

## **To Hear the Truth: A Reconciliation Dialogue among Pre-Service School Counsellors**

Pre-service school counsellors are faced with, among other things, a mountain of responsibility which must be shouldered if they are to be successful in their studies and, eventually, their practice. A broad knowledge of theoretical perspectives, development of counselling skills, and ethical acumen are generally considered the most important qualifications of a beginning school counsellor. However, additional challenges face today's prospective counsellors. Canada's changing socio-political climate demands culturally competent professionals who understand their biases and have taken on the responsibility of learning about past and present injustices and how these affect the people they serve. Adler University, in downtown Vancouver, is but one of many school counsellor education programs in British Columbia. It was there that, in the fall of 2018, the new cohort of School and Youth students pondered these challenges and responsibilities. Dr Gillian Smith, a former school counsellor and assistant professor at Adler, proposed to her School Counselling class that they view the film *We Were Children*, which tells the true story of two survivors of Canada's residential school system.

"It is paramount that school counsellors who work with First Nations, Metis and Inuit students, and their families, understand the historical context behind the circumstances of colonization that occurred in Canada" says Dr Smith, "such as the dismantling and maiming of native language, traditions, practices, and beliefs that resulted in significant destruction to the Indigenous community. Because children were legally forced to live in residential schools, they were often not allowed ongoing contact with their friends and families. As a result, they were not raised in their customary family settings, and many survivors did not receive their fundamental rights to healthy attachment, vital teachings on parenting, and healthy coping strategies. Many of these children were abused, neglected, or otherwise traumatized and the legacy of healing from these events continues." Inspired by Dr Smith's proposition, students in the class suggested that the screening of the film should be open to all people in the Adler community to increase awareness and activate discussion on social justice for indigenous peoples.

Adler's Manager of Student Services, Susanne Milner, was excited to help out with the event. Earlier in the year, she had taken the lead in Adler's Common Book program for the Vancouver Campus, a program which brings together students in all of the university's programs through literature and dialogue. This year's book is *Indian Horse*, written by Ojibwe author Richard Wagamese, which explores the true story of a residential school survivor. Ms. Milner had proposed the book in early 2018 as a way to "fill in the gaps" in the education system. "The novel is a great way to educate people about the intergenerational traumas of the residential school system and help them to see why Truth and Reconciliation is important." With Ms. Milner's help, Dr. Smith and her new cohort of students linked the Common Book program with a public screening of *We Were Children*.

Ms. Milner also reached out to the Indian Residential Schools Survivors Society (IRSSS), based in North Vancouver, in hopes of inviting a speaker to come to the event. Gertie Pierre and Wesley Scott from the IRSSS were happy to respond. After the film viewing, you could hear a pin drop in the room as participants gathered around Ms. Pierre, an Elder and Survivor of the Residential School System. With bated breath, the audience listened as she shared her deeply-touching first-hand account of growing up in the residential school system in BC and the immense impact that it has had on her life. Mr. Scott, who works as a Resolution Health Support Worker with the IRSSS, provided an overview of the history of residential schools in Canada. He also shared practical advice for the students and faculty in attendance, as well as school counsellors in general. “Networking with First Nations communities and elders, attending workshops and having open discussions, and learning about the history of First Nations people are all productive. It’s important to learn about the residential school system because of the significant impact that they have had on First Nations communities and on Canadian society as a whole. With informed practice and cultural competency, counsellors are better able to assist someone in their healing journey.”

### **Reflecting on the event**

Deepti Saini, a first-year counselling student, was touched by *We Were Children*. “I was able to relate to my own experiences as a child in a missionary school. There were a lot of scenes that took me back: feeling the same homesickness, the harsh schedules and discipline, the physical abuse, and the awful meals. However, the intensity of what those children [residential school survivors] went through was another level altogether.” Ms. Saini’s emotional experience in watching the film allowed her to empathize with people whom she had never met before. Namira Dossa, also in her first year, had learned about residential schools in the past, yet she found that the film made the truth of residential schools much more *real*. “The film gave me a better understanding of the intergenerational trauma, which is still present in this generation as much as it was in previous ones. I believe that all Canadians can benefit from watching the film - it offers a gateway to dialogue about the impact of residential schools between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.”

Guest speaker Gertie Pierre’s story was a valuable learning experience for student Jannie Ngo. “Hearing [her] story gave me a new perspective of marginalized people, especially people who struggle with homelessness. It’s easy to go about your life and not think about the people who are suffering. I think that counsellors can really benefit from hearing stories and past accounts from courageous survivors like Gertie. I have a newfound appreciation for what a privilege it is [for counsellors] to facilitate a healing space and listen to the most delicate moments of a person’s life.” Tia Turner, a public school teacher, sees opportunity for today’s students in Ms. Pierre’s story. “It was inspiring to hear how amazingly courageous, resilient, and graceful she is, despite the multitude of traumas in her life. Hearing about the power and healing that *she* has received by giving back and telling her story was empowering. We can create

opportunities for students to share their stories with each other, to learn and heal alongside each other, and bring students and communities together through the power of our stories.”

The event was attended by students in every one of Adler’s programs as well as a number of members of the teaching faculty. These attendees found great value in the stories that were shared and in learning about the residential schools. Although the morning was short, its effects were significant: students found themselves deeply empathizing with strangers whom they had never met, reflecting on newfound perspectives, empowered by the truth, and yearning for reconciliation. Furthermore, as school counsellors, we can become familiar with traditional healing practices and greet our indigenous students with sensitivity, empathy and respect for aboriginal customs, values and ways of knowing and healing.

Hosting an event like this may not be easy, as the emotions evoked are potent, but it is worthwhile as new insights and conversations may unfold, as they did at Adler. The resources exist for workshops of this kind to be held anywhere at any time. The IRSSS, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and numerous other organizations provide an array of resources which can be used to ignite awareness and discussion. Additionally, films such as *We Were Children* and books such as *Indian Horse*, which has also been made into a film, can be used to engage school counsellors and educators, enhance empathy, and increase understanding.

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### **Resources**

We Were Children: [https://www.nfb.ca/film/we\\_were\\_children/trailer/we\\_were\\_children\\_trailer/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/we_were_children/trailer/we_were_children_trailer/)

We Were Children facilitator’s guide: <http://www3.nfb.ca/sg/100732.pdf>

Indian Horse: <https://www.indianhorse.ca>

The IRSSS: <http://www.irsss.ca/>

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: <http://www.trc.ca> (click on “Find resources for students and educators”)