeded with multiple annotated readings of the conversation transcripts and hand-coded sub-themes using colors and key words that were then grouped and compiled into 4 emerging core themes; segregation, racial prejudice, inequality, community/connection (lack of) (Seale, 2012). These

themes were the primary factors of influence identified in our conversations on the Indigenous/non-Indigenous youth relationship in Whitehorse high schools.

In order to validate the collected information and ensure it was a correct reflection of the stories shared in our conversations, I compiled the identified themes and sub-themes along with participant recommendations into a bulleted list that was then returned to interested project participants along with their interview transcripts for their review and validation. Follow-up conversations took place with three project participants to verify the information and collect additional feedback. These conversations were followed by two meetings with three of the Indigenous advisors I met with at the onset of this project. In these meetings, I described my completed research process to ensure that it proceeded according to their recommendations and reviewed the collected information to verify its accuracy and consistency. In this manner, I tried to observe a more circular and cyclical approach to the research process in keeping with the guidance of Kovach and Wilson, and to be as accurate and responsible as possible when transferring the words of the project contributors into this paper, being cautious and mindful that “power resides in the writer” (Kovach, 2009; p.132). All of the feedback and recommendations throughout this validation cycle have been integrated into the final version of this paper.

I did not follow a traditional writing approach for this thesis, as I wished to stay in the spirit of the conversations I had with my project participants; one based on the sharing of stories and experiences. I used a more narrative, story-based style, closer to journalism than academic writing, and staying away from jargon and technical terminology that in my mind creates distance and barriers of understanding between writer and audience, curtailing reader appeal and

relatability. This choice of approach was also driven by my intent to make this research more publicly accessible while remaining as faithful as possible to the words and stories shared with me by this project's contributors, and by a spirit of social transformation inspired by the writings of Indigenous scholars that call for a more collaborative and relationship-driven approach to projects with Indigenous peoples.

Please note that in order to preserve the anonymity of the project's contributors, the names of all individuals quoted in this paper as well as the names of schools and educational institutions have been changed. All participants signed consent forms with the understanding that they could withdraw or remove any or all of the information they shared at any point in the project process.

Also of note, even though in the course of our discussions and in the resulting written report there are descriptive comparisons between schools and respective experiences within them, this project is not meant as a comparative analysis of Whitehorse high schools. I do provide information about the schools that participants discussed, as Whitehorse is a small city and each of its high school serves a particular program area or has particular characteristics that may influence the students' experiences there. The discussion of the school physical spaces is also not intended as a point by point comparison; the information shared is primarily anecdotal and based on participants' perspectives and visual observations of how school floor plans can sometimes be a factor of influence on student relationships. The end result of this project is meant to be a picture painted by participating students, family members and staff of Indigenous

youth's experiences in the current mainstream high school system in Whitehorse, their perspectives on these experiences, and their recommendations to make these better.

### **Literature Review**

The initial intent of the literature review for this thesis was to examine the current understanding of Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth relationships and interactions in Whitehorse, Yukon. Over 25% of the population of the Yukon Territory in northern Canada self-identifies as Indigenous. The majority of the Yukon's population resides in its capital city of Whitehorse, with the remainder of the population spread out in small remote primarily aboriginal communities.

No literature specific to Indigenous-non-Indigenous youth relationships in Yukon was identified during the course of this preliminary inquiry, and published academic research in the area of Indigenous-non-Indigenous youth relationships in Canada is minimal. Therefore, research on related influential factors has been included in this review in order to piece together facets of the discussion that help inform and construct a map of possible areas of tension between these two population groups. Although at the onset of my research I tried to refrain from assumptions of any particular social barriers, the documented evidence of deeply-rooted biases underpinning the majority of Indigenous/non-Indigenous interactions in Canada confirmed the apparent unavoidability of significant racially-motivated barriers, regardless of whether they are openly acknowledged or not.

The dominant theme emerging from the initial literature review for this thesis is that Canada's projection of a tolerant multicultural and accepting society is negated by the realities of

the lived experiences of its non-white population and racism towards its Indigenous people remains endemic (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; V. S. Denis, 2007; Lashta, Berdahl, & Walker, 2016), rooted in the colonial history and settler policies on which this country was constructed (J. S. Denis, 2011; V. S. Denis, 2007). Coupled to this theme is the severity of impacts from such ongoing discrimination on the daily lives of Indigenous people, manifested in their continued over-representation in the negatives statistics of socio-economic well-being (Friesen & Krauth, 2010) and Indigenous youth's disengagement from school and overall poor academic achievement rates (Clark, Kleiman, Spanierman, Isaac, & Poolokasingham, 2014; Davison & Hawe, 2012; Cormier, 2010; Hampton & Longman, 2003).

Four sub-topics that have emerged as relevant to this research project topic were examined as part of this review; the socio-economic realities of Indigenous populations in Canada, the evidence of systemic racism toward Aboriginal people in Canadian society, the particular social context of Indigenous youth, and the northern context.

**Socio-economic inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Canada**

As is frequently reported in mainstream media, there is significant evidence of ongoing social and economic inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Indigenous people represent just over 4% of the general population, with the majority being under the age of 25, and are the fastest growing segment of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Socio-economic statistics indicate they are over-represented in the judicial system, have lower graduation and academic achievement rates, (Cormier, 2010; Friesen & Krauth, 2010; Davison & Hawe, 2012; Hampton & Longman, 2003) have higher rates of drug and alcohol addictions,

poverty, abuse and neglect (Cormier, 2010; Friesen & Krauth, 2010) and have trouble securing employment (Hampton & Longman, 2003). In focus groups sessions for Hampton and Longman's study on employment barriers as perceived by Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan, youth participants consistently reported that discriminatory behavior and prejudice from prospective employers restricted their opportunities for secure or steady employment and thus limited the potential improvement of their economic prospects. The ongoing social and economic inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians has been attributed to racism, prejudice and discrimination that First Nations people continue to endure, impacting their health, well-being and overall sense of worth, and preventing their active engagement and successful participation in society (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; Lashta et al., 2016; V. S. Denis, 2007; Hampton & Longman, 2003). What further emerged in the examination of the studies selected for this review is a picture of Indigenous youth in Canada growing up in an environment influenced by discriminatory practices within the educational system and workforce, thus impeding their socio-economic progress and placing them at a considerable disadvantage to their non-Indigenous peers.

### **Systemic racism in Canada towards Indigenous People**

The overwhelming majority of Indigenous people in Canada have experienced racial discrimination, prejudice or negative stereotyping of some form (Clark & al., 2014; Lashta & al., 2016). As is noted by scholars in this review, Canada chooses to project the image of a multicultural and colorblind society that shuns discriminatory and racist behaviors. (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; V. S. Denis, 2007; de Finney, 2010). However, the prevalence of racism in its many

forms – systemic, institutional, cultural, individual – experienced by the Indigenous peoples of this land contradicts this idealized projection (Hampton & Longman, 2003). The legacy of colonialism and settler-imposed racialization continues to this day (Clark et al., 2014).

University of Saskatchewan professor Verna St Denis highlights how Canada’s colonial development roots the ongoing Indigenous / Settler relationship in its practices; “the racialized hierarchal human relations introduced through colonization have intimately and unequally affected Aboriginal families and communities, influencing ideas about who belongs, and who does not” (V. S. Denis, 2007, p.1172). St. Denis further stresses the need for anti-racist education to build bridges in Indigenous-Settler relations, and invites Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians to “work together to uncover and understand how racism and the normalizing and naturalizing of white superiority continues unabated in our schools and communities” (p.1088). It is in this spirit that I proceeded with my examination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth relations in the Yukon.

A particular theme to emerge from this literature review are the new iterations of contemporary racism, referred to by Denis and Lashta & Berdahl as ‘new racism’, as compared to the more overt ‘old-fashioned racism’ of direct attacks or derogatory and demeaning verbal assaults. ‘New racism’ is of a subtler nature, which “originates from the perceived threat that an increasing out-group population poses to in-group members’ way of life” (Lashta et al., 2016, p. 1244). It is however no less destructive or demeaning, and often taints daily interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with the perpetrators frequently unaware of the prejudice expressed in their words or actions (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; Clark et al., 2014; de Finney, 2010).

This ‘new racism’ also finds expression in the subtly delivered attacks, demeaning comments or insults disguised as jokes directed at Indigenous peoples that are sometimes referred to as micro-aggressions. In their study of racism experienced by Indigenous university students on Canadian campuses, Clark, Kleiman et al. describe racial micro-aggressions as “a dynamic interplay between perpetrator and recipient, and focus primarily on the everyday active manifestations (...such as) micro-insults, micro-invalidations, micro-assaults” (Clark et al., 2014, p. 113). The subtle –or not so subtle nature of these micro-aggressions however does not make the cumulative effect on an individual’s sense of self-worth any less damaging (Diangelo, 2018, Bobo 1996).

J.S. Denis emphasizes systemic racism in Canada in the “laws, rules and norms woven into the social system that result in an unequal distribution of economic political and social resources and rewards among various racial groups (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015, p. 221). Denis further points out that although he identified substantial evidence of racism in his research, it was not a subject that non-Indigenous individuals were willing to discuss out in the open. Denis reports that non-Indigenous respondents tended to deny the existence of racism in their community while expressing sympathy for Indigenous people, but would often also criticize what they described as First Nations’ constant reliance on government funding and programs, their seemingly never-ending social problems, their unwillingness to “get over” their issues and would generally hold them responsible for their own social failures (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015).

Denis’ observations were further supported by other scholars in this review; overt “old-fashioned racism” is no longer considered acceptable in modern Canadian society, and Canadians in general tend to avoid discussing racism as a whole, or even acknowledging its

existence in this country, thus making it easier to avoid recognizing its impacts on the lives of Aboriginal people. (Lashta et al., 2016; de Finney, 2010; V. S. Denis, 2007). As Denis points out: “this powerful norm of political avoidance discourages open discussion of racism and colonialism and helps maintain the daily appearance of racial harmony, despite continuing structural inequities” (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015, p. 234)

In a settler society such as Canada racism is detrimental to social cohesion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Lashta et al., 2016), resulting in significant negative health and social impacts to the discriminated members of its population. Settler respondents’ discomfort in Denis’ study around discussions of continued prejudice or discrimination, their continued belief that First Nations people are overly dependent on financial support, the repeated micro-aggressions documented in Clark, Kleiman & al.’s study all point to an unwillingness or inability to connect colonialism’s legacy with First Nations’ current socio-economic struggles, and reveal a lingering undercurrent of prejudice towards Indigenous people. As pointed out by St Denis, J.S.Denis, and Lashta & al., and further emphasized by the youth group discussions and interviews in Hampton & Longman’s study, sustained meaningful education on the legacy of Canada’s colonial past and honest conversations about race in this country is urgently needed to chip away at the persistent racist behavior and beliefs laced throughout Canadian society.

### **Aboriginal Youth in Canadian Society**

Aboriginal youth are struggling with numerous socio-economic challenges in Canadian society; they are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, have lower education and graduation rates than their non-Indigenous peers, and have trouble entering the workforce or

maintain stable employment (Hampton & Longman, 2003). Scholars connect these findings to a systematic exposure to racism that is highly detrimental to Indigenous youth's sense of self-worth and social inclusion (de Finney, 2010; Hampton & Longman, 2003). Indigenous youth report experiencing racism in school, both from peers and educators, leaving them feeling isolated and unwelcome, expected to fail or underachieve, and being negatively stereotyped, across all levels of schooling, from elementary to higher education (Lashta et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2014; Davison & Hawe, 2012). The discrimination and prejudice faced by aboriginal youth nationwide, both inside and outside of the educational system has a detrimental effect on their general well-being and impedes their successful integration and achievement in academic pursuits, the workforce, and society as a whole (Clark et al., 2014; Davison & Hawe, 2012; Hampton & Longman, 2003).

### **The Northern Context**

The social context presents itself differently In Canada's northern territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, and the proportionately higher ratio of Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2011) suggests the possibility of a more egalitarian society. Academic publications on northern and specifically Yukon populations are sparse, however my findings in the course of this literature review suggest that similar patterns of discrimination and racism as those found in urbanized regions of southern Canada are present in the North as well. No research was uncovered addressing Indigenous/ non-Indigenous youth relations in Northern Canada, but studies on northern Indigenous youth employment and education were examined. Consistent with what has been reported for the rest of the country, school-dropout rates are

significantly higher, and employment rates are significantly lower for northern Indigenous youth compared to non-Indigenous, suggesting similar dynamics are impeding their successful development (Abele & Delic, 2014; Davison & Hawe, 2012), and influences on aboriginal youth school engagement originate in their social and economic environments in addition to school context, expectations and resources. In the studies reviewed discussing school engagement in the North, researchers observed a marked degree of positive or negative influence teachers and peers can have on Indigenous youth, particularly in the smaller communities (Lewthwaite et al., 2013; Friesen & Krauth, 2010).

In the course of this review no literature was identified that specifically addressed Indigenous – non-Indigenous youth relations in the Yukon, NWT or Nunavut. J.S. Denis however conducted an 18-month study of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in a small remote northern Ontario town with a high level of cross-population contact, similar to what would be found in the Yukon. Denis notes that although there is significant daily interactions and relationships between Indigenous and Settler population groups – from marriage and friendships to team sports, school and work environments -there is nonetheless deep-rooted prejudice towards the Indigenous population, manifesting itself in ‘new racism’ manners such as blaming First Nations for their socio-economic problems, their need to “get over “ their complaints about the legacy of colonialism, and accusations of laziness or over-reliance on government hand-outs. The refusal to acknowledge the ongoing prejudice embedded in the social structure of this northern community allows its non-indigenous residents to continue on with their daily lives and interactions with Indigenous residents while maintaining the status quo of inequality (Jeffrey S.

Denis, 2015). Denis notes: "...racially stratified settler-colonial context and small-town dynamics breed divisions and silences that shape the forms and meanings of contact in ways that sustain group position prejudice" (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015, p. 222). He concludes that further research is warranted investigating whether similar patterns are at play in Indigenous-Settler relations in other communities or contexts, such as schools or work environments.

### **Literature Review Conclusions**

Dominant themes emerging from the concluding remarks in the examined literature were a need for further examination of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations in Canada, as this area, although key in the social dynamics of this country, seems to be underreported in academic inquiry, particularly as it pertains to youth, as well as a need for increased public acknowledgment and discussion of racism and prejudice towards Indigenous people in Canada, with concentrated effort on better education and understanding of the legacy of Canada's colonial history. The reviewed scholars recognize that discrimination towards First Nations is deeply rooted and embedded into the very social fabric of this country, and dismantling it a challenging prospect requiring sincere public and political will (Lashta et al., 2016; Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; V. S. Denis, 2007; Hampton & Longman, 2003).

### **Introduction**

We moved to Whitehorse, Yukon, just over three years ago, coming from a small primarily Indigenous community in the Northwest Territories. My four kids are Indigenous, Dehcho Dene, from their dad's side. I am non-Indigenous. Moving to Whitehorse, was to us, coming from a town of 1200 where we had lived for the last 12 years, moving to "the city." My

kids had until now gone to school with the same kids they had known their whole lives, in a small school of about 100 students, where everyone had similar backgrounds and family connections. My two oldest were now entering a high school of over 700 students where they knew no one. It was a big transition. To their new and small-town-kids' eyes, this large student body was intimidating to navigate and try and integrate. But as the first few awkward days went by, as they got a better grasp of the school's social structure, they noticed patterns, social groups, and had questions. Being completely new to a high school where the bulk of students already had pre-existing and established relationships, my kids noticed "cliquey" social groups that seemed divided along ethnic and cultural lines, with Indigenous students somewhat apart from the rest. This fact particularly stood out to them, as Indigenous kids.

I found their comments intriguing, a bit discouraging, and I was honestly at first skeptical. Teens are teens, I thought. They are cliquey, they always have in-groups and out-groups. But, maybe. My kids were adamant. This is what they saw. I listened to their words and decided to find out if their observations were simply misconceived assumptions, or if the ethnically-divided population groups they perceived in their high school were indeed a reality. I reached out to people who would have the best insights and understanding of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous youth relationship in Whitehorse high schools; students (ages 18 and up), family members, staff; upwards of 20 people, most of them Indigenous. Did they have similar views? What did the Indigenous/non-Indigenous youth relationship look in the other Whitehorse high schools? What factors influenced this relationship in school, possibly creating division?

As part of a graduate research thesis I sat down for many engaging conversations with individuals who were kind enough to share their stories with me, and while there were differences in experiences from person to person, clear consistencies emerged, common threads that painted a picture of high schools environments with complex social dynamics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, rooted in inequality linked to the colonial legacy of this country.<sup>1</sup> It quickly became clear that racial prejudice between students in Whitehorse, particularly against Indigenous students, is a daily reality, and the resulting in-group/out-group social structure a barrier to relationships, and a strikingly unacknowledged part of the social fabric in the high schools, staff included. But inequality, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in terms of Indigenous students' school experiences, treatment by staff, academic and curricular opportunities, sense of cultural representation and relevance, also contributes to peer relationship barriers, and a sense of alienation from the school community as a whole. Underpinning the racial prejudice and inequality in schools is the continued legacy of Canada's colonialism, the intergenerational trauma still carried by many First Nations families, and the persistent resistance or denial that some non-Indigenous students and staff demonstrate to acknowledging and understanding this history. This reality was reflected in the stories shared with me for this project. Taken together, these factors make for a school environment that does little to encourage relationship building between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of its community.

I write this paper primarily for non-Indigenous readers. There is likely nothing here that will be news for an Indigenous reader; if anything, the stories shared will be all too familiar, and

I will have missed or insufficiently stressed certain facts. As a non-Indigenous person living in Whitehorse, there is a whole layer of social realities experienced by its Indigenous residents that I don't experience, don't understand, and probably don't even see. But by doing this work, I hope to gain a glimpse and better understand parts of this layer, as it plays out in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth relationship in the high schools, and hopefully find ways to help contribute to its improvement.

### **Context**

The Yukon territory is on beautiful land; gorgeous mountainous landscapes, sprawling forests and pristine lakes, clean fresh air. Yukoners are indeed lucky to live here. The Yukon spreads across the traditional territories of 14 First Nations, 11 of which are self-governing. The Self-Government Agreements signed between 1993 and 2005 by Yukon First Nations removed the signatory Yukon First Nations from under the colonial era yet presently still enforced Indian Act of 1876, and are considered some of the most progressive and comprehensive modern treaties in Canada.<sup>2</sup> As such, the Yukon First Nations Self-Government Agreements are strong steps towards self-determination, and from my observations as a non-Indigenous resident, the Yukon Territory strives to be an inclusive land with vibrant Indigenous culture and traditions, where its First Peoples and Settlers cohabitate in a harmonious relationship of equality.

But what is the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship really like in the Yukon? This depends on whom you ask. Carl is an educator in a Whitehorse school, recently moved here after many years in the Northwest Territories, where we first met. Our kids go to the same school, so we chat. Carl is white, originally from Ontario. Interested in my project, Carl kindly agreed to

participate, and we sat down together to a long conversation where he shared his perspectives as both a parent and an educator. In Carl's experience, if you ask the average non-Indigenous Whitehorse resident about what the relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community is like here, they would likely say it's pretty great; that the Yukon does a good job of promoting Yukon First Nations culture and communities, that there is the gorgeous Kwanlin Dūn Cultural Centre downtown by the Yukon river, wonderful cultural events and activities to take part in, and everyone generally gets along quite harmoniously. To a non-Indigenous person, the relationship probably does look pretty great. An Indigenous person however would likely have a different perspective. Carl realizes this, because before moving to Whitehorse, he did his research on what the community was like and asked around, and those were pretty much the answers he got. But what Carl also noticed, is that once he moved to Whitehorse, as they found out he worked as an administrator in a local school, some non-Indigenous parents would ask him why First Nations content was being integrated into school curricula. This was an unnecessary waste of time, in their opinion, so why were all students now being required to study this material, not just Indigenous kids? Carl was very taken aback by the level of negativity and hostility he repeatedly heard, but realized that, seeing a white male teacher, non-Indigenous people assumed him a sympathetic ear to their views, and felt comfortable expressing their disapproval. What does this tell us? That maybe what the relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of the Yukon looks like depends on who you are and where you stand.

Whitehorse is by far the largest urban centre in the Yukon; with a population of 31,808 out of the territory's total of 40,717.<sup>3</sup> The city of Whitehorse is located on the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, both self-governing First Nations whose communities and government offices are located within the city. The majority of the Indigenous population of the Yukon are members of the 14 Yukon First Nations, with a small number of Indigenous peoples from other Nations, often Northwest Territories Dene and Inuvialuit, as well as a small Metis population. There is a significant Filipino community in the Yukon as well, particularly in Whitehorse, which can be seen reflected in the student population. There are fifteen other Yukon communities that range from 50 to 2300 residents, all accessible by road other than the community of Old Crow, which is fly-in only. Many Yukon communities outside of Whitehorse have populations that are predominately Indigenous, although the larger towns of Dawson and Watson Lake have a higher percentage of non-Indigenous residents. Despite having year-round road access, several of these communities are small and considered remote, with limited services, and only six have a high school. Unless students from the communities without high schools are willing to take their classes online, they must go to Whitehorse to complete their education. If they are fortunate, they have family members or friends that they can stay with. If not, they live in the student residence.

There are four high schools in Whitehorse (names have been changed): Tremblay Catholic high school, Poplar Heights Secondary School (English-only regular public high school), and Riverview Secondary School, which has a French Immersion stream as well and an English stream and is next to the student residence for youth from remote communities. There is

also a small French-first high school with a population of 38 students presently housed in the French-first elementary school Marguerite Poirier. A new building for the French high school is currently under construction. In addition to these schools, there is also the Alternative Centre that provides alternative schooling for students wishing to complete their high school outside of the mainstream system, and the Spruce Centre for Experiential Learning that provides semester-long specialty programs in arts and science for interested and eligible high school students. These programs have limited enrollment and admission is application-based.

**Indigenous/non-Indigenous Youth Relationships in Whitehorse High Schools**

**Physical and Social Spaces in High School**

**Riverview Secondary School.**

Two of my kids go to Riverview Secondary School, which is in a central neighborhood of Whitehorse, along the Yukon river. The school building is polished and fresh-looking, the old structures having been torn down and replaced with new construction in 2016. As you walk in, the school is bright, airy and clean. Other than a hand-carved and painted wooden crest hanging in the atrium, there aren't many visual cues to indicate that Riverview Secondary School is located on the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, nor that it is situated in a northern territory whose population is over 23% Indigenous.

To the left of the entrance are the administrative offices and reception desk, and the gym is located in the interior portion of the school, with hallways and classrooms around its perimeter. On the left side hallway of the school past the administration offices are the counselors' offices followed by rooms for the Education Support Workers (ESW). Several Yukon First Nations governments fund Education Support Workers in order to provide assistance to students from their First Nation during their time in high school. Not all Yukon First Nations have the financial resources to hire support staff, and each Education Support Worker has as its primary task to support kids from their Nation, however the ESWs do try and provide assistance to all Indigenous kids whenever possible. The role played by the ESWs is of tremendous benefit to the Indigenous youth in the schools, particularly those staying at the student residence who may not have any other family or support network in Whitehorse, and

their offices and couch area often serve as a gathering space for kids where they feel safe and welcome. In Riverview Secondary School, the location of the ESW offices in a back corner of the school however, away from regular classrooms and high traffic areas, gives a noticeable sense of separation—something that was mentioned to me several times by the students, family members and staff that I spoke with, followed by speculations as to whether this was deliberate. Even if there was no intended separation of populations groups, the placement of designated spaces can still send a subtle message, in this case a sense of “us and them”, to staff and students.

During breaks, when everyone pours out of classrooms, the school seems overfull, the halls crowded, with little room to spare. As described both by school staff and students, during unstructured school time, the teens congregate in their respective, unofficial but socially well-understood zones. During visits to Riverview, I discussed my kids’ observations with a few staff members who agreed to speak with me for this project. I asked if the divided student population groups is something they noticed too, or if it was just my kids misunderstanding their new school’s environment. In order to preserve the anonymity of the staff, I will refrain from any further details about them. The staff I spoke to were quite candid in their descriptions of what they saw, in this case at Riverview, on a daily basis:

because of the layout of the school I think there is... it's very segregated. We have the athletic people that hang out in front of the gym, then we have a Filipino and immigrants’ group that are just always right there down the hallway, they're all right there, and then we have the First Nations over there, and then you'll have your French immersion kids that are down that other hallway, and they pretty much all stick together right, and so it's

very very segregated in regards to... in the context of cliques and who goes where.

Everybody knows where their spot is. And it's not... there are kids that, you know, that will have the confidence and the courage to go anywhere in the school, however if they don't have that courage or if they don't have that good of confidence or self-esteem they're not going to put themselves out there.

I ask them if they think the school administration has noticed this separation also, and if so, whether there were any initiatives underway to improve the relationships between the students. I wonder if some of the separation might be program-based -the French immersion kids for instance, hanging out together— and perhaps greater interaction amongst students could be encouraged to help build relationships? What I hear from the staff is an impression that the administration does not understand the reasons for the apparent division of peer groups or seems unwilling to acknowledge or address it.

We discuss how the out-of-town students living in residence transition and integrate into the Whitehorse high schools. The Fireweed Student Residence is located in a separate building close to Riverview Secondary School as well as Tremblay Catholic Secondary School, which does not have very many Indigenous students. There are usually between 30 to 40 students staying at Fireweed residence, and though not all are Indigenous, school staff tell me that the vast majority are. As Riverview is a few minutes' walk away from the student residence, this is where most of the out-of-town kids go. The transition for these students from their home communities to Whitehorse can be challenging. Leaving their home at a young age, typically 15 or 16, to go to high school detaches youth from their support network of family and friends, and places them at

a disadvantage from their school peers residing with family in Whitehorse. As shared by a school staff member:

I think for some [Indigenous students] it's challenging and difficult, especially for the kids that come from the communities, cause it's their first time here so they need better supports (...) They tell me they're shy and they have high anxiety, and there's a lot of kids here, so they have a lot of struggle, I think, trying to get to know people.

Not only do the out-of-town students have to transition and adjust to the new challenges of high school, which is a big enough shift in itself, but they now find themselves living in an unfamiliar environment with new staff, rules, and requirements. As pointed out by high school staff, the student residence is another government-run educational institution, despite efforts to make it seem otherwise, and once again Indigenous youth from remote communities have to leave their homes to go to school. It isn't residential school, but it is a form of inequality between Whitehorse youth and youth from smaller or remote Yukon communities. Students living at Fireweed residence are expected to follow rules, with set times to wake up, curfews, meal times and so forth. As with any normal teen, observing rules can be at times challenging and kids may occasionally try to bend them, however the penalties at the residence can go as far as expulsion, which can jeopardize the students' education, as they will then need to find a place to live on their own so that they can finish high school in Whitehorse. The education staff I spoke with noted that transitioning and integrating into a school of over 700 can be difficult for many of these youth, as they often struggle to connect with the larger student body. They pointed out that sometimes Indigenous students from smaller communities come from different socio-economic

backgrounds than their Whitehorse peers, and differences in styles of dress, clothing brands, or extra-curricular activities, all part of teen social codes, can influence how well they are accepted and integrated into the more urban student population.<sup>4</sup>

Such differences in context and personal circumstances for the predominantly Indigenous youth in Fireweed residence can impact their ability to succeed in school and create a sense of separation from other students. Without efforts to help rural students with their transition, meeting people, establishing connections and building relationships, the separation risks being maintained. Furthermore, staff speak of the academic challenges that many of the rural community students face; coming from small remote schools with limited resources, these youths may not yet be meeting their grade level expectations. The students then find themselves struggling to catch up in the Whitehorse high schools or are discouraged by the gaps in their academic achievements, which are not a reflection of their true ability and capacity to learn.

The ones that are coming in, well all [Indigenous students] actually, but especially the ones that are coming in [from the communities], they're at a lower grade level and so you can really see the difference, so they're put in modified classes, which is difficult.

These academic gaps can again reinforce and perpetuate the racialized and false stereotype that Indigenous kids are less able to succeed academically, and can also contribute to further barriers in the building of relationships with their non-Indigenous peers. The staff point out that in their experience, the Indigenous students not living in residence but living in Whitehorse with family and with strong family support, they see succeed academically, and even on the honour roll.

**Poplar Heights Secondary School.**

Riverview Secondary is the high school I am most familiar with; my eldest daughter graduated from there last year, and I have two other kids attending it right now. Sports tournaments and band practices have brought me to Poplar Heights Secondary School in the subdivision of Poplar Heights, about 15 minutes from downtown Whitehorse, but otherwise my contact with this school has been minimal. PH, as everyone calls it, is a large single-story building on sprawling grounds surrounded by trees. Though an older building than Riverview, it has the biggest gym out of all the schools and ample classrooms to accommodate all its students. As much as Riverview is crowded and seems ready to overflow, PH, both indoors and out, has more than enough space for its roughly 450 kids.

I cast around to find students or former students from Poplar Heights High School who would be willing to share their experiences with me. A work colleague connects me with members of her extended family, engaged and outspoken young adults, keen to share their perspectives as Indigenous students. I meet with Thomas and Clara, recent Poplar Heights Secondary graduates, at a downtown cafe in Whitehorse to chat about their high school experiences. Currently in their first year at Yukon College, Thomas and Clara are close friends, both extremely bright and engaged high achievers, fiercely proud of their Indigenous identity and deeply connected to their respective cultures and traditions. I describe to them my kids' impression of Riverview' socially divided youth populations, particularly between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and ask them if in their opinion these observations are accurate, or a mis-representation of normal teen cliquishness; they immediately start nodding their heads

before I get to the “mis-representation of normal teen cliquishness?” part of my sentence. This reaction, I have come to realize, is becoming a pattern with all of the local Indigenous people I have spoken with in the course of this project, when I bring up racial prejudice and socially-divided youth in the high schools here. As a non-Indigenous person, I also realize that I am slightly taken aback by this unequivocal response; like many other non-Indigenous folks in Whitehorse, I see that I am simply oblivious to what is likely a daily reality to many Indigenous people living here.

Thomas, although a former Poplar Heights student, wishes to begin our conversation by sharing his perspectives on the student group division at Riverview. To him, it is partly linked to what he sees as the overcrowding of the school, which in his opinion forces students to conglomerate in groups where they find comfort and connection, rather than try and navigate the intimidating larger mass of students. Thomas and Clara do consider the smaller student body at Poplar Heights Secondary as more blended and cohesive than Riverview, which they describe, based on their conversations with friends and relatives who go there, as being extremely “cliquey.” Thomas and Clara suspect that PH’s better mix is likely due to the smaller size of the student population—their graduating class was of just over 60 kids, whereas Riverview the same year had over 100—which may make it easier to meet other students. As they both recognize, teens will tend to gravitate into social groups with those they feel comfortable and who share interests or activities, which is normal and expected social behavior. But according to Thomas and Clara, Poplar Heights’s lower student numbers allows for increased opportunities to interact

and get to know more of their peers, whether in class or extracurricular activities, and form relationships.

Clara is a strong student with an aptitude for sciences; as she moved through higher academic streams in high school however she noticed that there were very few other Indigenous students in these classes with her. An in-depth examination of the reasons behind this absence is not within the scope of this writing. But Thomas and Clara have their opinion on the matter. Thomas describes himself and Clara as bright high achieving students, but says that because they are successful academically then it is assumed that they aren't Indigenous:

Clara and I are super smart, and everyone would not think that we're First Nation and that [doing well in school] would be something that we think is important in our lives, but then when they look at people who aren't as successful in school they just automatically equate them as First Nations, and that's racist.

Thomas and Clara both noticed how some teachers in their high school would pair up Indigenous kids for assignments; Thomas sees this as a form of segregation, separating the Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids for school work. He even describes school counselors who would direct Indigenous kids toward lesser challenging course like Communication instead of English Honours or History, rather than encourage them to push themselves and succeed. As emphasized by Thomas, the unwarranted yet repeated lowering of the educational bar for Indigenous students on the assumption, by teaching staff and counselors, that the students will be unable to succeed in more challenging curricular streams limits the academic reach and career potential of Indigenous students who could otherwise thrive, if given the opportunity and support. Thomas:

I think there also is inequality when [school] counselors would tell [Indigenous] students like don't do English Honors, don't even do English, do Communication or do First Nation Studies 12 instead of History just cause they didn't think that they [Indigenous students] could push themselves but in reality they should have put them in those classes and said if you push yourself you're actually going to enjoy it and you're going to better yourself for your life instead of just generally try and graduate from those classes.

These segregating actions by high school staff, as described by Thomas and Clara and other Indigenous students and family members in this project, are based on false and racialized assumptions that further serve to reinforce negative stereotypes, limit opportunities for Indigenous students to succeed, and contribute to relationships barriers with non-Indigenous youth on whom no such prejudiced academic limitations are placed.

**The Alternative Centre.**

I didn't come across anyone in my networks who could speak at length about Indigenous students' experiences at Tremblay Catholic Secondary School. I was however, directed to the Alternative Center, as a good place to connect with older students. The AC, as it is known, provides self-paced learning for students who may have disengaged from the mainstream school system, faced personal challenges, or simply wish to explore an alternative approach to completing their high school education. The Alternative Centre offers a more personalized and relationship-based approach to support students towards academic success. Located within a single-story retail complex downtown Whitehorse, the AC is a small collection of offices, classrooms and larger communal workspaces through which students and staff drift in and out of.

There is soft chatting and instruction going on between teaching staff and students sitting at work tables, while others are working quietly on their own at computer workstations. A student is working on a group mural project in the hallway; a teacher stops by to look at the developing piece and offers words of praise and encouragement to the young artist. As I chat with a staff member in her office, another student stops in to show some beading she is working on. The space feels relaxed and communal, almost intimate, yet busy and productive. Everyone seems to know each other.

I meet with four young Indigenous adults at the Centre; Sarah, Jared, Tanya and Tim. All of them speak with great enthusiasm and appreciation of the AC and its staff, finding it a supportive and welcoming environment in which to complete their studies. In our conversations, they share their perspectives and experiences from their time in the other Whitehorse high schools. I sit down with Tanya, who is kindly willing to take time out of her lunch break to speak with me. She carries a steaming mug of soup with her into a small office space at the AC where we can chat quietly. Tanya is from Carcross, a beautiful community of about 500 roughly 70 km from Whitehorse, on the shores of Bennett Lake, large and icy cold, edged by sandy beaches and mountains. Carcross is home to the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, a powerful self-governing First Nation that has established a strong cultural presence in its community with the construction of Carcross Commons, a collection of small mural-painted houses for artists, artisans and food shops, and the recent completion of their Learning Centre, a majestic log building fronted by stunning hand-carved totem poles representing each of the 6 C/TFN clans.

Because Carcross is too small for the Yukon Government's Department of Education to establish a high school for its students, Tanya had to go to Whitehorse to continue her education. She moved to the Fireweed student residence and went to school at Riverview. There she mainly hung out with other Indigenous kids from her community that she knew, but she does remember noticing divided population groups in the school:

I went to Riverview for a couple of years before I came here and we mainly stuck together because we were all related and most of us grew up together, whether it was in Carcross or Teslin and what not, we all managed to come there at some point so we all knew each other (...) I remember the French immersion kids they just stuck to one side of their school where they had all their classes, yeah, there was like a lot of different groups, preps, athletes, smokers, you know...

Overall Tanya feels pretty positive about her time at Riverview and the student residence, but describes it as more of a socializing time, mainly with her Indigenous friends, and not so much for school learning. Tanya suggests I speak to her best friend and roommate at the residence who is now also at the AC, as she says her experience at the high school was very different, and not very good, but unfortunately we were not able to connect.

Jared is a young Indigenous musician who is well connected in the local hip hop community. He walks into the room with his headphones around his neck and has the confident chilled demeanor of an artist plugged into the local scene. Jared no longer attends the AC but still stops by to visit with the staff and other students. Jared also went to Riverview. During his time there he did notice cliques and social groups and also observed that Indigenous kids tended to

hang out separately. Jared didn't see these social divisions as much of a problem however, it was just the way it was between the kids, but he didn't really integrate into any of the groups either, describing himself more as the guy hanging out in the corner that nobody noticed.

Interestingly, in each of my individual conversations with Sarah, Jared and Tanya, they all describe the "smoke pits", the designated areas for smokers on school grounds at both Riverview and Poplar Heights, as places to socialize and meet other kids. Jared doesn't even smoke, yet he would go and hang out at the smoke pit while at Riverview just to visit and chat with other students. Tanya tells me:

I noticed that, I think towards my last year there, a lot more kids started smoking, so like, all the like French kids, athletes, stuff like that, we'd all come out for our smoke breaks and that's where we would have our actual talking to each other, whether we were buying smokes from each other or you know, need a lighter (...) but, other than that we mainly just stuck to our own.

Teens connecting and building relationships across different social groups while engaging in unhealthy activities such as smoking is probably not something that should be encouraged; as a parent, this is not where I would like to see my kid. Yet, there does not appear to be many opportunities where students from different programs and social circles are pulled together in a designated space for a fixed amount of unstructured time, with some sort of catalyst or connector to initiate conversation. In this case, it's the exchange of smokes or lighters. Interestingly, - although this may seem a bit of a stretch- the social environment of the high school smoke pit reproduces some of the elements recommended for successful intergroup contact to reduce

prejudice between groups:<sup>5</sup> equality of status (everyone there is a smoker), cooperation (sharing smokes and lighters), common goals (want to have a smoke) and support from authorities (designated and authorized area for smoking during breaks). For the kids that are not engaged in sports or other team building activities, are too shy or reserved to join a club or reach out to new acquaintances in class or during breaks, there may not be many such opportunities for building relationships, outside of their usual social group.

### **Racist Jokes, Derogatory Terms, Racial Bias, Stereotypes; What Racism Looks Like in High School**

Back with Riverview school staff, I discuss social interactions between the different student population groups; as these staff see it, daily intergroup contact does occur, without visible coolness or overt hostility. Yet relationships across these student population groups don't seem frequent, and racial bias and prejudice do appear to taint opinions and perceptions, particularly towards the Indigenous youth. The staff I spoke with describe instances where racist terms are tossed around by students—about First Nations people, but also other ethnic groups—meant as “jokes” and teasing not to be taken seriously, yet this is language that is known to be offensive and derogatory. I speak with George, who has worked at Riverview for over a decade. When I ask about racial prejudice amongst the students, George is unequivocal. According to him, there are definite and consistent racist behaviors and incidents, even increasingly so, directed primarily towards the Indigenous students from non-Indigenous kids. As he shares examples of racial prejudice he has witnessed or heard of in the high schools, George firmly and categorically states that racism against indigenous youth in the schools persists. But to this point,

George also wants to make clear that although Indigenous students are often the primary targets, unfortunately, it doesn't stop there:

It's all. It's all. It's not just one group or the brown and white, it's all. And it's ugly. (...)

It's learned, it's learned stuff, a lot of it, it's learned racism or passed down and so a lot of them don't even know what is, but it's out, it's in the families.

Back at the Alternative Centre, when I ask Tanya and Jared about racially-motivated incidents in high school, they say they don't recall experiencing any themselves before coming to the AC. But interestingly, in my separate conversations with Tanya and Jared, both of them went on to discuss incidents they heard about that involved racial slurs being used against Indigenous friends or family members in school, at Riverview and Poplar Heights Secondary, and both do state having definitely heard comments with racist undertones targeting Indigenous people. When I ask her for examples of what she has heard, Tanya clarifies:

There are like little remarks of discrimination and stuff like that (...) like I don't think it was meant to come off as racist, but (...) it's the kind of comment that makes me kind of look like, wait, wait what??

I ask Thomas and Clara about their experiences at Poplar Heights Secondary; did they experience prejudice or hear derogatory terms being used? Clara describes herself as very fair, and "not looking super First Nations compared to some of my cousins." She says because of this, non-Indigenous kids feel comfortable using racial slurs around her, even directed at her, in the guise of jokes. She lists these words to me, but they will not be repeated here; I am dismayed that kids would throw these racist terms around so casually, thinking them harmless teasing.

When Clara takes offence at the racist language, the non-Indigenous kids minimize and dismiss her reaction as not valid, because she “doesn’t even look native, so it's fine, you don’t need to defend your people.” Clara recalls wearing items of traditional clothing made by family members, precious and meaningful to her, and being teased about these by non-Indigenous students. It may not appear as a racist attack, but mocking their regalia or hand-made gauntlets is yet another form of damaging micro-aggression for an Indigenous youth to absorb and internalize. This seems to be a common thread in the descriptions of racist-tinged occurrences against Indigenous students in high school, shared in these conversations: subtle digs, but not blatant hate-filled attacks; micro-aggressions, and a “feeling” of racial bias and prejudice lacing words or actions, picked up in the tone or inferred meaning of a comment, but not obvious enough to call someone out on.

From where Thomas and Clara both stand, they do not hesitate in describing such behavior by non-Indigenous students as racism; even though words are meant as “jokes,” to their ears, they are offensive and racist attacks disguised as playful teasing. Thomas relates how the students would excuse themselves by stating that because their intent is not racist then they aren’t being racist, regardless of how hurtful their words may be. These stories are echoed by many others shared in this project.

Also, very angering and frustrating for both Thomas and Clara, was the reaction of so many non-Indigenous students during the teaching of the Residential Schools unit in their grade 12 Social Studies class. They heard comments like “why do we need to learn this? why are we living in the past? this is just a waste of time.” They both feel like the topic of residential schools

is insufficiently addressed in class to begin with, but the lack of interest and disrespect from their non-Indigenous classmates is infuriating. Clara recalls an incident where her whole class erupted in a shouting match over a discussion on cultural appropriation and Victoria's Secret models wearing First Nations type headdresses during their annual runway show. Clara found herself to be the minority voice defending the Indigenous position against her defensive and angry classmates:

It was awful, I actually got really angry and started yelling at someone, because it was about cultural appropriation, [and they would say] how we just needed to get over it and I was like no! (...) I was like "this has affected my family greatly!" And I went off and it was really bad, they were yelling over top of each other and at the teacher and they were like "no I don't care!" And I was like, woah, this is a classroom full of people who don't know anything about the history of First Nations people in the Yukon. And like they try to teach it and introduce it in school but I don't think it was introduced enough, it was skimmed on the surface, enough that kids were slightly aware, but they were still racist about it.

The teacher's reaction to the upheaval in her classroom, was to shut down the discussion and cancel the assignment, rather than try to turn it into an opportunity for learning and teaching. According to Clara, the teacher was just too overwhelmed, ill-equipped, and unwilling to handle such a challenging discussion. Thomas and Clara, completing each other's thoughts, add:

(Thomas) I think that it goes back to the point that we were talking about earlier, and why is it always on Aboriginal people the burden to explain the atrocities that happened, and I

think that comes back to... (Clara) then in class being like come on guys this happened, and it's really hard to convince 30 other not like-minded people of something like that.

Non-Indigenous readers let's pause for a moment and consider those words, by two young bright minds, confronted by the ignorance and disinterest of their non-Indigenous classmates. If another argument is needed in support of greater emphasis on teaching the Canadian colonial legacy in schools, and at an early age, then Clara's story is a powerful one.

To hear from more parents, I reach out to social acquaintances of mine, John and Tara. They have a daughter, Megan, who is in her final year of high school at Poplar Heights Secondary. John is a citizen of the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, and Tara is white. As they watched their daughter move up through elementary school and transition to high school, they saw a marked shift in her peer group and relationships. According to her parents, Megan's experience in her Elementary school was nothing but positive. Close to the Kwanlin Dün First Nation village, within the newer subdivisions of Whitehorse on the ridge above the valley, Elijah Smith Elementary School had a mandate that emphasized community and connection with its students and students' families. While a student there, John and Tara saw their daughter as a well-adjusted child with friends from many different backgrounds. The school held numerous Indigenous cultural activities, crafts, gatherings, and also had a very popular dance group that, although grounded in Yukon First Nations' cultural traditions, welcomed and included kids from all ethnic backgrounds. To her mom Tara, all of this changed as Megan switched over to Poplar Heights Secondary School. Whereas in elementary school Megan's friends were from diverse backgrounds, Indigenous and non-Indigenous mixed together, at Poplar Heights her friend group

became primarily Indigenous. As John and Tara see it, this is now where Megan feels safest, and accepted. John reflects:

People tend to drift it seems to me into their little silos where there's comfort and there's no challenge. Especially someone like our daughter who I think you know needs safety, needs that feeling of safety and comfort. And I know that now she's embraced by those kids cause she's the exact same color as them; that, that is what drew them.

Listening to John speak, Tara nods her head and continues:

I just think it's more of a closeness and the feeling of safety I think, and acceptance, and you don't feel like inferior, maybe, not inferior but not judged maybe, I don't know... maybe that's it...

When I ask them if there were any other factors that led Megan to find safety within an Indigenous peer group, John and Tara describe incidents that they have cobbled together from bits and pieces shared by Megan that involve racist verbal attacks and comments made by some of her former white friends towards her Indigenous friends. Tara concludes:

The white girls would act superior around her and her native friends and you know, call her native friends trash, and you know... so when people do that kind of stuff then you say: oh that's how they think of us, that's how they think of us, okay...

What was especially hurtful to John and Tara as they watched this divide grow, as these racist words were directed to their Indigenous daughter and her Indigenous friends by white classmates, is that all of these kids had grown up together and been friends since elementary school, since daycare. To Megan's parents, the shift, the break is clear. The transition from grade

school to high school, the change in community, and there the barriers went up. John and Tara try and understand this emergence of racist behavior and prejudice amongst Megan's former white friends. They can only speculate, but suspect a lot of this racial division is due to peer pressures and influences on their young pliable minds by other biased youth, or even family members.

I ask John and Tara about the staff, which is predominantly white; do they think the school staff or administration are aware of these instances of prejudice and racist behavior against Indigenous students, and if so, how are they addressing it? Tara pauses for a moment, then says to me with a shrug:

I don't really think they [school staff and administration] think of it as an issue, because they don't go home with that. It's not something they... unless they have a child that is in one of these groups, like an adopted child or whatever then they might hear how their child feels in that sense, but I don't think so... They probably just say, "oh it's like the pigs stick with the pigs and the ducks stick with the ducks and the sheep with the sheep."

They just think all that's nature and don't really look at [the division amongst students] at any other depth, like why is it that, you know, why won't they mix?

I go back to George, with his many years of work experience in the Whitehorse high schools; does he think that the lack of action on the part of school staff has anything to do with racial bias or prejudice against Indigenous people? Or is it just not knowing what to do? George expresses a similar feeling as John and Tara; that the staff in the school do see the separation of groups, the limited interaction, but don't want to address it. George has been working in the school system

for over a decade and feels disheartened and discouraged by the lack of progress in the relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community, both staff and students, of the school. If anything, he almost feels like it's getting worse, not better:

Personally, and I would have never said this years ago, but over the last few years, when kids would say "the teacher's racist those guys are racist" this and this and that I would say "you know what, that's strong, let's see, how about let's just say that they don't like that behavior, that doesn't make them a racist, you're late all the time" [and kids would say] "it's cause of my brown skin!" and I would try to explain to them you know I think it's the behavior, I don't think your skin has anything to do with it. But as time has gone on, and the experiences with [a specific teacher at the school that demonstrated repeated racial bias] and as I see how the administration deal with some of the First Nations kids, yeah, yep, there's clearly prejudice and racism within the staff and the administration here.

George feels that the additions of Yukon First Nations history and culture to the school curricula are forced, a result of strong lobbying by the Yukon First Nations' organizations and leadership, but that the motivation at the Department of Education to make meaningful change and build connection with the Indigenous students and the school community just isn't there. George further shares his concerns about some school staff's racial bias against Indigenous people:

I guess I didn't want to see it, I was hoping it wasn't there you know, I think, but you know, I've been here many years, and yeah, it's here [racism], it's here, and I don't know if it's ever going to go... I really hope so, but I think it's very hard to change people's

attitudes, you can't make them think a certain way if they have feelings about things, or are not interested as teachers in learning more about trauma, and Indigenous youth, or residential schools, or if they don't really want to learn about what's the driving force behind some of the kids' issues and really go into that. You can't force them to like a nation of people.

“You can't force them to like a nation of people.” Those words just hang in the air.

To add insult to injury, George describes being at Yukon First Nations history and cultural Training workshops that all school staff are mandated to attend and witnessing a couple of staff members, teachers from Riverview, giggling and scrolling on their phones while elders were sharing stories about surviving residential school. George speaks with such passion about his work with his students, his dedication shines through every word. But when talking about the racial bias against Indigenous people that he still sees to this day in the schools, both from staff and students, he speaks with discouragement and bitterness.

George does emphasize that these prejudiced teachers and staff represent a minority and that there are many dedicated teachers working hard to help all students learn and grow and succeed. To be clear, most of the conversations I had for this project included mention of teaching and administrative staff that were often very supportive and encouraging of Indigenous students, with a few noted teachers that were exceptional and went out of their way to deliver meaningful and engaging classes. Prejudiced, racially-biased staff may be a minority within the Whitehorse school system, however this minority is still sufficient to taint the experiences of Indigenous students and have a strong negative impact on their education and school successes.

Racism and prejudice are still to this day part of the lived experiences of Indigenous people in Whitehorse and of students in high schools. Much as the non-Indigenous community would prefer to keep silent on this fact, all of the First Nations people I spoke to during the course of this project, upwards of 25, confirmed this as a reality.

**Inequality in Resources for Yukon First Nations Cultural Education**

Thomas and Clara are confident and outgoing young adults; both had good social circles while studying at Poplar Heights Secondary, but they noticed that several of their Indigenous peers hung out separately. Thomas uses the word “segregation” when describing the division he saw between Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids in his school. I mention that segregation is a pretty strong word, but it is one that keeps coming up in the conversations for this project.

Thomas quickly responds:

It is a really strong word, and I would continue to use that word, because until Yukon First Nations have an equal place at the table where all of our rights are being represented equally and everyone in society acknowledges that, there’s always going to be segregation.

When I ask Thomas and Clara how they feel this is demonstrated in the school system, they bring up how, at Poplar Heights Secondary, they were unable to pursue their Indigenous languages studies due to a lack of qualified staff to teach the classes, yet there are always French and Spanish teachers; how they did not feel that Yukon First Nations culture was truly included and represented in school, and that Indigenous cultural events and activities that did take place were minimal, and not very meaningful. Clara adds: “But then they [the school] kind

of shoved French down our throats... and so we learned French, but it was not a good experience for me, so I don't really like speaking French". This was an experience also shared by John and Tara's daughter Megan; she wished to continue the Southern Tutchone language classes at Poplar Heights Secondary School that she had begun at Elijah Smith School, but midway through there was no longer a teacher, then another one took over the class, but was non-Indigenous, and did not speak the language. So, Megan dropped the class, because what was the point? Her high school language options then were to take French, or Spanish, as those were always available. French instruction as part of Yukon school curricula or as immersive programs, in addition to the existence of a separate French only elementary school in Whitehorse, and now high school, comes up often in these conversations. It's a source of frustration for Yukon First Nations, and appears to be somewhat of a relationship barrier in itself between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community, both in and out of the schools. As part of Canada's Official languages policy, French instruction is mandatory here from grades 5 to 8.<sup>6</sup> Although there is of course much benefit to the learning of a second language, both for brain and personal development, the fact that the language of a colonizing nation is imposed on Indigenous students, "forced on us" as one parent stated, when Yukon First Nations languages instruction is intermittent or simply unavailable, is a source of bitterness for many of the Indigenous students and families I spoke with. Thomas also points out that in addition to the inadequate access to Indigenous language or relevant Yukon First Nations curricular content, Indigenous students from the communities attending high school in Whitehorse may also have left, on top of their families and homes, the cultural teachings and traditions of their Nation to learn a western

education system that they may not feel applies to them. Furthermore, the high schools do not visually much reflect Yukon First Nations culture or traditions, and cultural activities or events are few, and do not always feel very meaningful. John and Tara also discussed with me their daughter Megan's experiences at Elijah Smith Elementary School where Yukon First Nations cultural activities were frequent and prominent, and served as a powerful connector between the students. To John, in comparison, the few Indigenous cultural activities that do take place at Poplar Heights feel forced, as if the school is simply fulfilling a mandatory Department of Education dictated requirement:

I know they do stuff, but it's the approach to it, it's like, check bannock, and moose stew dinner, check, and I've got a list of things (...) That's what it feels like to me, like, obligatory: "this is the new system for us now, we need to check the diversity. Do we have... oh no diversity? Oh, geez well we better get whatever is that diversity on staff" or I don't know...

### **Inequity in Resources Between French and Yukon First Nations Programs in Whitehorse**

In Whitehorse, there is a French-only elementary school, a French-only high school, two French immersion elementary schools and one French Immersion high school. At this time, there are no Yukon First Nations Languages immersion programs, and no First Nations schools, despite the fact that Indigenous languages are in desperate need of revitalization efforts.<sup>7</sup> According to Official Languages Canada, French is the mother tongue of 5% of the population in Yukon.<sup>8</sup> According to the last available census (2016), 23.3% of Yukon's population identified

as Indigenous.<sup>9</sup> As described by Carl, the white school administrator who spoke at the beginning of this paper:

I can tell you some of the people I've worked with are feeling very frustrated right now because they're trying to move forward with First Nations agendas and First Nations education and a thorn in a lot of people's side is French, it's a thorn, and it's hurtful, because the French kids get so much more money (...) When you look at a school like EMP [the French-first elementary school -] the joke is its publicly-funded private school, look at the trips they go on, they do phenomenal things (...), so talk about an us and them? there is an Us and Them, and another Them. So that's definitely felt by a number of First Nations people that get very upset about it. They say "it's our languages that are dying, not French, yet they [French programs] get the support."

At this time, there are no immersive Indigenous studies programs comparable to the French programs in Whitehorse, or the Yukon. In June 2019 the Office of the Auditor General released their Report on Education in the Yukon, which states that the Department of Education is not meeting the needs of its rural students, particularly Indigenous rural students, nor is Yukon First Nations language and culture instruction sufficiently included and supported in schools.<sup>10</sup> The Yukon Government announced early 2019 the establishment in collaboration with the Council of Yukon First Nations' Chiefs' Committee on Education of a new Assistant Deputy Minister of First Nations Initiatives position within the Department of Education, who "will work to establish effective partnerships with Yukon First Nations and implement initiatives supporting the success of First Nations learners".<sup>11</sup> Efforts do appear to be underway to better provide for

Yukon First Nations education in schools and will hopefully be successful in supporting greater language and cultural instruction.

### **Seeking Connection, Seeking Community in High School**

The desire for connection, and the sense of alienation of Indigenous students from their school community; these concerns are repeatedly expressed in project conversations by parents and staff, witnessing their students' search for comfort and safety at school. John remembers when Megan was a student at Elijah Smith Elementary School; teachers did not allow separation around student population groups to happen. Staff emphasized community, inclusiveness, and put considerable effort towards achieving these goals. The staff were open and engaged with parents, greetings were said in the morning in Indigenous languages, the principal at the time was always visible, standing at the door and welcoming kids to school every morning, asking how family members were doing, chatting about pets; all these actions fostered a sense of connection and community amongst the students, their families, and the school staff. To John, it was the dedication of the Elijah Smith Elementary School principal of the time to the memory and spirit of Elijah Smith,<sup>12</sup> and respect for the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation on which the school was built, that guided his community-focused approach to administering the school.

Although a member of a Yukon First Nation, John grew up with very little connection to his culture and traditions. To him, seeing his daughter Megan experience what he lacked through the cultural activities in her elementary school gave him comfort that she would regain a measure of what he was deprived of, and could not give her.

She's getting some connection to that, and when she's old enough we can talk about these things in a way that I may not be informed to answer, but I can put her in touch with people who are informed to answer, so at least we're on a great path here [at Elijah Smith]. And then high school hits, and all that changed.

Reflecting on their daughter's school experiences, John and Tara wistfully describe Megan's enthusiasm for her elementary school staff, particularly the Indigenous culture and language teachers; John remembers seeing Megan happily run up and hug any they saw around town. There is definitely none of that closeness with her current high school teachers, As John puts it "The connections there are just so much weaker." The connection to staff, the push for community that helped form bonds and relationships between kids of all ethnic backgrounds at Elijah Smith Elementary school during Megan's time there, John and Tara no longer see it at the high school. To John, Poplar Heights Secondary is representative of European values and educational philosophy, and feels more like a business than a school:

Well it's "their" school system, it's not traditional, with [our] traditional values, it is the institutionalized values that they say are important that come from European influences I would say. [...] It's like a business, it's not personal, it lacks that human element.

### **High School in Whitehorse; A portrait**

A picture is painted here, as the same phrases keep coming back in these conversations. Although the stories shared with me varied with each individual, from school to school, year to year, I hear clear, recurring themes, as I listen to the lived experiences of Indigenous students in Whitehorse high schools. With words like community, supportive, welcoming, inclusive,

connection, relationships, school is remembered fondly, positively. Other stories are punctuated with division, separation, segregation, inequality, alienation, prejudice, stereotypes, racism, often within the same story, the same school. Looming over all of these stories, like the great dark shadow that it is, is the history of Canada; of colonialism, its assimilationist policies and residential schools for Indigenous peoples, and the enduring intergenerational trauma these left behind. Tanya, George, Jared, Clara, John, Tara, Thomas, and many others; students, staff, parents, all mentioned, during the course of our discussions, a mother, father, grandmother, or other family member who went to residential school, and came back carrying the scars of trauma into their family's lives. This paper isn't the place to delve into the Canadian colonial legacy, but its inescapable presence sat lurking in the corner throughout all of our conversations.

I spoke with many individuals to complete this project; more people than I could include here. They generously shared their stories about how their Indigenous identity influenced their experiences and relationships in high school. I am deeply grateful for their willingness to open up to me, a stranger to some of them, and share these sometimes painful memories. The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Whitehorse is much improved from what it was two or three decades ago, certainly. The schools are better, the racism less obvious or tolerated, by far. But it remains. Tensions are simmering under the surface and flare up when triggered, as in the resentment expressed at the Blanket exercise by Poplar Heights students, or during the heated group discussion on cultural appropriation in Clara's social studies class. As re-affirmed by the bulk of the participants in this project, and the stories and anecdotes they shared with me - both indigenous and non-Indigenous - is still much ignorance, denial, and

disinterest about the colonial history of this country, among both non-Indigenous staff and students.

The number of people I spoke with for this project may not be considered sufficient to draw conclusive statements about the mainstream school system in Whitehorse. Nevertheless, the message rising from the collective voices of school staff Indigenous students, and family members is loud enough to demand attention, and their experiences are not to be ignored. The consistent patterns that emerged from this project conversations, of racial prejudice against Indigenous students, of their sense of alienation from the school community, of separation and inequality, in my opinion clearly warrant greater in-depth examination, followed by meaningful action. There is a sense of discouragement and urgency from Indigenous parents and education staff. As George emphatically states:

Our [indigenous] kids are falling, a lot of them are falling, and falling quick, and if we don't start to change the system and make them feel valued in here, make them feel like this is their community, we're not going to... They're going to leave and we're going to deal with the same issues that we've been dealing with, and it's going to be even harder to climb out of that box they put us in.

Denying that racism against Indigenous peoples continues to exist, in Canada, in the Yukon, in Whitehorse, amongst high school students, staff, allows it to persist and prevail, sheltered by silence.

As I work on revising my draft of this paper, I chat with an elder from Kwanlin Dün First Nation and tell him about this project. My hope is that he will agree to review my work and

provide feedback and comments. As we talk, he tells me that just that same day, he was supporting a young woman from his First Nation who had to defend her teen from a racist verbal attack from another student at their high school. A teacher had come upon them just at the moment when the young mother was trying to get the non-Indigenous student to stop taunting her son and leave them alone. But the teacher appeared to take the side of the non-Indigenous student, and the mother was furious. Racism lurks, close at hand.

Finally, what is the message here? It's a simple one, from all the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people I spoke with in the course of this project; racism, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, are alive and well in the high schools, and in the Whitehorse community as a whole. They create divisions, form barriers to relationships. They must be addressed, and in Appendix A are compiled the project contributors' suggestions as to how to do so.

Whitehorse is a beautiful community. The Yukon is a gorgeous territory. But to pretend that all live in harmony and that racist behaviors are not still hurting people every day in this town, is a lie. Racism towards Indigenous people in the Yukon is still a daily reality. And it is in the high schools. The youth see it, the staff see it, the parents see it. Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. If we, as members of this society, truly wish to heal the Indigenous-non-Indigenous relationship, and see it grow, between kids from different communities and backgrounds, then barriers to these relationships must be acknowledged and named for what they are. As in the heartfelt words said to me by a young woman from Champagne Aishihik First Nation who is dedicating her career to helping break down barriers between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of the Yukon: "We as a human race need to stop it, we just need to

## **BARRIERS TO INDIGENOUS/NON-INDIGENOUS YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS**

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stop, not just in the Yukon Territory but as a human race, it needs to stop, we need to stop hurting each other”.

To the non-Indigenous reader, I leave you with these words, from a young leader and youth facilitator from Kwanlin Dūn First Nation who provided guidance for this project:

“No one is asking you to apologize for the actions of your ancestors; we are asking you to dismantle the systems they built, and you maintain.”

**“You can’t force them to like a nation of people”**

**Relationship-Building Recommendations from Project Contributors**

You know I keep going back to it and I will say it again because I think it’s at the cornerstone of everything, and that’s community. Whitehorse has grown and it is improving, and I think part of that is the settlement of land claims. People are now stretching their political muscles in ways they didn't know that they had the power to. And when you get people like us buying into this idea of community, and other families buying into this idea community, it changes the nature of what goes on behind those [school] doors, because people are more active, people feel more welcome, they don't feel nervous about being involved in the system.

John, parent & project contributor, citizen of Ta'an Kwäch'än  
Council

High school is an interesting social environment; groups of teens gathered together for prolonged stretches of time with people they may otherwise never interact with. As racial prejudice and social stereotypes remain pervasive in contemporary Canadian society and can be obstacles to healthy relationship-building, a school environment that creates opportunities for significant peer interaction across social groups, cultural learning and sharing, while emphasizing openness and respect for population diversity could provide students with years of experiences that foster social connections to then carry into their adult lives and greater communities. High school could be a time to broaden students’ awareness, understanding and

empathy for each other, or to further cement existing social barriers and racial prejudice. The potential is there for both.

During our conversations, I asked this project's contributors what in their opinion could help address the youth relationship barriers they identified in our discussions concerning Whitehorse high schools. The compiled proposed recommendations below from students, family members and staff are their ideas for effective and locally-relevant initiatives to combat racial prejudice, encourage relationship-building and create a more inclusive and welcoming school community where Indigenous students feel valued, connected, and their culture meaningfully represented.

### **Anti-Racism Education**

Racism in school cannot be addressed if it is not acknowledged. For Indigenous and racialized people, which, in the Whitehorse student body, often also includes Filipino and Indian youth -as well as new immigrants as Yukon's population grows-, racial prejudice is frequently part of daily life (Bobo, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Denis, 2015). For white Canadians, including white Yukoners, racism can be easily ignored and dismissed as not of significance in contemporary Canadian society. White society, as the dominant population group, benefits from the racial status quo; it is therefore not in its interest to tackle matters that could potentially alter the current balance of power (Anderson, 2011; Bobo, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Racism today can sometimes take subtler forms (although more aggressive and blatantly racist incidents persist) as described earlier in this paper by project participants; it can be hard for a student on the receiving end of a racial aggression to clearly identify or explain what has taken place.

Today's contemporary racism in Canadian society, or "laissez-faire racism" (Bobo, 1996; Denis, 2015), often takes the form of subtler but no less destructive micro-aggressions, as those discussed earlier in this paper, and found in Whitehorse school staff's biased assumptions about Indigenous students' academic ability, the eye-roll admonitions by non-Indigenous students that Indigenous students should "just get over it" during residential school discussions, or the joking use of racial slurs. For individuals not living with these daily micro-aggressions, it is easy to underestimate the cumulative impacts that racism in all of its many manifestations can have on an Indigenous student's life, and overall well-being (Anderson, 2011; Bobo; 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As Bobo argues, "feelings of racial alienation reflect the accumulated personal, familial, community, and collective experiences of racial differentiation, inequality, and discrimination" (1996, p. 956). The silence around racism in our modern Canadian society, the avoidance of "race-talk" (Denis, 2015), allows racial prejudice to fester and endure, and is a particular challenge of today's "new racism" (Bobo, 1996; Denis, 2015; Diangelo, 2018). Yet racism, particularly against Indigenous people, persists beneath the appearance of a harmonious and integrated Whitehorse society, and quickly rears its ugly head when triggered, as demonstrated in instances shared earlier in this paper.

Racism, prejudice, and discrimination are learned behaviors reinforced by collective experiences, social environments and popular media (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Fredrickson, 2015). Here in Canada, most children spend years in the mainstream school system; this would seem an ideal time to open and broaden young minds to all the different cultural groups around them. From this project's contributors' perspectives, the mainstream school environment in

Whitehorse can either help maintain and perpetuate racist beliefs and behaviors or help dismantle them. Anti-racism education, starting at a young age seems a given, yet curiously does not appear to consistently take place nor be particularly emphasized within current school programming.

Presently in Whitehorse high schools there are awareness campaigns on anti-bullying, LGBT2Q rights, and social justice clubs. The apparent improved level of peer acceptance of queer or transgender students in the schools here seem to demonstrate that these awareness campaigns do have a measure of effectiveness in fostering a more accepting and inclusive society. This information is anecdotal and based on informal observation yet appears accurate. There is a rainbow room at Riverview for LGBT2Q students to gather and to host activities. There are rainbow painted crosswalks in downtown Whitehorse, and Pride events are well attended and celebrated. Why not the same degree of efforts against racism? Perhaps a public awareness campaign that explains why using derogatory terms like “squaw” is wrong and offensive, or explaining the racist subtext underpinning dismissive calls for Indigenous peoples to “just get over” the trauma of residential schools could open the door to greater understanding of the continued pervasiveness of racism in modern Canadian society. All contributors to this project clearly emphasized the need for meaningful, consistent and multi-layered anti-racism education, both for students and staff.

I am not an educator, and it was not in the scope of this project to examine current practices or parts of curricula that address racism or anti-racist education; these suggestions are based on the needs identified by this project’s contributors to help resolve some of the race-based

challenges they have identified, and high on this list is anti-racism education across all grade levels. A component of this education could include age-appropriate conversations around the socially created concept of race, how racist beliefs develop and are maintained, on the issue of identity and social power to further help youth begin to understand the complexities of social relations, and the root of racial slurs they might ignorantly toss around. Specific to the Canadian and Yukon context could be conversations on what it means to be an Indigenous person, a non-Indigenous person, and a white person in Canadian society. White Canadians learning about racism will often not be taught about the accompanying white privilege flip side of that coin, thinking themselves neutral observers outside of racial dynamics (Anderson, 2011; Diangelo, 2018). Too often white individuals do not consider themselves as having a “race,” and believe that the term or ethnic identity only applies to others, i.e. non-white people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Diangelo, 2018; Fredrickson, 2015). This emphasizes Us and Them group positions, with the White Us as the dominant group (Bobo, 1996; Denis, 2015; Pettigrew, 1998). Non-Indigenous students, particularly white students and school staff, may be aware that racism and inequality exist in Whitehorse, in the Yukon, in Canada, but may not understand the role they could unwittingly play in perpetuating its existence in society.

Family members and staff also spoke of a need for education on lateral violence for students, and greater support to address it in school. This is “learned violence,” an internalized self-hatred often found in marginalized populations and a legacy of residential schools (NWAC, 2011), that here in the Yukon is dragged into present day high school. Project contributors suggested greater supports for youth are needed to address lateral violence; Indigenous kids from

mixed backgrounds also experience racism from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. Also recommended is early, age-appropriate and consistent education on Canada's colonial history, across all grades—much more than the current modules offered in grades 5 and 10.

Is it due to the misguided belief that racial prejudice is no longer a problem in Yukon schools that anti-racism education is not more emphasized? This is unclear. From our conversations, it appears that discussions on racism do take place, but often after a racially-motivated incident occurs, instead of before, which would be a preventative and more effective strategy. Anti-racism education, cultural awareness and acceptance taught to kids at an early age, before opinions are formed and throughout their school years, would increase the odds of a less prejudiced and more harmonious and inclusive society (St. Denis, 2007). Discussing racism in Canada, particularly against Indigenous people, with non-Indigenous people of any age, can be difficult, as defensiveness and denial often quickly appear, becoming obstacles to open and constructive conversations (Denis, 2015; Diangelo, 2018; Regan and Alfred, 2014), particularly on the part of White Canadians. These conversations must be had however, if the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship in Canada is to become healthy and grow.

### **First Nations History and Cultural Awareness Training**

Carl, the non-Indigenous school administrator met earlier in this project, sees a need for much greater Yukon First Nations cultural education and training for non-Indigenous school staff to help address some of their lingering racial bias and stereotyping of Indigenous people. In his opinion, on the land activities with Indigenous guides and facilitators, such as those he experienced in the Northwest Territories, are powerful connection and relationship-building

opportunities. Getting out of the classrooms and offices and out on the land on equal footing with members of the Indigenous community here, could help non-Indigenous school staff increase their understanding of the local historical context, learn and appreciate Yukon cultural traditions, and build connections with their Indigenous colleagues. This suggestion is also consistent with the recommended conditions of Intergroup Contact Theory to help reduce racial prejudice, namely equal status, common goals, collaboration, and support from authorities (Bobo, 1999; Pettigrew, 1998). As part of this on-the-land training could be continued in-depth education for staff on the legacies of colonialism, residential schools, or meaningful discussions of current issues such as the recent Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls National Inquiry's calls to justice, or the socio-economic gap that still exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada. In other words, as was stressed by Carl, from his perspective as a school administrator, it's not just the legacy of residential schools; there are ongoing present-day issues that continue to directly impact Indigenous children and youth wellbeing (not just through inter-generational trauma, but also contemporary forms of trauma brought on by colonial structures and policies). Some Indigenous students continue to grapple with intergenerational trauma within their families, and as Clara highlighted, many of these stories are still in the process of coming out, and the pain is still very fresh. The need for greater education and cultural sensitivity and awareness training for non-Indigenous school staff about the Canadian colonial legacy cannot be sufficiently emphasized.

Non-Indigenous staff I spoke with also pointed out that some non-Indigenous teachers do try and incorporate more Yukon First Nations content into their school programming yet often

lack knowledge as to best practices, are unsure of how to proceed or whom to speak to, or don't follow-through out of fear that they will do it wrong. Donna, a young non-Indigenous educator in Whitehorse, sees a need for non-Indigenous teachers to get better training on integrating Yukon First Nations content in school programming, as discomfort around protocols and appropriateness may be holding them back:

I am learning a ton this year you know and there's just a lot that I just wasn't aware of that I didn't know coming into this role, and I feel like there are a lot of [non-Indigenous] teachers that mean well and want to include First Nations voices, First Nations ways of knowing and doing but they just don't know how you know, and that it becomes a bit of a fear, because well [they think] what if I misrepresent something or what if I say or do something that isn't right then am I going to offend somebody is this going to get me in trouble. It becomes easier to just kind of avoid it.

Donna feels there is also a need for more Indigenous staff, elders, and educational resources to help guide non-Indigenous staff in their work and help connect with Indigenous students. Donna is aware that being an outsider to the First Nation that she works for, she is lacking understanding of the family lineages, contexts, and the lived experiences of the community. She tries to learn and inform herself as best she can, but she realizes there is much that she just doesn't know or understand.

### **Facilitating Transition to High School and Intergroup Contact**

The transition from the smaller and more structured environment of elementary school into the larger student body of high school can be difficult for any new student, but can be

particularly difficult for Indigenous youth who may find themselves relocating to Whitehorse and thus feel isolated, a minority in a large student body with a high percentage of non-Indigenous youth. This was a point frequently raised by project contributors, as demonstrated earlier in this paper. Furthermore, as pointed out by Clara, in elementary school kids are together in the same class for most of the day and have lots of time to get to know each other. In contrast, in high school they are constantly switching classes and student groups, which does not provide much opportunity to get to know peers. Greater supports are needed to ease this transition and help students start their school experience in a more positive manner, and to facilitate contact and integration into the student population. Although there is daily interaction between the “siloed” high school student groups discussed earlier in this paper, contact alone is insufficient to significantly decrease any existing racial prejudice that could be contributing to relationship barriers (Bobo, 1999; Denis, 2015; Pettigrew, 2011). Interestingly, the key conditions for successful intergroup contact—equality of status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support from institutional authorities as hypothesised by Allport in his Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew, 1998) - find themselves reflected in the experientially-grounded suggestions of this project’s contributors as to how to improve the Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship in the schools. School social spaces do not operate in a vacuum, detached from the social environments of their communities; racial biases, prejudices, stereotypes learned outside of the classroom within families and communities will inevitably be dragged in (St. Denis, 2007). As Bobo argues, “the learning of feelings and stereotypes takes the place of direct experience and

knowledge. Accordingly, any factor that imparts information and knowledge, such as higher education, should reduce levels of prejudice and hostility” (1996, p. 954)

Dismissing the silo-ing of Whitehorse high school student population groups as unimportant or “normal” also contributes to the reinforcement and persistence of existing social group positions (Bobo, 1999; Denis, 2015; St. Denis, 2007). This reality is clearly understood by the contributors to this project. Interestingly, all of the suggestions gathered from our separate conversations were consistent, and involved simple, accessible actions to facilitate meaningful intergroup contact. As an example, more opportunities for staff and students to gather and share food. This type of relationship-building activity may seem like an overly simplistic solution, yet kept coming up in our conversations by students, families and school staff—which speaks to me as evidence that this suggestion would resonate with many people. School feasts, community feasts are always a hit. If used as opportunities for greater learning and relationship building - rather than simply being fed – feasts could provide venues for connection and perhaps facilitated discussion amongst students. Added to the feast could be opportunities for students to learn harvesting and preparation of country foods to be shared together. People like to eat, they like to gather to eat, they like to try new foods, and learn how to make them. The communal sharing of meals is an age-old draw, a connector, across cultures and societies. A proper budget for school staff to plan such food sharing activities would be a great place to start, while ensuring that these feasts are not simply about food but encompass the greater goals of learning and sharing.

The Spruce School experiential learning programs also came up frequently as examples of successful relationship-building programming. Spruce School programs, such as the Outdoor

Pursuits, Music Arts and Drama or Experiential Science programs are very popular with students and involve frequent hands-on outdoor or team building arts-based activities, during which kids interact and connect while loosely engaging in other tasks, such as setting up a campsite or building art sets for a theatre production. These programs, however, have limited enrollment and are application based, which limits their reach and makes them inaccessible to some students. Greater integration of experiential learning-type programming into the regular high school curriculum to allow all students to benefit from this successful approach could be an effective way to facilitate transition into high school and student relationship-building. These types of experiences would also be in line with the objectives identified in the Yukon First Nations Joint Education Action Plan (CYFN, 2013).

### **Yukon First Nations Cultural Inclusion and Representation**

#### **Physical space.**

Right now, if you walk into any of the Whitehorse High Schools, there are not many visual representations of Yukon First Nations culture. School programs and curricula follow a European, “colonizer” model. Indigenous students find themselves surrounded by primarily non-Indigenous teaching staff and administrators, and there are very few Indigenous people in positions of power and authority. As pointed out in the beginning of this paper, the First Nations Education Support Worker spaces are currently located in a back corner of Riverview Secondary School. Students and family members discussed whether this was a deliberate decision; they feel that if the spaces were spread-out throughout the school, they might be less perceived as a separation of the Indigenous students from the rest of the student body. A separation of population groups as a result of class layout and distribution of school spaces can further maintain spatial segregation of groups (Anderson, 2011). Perhaps there could be a better layout or use of the existing physical spaces of the school to facilitate and encourage interaction between students.

#### **Cultural and social spaces.**

The need for more Yukon First Nations cultural activities and events in high school came up time and again. Indigenous students and staff I spoke with said they would like to feel that the high school is representative of Yukon First Nations cultural traditions, proudly demonstrated with visible displays of Yukon First Nations art, with dance groups, drumming, games, and other traditional activities, on a regular basis, not just once or twice a year. These types of activities

would not only help share and teach Yukon First Nations culture to non-Indigenous students and staff, but also create opportunities of cultural learning for Indigenous students who may not be as connected to their cultural traditions. Increased Yukon First Nations cultural activities and educational programming would also support language and cultural revitalization. Plus, these activities are fun, and fun is a great way to build relationships, get to know each other, and make new friends. One parent suggested larger inter-school gatherings, such as the Moosehide Gathering held bi-annually on the traditional territory of the Tr'ondek Hwech'in, near Dawson City, or the Champagne Aishihik First Nation dance festival, popular celebrations of Yukon First Nations culture. These could be great opportunities for Indigenous students to lead and help organize the events, possibly in partnership with other Indigenous and/or non-Indigenous community organizations, as celebrations of Yukon First Nations culture and history, and as ways to education non-Indigenous staff and students, while also strengthening intergroup connection. And finally, an important point that was stressed by all; if these activities are to take place, they need to be delivered in a meaningful way, by staff who are committed and dedicated to doing so. As pointed out by Clara: "Indigenization is not a check box".

**Advocate or Support Person for all Indigenous Students**

Currently, if a student experiences a racially-motivated attack or feels that a teacher demonstrates racial bias or prejudice against them based on their Indigenous identity, they do not have a designated staff person to go to for support. The student or a family member can take their complaint to administrative staff, however as repeatedly stated by discussion participants, this often does not seem to result in concrete action. Administrative staff may be already too

busy to take on further student support roles, or a student victim of a racially motivated incident may not feel comfortable going to the school administration or school counselors for support. In conversations, family members have pointed out that their student does not always feel they will be believed, or taken seriously, or their complaint might be dismissed, as has happened in the past. The First Nations Education Support Workers are very helpful but also extremely busy supporting students from their own nation and should not have to be additionally tasked with advocating for Indigenous students dealing with racism in the school. Carl, the school administrator, admits that there have been instances where incidents of racist behavior were brought to his attention that he was unable to address sufficiently, simply due to lack of time. As he sees it, school administrative staff are already managing heavy workloads and often do not have the capacity nor the resources to adequately address all the complaints that cross their desks, and so things get dropped, or missed. He also points out that he does not have training as a counselor, nor do most of the other administrative staff, and may not have the skill set to adequately handle sometimes very delicate situations. So, for Carl, who clearly sees the need in his school, and other project contributors, more meaningful training for staff would be of benefit, in addition to support staff for all Indigenous students. A designated individual per high school, preferably Indigenous, providing support and guidance to all Indigenous students and their families and helping to resolve incidents of racism was proposed as a much-needed resource; a safe person for Indigenous kids to speak to and make them feel heard.

### **A First Nations School**

There was no clear consensus on this suggestion in our project conversations. The idea of a First Nations school was raised by some as the necessary and ideal solution to resolve the insufficient inclusion of Indigenous world views in the current teaching methods and curricula, and the lack of adequate cultural representation. It could also provide a safer and more comfortable space for Indigenous students to pursue their education, ideally supported by Indigenous staff. But others see a separate school as further divisive, increasing the separation between community groups, and would prefer an Indigenous stream within the current school system, similar to the French immersion stream. As said by one parent “we need to bring people together, not create more division.” There is also concern around the perception that a First Nations school would be an academically-watered down version of the curriculum, a “dumber” school, due to the racialized stereotypes that Indigenous kids don’t do well in school, and therefore need easier courses. The question of a separate First Nations school is still being debated within the Yukon First Nations community.

### **Proposed Areas of Further Study**

The conversations with the contributors to this project also identified areas that would be in need of further study. The inequity in resources between French language education programs and First Nations education in the Yukon is a frequent and sore topic of discussion. In Whitehorse, this inequity is physically visible every time you drive by the construction site of the new French high school. The Francophone community in Whitehorse is active and vocal; they lobbied strongly for their new high school. Both the French-first Elementary school and high

school as well as the French immersion programs are great assets for the Whitehorse community as a whole, but also highlight the inequality in resources for Yukon First Nations education. Yukon First Nations are actively advocating to have this inequity resolved. An examination of how this inequity impacts the social dynamics and relationships in Whitehorse between the Francophone community and the Yukon First Nations community and potentially contributes to greater social division could be of interest.

Several incidents of racial prejudice and bias against Indigenous students by non-Indigenous high school staff were described in conversations with students and family members. Family members recalled approaching the school administration in the hopes of having the behavior addressed and certain teachers reprimanded for their racially-biased actions, yet no meaningful resolution appears to have taken place: the teachers in question remained on staff, or were relocated to a different school, but continue to teach. The families were not informed if remediating actions took place or not. The teacher's union has been raised as a possible obstacle to properly addressing racist behavior from staff. An examination of whether union policies prevent the protection of Indigenous or other racialized minorities from racially biased staff may be warranted.

Although the experiences shared here from conversations focused on Indigenous students' lived experiences and perspectives in the Whitehorse High School, they are reflective, in the opinion of my project contributors, of the social reality of the community of Whitehorse as a whole. It could be easy to extrapolate that the racial bias and prejudice demonstrated in the schools is a smaller scale version of the broader adult community relationships. Indeed,

experiences were also shared in conversations about racial prejudice experienced by Indigenous people in adult social interactions, and in the greater community of Whitehorse, and the Yukon. The contemporary Indigenous/non-Indigenous adult relationship in Yukon would be an area worthy of further examination.

In conclusion, it is important to note that fostering relationships by facilitating contact between school population groups, while positive in terms of community building and reduction of racial prejudice, does not address nor resolve all of the challenges and relationship barriers between indigenous and non-indigenous youth identified by contributors to this project. Greater intergroup contact is but one factor that can help improve the Indigenous students' experiences and success in school, and while it can greatly reduce prejudice, studies indicate that it does not seem to eliminate it completely (Denis, 2015; Pettigrew, 2011). This is where meaningful anti-racism education starting at an early age, can also help (St. Denis, 2007). This paper and the above contributors' suggestions only address a small part of the greater challenge that is the continued gap in academic achievement and high school graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This was not the topic of this paper, and there is considerable existing research discussing this gap and the resources needed to close it. You only need to go as far as the latest Auditor General's report of June 2019 on the status of K-12 Education in the Yukon, or the Yukon First Nations Joint Education Action Plan of 2014, which draws on numerous studies of Indigenous student outcomes to propose a strategy for improved indigenous student success. But perhaps listening to the collective voices of this project's contributors describing what they see from the inside, and what they think would best help youth of different

backgrounds overcome barriers and connect, while improving the school experience for Indigenous kids, can also point educators and school administrators in a direction of meaningful change.

### **A Final Word**

I have lived in the North now for over 15 years, 12 in the Northwest Territories, 4 in the Yukon. During this time, I have witnessed some of the legacies of the residential schools and their lasting intergenerational trauma, and listened to survivors' stories shared during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's visit to Fort Simpson, where I lived, yet I will never be able to fully understand this reality from the inside. I take to heart the words of Senator Murray Sinclair and the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2015 report, for non-Indigenous Canadians to inform themselves, to learn about the true colonial history of this country and its destructive assimilationist policies. And now, these new words have recently come from the Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019 report, and its Calls for Justice to all Canadians:

Using what you have learned and some of the resources suggested, become a strong ally, actively working to break down barriers and to support others in every relationship and encounter in which you participate.

Confront and speak out against racism, sexism, ignorance, homophobia, and transphobia, and teach or encourage others to do the same, wherever it occurs, in your home, in your workplace, or in social settings.

It is in this spirit that I wrote this paper.

## **EPILOGUE**

### **Thesis Defence Presentation**

This research project has been, as I am sure it is for many graduate students, a profound personal journey. I chose to explore relationship barriers between Indigenous and non-indigenous youth in the Yukon. As a non-indigenous mother of four children of indigenous and European ancestry, my family's personal circumstances and experiences are directly linked to this choice of topic. Upon our move to Whitehorse, Yukon, 4 years ago from a small primarily Dene community the Northwest Territories, my kids had to integrate into a new town and new schools. Being new to this town, we did not yet grasp the social structure of this city, or territory. However, my children's observations of the social dynamics within their new school's student body seemed indicative of a significant measure of social segregation and discrimination against Indigenous youth, although in a covert, manner, unacknowledged by school officials. These observations led me to consider which barriers could be at play within Whitehorse student relationships, and if examinations on these potential barriers had been already completed. The academic literature review conducted for this study confirmed research gaps on the state of Indigenous-non-indigenous youth relations in the North, and a need for further examination in an area that warrants in my opinion sustained inquiry and meaningful discussion.

### **Methods**

Using a non-traditional narrative approach focusing on the lived experiences of Indigenous students, this thesis project therefore identifies and examines barriers to relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous youth as observed in Whitehorse high schools. This

thesis also presents recommendations from former students, family members and school staff on how to better foster relationship building and connection between students and create a more welcoming, inclusive and culturally relevant high school environment for Indigenous youth.

This project is situated within a transformative paradigm while drawing on principles of indigenous research methods which guided my work as a non-Indigenous researcher. The writings of indigenous scholars such as Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson further framed my methodology to follow an approach grounded in indigenous community accountability and relationship-building. Elements of Gordon Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory and Herbert Blumer's Group Position Theory and as further developed by Lawrence Bobo, provided a theoretical framework against which I examined the experiences shared by this project's participants. Allport's Contact Theory explores both the benefits and limitations intergroup contact can provide in decreasing pre-existing racial prejudice a dominant population group demonstrates towards a marginalized or negatively perceived group ( Pettigrew, 1998), while Group Position Theory provides an understanding of the collective processes of perceived threat felt by dominant population group in interactions with subordinate groups, and the social mechanisms at play in the construction and maintenance of these perceptions (Bobo, 1998). Concepts drawn from Whiteness Studies and Critical Race Theory further provided insights in the dominant white population's continued resistance to improving the relationship with and the overall socio-economic health and well-being of, the Indigenous people of this country. These theoretical models, in their discussions of power dynamics underpinning race relations, provided an analytic approach to help deconstruct and understand how race-based power structures

manifest in social contexts and interactions between different populations groups; in this case, Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth within a high school in a northern Canadian social environment.

**Response to External Examiner’s Report- Narrative Style**

I chose a non-traditional approach for the narrative structure of this paper, in keeping with my objective of accessible and applicable research. I would like to take a moment here to respond to a question posed in the EE’s report, on my reference to the use of a “journalistic” narrative style of writing for this paper, which has also come up in other review comments. I realize in hindsight that my use of this term is an inaccurate representation of my process while scripting this thesis. A more accurate description would be a story-based narrative approach. This thesis is solidly grounded in the stories shared by the project’s participants, and all though only a fraction of the stories themselves could be directly included in the final document, these lived experiences, particularly those shared by Indigenous people in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, and into which is lightly woven my family’s, are the foundation into which this paper is anchored. A story-based narrative approach could also be considered more consistent with and respectful of an Indigenous paradigm, and more in keeping with recommendations for non-Indigenous researchers provided by Shawn Wilson in *Research is Ceremony*, and Margaret Kovack in her book *Indigenous Methodologies*. As a non-indigenous researcher conducting research with Indigenous peoples, it is critical that the teachings of Indigenous scholars frame my process. Furthermore, the External Examiner referred to the paper as bordering auto ethnography, which is an interesting observation; whereas a journalistic style would infer a

perspective closer to the outside looking in, and less vested in the topic explored, which in this case, would be an inaccurate description. I therefore wish to re-phrase my description of narrative style as being, rather than journalistic, a story-based approach guided by Indigenous Methodologies and rooted in the sharing of lived experiences.

**Context**

In the Yukon, the location of this study, close to 25% of the population is Indigenous (Yukon Statistics, 2016). As the capital of the territory and service hub, the Whitehorse area holds 77% of the total Yukon population (Yukon Statistics, 2016). Youth from smaller primarily indigenous communities who do not have access to full K-12 schooling or require additional resources unavailable in their communities move to the capital to complete their education, staying in residence or with extended family members.

**Response to External Examiner Report - Discussion of Education**

Here I would like to take a moment to speak to a point raised by the External Examiner of a need for greater discussion of First Nation Education in the Yukon within the context of this paper. This is a valid point with which I did struggle. At the onset of this project, the intent was not to address the education system in the Yukon; my focus was on the nature of the social relationship between the youth in Whitehorse, not the school system. However, as schools are an arena where different population groups find themselves in somewhat forced close proximity and interact on a daily basis, they seemed an obvious and ideal choice to explore youth social dynamics.

My area of study for this degree does not involve education, and I do not have the knowledge or expertise to properly address the status of Education here. However, as my time in the Yukon lengthened and my research progressed, the inequity in treatment, educational experiences and outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student populations in the schools became clear, as was the Yukon Government's failure in meeting the needs of its Indigenous students. The June 2019 tabling of the Office of the Auditor General's report on K-12 Education in the Yukon very clearly and severely confirmed these observations. In my initial thesis drafts, sections did aim to examine and address these failures by Yukon's Department of Education. However, perhaps incorrectly, I did not feel like I could discuss education in an adequate manner without getting too far away from my focus on the dynamics of youth relationship and racial prejudice, and furthermore, I did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable in educational matters to be able to understand and discuss these correctly.

### **Literature Review**

The initial intent of the literature review for this thesis was to examine the current understanding of Indigenous non-Indigenous youth relationships and interactions in Whitehorse, Yukon. No literature specific to these youth relationships in Yukon was identified during the course of this preliminary inquiry, therefore research on related influential factors was included in this review in order to piece together facets of the discussion to help inform and construct a map of possible areas of tension between these two population groups. Although at the onset of my research I tried to refrain from assumptions of any particular social barriers, the documented evidence of deeply-rooted biases underpinning the majority of Indigenous - non-Indigenous

interactions in Canada confirmed the apparent unavoidability of racially-motivated barriers, regardless of whether they are openly acknowledged or not.

The dominant theme emerging from the initial literature review for this thesis is that Canada's projection of a tolerant multicultural and accepting society is negated by the realities of the lived experiences of its non-white population, and racism towards its Indigenous people remains endemic (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; V. S. Denis, 2007; Lashta, Berdahl, & Walker, 2016), rooted in the colonial history and settler policies on which this country was constructed (J. S. Denis, 2011; V. S. Denis, 2007). Coupled to this theme is the severity of impacts from such ongoing discrimination on the daily lives of Indigenous people, manifested in their continued over-representation in the negatives statistics of socio-economic well-being (Friesen & Krauth, 2010) and Indigenous youth's disengagement from school and overall poor academic achievement rates (Clark, Kleiman, Spanierman, Isaac, & Poolokasingham, 2014; Davison & Hawe, 2012; Cormier, 2010; Hampton & Longman, 2003).

The ongoing social and economic inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians has been attributed to racism, prejudice and discrimination that First Nations people continue to endure, impacting their health, well-being and overall sense of worth, and preventing their active engagement and successful participation in society (Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; Lashta et al., 2016; V. S. Denis, 2007; Hampton & Longman, 2003). What further emerged in the examination of the studies selected for this review is a picture of Indigenous youth in Canada growing up in an environment influenced by discriminatory practices within the educational

system and workforce, thus impeding their socio-economic progress and placing them at a considerable disadvantage to their non-Indigenous peers.

The social context presents itself differently In Canada's northern territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, and the proportionately higher ratio of Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2011) suggests the possibility of a more egalitarian society. Academic publications on northern and specifically Yukon populations are sparse, however my findings in the course of this literature review suggest that similar patterns of discrimination and racism as those found in urbanized regions of southern Canada are present in the North as well. Consistent with what has been reported for the rest of the country, school-dropout rates are significantly higher, and employment rates are significantly lower for northern Indigenous youth compared to non-Indigenous, suggesting similar dynamics are impeding their successful development (Abele & Delic, 2014; Davison & Hawe, 2012), and influences on aboriginal youth school engagement originate in their social and economic environments in addition to school context, expectations and resources. Furthermore, in the studies reviewed discussing school engagement in the North, researchers observed a marked degree of positive or negative influence teachers and peers can have on Indigenous youth, particularly in the smaller communities (Lewthwaite et al., 2013; Friesen & Krauth, 2010).

Dominant themes emerging from the concluding remarks in the examined literature were a need for further examination of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations in Canada, as this area, although key in the social dynamics of this country, seems to be underreported in academic inquiry, particularly as it pertains to youth, as well as a need for increased public

acknowledgment and discussion of racism and prejudice towards Indigenous people in Canada, with concentrated effort on better education and understanding of the legacy of Canada's colonial history. The reviewed scholars recognize that discrimination towards First Nations is deeply rooted and embedded into the very social fabric of this country, and dismantling it a challenging prospect requiring sincere public and political will (Lashta et al., 2016; Jeffrey S. Denis, 2015; V. S. Denis, 2007; Hampton & Longman, 2003).

### **Information Collection and Analysis**

In terms of data collection for this study, qualitative methods were used in the form of unstructured conversations about school and peer relationship experiences with 15 project participants, primarily Yukon First Nations, including recent high school graduates, family members, and school staff. A thematic analysis of conversation transcripts was conducted, guided by a cyclical process involving multiple review discussions with local indigenous contacts and community advisors. Although the population sample involved in this project would be considered too small to draw conclusive statements, the marked consistency in emerging themes demonstrated clear evidence of racial prejudice against Indigenous students, both from peers and educational staff, creating social barriers impacting their ability to develop healthy and egalitarian relationships with their peers; the difficulties faced by Indigenous students transitioning into a high school environment that does not seem to acknowledge their cultural or traditions; and of Indigenous youths' overall sense of alienation from the school community as a whole. Project participants provided their input as to tangible and reasonably accessible recommendations to improve the Indigenous student experience in the Yukon school system, and

youth relationships as a whole, beginning with significant increases in anti-racism education alongside sustained and meaningful education on Canada's true colonial history. Added to this, were recommendations to incorporate Yukon First Nation focused land-based and experiential learning in school, and cultural events and activities, as these encourage interaction between students, create opportunities for dialogue, and foster relationship building.

**External Examiner Report – Possible Area of Further Study**

In terms of the External Examiner's question as to other possible barriers not discussed in this paper, I would say that the socio-economic gap between the Yukon's Indigenous and non-indigenous populations is most likely a significant barrier. This was briefly alluded to by some project participants in the course of our conversations, but in a manner secondary to the more salient experiences of racial prejudice or alienation that were shared. There is a significant section of the Whitehorse population, primarily white, in high income brackets; these families take part in community activities and sports frequently out of reach of lower income families. As Whitehorse is a relatively small town of thirty thousand people, this creates, based on anecdotal observations, a social pattern where community members and their families from this predominantly white and affluent demographic intersect in workplaces, sports, cultural events and activities, creating insular social circles that exclude lower income families, and in the Yukon, these are predominantly indigenous. This potential barrier would be worthy of further exploration and may be particularly distinctive and prevalent in northern communities across the country.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I had the honor last week of hearing Senator Murray Sinclair speak at an invitation only event organized by the Council of Yukon First Nations at the beautiful Kwanlin Dun Cultural Center here in Whitehorse. I fully expected Senator Sinclair would be a brilliant, inspiring and moving speaker, but still did not anticipate how deeply we the audience would be collectively moved.

Among many powerful moments, Senator Sinclair shared with us a video in which non-indigenous Honorary Witnesses conveyed to the TRC their closing thoughts. 2 phrases in particular stood out to me. One honorary witness spoke about carrying the shared pain of the survivors for one day during the hearings, and his awe at survivors' ability to carry this pain throughout their lives. I share this awe at such strength and resilience. Another non-indigenous witness, spoke about how the title of Honorary Witness should instead be Honored Witness, as it was their honor, to be included in this difficult process, and to be asked to witness the collective pain of Canada's Indigenous peoples. In this spirit, I would like to express from the bottom of my heart my deepest gratitude to all of the project participants and community members who were willing to take part in this project. I wish to thank them for their willingness to share their stories with me, and allow me to witness a glimpse of the continued legacy of the colonial policies of this country, and Indigenous people's experiences of the racial prejudice that still pervades Canadian society to this day. It has been my humbling honor to listen, and learn.

Mahsi Cho, Kwànàschis, thank you.

**Endnotes**

1. Denis (2015); St. Denis (2007)
2. For a detailed explanation on the self-government process in Yukon see [Mappingtheway.ca](http://Mappingtheway.ca)
3. Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2018 Census.
4. Anderson (2011); Bourdieu (1986); Egerton & Roberts (2014).
5. Bobo (1999); Denis (2015); Pettigrew (1998)
6. Government of Yukon Department of Education. Learn About French Programs in Schools:  
Core French
7. Assembly of First Nations, Yukon Region, Yukon Indigenous Languages Paper
8. Office of the Commissioner of Official languages.
9. Yukon Bureau of Statistics, Aboriginal People Census 2016.
10. Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2019).
11. Government of Yukon, news release, February 1 2019: New Senior Level Department of  
Education Position Focuses on First Nations Initiatives.
12. In 1973, Yukon First Nations respected speaker and leader Elijah Smith brought a delegation  
of Yukon First Nations to Ottawa and presented to then Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau  
the document Together Today for our Children Tomorrow, a statement prepared by the  
Yukon Native Brotherhood and Yukon First Nations Elders. This action is considered to  
mark the beginning of modern treaty negotiations in the Yukon. For more on this please see  
[Mappingtheway.ca](http://Mappingtheway.ca).

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